The Co-operative

by Sealie

Summary

Danny Williams, Professional Photographer, and his first month at the Seolh Co-operative.

Notes

Rating: Pre-slash; oodles of h/c
Warnings: please contact me if you require a run down. Alternatively, see the end notes.
Advisory: potty mouth; disability; frank religious discussions (of a similar nature to the television series), and the bad guy is an ableist shit
Disclaimer: writing for fun not for profit.
Comments: British English spelling
Spoilers: none, it’s a AU
Beta: Springwoof, clanger wrangler extraordinaire! 💖, Babe. Applause for Springwoof -- she has gone beyond the bounds of betaing supporting me as I wrote this story.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Danny straightened his tie, patted his hair, and checked the creases in his pants. Bracing himself, he pressed smartly on the doorbell. Once, hard, and stepped back.

He didn’t know what he was expecting, but he didn’t expect a dark-haired, six foot plus, long tall drink of water, wearing the tightest t-shirt and shorts that Danny had seen since arriving on the islands a mere three months ago. His feet were bare.

His hair was wet.

“Swimming,” Danny said, realising the reason for the state of undress.

Long Drink of Water looked him up and down, and took in the battered suitcase left at the bottom of the steps up to the veranda.

“Come in,” he said in a strangely flat voice, beckoning.

Danny debated for two seconds about leaving his suitcase on the bottom of the stoop. It had been a long walk up the drive, but leaving the last of his possessions outside didn’t appeal. He left it just inside the door. His little case he kept with him.

The interior was ornate, like nothing he had seen since arriving on the islands. The foyer ceiling was three storeys high and a domed window let bright light into the room, lending a light and airy cast despite the dark wood dressing the walls.

Artwork in a variety of styles and mismatch of frames was set in every panel along the foyer. Towards the end of the corridor where Long Drink of Water waited the panels were bare – evidently an ordered mind dictated the positioning of the pictures. Danny wasn’t too sure that he liked that.

“Kitchen.” Long Drink of Water preceded him into another old fashioned room. Oh, the utilities were sparkling new and commercially big, but the cupboards, table, and chairs were ancient, dark hardwood and battered with life.

“Nice,” Danny said for lack of anything else.

“Sit. Gimme a moment.” Long Drink of Water held up a finger. Grabbing a towel from the back of a chair he briskly rubbed his hair, messing it up wildly. Cocking his head to the side he carefully dried his ears and then folded the towel around his neck.

“I uhm--” Danny began.

Long Drink of Water ignored him, reaching up into a little woven bowl on the top of the fridge and took something out. He carefully inserted hearing aids in both ears.

Ah. Danny waited.

Long Drink of Water scrabbled in the bowl and pulled out what looked like a car key alarm and set it on the table before Danny.

“You wanna coffee?” he asked, looking directly at Danny. “You look like you need a coffee.”

“Yes, please,” Danny said carefully.

“White, two sugars.”

Long Drink of Water set to work efficiently, water from the filter, kettle on, coffee grounds in the French Press. He pulled a carton of semi-skim milk from the fridge and put it on the kitchen table along with a plate of sliced meat and cheese with a bowl of fruit salad.

“Can I help?” Danny asked, and then winced because he was talking to Long Drink of Water’s back.

A loaf of bread, knife, and plates followed. The kettle hissed and wobbled and the bright red light on the side flicked off. The coffee smelled divine as Long Drink of Water poured hot water on the grounds. Danny was starving; he snaffled a slice of meat off the plate and stuffed it in his mouth.

Long Drink of Water set the French Press and two mugs on the table and the first smile that Danny had seen crossed his face as he saw Danny munching.

Danny swallowed hard. “Sorry, I was hungry.” He wiped his fingers against his shirt and bobbed up a fraction, holding out his hand. “Danny Williams.”

“Danno?” Long Drink of Water cocked his head to the side.

“Dan-ney,” Danny emphasised.

“Steve. Steve McGarrett.” Steve shook his hand and sat with a thump. “Eat up. And then we can talk.”

It should have been uncomfortable sitting in a strange house, with an unfamiliar person, being fed, but it felt all right. He had had an insanely horrible ninety six hours and just sitting was a blessing. The coffee was hot and milky, but Long Drink of Water -- Steve -- had forgotten the sugar. Danny wasn’t going to complain, he was even going to eat the pineapple slices.

Replete, he sagged back in his chair. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. You look like you needed it,” he said without preamble. “What happened?”

Now wasn’t the time for obfuscations and misdirection, he was too tired.

“My apartment burned down. Exploded actually, drug addicts next door were trying to make crystal meth, or something, and boom.” Danny threw his arms out wide, Steve jumped back slightly in his seat. “The fire took out the whole apartment complex.”

“You lost everything?” Steve asked.

What was everything, Danny wondered. “No, not everything. I was out: I had my car, my credit cards, my camera. It was just stuff. Just stuff.” Hardcopies. Portfolio -- gone. My baby was with her mother, thankfully. Nothing else matters.

“You walked up the drive,” Steve observed.

“I had some bills that I had to pay,” Danny said tightly.

“Fair enough. How did you hear about this place?”

“Kono Kalakaua said you might have a room that I could rent.” There was no way in a million years
that he was going to be able to afford a room in this mansion. What had Kono been thinking?

Steve snorted, “I think Kono misled you.”

“Oh.” Danny felt a little cold and hot at the same time. He pushed back from the table. “I’m sorry for taking up your time.”

“Don’t be so quick. Sit.” Steve clicked his finger and pointed at the chair. “What do you do?”

Danny stayed standing, just because. “Do?”

“Yes, do. I assume that the camera, which you haven’t put down, is part of it.”

“Photography. Photography,” Danny said, holding his Canon, the only one that he had left against his chest. Damn the divorce. Damn the fire. Damn, this fucking expensive island.

“You took photographs of Kono?”

Danny nodded.

“Did she like them?”

“Yes!” They had been excellent shots, black and white action shots of her cutting through the waves. He had used one of her friend’s point-and-shoot waterproof cameras and he had been stuck on a horrendously noisy jet-ski clinging for his life to the driver, but the shots had been amazing.

“Okay. I’ll give you the tour.”

“Tour?”

“Who’s deaf, here, you or me?” Steve smiled, but, Jesus, it was a sharp, weighty smile. He would have to photograph it and study it for weeks to understand the nuances.

“Lead on, MacDuff.”

“McGarrett,” Steve corrected, a crease of confusion between his eyes.

Danny winced; he figured word jokes were in bad taste.

Steve stood, pocketing the car remote. It made a bulge in his swimming trunks. “Okay, this is essentially a Co-operative. There’s four artists in residence in the house at the moment. I can’t show you their rooms, because they’re their rooms. I think Chin Ho’s in; you can talk to him and see what you think. Get his perspective.”

Danny followed Steve into a sitting room, dominated by a mismatched selection of sofas angled towards the entertainment corner with an oldish, large flat screen television and a music system tower. Game consoles and box-sets were strewn in front of the television on a gaudy knitted rug.

“Play room, basically.” Steve turned on his heel and left. Danny followed him into the next room, which once upon a time might have been a dining room, but with the attached conservatory, was decked out with an array of exercise machines. It was a gym. “All the rooms on the ground floor are essentially, communal.” Steve said as they opened the door into a large, walk-in pantry, shelves stacked high. “The other door twists back to the kitchen.”

Danny turned in a circle, trying to get the layout straight in his head: long foyer, kitchen, dinning room and conservatory, siege-pantry, sitting room. There were two rooms off the hall which they
hadn’t looked in.

“Office,” Steve supplied, following his line of sight. “Private. So not communal. The first door leads to the reception rooms.”

“Reception rooms?” Danny asked.

“That’s what the founder called them. Artists can meet people, clients and such, there without bringing them into the house. They don’t get used much. The next floor is the studios.”

Steve took the stairs three at a time. Danny chased after him, careful of his camera.

The curved staircase led up to a balcony. Beyond the balcony, a long corridor, dressed in dark wood and old fixtures, stretched back into the house. The foyer ceiling window, another floor above them, let light into corridor. The stained glass set patterns of light on the balcony staircase. Danny crouched down, intrigued by the interplay of light. He had his camera out before thinking about it. He wished that he had his tripod but settled for placing his camera on the next to last stair and setting the timer. The first shot brought the slats into sharp relief and blurred the background in a mosaic of browns and oranges and auburn. He kind of liked it.

Fiddling with the LCD screen, he zoomed in on a carved newel post, checking the focus.

Steve was watching him, arms crossed, leaning against the wall.

“Sorry,” Danny said, flushing.

“No worries, that’s kind of why this place is here.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “This studio is empty.”

Danny followed him into a ramshackle room, filled with a random assortment of crap.

Steve scratched the back of his head. “We dumped a lot of crap in here.” There was even a pink tapestry-covered chaise lounge, a table with four chairs stacked on top, a wardrobe from Narnia, wooden boxes, and dust sheet draped piles. But there were floor to ceiling windows along the whole west wall. Steve weaved between the piles. Danny snapped off a picture of a statue of a cherub in front of a pockmarked, tarnished mirror reflecting the Room of Requirement.

“Smaller room, could be a bedroom. It was a walk-in dressing room.” Steve tapped a door but didn’t open it, stepping over a box. He did open the next door. “En-suite bathroom. There’s no shower, only a bath. Could get one of those hand-held things.” Through the door, Danny could only see white tiles and the edge of a porcelain claw-footed bath.

“No. No. It’s perfect.”

Steve smiled and Danny couldn’t help take a picture.

“How does this place work?” Danny asked.

“What?” Steve squinted, and jumped over a box coming closer. His focus was intense. Danny resisted the urge to lick his lips.

“Rent? Amenities? Access to the kitchen?” There was nowhere to prepare any food in the studio.

“Five hundred dollars a month all in. Maybe a little bit more if there’s an emergency.”

Fuck, that was peanuts.
“There’s a rota system: kitchen duties, shopping, cleaning, gardening… maintenance. If you’re better at gardening than cooking, you can barter gardening against preparing the evening meal. There are allotments out the back, we grow a lot of our own vegetables.” Steve shrugged. “I do a lot of cleaning and maintenance. Chin likes to grow stuff. You want to meet Chin?”

“How do you mean?”

“Your own rooms are your own. You have your own set of keys. You can do what you want. But this place is communal. There has to be a certain level of order and consideration of others. Noise,” Steve said flatly. “No loud partying after eleven o’clock unless agreed. Breakfast isn’t part of the rota – just do your own thing. But there’s a weekly timesheet indicating where you’re going to be during the week, so food can be prepared economically and efficiently, and the chores can be sorted out. We all get together on Sunday evening to discuss what’s what for the coming week. That’s the way that this place works.”

The undercurrent of ‘like it or lump it’ was strong.

“Let’s check on Chin Ho,” Steve continued. He didn’t wait for an answer, weaving between the boxes and sliding past Danny without touching him.

Dutifully, Danny followed, thinking hard. Ideally, in a perfect world, he wanted his own place, with Grace. Sharing a kitchen and rota with a bunch of strangers, in what was rapidly appearing to be a commune, didn’t really appeal. But, five hundred a month and a roof over his head was very, very appealing. If anyone started talking about gods and goddesses, he was running for the door.

Steve knocked on the door of the next studio, and called out his own name. There was a little box sign by the door -- the panel had been switched indicating that the resident was in. Danny clearly heard someone yelling, ‘Coming,’ but Steve didn’t react until the door opened.

“Chin Ho Kelly,” Steve said stepping back, “This is Danny Williams, he’s a photographer.”

Danny leaned forwards, hand outstretched. “Please to meet you.”

Chin smiled and the urge to photograph this man was irresistible. “I would shake your hand, but--” he held up a paint covered hand. The other held a towel, which he must have used to open the door.

“You’re busy,” Danny said.

“Not so much that I can’t be interrupted. Come in.” Chin used his elbow to open the door wide. The room behind him was similar to Danny’s, but sparsely furnished. An enormous canvas lay on paint-spotted tarpaulin that covered the majority of the hardwood floor.

“Can I leave Danny with you, Chin? I’ve only shown him the house, but I want to get a shower and I need to speak to Mrs. Keawe.”

Chin angled his body, facing Steve directly. “Yes. I will talk to Mr. Williams and then I will show him the grounds. We will come and find you afterwards.”

“Thanks.” Steve nodded. He turned poised to run off. “Oh, he knows Kono.” And then he loped away.

“Kono doesn’t live here, does she?” Danny asked. He kind of thought that she had a tiny, trunk-sized apartment in downtown Honolulu.

“Yes, she’s my cousin.” Chin stepped back. “Come in.”
Danny lay on the sofa, blanket pulled up to his chin, television on low in the background, blocking out the ebb and flow of the waves outside. He was exhausted. He should sleep, but his thoughts cascaded in his head. It had been a long day, a long five days.

He still didn’t know about the House, but that was okay, because there was a month’s getting-to-know-you period and if it didn’t work, it didn’t work. He liked his privacy and hippy communes were hippy communes. But he was in a bind and he could survive a month.

Working with Steve, they had concentrated on the bathroom. Man, it had been a mess. Hauling in a toolbox, Steve had set to work on the plumbing, getting it sorted out, putting in a new pipe. But by mid-afternoon, they had got hot water running. Then, they had set to cleaning from top to bottom. By the time a goddamn dinner bell had rung, they had the bathroom up to snuff. The lights had flashed three times; short, short, long, telling Steve that dinner was ready.

Danny had met Toast at dinner -- a skinny space-cadet who was doing something arcane with computers in one of the studios. He didn’t talk, but ate like no tomorrow, tucking into baked salmon and prawn lasagne with salad like he hadn’t had a decent meal all week. Danny watched him and found the strength to eat carefully and slowly and not like an animal.

After dinner, he and Steve had put in a couple of hours work carrying out the easily portable crap from the main room and transporting it downstairs into one of the seven reception rooms in the East wing. One of the seven reception rooms!

Steve had called it a day at eight o’clock when it had been obvious that it was a two day or even a three day job to make the studio habitable. Chin had promised to help tomorrow and murmured about Kono joining them. Even though there wasn’t a place to lay his head, Danny had agreed since his knee was killing him and he was really looking forward to a long-long-hot soak.

When he had emerged from the bathroom there was a note hanging off the clothes stand which had been set deliberately where he would see it, directing him downstairs to a pile of blankets on longest, softest sofa in the playroom. The room had been tidied.

Tomorrow was another day. He pulled the blanket over his face and let go.

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“Psssssst. Psssssst. Danny? You gonna wake up?”

Danny blinked awake, confused by the pink flowery pattern close to his nose. “What?”

He batted at the daisy and bright sunlight fell on his face. It all came back to him, the weird-assed commune, the fire, sleeping in his car until he sold it, one night in a frankly awful hostel, and Kono.

“Kono?”

She was poking her head around the doorway. “Hey, Brah, you want lunch?”

“Lunch?” Danny sat up.

“Yeah, I figured you better eat. Steve thought we should let you sleep yourself out. Mamo abstained. Chin agreed with me, so that was two against one and I won the toss and got to wake you up.”
Danny scrabbled for his watch beside the sofa. It was quarter to two o’clock in the afternoon. Unbelievable. He kicked off his sheet. Fucking, he was only wearing his shorts. He scrabbled for the sheet pulling it against his chest.

Kono laughed richly. “Bread will be ready in fifteen, if you want to grab a shower.” She ducked out.

Stunned and sleep fogged, Danny gathered up the clothes that he had worn the day before, but then dropped them. They were dirty. He got the last clean pair of jeans and a t-shirt from his suitcase. Gathering the sheet around his waist, he darted upstairs to his bathroom. Thankfully, he didn’t meet anyone.

Having a bath in the morning, or afternoon, was pretty weird, but he rushed through his ablutions, combing back his wet hair into a semblance of order. The smell of baked bread permeated the house and his stomach growled. Barefoot -- he had left his shoes downstairs -- he padded into the kitchen.

“Danny,” Kono carolled. He wished he could bottle her enthusiasm. “Sit.”

Danny sat. Chin sat at the head of the table, focused on slicing a ham. It looked like a buffet lunch had been prepared: ham; salami; hard cheese; with jars of mayonnaise and relish; a bowl of salad, overloaded by tomatoes by the look of it, and a selection of yoghurts.

“This is Mamo Kahike.” Kono grinned at an elderly man sitting at her left. “He makes surf boards. Best on the island. Mamo, this is Danny Williams, photographer.”

“Please to meet you, sir. Are you one of the residents?”

“Mamo, keiki, not sir.” He grinned, softening the rebuke. “Yes, I have a workshop out back, but I don’t live in the House. I live with my wife. I come here to get away from her nagging.”

“You do not--” Kono waved her spoon at him, “--you love her nagging.”

“True.” Mamo smiled.

Steve leaned over the table and set a crusty loaf on a hardwood board in the centre of the table. Freshly baked bread, Danny’s mouth watered, and there was real butter.

Steve sat, up by Chin, but didn’t say a word.

Danny carefully cut off a slice of bread. It was still warm. “Where’s Toast?” he asked as he buttered, the knob melted into the bread.


Danny moaned as he bit into his first mouthful of bread. It was divine.

Kono laughed. “Steve can’t cook, but he can bake. You can’t beat warm bread and butter.”

“Man, Steve, this is sooo good,” Danny said around a mouthful of bread.

Steve glanced at him quizzically.

Danny swallowed hard. “The bread is delicious.”

“Good.” Steve leaned across the table, got his own slice and carefully constructed an open sandwich of thin layers of tomatoes, cheese and salad leaves.
The conversation was desultory. Danny didn’t feel the need to engage as Chin and Kono caught up on the antics and shenanigans of the younger members of their extended family. Mamo was also related but distantly, through marriage to a third cousin twice removed or some other complicated circumstance.

In a lull, he asked. “Who do I need to make the cheque payable to? Or is it cash?”

He received a bunch of perplexed looks before Chin said, “Make it payable to the ‘Seolh Cooperative’ or I can email you the bank account details.”

Danny’s laptop was a burnt crisp of plastic and metal. “The what?” he asked.

Chin spelled it out carefully. “There’s no hurry, though. I won’t be going into town until next weekend. Actually, it might be better if you wait until the end of the next month and give me a month and a half contribution.”

The flaw in that reasoning was that after a month he might be deemed unsuitable and asked to leave. “Okay,” Danny said slowly, because a couple of royalties didn’t hit his account until the end of the month. “I’ll write you a cheque and you can put it in when you want.”

“If you do want to pay in cash or part in cash, there’s a tin on top of the fridge.” Steve pointed. And, yeah, there was a tin with a label marked ‘rent’ written on with a blunt nosed marker next to the little woven basket. “There’s usually some cash in there, if we want to have a pizza night or something.”

“You take pizza money from the rent?”

“Yes,” Steve said slowly. “It’s all in. The rent covers the food, gas and electric, upkeep… If there’s something you really like to eat like, I dunno, cream cakes, put it on the list, or buy your own and put it on the top shelf in the big fridge.”

Danny was having trouble parsing that sentence. “The rent includes food?”

Kono laughed.

“The house belongs to the owner -- outright,” Chin said. “They inherited the house on the understanding that it would be used to the benefit of the community. There’s a House Charter in the office, I’ll show it to you, if you want. You’ll need to sign what we call the Agreement if you decide to stay after a month. It’s been a – I guess you’d call it an artists’ commune since the 1920s. The owner lets us stay and keep the house from falling apart.”

“Why isn’t this place overrun?” Danny demanded.

Steve tapped the table top. “I didn’t catch that.”

“People should be queuing up to live here,” Danny said carefully.

“It’s invitation only, Brah,” Kono said.

“And, to be honest,” Chin said, “it’s not for everyone. It might not be for you.”

“You’re going to have an interesting month, keiki,” Mamo laughed, as he pushed back from the table. “It’s my turn to do the dishes.”

“I’ll help, Mamo.” Kono jumped up.

“I,” Danny began.
“We’ll continue clearing out your studio.” Steve stood. “There’s a lot to do.”

“It’s going to take three of us to move that horrendous chaise lounge.” Chin wiped his mouth and also stood.

“I kind of like it,” Steve said.

“Babe,” Danny said horrified.

They trooped up the stairs and Danny found that while he had been sacked out on the couch, Steve and Chin had been carting stuff out of the studio to make space for him. The pink chaise lounge stayed.

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They worked until nine o’clock in the evening, clearing a lot of space, and then setting to with mops and brushes. Steve set up a blow up air mattress by the windows, which was a luxurious foot thick. It was going to be a higgelty piggelty room, Danny realised, but interesting. The Narnia wardrobe stayed, along with the chaise lounge and assorted mismatched furniture. The majority of the boxes and statues had been lugged downstairs and stored in the first reception room.

Steve stood, stretching out his back and wincing. “That’s enough for tonight, I think. I’m pretty sure that there’s a bed frame in the other studio. We’ll look at it tomorrow. There’s no mattress, though. We’ll have to set up the bed and then measure the base. We can drive into town in the morning and get a new mattress. You want to grab your bedding from the main room?”

“Sure,” Danny said.

“Beer!” Kono stretched up onto her toes. “I need beer.”

“I need a shower,” Chin said, escaping at the speed of light. “I will join you after I have stood under the shower head for half an hour.”

Danny paused by the door. “Uhm, thanks, guys. I can run out and get beer?”

“Beer?” Steve asked. “There’s beer in the main fridge. If there isn’t, there’ll be some in the utility room fridge -- we buy in bulk from Costco.”

“DVD?” Kono slid towards the door on the newly clean floor.

“I bought X-Men First Class last time I was out,” Chin called from the corridor. “I’ll bring it down.”

“Chin has the latest X-Men DVD,” Kono told Steve. “I think snacks would be good.”

“Popcorn and Pringles?” Steve hazarded.

“Sounds like a plan.” Kono clapped her hands. “I’ll help.”

Danny darted downstairs and grabbed his stuff from the main room, coralling his suitcase and camera bag and the frankly horrendously patterned bedding. The owners were obviously middle-aged women. But it was good quality stuff. He made up the airbed and then quickly washed. Thankfully, there was a surfeit of hot water, but the regular baths were going to get old very quickly.

He spared a glance at the bed before going downstairs, very tempted just to lie down and sleep the night away.
By the time he made way downstairs, Kono was sprawled over a massive armchair, legs hanging over the arm, a massive bowl of popcorn held possessively on her lap, and a bottle of beer tucked down the side of the cushions keeping it upright. Steve lay on the sofa that Danny had slept on last night, taking up its entire length. Danny chose the armchair beside Kono, facing the television and incidentally near the sweating bottles of beer.

“Has Mamo gone home? Toast?”

“Yeah, Mamo’s gone home. Toast does what Toast does,” Steve said. “He’s staying over at his girlfriend’s tonight.”

Chin meandered into the sitting room, a large glass of red wine in his hand. He dropped on Steve’s sofa, forcing him to move his feet.

“DVD?” Kono asked.

“It’s in the player. I meant to watch it last night and then Malia called.”

Steve rolled onto his side and grabbed the remotes controlling the TV and DVD player from the coffee table. Danny snagged a beer as Steve switched on the television and player, navigated to the settings, and selected close captioning.

Of course.

Danny settled back to watch his first film with subtitles.

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“Danny. Danny, wake up.”

Danny jerked up from his sprawl against the arm of the chair. In the background, he could hear Kono cajoling Steve. He opened his eyes to see Kono flicking un-popped kernels at a sleeping Steve.

Steve awoke with a start, limbs flailing, and Danny snorted out a laugh. Steve blinked, still half asleep.

“It’s after midnight, Steve,” Chin said.

“Right,” Steve said, monotone, and rolled off the sofa and staggered to his feet, lurching to the left. Chin caught him, and released him the millisecond he found his balance. “Thanks. G’night.” He staggered off.

Danny kind of thought that he might have missed something, but the siren call of his air mattress was loud.

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# 3 #

Day three. Day three, Danny marvelled, was another day devoted to cleaning and tidying. Steve was right, there was a bed in the other studio -- the significantly less cluttered and tidier studio, but it was going to get early morning sunlight, while his rooms got afternoon light and a glorious sunset.

The frame was in pieces, which made it easier to move into Danny’s studio. Steve was adept with his hands, building the bed and making Danny do the heavy lifting. Danny bemoaned his own goofy
thumbs. Before lunch, they were heading into town to find a mattress.

“So the House hasn’t been occupied for a few years? I mean the cluttered rooms?” Danny asked as Steve drove them into the city in an old pick-up truck.

Steve shrugged. “There’s always been someone there. I guess it’s more busy now. For a long time it was just Mrs. Keawe and ChIn.”

“So what is it that you--?”

“We’re here,” Steve interrupted as he signalled and turned off onto a slow ramp.

As the road curved down, Danny could see the sprawl of a shopping centre. One of the block buildings advertised ‘Bargain Beds.’ Danny set his hands on the dash as Steve took the curve of the road a tad too fast, in Danny’s humble opinion.

“Hey, Mario Andretti, this is a Ford pick-up not a Porsche. It doesn’t corner!” Danny berated when he got his breath back.

Steve grinned and, shit, his entire face lit up when he smiled. Danny clung to his seat as Steve hand-break-turned into a parking space.

“And, of course, because you want to play, we’ve parked at the other end of an empty parking lot instead of close to the store we want to shop in.”

“It’s good exercise,” Steve said. “You should always park away from your goal.”

“I--” The opening chorus of Star Wars ‘The Storm Troopers March’ stopped him. He glowered at his pocket but pulled out his cell phone.

“Hello, Rach-- Monkey! What are you doing on your Mom’s phone?”

“Danno,” Grace chirped. “Mommy wants to talk to you.”

“Right,” Danny kept his tone light, because he was talking to his Monkey.

Steve unhooked his seat belt and turned in his seat so he could better see Danny. He seemed content to wait propped up against the door.

“Ex-wife,” Danny mouthed.

Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Daniel,” Rachel began.

“Rachel,” Danny rejoined.

“I was wondering if you would like to have Grace this weekend. In the background he could hear Grace whooping with glee. He closed his eyes, wincing. How could he take Grace this weekend? He hadn’t even moved in properly. He didn’t know these people – yet. Damn, Rachel having Grace with her when she asked – way to make him look like the bad guy if he had to say no.

“Daniel,” Rachel said crisply “Is it a problem? I thought that you would jump at the chance for an extra weekend.”

“I’m moving into a new…” Danny trailed off, how did he describe it? “--studio this weekend.”

Danny pulled a face, because Rachel’s idea of a studio and the actual studio were two entirely different things.

A sharp finger tapped his knee Danny. He opened his eyes.

“What’s the matter?” Steve asked, leaning closely.

Danny looked at the cell phone, looked at Steve. He hit mute.

“My ex-wife is asking if Grace, my daughter, can stay with me this weekend. I…”Was it even allowed? He couldn’t believe that he hadn’t asked.

“Sure.” Steve shrugged. “Why not?”

Danny thought about the ramshackle space he was occupying.

“There’s plenty of room,” Steve finished.

Fuck, he wasn’t passing up time with his Monkey. He thumbed the mute button. “Yes, I’ll pick her up normal time.”

“See you at three o’clock.” Rachel rang off.

Shit, he didn’t have a car anymore.

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The tally of favours that he was drawing up was getting ridiculous. Danny stared bleakly out of the truck window, watching the high walls of protected, alarmed estates beside perfectly manicured sidewalks. The GPS adhered to the windscreen pinged and the LCD screen flashed ‘destination.’ Obediently, Steve pulled over to the kerb by the stupidly enormous gates of Stan’s pointlessly ostentatious mansion.

Danny was not petty and vindictive.

The House was significantly superior – it had character.

“Danno!” Grace swung off the rails on the inside of the gates. “Daddy!”

“Jesus,” Danny grumbled. He was happy to see his baby, but the fact that Rachel sent her to the gates to wait for him, galled. Danny piled out of the truck. “Monkey.”

Grace leaned back, craning her head over her shoulder. “You can open the gates, Maria.” She hung on them as the housekeeper thumbed a handheld remote and opened the gates.

Danny stayed pointedly on the threshold. Grace jumped down and whipped around the gate to jump into his arms.

“Daddy!” She swung her arms around his neck and suddenly his day was perfect. “I get to stay with you all weekend. When will I see your new studio?”

“About that,” Danny began, “I’ve got a new place and that’s where the studio is.”

Behind them the gates closed. Maria had left Grace’s weekend case outside the gates. Used to quiet
and unobtrusive servants, Grace leaned back in Danny’s arms to look at him straight on.

“Is it nicer than the apartment?”

Danny thought about it for a heartbeat. “Yeah, I think it is.”

“Hey.” Steve was hanging out the truck window. He drummed his fingers on the side door.

Danny turned to face him, swinging Grace onto his hip. “Grace, this is Steve. This is Grace, Steve. Steve lives in the same house that I do, at the moment.”

“Hi, Steve!” Grace smiled and waved.

Steve waved back. Carrying her easily, Danny picked up the case and stomped over the truck. He wasn’t angry, he was happy. Just everything, everything, was too much at the moment.

“Do, I get to sit in the back?” Grace peered excitedly into the flatbed.

“No, you’ll sit between me and Steve.” Danny tucked Grace’s case in the back, squeezing it beside a locked box, hoping it wouldn’t blow way and end up in Timbuktu.

“Okay.” Grace wiggled down and darted around the side of the truck.

“Road!” Danny roared, chasing after her. But the street was quiet.

“Sorry, Daddy.” She hung on the door handle swinging a little.

Danny bent over at the waist. “Grace, I will smack you if you do that again. That was dangerous. I don’t care that you’re a big girl, almost eight, in an argument between you and a car, the car will win.”

“I’m sorry, Danno.” Grace looked down at her feet.

“In.” Danny hoisted her into the high cab.

She clambered over the passenger seat and dropped into the smaller middle seat. “I get my own special seat and I can see everything!”

“Magic.” Danny secured her with the lap belt and then double checked the lock. He slammed his door and pulled his own seat belt into position.

“Secure?” Steve asked.

“Yeah,” Danny confirmed, slinging an arm around Grace’s shoulders. He wasn’t to sure about lap belts; he thought that he had read that they weren’t that safe.

Steve pulled away slowly and carefully, and drove with none of the early afternoon’s race car driving.

Grace chirruped away, happy and loud with the day’s events, including the antics of Mr. Hoppy, and the improbable adventures of Benji and John and Sarah at school.

“Mr. Steve, you live with my daddy?” Grace finally asked.

Steve darted at glance at her, but was obviously concentrating on the driving.
“Sorry, Grace, I didn’t catch that.”

“You live with daddy?”

Steve laughed. “You’ll see. You’ll like the House.”

~*~

“This is the best place in the universe,” Grace sirened as she blew through the kitchen at the speed of light, and ran into the corridor.

Danny dropped his head on the kitchen table. “Sorry.”

Chin laughed. “It’s perfect for kids. It’s every adventure-mystery book you’ve ever read rolled up into one. It could take you days to explore the House, especially if you get into the reception rooms.”

“And the gardens,” Steve said between mouthfuls of coffee. “I’ve always liked the grounds.”


“In the grounds?” Steve asked. “She should probably avoid the bear trap.”

“What!”

“Steve!” Chin batted Steve on the shoulder.

Steve smiled, unrepentant. “It would be best if she didn’t play near the kilns or the workshops. Oh, and the fence. I’ll show you.”

“Now?” Danny asked as Steve put down his mug.

Steve nodded. “If you want.”

“Monkey!” Danny yelled. “We’re going to explore outside.”

“This is place is great.” Grace ran in, pigtails flying. “It’s just like the house in the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe or Lex Luthor’s mansion. I found the door which led to all the special rooms filled with stuff. There’s a statue of a lady with flowers draped all down her front and she holding a big vase with water falling out.”

It sounded a little risqué, Danny thought.

“I counted and there’s seven doors. There’s so many things.” Grace bobbed up and down. “There’s a set of double doors, which are enormous.”

“And there’s more outside to see, I guess,” Danny said in the face of that enthusiasm.

“What’s outside? Do you have a swing set?” Grace asked.

“I dunno. Steve?”

Steve pursed his lips. “I didn’t catch that,” he said slowly.

Chin slipped from his seat and crouched down, at eye level with Grace. She stopped dead realising that something important was happening and flicked a glance at Danny. Chin smiled reassuringly.
Danny made a step forwards but caught himself.

“You see the things in Steve’s ears?” Chin asked. Grace immediately stared at Steve.

A hint of a flush under his tan, Steve cocked his head to the side. They were hardly visible; beige-tan plastic moulded lumps sitting directly in the well of his ear.

“They’re in the ear aids, sometimes they’re called ITEs,” Chin continued. “They’re a special kind of hearing aid that helps Steve hear what’s happening around him.”

“Okay,” Grace said slowly.

“But we can help Steve as well,” Chin said.

There was a definite flush and that expression could only be described as stoic. Steve looked as if he was bracing for a punch.

“Steve hears low sounds best. And he’s going to watch your lips. You’re eight?” Chin hazarded.

“Seven and a half. I’ll be eight in May.”

“Well, like all seven and a half year olds, you have a high ‘pitched’ voice. It will help if you tried and speak lower,” Chin demonstrated as he spoke. “Does that make sense?”

Grace nodded slowly, eyes catching Danny’s.

“It’s okay.” He knelt by his daughter. She shuffled in close, under his arm. She turned her face up expectantly at him. “Question, Monkey??”

“So I’ve got to talk low like a tuba,” Grace’s voice ratcheted up a scale, “not high like a flute?”

“Exactly.” Danny beamed proudly. “And try and remember to speak a little slowly?” he glanced for confirmation from Chin and Steve. Chin nodded, but Steve was standing at parade rest gazed fixed on the wall. Unfortunately, Danny knew Williamses and speaking slowly was a difficult combination, especially when excitement was added into the mix.

“I. can. do. that,” she said.

Danny laughed, because he knew that she would try her best. He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. Steve was now watching them watch him; he deliberately stuffed his hands low in his pockets of his board-shorts, breaking the tense line of his posture. Chin smiled and Danny made a mental note, once again to ask if he could photograph him.

Chin rose to his feet. “Relax, Brah,” he said to Steve.

Grace squirmed free of Danny’s light grasp and skipped across to stand directly before Steve. He stared at her like she was a firework about to go off.

“Is there a swing set in the garden?” she asked carefully.

“Kind of,” Steve replied.

~*~

# 4 #
“No.” Danny caught Grace by the back of her t-shirt. “I am not letting my daughter on that death trap.”

Said death trap was a rope swing with a single cross piece of wood as a seat. It hung from a branch belonging to a tree that was as old and hoary as Methuselah. The gnarly tree even looked like it had a mossy beard.

He should have known what to expect when Steve had taken them along a meandering, up-and-down trail through what was essentially a forest.

Danny crossed his arms and refused to be charmed by the dappled sunlit glade. The opening in the woods was probably due to some catastrophic climatic event.

“Daddy,” Grace whined.

“It’s perfectly safe,” Steve said. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Grace shadowed Steve so Danny had no choice but to follow. In all fairness, the swing seemed a little more sturdy closer up. What he assumed was a stick was smoothed and rounded on the top side forming a comfortable, splinter-free seat. The knotted rope passed though a carved hole. Faint traces of swirling designs decorated the base and ends, worn indistinct with the patina of age. The rope was as thick as Danny wrist.

“Come on,” Steve jumped up and caught the rope above his head. He hung there biceps taut. Above him a breeze gently ruffled the leaves of the tree,

“What?”

“Get on,” Steve explained. Swaying just a little bit as his feet dangled past the seat. “If it can hold both of us, it can definitely hold Grace.”

Danny looked down at his smart khaki pants and leather shoes.

“Unless you can’t, of course,” Steve dared.

“Oh, bring it.”

Danny clambered onto to the swing, setting his feet on either side of the rope on the seat. He tugged hard on the rope and pulled himself face to face with Steven J. McGarrett and froze. He breathed in Steve’s air, their noses almost touching. Geez, Steve’s eyes were hazely green and blue – there were even tiny flecks of amber like molten gold. Macro lens, in clean sunlight, Danny thought, to best capture the eddies of colour. But what framing?

Steve waggled his eyebrows once and grinned goofily. “Hold on.”

“What!”

Steve jack-knifed, jumping hard on the rope. The branch above them flexed, leaves rustled and a blue-black bird launched itself in to the sky squawking. Grace yelled in delight.

“You…. Child!” Danny jerked back and off the swing.

Steve laughed richly. “It held, didn’t it?”

He flipped upside down, crossing his legs around the rope and let go with his hands holding his arms straight out at the sides. He hung head down. His tight t-shirt slid down a fraction, revealing a line of
tanned skin.

“Daddy.” Grace pressed her pink Coolpix Nikon camera into his hands.

Danny gazed at it stupidly for a heartbeat, and then dropped down on one knee framing the shot.

“Stay,” he ordered, but Steve seemed content to hang.

Danny quickly checked the settings, the lens was shit but they might be lucky. The angle was boring, but he snapped off a couple of shots regardless. Emotion was what counted, that smile was as bright as the sun.

Danny dropped down, lying flat on the grass, and flipped onto his back, looking up along the long length of Steve’s body, the line of rope twining around him, stretching and knotted around the branch above. The background of branches and leaves was a patchwork of living colour enhanced with light and shadow.

Hmm, he realised that he was going to have to revisit this, but the shots that he took were going to help him firm up his ideas.

Steve was watching him like a hawk, or an upside down owl, expression weighing and speculative.

The smile was glorious, but there was something to be said about the thousand yard stare. Danny fiddled with the focus and aligned a shot with the left half of Steve’s face in the foreground, his body framing the right side of the shot and the leaves overhead stretching over the majority of the picture. The gnarly, mossy trunk mirrored Steve.

“Daddy?” Grace said bored, even though she had given him the camera and she knew what he was like,

Steve ended the impromptu photo shoot; curling up and over, and dropping to earth to stand, astride Danny’s chest. Wrapped around his forearm, the rope was pulled taut.

Danny snapped off a shot, looking straight up Steve’s nose – just because.

“My turn,” Grace yelled, stepping over Danny and grabbing for the swing.

“No, acrobatics.” He glared up at Steve as he freed his arm from the rope. “I can’t believe that you did that. Teaching my daughter bad habits.”

Steve huffed, even as he proffered his hand, lending Danny help in standing, awkwardly manoeuvring him – one step, two steps -- out of the arc of Grace’s swing as she pumped her legs. They each seemed to support the other.

“Proved it’s safe.”

“Safe. Hmmm.” He snapped of a series of shots -- defaulting to sports camera mode -- of Grace swinging high, her pigtails streaming behind her.

“How much land is there?” Danny asked because they had been walking through the grounds forever to reach the swing.

“The whole peninsula.” Steve held his right thumb and fore finger together shaping a triangle. “The house is in the here – sort of offset at the bottom left hand corner.”

Steve had large hands, Danny noticed.
“The sheltered cove follows the length of my thumb. It’s really rocky around my fingernails. There’s sheer cliffs along the length of my index finger. The trees are buffered by wind and rain so there’s open space along most of the edge, with little trees and shrubs and brush. There’s marker poles along the length. We need to show Grace where they are so she knows not to go any further.”

“What!” Danny demanded, imaging plummeting depths and eroding rocks collapsing under his Gracie.

“It’s perfectly safe.” Steve stamped his foot. “Solid metamorphic basalt. It’s just sensible to mark the edge. She’s bright; she’ll understand.”

“Grace,” Danny bellowed, “off the swing.”

“You’re not leaving are you?” Steve asked.

“No, you’re going to show us these markers.”

~*~

“Daddy, I like it here,” Grace said. Danny tip-toed through the final piles of clutter from the bathroom to his double bed.

“Yeah?”

Grace was curled on her side in her princess bed – aka horrendous pink chaise lounge. Big enough for a decadent, slothful adult, there was room for a tiny Gracie to sleep in perfect comfort.

In the sprinkling of moonlight, he could see that her eyes were closed and lips parted as she breathed slowly and evenly. She was sleep talking, Danny realised.

“Good night, Monkey,” Danny whispered, dropping the lightest of kisses on her forehead. She snuggled down further into her bed.

They had had full late afternoon-evening exploring: finding the markers, following meandering trails which had only covered half of the grounds; coming full circle to the back of the house to the workshops. Steve had declared them off limits with a gravitas which Grace responded to with wide eyed seriousness.

Oh, Steve hadn’t kept them secret and therefore tantalising. They had a guided tour of the uninhabited pottery workshop with a mothballed kiln. Danny had lifted Grace up and let her look in the window of Mamo’s studio to look at the lines of Olo, Kiko’o, Alaia and Paipo surfboards in various stages of construction.

“Oh, Papa he’e nalu,” Steve had whispered.

There was a couple of other workshops but the dinner bell had rang and Grace was introduced to Chin and Kono (Danny didn’t know why she just didn’t get a studio). Toast had trailed in late, weighed down by books, and disappeared upstairs with a careless wave.

Danny slipped into bed, luxuriating in a new, firm mattress. Folding his hands behind his head, he looked up at the night sky. It was so isolated on the peninsula there was no light pollution. The cloudy-light of the pin-pricks of the Milky Way were visible. Danny shuffled into a comfortable position, thoughts on lenses and tripods and new images.

~*~
It was well past sun up when Danny awoke, blinking. He was going to have to buy some curtains… if he stayed.

“Monkey?” he called, rolling onto his side.

The chaise lounge was abandoned, the sheet and blanket cast on the floor. He had slept through Grace getting up. Stretching -- the bed was glorious -- he contemplated and dismissed grabbing a quick bath. He best find Grace. Maybe the door closing as she snuck out had woken him?

Rooting through his suitcase, he bowed to the inevitable. Today was going to be a laundry day. There was a pair of jeans which weren’t too disgusting and, after sniffing three t-shirts, he selected the least vile.

Where the Hell were his shoes?

Danny padded downstairs. The House had that resoundingly emptiness which meant no one was in. Danny picked up speed, rushing into the kitchen -- even the hub of the House was vacant.

“Grace?”

The gentle plop of the coffee machine was the only sound.

“Coffee?” Someone had been here recently.

Propped up against the coffee pot was a lilac notepad.

Danny snatched it up. In familiar, careful, loops and curls, Grace had written:

Hi Daddy,

You were sleeping. Steve and me have gone to the beech.

Lots of Love

Grace Elizabeth Williams

Underneath it, Steve – Danny assumed – had drawn a spindly, carefully annotated map directing him to the beach. He was going to thump the man when he caught up with them.

~*~

“Dragons! Here There Be Dragons! Is that supposed to be funny?” Danny demanded as he stomped across the sand.

“Danno!” Grace flung herself up into his arms, twining her legs around his waist. “You woke up – finally.”

Steve looked up from where he was carefully patting sand into a turret. The sandcastle was a sprawling edifice as long as Grace was tall. It was halfway there; Grace had been carefully digging a moat with an old rusty spade.

Grace was wearing a one-piece but she was dry. “You haven’t been in the water?”

“I wanted to, but I told Steve that you didn’t like it. He wrote there were dragons on his map and I
laughed. Can I go swim now?"

“I --” Danny had jeans and a t-shirt on. He wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“It’s okay. Steve is a seal; he can take me. He can swim and scuba dive and surf and water ski and hold his breath for nine minutes.”

“A seal?”

“Yeah, Sea, Air and Land.” Grace sat tall, proudly.

“You mean a SEAL.” Danny corrected. Steve cocked a smile at him and returned to picking out details on the top of the turret with a lollypop stick.

“That’s what I said,” Grace confirmed.

“Steve is a SEAL?”

“Currently retired if you want to be pedantic.” Steve carefully placed the lollypop stick like a flagpole in the turret. “So, can I take Grace in the water?”

The waves were gently lapping against the beach; it was flat calm. It was a perfect little cove, accessible from the sloping, twisty path from the estate. There was a young family a little way off, the mom helping her toddler stand on the shifting sand. Judging by said toddler’s expression, he was a little dubious about the new experience underfoot. There were a couple of bags left unattended and Danny spotted a few folk in the water swimming strongly across the width of the cove. Safe, really private but no life guard, he noted.

It behoved him to point it out. “No life guard.”

“I’m a Navy SEAL, Danny,” Steve said, insulted.

“And?” He had a vague clue as to what that entailed, but, hey, this was his daughter. Danny waved his hand directing Steve to expand.

“I undertook a twenty five week course at BUD/S. The first eight weeks focussed on running, swimming, obstacle course, and basic water and lifesaving skills. I then did seven weeks training to become a Naval Special Warfare combat swimmer. I then spent ten weeks becoming a naval commando. I’ve been a SEAL for many years. That means that I can swim.”

“Daddy?” Grace said with an edge of a whine. “Please?”

“Yes, please.” Steve echoed with a grin.

“Okay, but you can’t go out of your depth. You need to be able to stand up.”

Steve stood up. Danny marvelled that his body language seemed to scream: *Geez, over protective, much?*

“Here.” Steve plucked his aids out of his ears, pulled out a box from his shorts pocket, stuck them in and tossed them over. “Look after them.”

Danny caught them one handed, fingers tightening around the case.

“I”
“Down, Danno.” Grace wriggled free and ran over to Steve.

“We’ll be fine.” He caught Grace’s hand and paddled into the surf lapping at the edge of the castle.

Not being able to hear doesn’t affect his ability to swim, Danny half-rationalised half-chastised himself.

Grace squeaked, dangling on Steve’s arm as she jumped over a tiny crest of a wave.

He was gong to have to invest in some trunks, Danny realised as he plopped butt first onto the sand and watched them play

~*~

There was no shade. He’d left the coffee pot perking on the counter. There was nothing to read. Returning to the House never entered the equation. He rooted in Grace’s bag and, thankfully, found a tube of factor 50# kids’ waterproof sunscreen.

Crankily, he lay back on Steve’s towel and shielded his eyes with the crook of his elbow and focused on dozing.

It didn’t work.

He guessed four hours had passed or maybe thirty minutes.

Danny sat up.

Steve was in the process of launching Danny’s baby girl into the air. Objectively, it was a beautiful arc of movement that he wished that he had caught on camera (he had forgotten his camera again). Subjectively, he was Not. A. Happy. Camper.

“Enough!” he hollered, as Grace surfaced, a wide-wide grin on her face.

He tapped the wrist that would have been wearing a watch if he had thought about grabbing one.

Across the gentle waves, Grace gesticulated at Steve, pointed at Danny, pulled a face, grabbed Steve’s hand and then towed him back to shore.

“Danno?” Grace asked, as she set feet on dry land.

“Lunch. Brunch, whatever. It’s time to eat.”

Grace canted her head to the side, consideringly. She gazed up at Steve and mouthed, “Lunch?”

Steve snorted. “I could eat.”

Danny slapped his palm into his forehead.

Steve bent over smoothly and snatched his towel from the sand and shook it out. Danny smiled unrepentantly; he wasn’t going to sit on the sand. Steve scrubbed his hair dry and patted down his skin-tight t-shirt. The stretch of the vaguely shiny material across his biceps was interesting, Danny noted. The swirling edge of intricate tattoos poked out – Danny wanted to see more. Steve carefully dried the dips and wells of his ears.

“Oh, you want?” Danny held up the black case.
Lips pursed, Steve nodded once. Steve might have casually lobbed them over before he went swimming, but Danny carefully handed them over. Mouth open, intrigued, Grace watched as Steve carefully inserted one his ear.

Steve dropped to one knee. An aid rested on the palm of his hand. Grace bent over, hands clasped behind her back.

“It’s very small.”

“But powerful.” Steve tossed it in the air and caught it, and then stuck it in his ear.

“They help?” Grace asked.

Steve shrugged, nodded and flinched all at the same time. “Yes, they help.”

“I’m glad.” Grace smiled sunnily.

Danny really wanted to know what the story was. If he had had his laptop he would have been Googling like crazy. Steve was a Navy SEAL, or to be more precise a retired Navy SEAL. He was young to be retired. Accident at work? Danny guessed.

“Food?” Danny asked.

~*~

The habitual cold cuts, salad, divine freshly baked bread and relishes ended up on the table. Steve had also added a bowl of anchovies marinated in oil and vinegar. Danny had pushed it out of reach with his little finger.

The coffee was stewed but hot and caffeine rich; Danny was happy. He wasn’t going to touch Steve’s pitcher of iced tea with a bargepole.

Steve ate anchovies like a baby seal or a puffin. He delicately picked the bowl clean with his fingertips, angling his head as he munched them down one at a time. His hum of contentment was actually cute.

Grace chatted and Steve watched like a hawk, a tiny little furrow of concentration marring his forehead. Danny only had a small sample -- he couldn’t believe how quickly he had got used to living in the House – but Steve was quiet when more than three people were in the room. He was better one-on-one.

“Have you always lived here, Mr. Steve?” Grace asked.

“No, but I’ve always spent a lot of time here. This was my grandmother’s house. To be accurate, it’s been in the family since forever.”

Danny managed not to yelp. Steve owned the House?

“You’re the owner?” He leaned forwards so that Steve could see him better.

“Sort of. It’s complicated. The Charter supersedes ownership. The family looks after the House and the peninsula.”

Danny threw his hands high. “So you just have an open house for artists who need… help?”

“Danno?” Grace asked tentatively.
"You’ve read the Charter?" Steve half-asked because pretty much when he had been awake he had been with Danny and Danny hadn’t had a minute to read any freakin’ Charter.

“No, I haven’t read the Charter.”

Steve raised his palm. “Can you talk a little slower?”

“No,” Danny said pissily, “I have not read the Charter. “

“The House and lands have to be used for the benefit of the community and be preserved for the future,” Steve quoted. “My grandmother chose to do it like this. And it works.”

“Why?”

Steve craned his head. “Why? Why, what?”

“Community? Why the community?”

“Believe it or not--” Steve shrugged, “--it’s a because of a curse.”

“A curse,” Danny said flatly. No fucking way.

“A curse, Danno, that’s like a fairytale.” Grace got up on her knees on her seat.

“Yes, make believe,” Danny pointed out.

“What’s the curse about?” Grace asked.

Steve heaved out a sigh. “It’s pretty old and confused. It’s only a little curse -- more of an obligation.” He held his hand up, fingertips a fraction of an inch apart.

“And?” Grace asked.

“There’s a tapestry in the Hall, which tells a lot of the story.”

“A Hall?” Danny asked.

Grace was gone, speed of light, running out the door, abandoning her brunch.

“Tell her not to go in the Hall without us.” Steve stood and set off after her at a controlled, but fast clip.

“Grace,” Danny yelled as he chased after them, “slow down.”

Danny followed Steve to the corridor of reception rooms. Grace had made it to the double doors at the end of the corridor, before they caught up with her. She swung, as was her habit, off the ornate gold handles waiting for them.

Steve pointed at a box by the door loaded with house shoes, slippers, some fluffy foot thingies and balled up socks.

“The floor is special,” Steve explained, “it’s a wooden sprung floor for dancing. No bare feet or hard shoes.” He put on a pair of slippers.

“I didn’t when I was exploring before.” Grace gazed at him eyes huge. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Steve shifted awkwardly. “You didn’t know. I hadn’t told you. Now you know.”
“It’s okay, Monkey. Put some of the soft shoes on.”

Grace rooted through the box and selected the giant fluffy things.

Steve pushed open the double doors into a world of sunlight. Grace drifted past him, swirling on her fluffy shoes, taking in the high arched ceiling and crystalline chandeliers.

Windows stretched from floor to ceiling at either end of the long Hall. Danny made a tentative bounce and, yes, the floor moved ever so slightly. It was a pretty amazing floor made of interlocking blocks of different shades of wood. The central core was gold and amber and edged by an outer knotwork pattern of darker woods. Where there weren’t windows, long tapestries hung. In complex contrast to the old-world style of the Hall, a purple, rectangular mat and plastic crate was set in the centre of the room.

“I like to do yoga in here,” Steve said, following Danny’s line of sight.

“Is this it? Is this it?” Grace stood before a massive tapestry dominating the far wall.

“How the Hell do you make something like that?”

“A really, really big loom and a lot of focus,” Steve said. “A lady back in the 1940s made all these. My Grandmother said that Mrs. Mackenzie wanted big, she was sick of pillows and comforters she wanted to…?”

“Expand her horizons.”

“I guess.”

“What’s the story?” Grace asked.

“You tell me.” Steve pointed. “It’s all there.”

At the top, a night sky filled with stars bled into a morning of rising sun. A stretch of sea and waves and dancing dolphins circling a sinking topsail schooner dominated the centre of the tapestry. Stormy waves and dark black clouds marred the left hand edge of the sea. The disparity drew the eye. Towards the bottom of the tapestry a pale, pale lady was draped over a triangle of rocks, her hair a snarl like knotted seaweed. There was an element of scales to her legs which trailed into the sea. A Hawaiian man was crouching, offering her a hand as she reached to him.

“She’s a princess and she was on the ship and it sunk and she washed ashore and rescued by a prince and they fell in love.”

“Astute summary,” Steve said forgetting that he was talking to a seven year old.

“You got it in one, kiddo.” Danny ruffled her hair.

“So what happened next? Why’s there a curse?” Grace asked, getting straight onto the important parts.

Steve gazed at the tapestry. “She waited a long time to be rescued.”

“Why? Wasn’t anyone looking for her?” Grace asked, face wreathed with concern.

“No, her family were looking for her. But the world was a lot bigger then. You could be at sea for months -- or even years -- without seeing land.”
“Oh, was she lonely?”

“Probably,” Steve said, pondering. “But after awhile she wasn’t lonely and she really didn’t need rescuing. She fell in love and married ‘Aukai and had two children. But then her father found her.” Steve pointed at the dark storm cloud and belatedly, Danny spotted a tiny ship in the centre of the darkness.

“And dad didn’t approve of his baby daughter’s choices?” Danny hazarded.

“No,” Steve said succinctly.

Danny winced, because there was a dark core to this story. Steve looked down at Grace gazing expectantly up at him to continue the tale.

“The captain took his daughter back and he defeated everyone who stood in his way, even ‘Aukai. Mary cried all the way back to England and never forgave her father until the day he died.”

“Oh.” Grace scrunched his nose up. “What about her babies?”

“Mary’s father brought his granddaughter with them but left her brother behind.”

“Jesus.” Danny rubbed his face as he muttered under his breath, “Colonial shithead.”

“What about the curse?” Grace persisted.

“The captain left a lot of unhappy people behind, I think that is where the curse came from. Misfortune followed the captain because all he did was take.”

“Misfortune, bad luck,” Danny translated.

Grace glared up at the tapestry mulishly.

“Did Mary make it back home?” Danny asked reading Grace’s mind. They needed a happy ending or there was going to be tears in the near future.

Steve shook his head. “Her daughter did. She married a Royal Naval officer and came with him to the Islands of Hawaii. And he took the peninsula where Mary’s mother had been shipwrecked and built the first house.”

“He ‘took’ the peninsula?” Danny raised an eyebrow.

“Euphemisms for the win. Take, take, take, take,” Steve said, keeping one eye on Grace. “There is a deed, hmmm.”

“Did Mary’s daughter – what was her name? – find her brother?” Grace asked still focussed on the tapestry.

“Peni, although everyone called her Penelope, did find her brother.” Steve smiled.

Grace breathed a massive sigh of relief. “It’s still a sad story. Mary never got to go home.”

Danny pulled her against his hip.

She turned her face into his tummy. “Most fairytales are a little sad,” she sighed.

“I know,” Danny commiserated.
Steve’s face screwed up in a mismatch of sympathy and confusion. “I have ice cream,” he ventured.

“Really?” Grace rolled her head on Danny’s gut until she could see Steve out of one eye.

“Mint-chocolate chip.” Steve chanced a smile and Grace returned it wholeheartedly.

Danny wished most problems were solved as easily.

~*~

# 6 #

“Danno?” Grace wiggled under his arm and clambered on his lap. “Can we look at our photos?” She held up her Nikon camera and cables.

“Of course.” He angled the camera in her hands and selected playback.

“No! I want to see it on your laptop. We can look at them properly.” Grace rotated her fingers and thumbs making different sized rectangles. “We can pick the best bits.”

“My laptop broke. I don’t have one at the moment.”

“Broke? We can look on your desktop.”

“That broke too.”

“Both? Grace asked -- a bright, intelligent Monkey.

“They got very wet in my old apartment. It’s one of the reasons that I had to move here.”

“It’s okay. I’ll bring my laptop next time. Oooh!” She slithered out from under his arm like when she was three months old and fresh from the bath. “Steve! Steve.”

“No.” Danny grabbed at air as Grace disappeared out of the living room. He kind of just sat there watching the ‘Thundercats’ reboot. He didn’t really approve of what they had done to Tygra – he had been his favourite Thundercat when he had been Gracie’s age.

“What are you watching?” Steve poked his head around the door; Grace peered around his hip.

“‘Thundercats’.”

“I brought Steve and his laptop. Can I go get your camera?” Grace asked.

Danny nodded. “It’s in our room.” He called out as she raced away.


“Digital age,” Danny observed.

The windows icon swirled across the screen. Like a watched kettle never boils the computer seemed to be taking a glacial age to boot up.

“You okay doing this?” he asked Steve.

“Yeah, why not?” Steve drummed at the side of the casing. “Takes a while to boot up.”
“Yeah.”

“I don’t have any Photoshop programmes, except Paint.”

Danny shuddered.

“You lost your laptop?” Steve asked.

“Yeah. Fire and water damage. There’s no resurrection from that.” It had been a charred briquette of plastic and metal.

“Toast might have a spare laying around.”

“That’s not necessary.”

“Got it!” Grace plopped beside Danny, lifted his arm up and tucked it around her shoulders.

“I can see,” Danny said protecting his lap has she dumped the bag on him.

“Finally.” Steve’s fingers blurred as he tapped in a very long password. Wordless, he proffered the laptop over, so that Danny had to juggle it and the camera.

Steve lazed back slinging an arm over the back of the sofa behind Danny’s head. He smiled, shifting closer to see the laptop screen.

Finally, Danny got the pink Nikon hooked up to the laptop with a USB cable (he had even lost his card reader).

“I took some of these,” Grace pointed out, “because it’s my camera.”

In the corner of the room, Lion-o invoked the power of the Thundercats.

Grace actually had a good eye, and Danny wasn’t saying that just because she was his Monkey. Yes, there was the occasional headless zombie, but she took photos of anything and everything that she was interested in from the cornerstone edge of a building to her foot held before the sky as she lay on the grass.

“Okay, for the record,” Danny said as the photographs cycled through to the outside of the House, photos which had hadn’t taken, but his were coming up soon. “I don’t normally let anyone see my photographs until I am happy with them. These are going to be raw.”


Caught, his whole face smiled, creases around his eyes, teeth white and shiny – it wasn’t in any way endearing, Danny told himself.

“Yep.” Grace tapped Steve’s nose on the screen.

Steve hid his face in his hands as the images scrolled on. They were good. They were indeed raw, but Steve was one photogenic son-of-a-bitch. Danny hit pause at the first hanging shot. It was straight on, but all the energy and power was palpable. There was something there. Danny stroked his finger over the touchpad and selected the rectangle of Steve suspended. He was definitely on to something here.

“Daaaa daaaaano,” Grace whined.
“Moving on.” Danny tapped the right arrow key. The shot of Steve hanging on the rope when Danny had been lying beneath him and the tree arching overhead worked.

“I like that one, Danno.”

Steve splayed his fingers and peered at the screen. “Oh, that’s weird. I mean I like it. But it’s weird seeing… me.”

“Haven’t you had your photo taken before?” Danny arched an eyebrow.

“Usually not hanging from a tree like a monkey.”

“That rhymes,” Grace chirped.

“Badly,” Danny noted as the photographs scrolled on. Ah, he thought, I’m going to have to print off the ones of Grace on the swing when I’ve got a printer.

The ‘Thundercats’ segued into ‘Avatar: the Last Airbender’ and they lost Grace’s attention. Danny set the computer aside on the coffee table rather than hook up his Canon.

“I don’t actually like cartoons,” Steve volunteered suddenly. “You don’t get a lot of subtitles except for Anime and boxsets.”

“What happened?” Danny asked before he could stop himself. He clapped a hand over his mouth.

Steve glanced at Grace lying on the floor, head propped in her hands, entranced. Rising to his feet, he jerked his head at the door.

Right. Danny guessed that they were heading to the kitchen, ’cos the kitchen was the place of conversations.

“Coffee?” Steve asked. “Nah. I don’t want coffee.”

Steve rooted in the fridge and pulled out two glass bottles and thumped them on the table. Danny skimmed a finger over rapidly appearing condensation on the glass as Steve rattled through drawers looking for a bottle opener.

“Long story short,” Steve said succinctly, holding the bottle opener clenched in his fist. “I got too close to an IED in Afghanistan. Boom. It was a daisy chain along a roadway. Multiple explosions and my hearing was completely fucked. I was lucky.”

“Lucky?” Danny echoed.

“I’m here.” Steve stretched over the table and cracked the Longnecks.

“Shit, man.” Danny glugged down half of the contents of the bottle in one swoop. He slammed down the bottle on the table top. “Thank you for your service. Oh, I mean that. I really do. I don’t mean it tritely. Christ. I’m so sorry.”

Leaning up against the counter, Steve studied him like a spider trapped under a glass. He slugged back a mouthful of beer.

“Give me a break, man. I don’t know what you’re thinking. I don’t want to upset you,” Danny continued.

Steve took another glug. “You’ll find, actually, that I’m pretty hard to upset.” He rolled his eyes.
“Civilians.”

“You might be hard to upset, but I can tell that you are pissed off.” Danny waved his finger at Steve, encompassing stiffness and square jawness. “And I don’t blame you. I would be so annoyed I would be spitting bullets. I’d be punching holes in walls.”

Steve pushed off the counter and sat diagonally to Danny’s chair, giving him fraction of the normal attention that he bestowed. The bottle dangled back and forth between his fingertips.

“I kicked a door off its hinges,” Steve said reminiscing. “I kicked my physiotherapist in the nuts. Not one of my better days. But he was a patronising son of a bitch. The next one was better, at least she had balls.”

“We’ll if you get annoyed at me and kick me, I’ll kick you back,” Danny promised.

“I’m sure you will.” Steve smirked.

“But, Babe. Man, thanks for telling me. I can’t know what its like, but I can,” Danny bit the bullet, “listen.”

Steve rocked back in his chair -- he failed to balance it -- and shifted his weight bringing all four legs back to the floor with a thump. He gazed out the window, expression pensive. Deliberately, he took another mouthful of beer.

Danny waited, striving for the patience that he knew that had didn’t have. He imagined setting up a shot, Steve back at the tree, higher though, closer to the leaves. A green filter would mute the colours. A small dark part of him wanted to catch the expression that was currently gracing Steve’s face.

“Not when Gracie’s here,” Steve finally said. “It’s a beer and whisky conversation, late at night, when the ghosts are walking.”

Danny hunted for the right words and finally said, “I’ll be here.”

~*~

# 7 #

Saturday segued smoothly into Sunday. Danny finally got his laundry done and, with Grace, rooted through the reception rooms, hunting for a desk and chair. The wacky multi-drawered desk he found was, according to Steve, called an escritoire. It looked like a bookcase and a sideboard had mated and then produced a mutant. He and Grace played Goldilocks until they found the perfect chair, which did not match the table, but neither did anything else in his studio.

Toast appeared at one point with a loner laptop which appeared to have five times the processing power of Danny’s old laptop. Danny thanked him profusely and pointed out that Steve’s apparently brand new, shiny laptop was as slow as fuck. A couple of hours later, Toast complimented Danny on his photography skills. Apparently Grace had loaded her favourites (which matched Danny’s favourites) as screensavers on the computer when he and Steve had been talking in the kitchen. There had been a short lecture about respecting people’s property.

Dinner came around too quickly and then, annoyingly, it was time to get Grace back to her mother’s. Danny stared glumly at the closing gates. Grace trooped back up to the house. She paused, forcing the housekeeper to stop, turned and waved. Danny waved back and then waited until she walked out
“When do you get her again?” Steve asked softly.

“Depends. It should be next weekend. But Rachel might want to discuss next weekend in light of the gift of this unexpected weekend.”

“Can she do that? I mean isn’t visitation agreed by courts?”

“Yeah, you’d think so.” Danny crossed his arms and slumped. Steve read the massive hint and let him stew in peace as he drove them back to the House.

~*~

“It’s Sunday evening,” Steve said suddenly as they wandered around the back of the House to the kitchen. The front door just seemed to be for visitors.

“And?”

“Meeting in the kitchen,” Steve said as he opened the door.

“Hey.” Toast waved laconically. He was sitting at the kitchen table. Mamo was present. Chin sat at the head of the table, an open laptop before him. Kono was pootling at the counter, pouring hot water into mugs.

“Whoa.” Danny froze. Then realisation struck -- they weren’t going to kick him out for bringing Grace over. “Chores.”

“Yep.”

Gingerly, Danny sat. This was the weirdest part of the whole co-operative thing going on. Steve didn’t sit immediately, but closed the door into the corridor and lifted off a white board hanging to the back of it.

“You want a tea or coffee?” Kono asked.

“No, thank you.” Danny shook his head; it was a little late for tea or coffee if he wanted to sleep tonight.

Steve dropped the board on the table and turned to the fridge. He pulled out a pitcher of something pale gold coloured – another type of tea, Danny guessed.

There was a grid on the board. Names were carefully printed out in the left-hand column. Across the top row were the days of the week: Monday to Sunday. The furthest, right hand column was twice as wide as the others and filled with scraggly writing. The blocks and squares of the grid pattern were a mismatch of writing and magnetic shapes.

Mamo wiped off the central grid with the edge of his sleeve. Steve’s name was at the top of the list, Mamo underneath followed by Chin and then Toast’s name. Kono’s name was at the very bottom.

“I thought…” Danny began.

“I eat here a lot, Brah; I contribute.” Kono sat beside him, handling four mugs of tea. Toast reached over and snagged one for Mamo and one for him. Carefully, Danny passed the fourth mug up to Chin.
“Here.” Mamo handed him a blunt tipped marker. “You want to write your name?”

“Oh.” Danny accepted the pen. The sharp scent of marker cut the back of his throat. Shit, this was real.

Steve sat opposite him and waggled his eyebrows. “Danno?”

“Yeah, sure.” Danny carefully printed out his name below Toast’s.

“Excellent,” Kono crowed.

“So,” Chin began. “Welcome to Danny and Grace. For your benefit, Danny, we normally all fill in the spreadsheet for the coming week. The black cross is if you’re going to be out overnight and starred if you’re not going to be around for dinner. We discuss chores. The main ones are housework and kitchen: preparing food and cleaning up. The other chores like maintenance and gardening kind of have defaulted to individuals. But this is a perfect time to revisit that. We go through the finance spreadsheets at the end of the month, rather than weekly.”

Toast was scribbling black stars across his row. “I’m running an experiment this week, compiling code; I’ll be out Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. I’ll do dinner tomorrow night and Friday and clean up. I’ll help you, Chin, on Saturday in the gardens?”

“Depending on weather. Or housework?”

“Yeah, sure. I prefer working in the garden, though.” Toast scribbled details in the far right square.

“Clean up lunch times.” Mamo tapped his finger on his row, not changing anything.

“I can cook,” Danny volunteered. “Tuesday and Thursday evening. I don’t know anything about growing vegetables. I can learn, though.”

“Can you come on the market run on Wednesday morning?” Chin asked.

“Yeah, sure. What’s that entail?”

Steve punched the air, gleefully.

“Steve doesn’t like doing the market,” Kono explained.

He flushed bashfully. “It’s too busy. I don’t like crowds.”

“No, worries, Babe,” Danny said. It sounded interesting. He’d have to remember to take his camera.

And so it continued. Chin officiating -- standard, mundane (Danny guessed) chores were grabbed or parcelled out. Steve announced that he was going to check the marker poles along the northern edge of the peninsula and clear any scrub potentially obscuring the edge. Danny immediately volunteered to help. Mamo volunteered his youngest grandsons to also help, pointing out laughingly that conscripted grandchildren counted towards his chores.

~*~

Monday dawned bright and breezy and Danny sat in the kitchen drinking coffee and contemplated what-to-do. He was as poor as a church mouse. He was down to one relatively good camera. He had a roof over his head. He had a working laptop. His roommates didn’t mind his Monkey visiting.

Everything was fine.
He needed a job.

He refused to do weddings.

The doorbell rang and the amber light above the door lintel flashed simultaneously. Danny snagged his coffee cup and ambled to the front door.

“Rachel?” he said, astonished. “What are you doing here?”

Rachel stood in all her fine, overpriced but understated glory on the veranda. Her arms were crossed and her chin was high.

Shit.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you’d moved? You brought Grace to a place which I know nothing about. I didn’t even have the address. How was I supposed to get in contact with you?”

“Cell phone,” Danny suggested. “Like always? And weren’t you on Maui or something?”

“That is not the point, Daniel. I did not know where my daughter was.”

“Half the time you have the driver or the maid looking after her.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. Defensive.” Rachel pivoted on a heel, but didn’t start striding away.

“Defensive? You just turn up on the doorstep and start on me. If you’re going to be offensive. I’m going to be defensive. Soccer – Oh, football – rules.”

“Hey, everything okay?” Steve appeared at the bottom of the steps up to the veranda all sweaty and breathing hard. He’d been running and was decked out like a stormtrooper ninja in black with yellow piping. He took in the red Porsche fishtailed in the middle of the drive and Rachel, and made the obvious connection. “Steve McGarrett, welcome to Seolh.”

“Thank you,” Rachel said, innately polite. “You have a lovely home. Much nicer than an apartment complex in downtown Honolulu.”

“So why are you complaining?” Danny muttered under his breath.

Rachel snapped a glare at him.

“Steve, this is my ex-wife Rachel Edwards. She’s come to check the House. Make sure that it’s safe for Grace,” Danny said, stirring, because he hadn’t even had his breakfast.

A previously hitherto unseen smirk very briefly graced Steve’s face. “Would you like a tour, Mrs. Edwards?”

A completely different version of the tour that Danny had had followed. Rachel got to see the kitchen. Steve carefully pointed out the fire extinguisher and blanket hanging by the cooker. The ample first aid kit in the downstairs bathroom. The detergents and bleaches in the laundry on the top shelf out of any small child’s reach. Rachel was not conducted upstairs. She tip-toed cautiously along the cobblestone paths in her Gucci heels to the vegetable gardens and small orchard. Danny did not mention that they were taking the long way around avoiding the workshops. Chin was puttering away in a plot of squashes.

“I know you,” Rachel announced. “You’re Chin Ho Kelly.”
“Urh, yes.” Chin stood, wiping his hands on his pants.

“I have one of your pieces hanging in the vestibule. A study of Leis. It’s lovely.”

“Thank you.” Chin inclined his head ever so slightly.

Danny couldn’t picture it but he’d only been in Stan’s mansion once since moving to the Islands. He wasn’t entirely sure what a vestibule was either.

“Mrs. Edwards is Grace’s mother,” Steve explained. “She just wanted to see where her daughter was staying when she’s with her dad.”

“Well, it’s perfect for kids,” Chin said. “My nieces and nephews come out here all the time.”

“It is lovely,” Rachel said, thawing.

Steve leaned back out of Rachel’s line of sight and gave Danny a thumbs up.

“I was finishing up.” Chin smiled. “Shall we return to the House and have a cup of tea?”

“I like tea,” Steve said bouncing on his toes.

“Tea,” Danny said darkly.

~*-~

“You have a lovely home, Mr. McGarrett – Steve,” Rachel said as she slipped gracefully into her car. “It’s an impressive piece of real estate; the gardens alone are outstanding.”

Steve stepped back making space for Danny beside him. “It’s more than the trappings, it’s the place.”

“Indeed. Daniel.” She nodded and then slammed her car door shut. Pebbles and grit sprayed out from under the tyres as she sped down the drive.

“Wow,” Steve said. “She’s…. Words fail me.”

“Prickly,” Danny supplied.

“I was going to say ‘firecracker’ but I’m afraid that my baby sister will teleport in from Los Angeles and beat me over the head with her bare hands.”

“You have a sister?” Because, hey, it was better than talking about Rachel.

“Yeah. So, will—” Steve pointed at the gouges in the drive and vaguely into the distance, “—she be okay now? I kept her out of your studio because I know Gracie loves the Louis XV chaise lounge-princess bed, but I figured that Mrs. Edwards wouldn’t be impressed. And that you’re sharing the room. The dressing room would make a little bedroom – we could fix it up?”

“I was thinking that that would make a good dark room, actually,” Danny said.

“Oh, okay. We’ll have to improve the ventilation.” Steve glanced upwards and to the right thinking hard. “Actually, I don’t think that that is very safe: chemicals in the House, right next to your room, and the other studios on the second floor. We’ll find space in one of the workshops out back.”

What was it with this guy? He was too good to be true.
“Are you real? Or were you cloned in a lab as the perfect genetic specimen?” Danny demanded. “You’re like Santa Claus and Nanny McPhee rolled into one. You can even bake bread.”

Steve laughed in his face. “You haven’t had your breakfast, have you? I’m gonna grab a shower. I’ll see you later.”

~*~

“Do you have any t-shirts that aren’t skin tight?” Danny snapped, as Steve moseyed into the kitchen.

Steve ducked into the fridge and pulled out his pitcher. It was filled with emerald green gloop this time. “It’s a compression top. It’s specifically designed for after exercise to help your muscles recover.”

“It looks exactly like the one that you were wearing before, except grey. Do you have shares in this ‘Skins’ company?”

“Wow, you’re cranky,” Steve observed. “I’d recommend having more coffee, but that probably a bad idea. I’ll be out back in the workshops. See you later.”

He breezed out the door, pitcher in hand, leaving Danny feeling like a heel.

~*~

Danny grabbed his camera, walking outside, snapping off some shots would calm the anger frittering over his skin. He wanted a fight. He wanted to yell at Rachel instead of gritting his teeth. Yell at her like when they had first started realising that their marriage was over and they had thought that Grace was too young to understand. They’d learned quickly to lock down the yelling and screaming -- it made it more poisonous in the long term, but Grace had been protected. Destructively, he had produced some of his best work during that period, as he had started boxing again and then capturing images of the violence around him.

He couldn’t yell at Rachel no matter how much he wanted to. Damn her coming out to the House and checking up on him. Steve and Chin had been pretty cool, though. Pulling out the tour and then the tea and cookies. Steve had apologised for the lack of biscuits. Rachel had laughed, charmed.

Steve had even dunked his chocolate chip cookie in milky tea with evident enjoyment.

Danny scrubbed the hairs on his forearm against the grain. The sky was overcast and the light was mediocre. He snapped off a shot of the striations of grey and white clouds overhead. There was probably going to be a storm later on.

There had been nothing on the morning weather forecast.

He moseyed over to the workshops. Stopping by Mamo’s, he found the craftsman leaning over a board with a fine paintbrush in a puddle of light from a halogen bulb.

“Hey, keiki,” Mamo said without looking up.

“Mamo,” Danny returned. “Can I take some photos?”

“Sure,” Mamo said, without taking a break from his painting.

These were going to be good. Danny could feel it in his bones. Mamo was the perfect subject, his attentiveness and concentration was absolute. The bright light above his head set the crevices and
wrinkles drawn from life over his face in stark relief. Danny focused in closely, getting him warts and all, but his eyes were brilliant and engaged. Ratchetting back a fraction, he composed a shot of Mamo and his paintbrush. Checking the LCD screen, he decided he liked the shot, but it wasn’t quite right. Crouching at the head of the board, Danny lined up a shot along the length of the long board. The starkness of the light made the background behind Mamo pitch-black, centring all the focus of the shot on the man and his work.

“I need a tripod,” Danny said out loud.

“Portable workbench behind you,” Mamo said intent on an intricate swirl, “that should work.”

~*~

# 8 #

“No. Mom, I want to do something special. I thought that your lasagne recipe would be perfect.” Danny rolled his eyes at his Blackberry propped up on the pantry shelf.

His mom was struggling to understand the co-operative and housemates, but she was very glad that he was making new friends. Danny sighed into his palm.

“Yes, Mom, there’s fresh tomatoes and basil.” There were more tomatoes than you could shake a stick at, courtesy of a bumper year and Hawaii’s horribly constant, sunny weather.

“No, Mom. I’m making the lasagne tomorrow, but I want the sauce to mature overnight.” Danny picked up a bulb of garlic and tossed it in the air.


~*~

“Productive,” Steve noted as he dodged into the kitchen, quickly closing the door against the hammering rain.

The large oak table was strewn with all the ingredients needed to make Danny’s Mom’s tomato sauce.

“You’re on tomorrow night,” Steve noted. “And it’s only you, me, Chin and Kono.”

“I spotted those chest freezers in the cold pantry and thought I might was well make a batch and we can freeze the excess. Who has a cold pantry secreted behind the main pantry? Have you seen the food stored in there? Are you prepared for a siege?”

“Yes?” Steve said, his tone: is this a trick question?

“What sort of siege?” Danny demanded, honestly curious.

“I dunno, Zombie Apocalypse.” Steve picked up a juicy tomato and bit into it, juice dribbled down his chin and he caught it with his other hand. “It’s part of the ethos of the House: food is grown, food is preserved, and food is stored.”

“Animal.” Danny fired a damp cloth at Steve so he could wipe his mouth and hands. “Don’t touch
the food until you’ve washed your hands.”

Steve cleaned his hands and threw the cloth back at Danny. Winding his arm back to retaliate, Danny paused because Steve had turned away and was scanning the bookshelf beside the utility cupboard. He crouched and pulled out a thick binder and a box file from the bottom shelf.

“I figured Chin was going to tell you about this tomorrow. To be honest, we’re all pretty easy going. Okay, Kono loathes beets and she’ll go after you with a blunt teaspoon if you cook anything with beets.” He sat at the table and opened the binder. He flipped through the pages to the back.

“What is this?” Danny pulled out the chair beside Steve. “Diet? Allergies?”

“There’s nobody with any anaphylactic reactions, I would have told you already. There’s allergies and intolerances and likes and dislikes. Chin has a database where he’s cross-compiled the ‘likes’ to make the perfect ingredient list. I just make two dishes when it’s my turn, to give everyone a choice, and freeze the excess.” There were clean sheets at the back. “You should fill out one for you and Grace. Hey, we need to add Grace to the list for weekend visits!”

Steve abandoned the book and went to the back of the kitchen door.

“You don’t--” Danny said as Steve squatted, back straight, and scribbled Grace’s name at the bottom of the board above Kono’s name.

Steve was grinning happily and it was impossible not to grin back at him.

“Nobody is vegetarian or vegan?” Danny asked, even though he half knew the answer, thinking over the dishes that had been served since he had arrived.

“Not at the moment. There’s a really good vegan cookbook.” Steve sort of half-lurched to the bookshelf but froze. “The Veganepicuran. You want?”

“No, I just thought….”

“People in a co-operative are hippy vegans?” Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Evidently not,” Danny retorted, refusing to rise to the gibe.

“Nutrition is important, though. Low fat, nutritionally-balanced food, preferably organic and cruelty-free, should be served.”

Oh, Danny realised, Steve was really, really serious. Danny’s mom’s lasagne was a lot of things. It had lots of tomatoes in it — they were good for you, loads of vitamin C — but low fat it was not by any stretch of the imagination. It wasn’t like Steve didn’t need the extra calories; his ribs were visible beneath the damp pale-grey t-shirt.

“So what’s the box file?” Danny asked, quickly changing the subject. He cracked the box. It was filled with adhesive labels of different shapes and sizes and a couple of pens. “What?”

“You fill in what you’ve made plus ingredients and date -- for the freezers, fridges or the pantries.”

“Has anyone mentioned your OCD?”

“And lived?” Steve asked, baring his teeth, but the crinkle around his eyes gave him away. “Not recently, no.”

“I suppose it’s a good idea,” Danny admitted and, thinking about the three chest freezers and the
number of shelves in both pantries, it was necessary.

“So what are you making?”

“Passata.”

“What’s passata?”

“What’s passata? What do you mean, what’s passata?” Danny asked astounded.

“I mean, what is passata?” Steve reached for another tomato and Danny slapped his paw with a wooden spoon.

“Ow.” Sulkily, Steve sucked on his fingers.

“It barely hurt, wimp. Passata is mashed up tomatoes, sieved to remove the seeds, and then gently heated to produce a thick reduction of tomatoes. And then I’ll use the passata in my Mom’s Tomato Sauce.”

“Your Mom’s recipe? That’s nice.”

“Nice? It’s not nice, it is utterly divine. The best sauce in the world.” Danny kissed his own fingertips dramatically. “Now go and play wherever it is you play, because it’s a secret recipe.”

“Okay,” Steve said laughingly. “Let me just get a glass of milk and then I’ll leave the kitchen all to you.”

“Thirty seconds and counting.”

Shaking his head, Steve opened the fridge. He pulled out a carton, hefted it and shook it, dregs sloshing vigorously. “Hey, who drank all the milk and then put the carton back?” he asked, aggrieved. “It was full this morning.”

“Not me.” Danny held up his hands. “I don’t drink milk by the gallon.”

“Toast,” Steve said darkly and headed out of the kitchen — man on a mission.

Danny shook his head; Milk Wars, always the worst bone of contention in shared kitchens.

~*~

When the pot of sauce was gently simmering away and sterilised jars of passata were cooling (there had been more than one phone call home during the preparations) on the kitchen table, and the dishes were washed and dried, Danny stepped back with a content sigh.

He stretched out his back. If he could convince Steve to prepare freshly baked focaccia with rosemary and rock salt it would be the perfect accompaniment to his lasagne.

“Focaccia. Focaccia.” He scanned the plethora of cookbooks on the bookshelf. There was one well-thumbed, smudged with floury fingerprints, brick of a book. It looked old. The page detailing a recipe for artisanal focaccia was clean – so he doubted that Steve had made Italian flatbreads. Tucking it under his elbow, he went hunting for the retired SEAL.

And rapidly figured out that he didn’t have a clue where Steve was hiding. The gym was unoccupied. Danny drew a finger over a dumbbell and frowned at the dust. Steve wasn’t alphabetising preserves in the pantry. The laundry room was empty. The television was dark and the
DVD player’s standby light was gleaming red. Danny checked the reception rooms. He carefully knocked on the door to the Hall and poked his head in. The purple yoga mat was placed centrally and the matching plastic crate positioned next to it.

But no Steve.

He paused at the top of the stairs on the second floor and realised that he didn’t have a clue which studio belonged to Steve. He didn’t actually know what Steve’s artistic contribution to the House was – or even if, as the owner, he had to contribute. Danny had started to ask a couple of times, but Steve had avoided the conversation – adroitly, but definitely avoided.

The studios had little box-panels displaying if the resident was in or out.

Steve’s name was not on any of the studio boxes. He checked a couple of the rooms with no name, but they were obviously empty. A few of them were remarkably tidy and somewhat more ready for a resident than the studio that he been given.

Huh?

That left the third floor.

There was a staircase at the far end of the long corridor, tucked around a corner. It was narrow and twisted and turned back on itself. Danny crept up the first tier, and craned his head, looking up to a little landing. There was a door at the top of the staircase and one of the ubiquitous boxes at eye height. Guessing that this was probably it, Danny picked his way up to the landing. The panel indicated that McGarrett was in.

McGarrett lived in the garret.

Danny knocked and then entered. However, Steve did not live in the attic like a forgotten toy. Steve lived in a modern open-plan apartment all dressed out in pale amber and blond woods. The overall impression to Danny’s photographer’s eye was *sunny*. The window which dominated an entire wall was a half circle providing a view of the peninsula and the ocean beyond.

The point of his search was lolling in a plush Navy blue armchair playing what looked like Doom of all things. Steve’s television was a thing of beauty. The gaming system looked like something out of Star Trek.

Steve startled and was promptly gobbled by a zombie. “Geez, don’t you knock?”

“I did actually,” Danny took that as permission to enter. “I think that you were more focussed on killing zombies.”

Steve shrugged and hit pause. “Come in, why don’t you?” he drawled.

“Thanks.” The whole space was intriguing. It was, Danny realised, designed with an overall idea in mind. Danny would bet his bottom dollar that everything in the open-plan area, apart from the fridge and sink unit in the wet bar – kitchenette in the far corner, had been created for this space. “Nice apartment.”

“I like it,” Steve said drolly.

While there was not a single ornament or piece of naval memorabilia it bore a slight resemblance to the styling of a sailing ship. Danny crouched, trying to figure out what gave that impression -- something about the lines and curves, he realised. The wall opposite the semi-circular window had
been entirely given over to a bookcase of diamond shaped wells, so it appeared as if the ship was caught in time as it sailed through a rolling storm. Books of all shapes and sizes were set higgledy piggledy in the offset squares.

“Knock yourself out.” Steve waved his hand imperiously and went back to killing zombies.

Danny was a lot of things, but reserved was one not of them. He took the permission and explored.

There was a bedroom with a double bed -- military neat – that was definitely unoccupied (the wardrobes were bare). The sparkling clean bathroom had a power shower that drew an envious sigh from Danny. An empty rectangular room, which might have been set up for utilities, but seriously, had absolutely nothing in it – not even a broom. Danny found the cupboard that contained the vacuum cleaner and household goods in a false wall behind the kitchenette.

Danny carefully opened a heavy door and found a study. The same hand that had been behind the design in the main room had been active here. The study was a little more cluttered, a little more lived in. The maritime memorabilia that was conspicuous by its absence in the living space was strewn around the room: an oil painting of a top-sail running through stormy waves; a sword on a plinth; bizarrely, a picture box of different knots; a brass telescope on a stand…There were many certificates on the wall and framed photographs. Danny was drawn over to them. There was posed professional photograph of Steve in dress uniform, some sort of graduation picture Danny guessed. He was young and bright eyed. There were a few more candid shots of Steve with his fellow SEALs, caked with mud and dust, grinning at the camera. The single landscape shot caught Danny’s eye, it was the setting sun sending golden light over scrubby, mountainous terrain. Afghanistan, Danny thought. This was the wall of a professional soldier and Steve was no longer a professional soldier, or sailor, or whatever. Danny wondered if he missed it? He thought that he probably did, but it was a vague thought, unformed, because Danny knew that he couldn’t begin to understand what it was like to be a SEAL.

Danny retreated, closing the door quietly behind him. He trotted back along the short corridor so he could see Steve.

“Where the Hell do you sleep?’”

Steve paused mid-firing and jerked his right thumb indicating upwards. Then he was back in the zone – massacring zombies with disturbing accuracy.

At this point, Danny was looking for a hammock.

“Seriously, where?”

Steve saved the game. Laconically, he rolled on to his right side, lounging on the arm of the chair and fixed Danny with an impenetrable gaze.

“What?” Danny lifted his hands high.

“The staircase.”

“What stairca--,” Danny said coming into the main living area. “Oh.”

In the same wood as the fittings and fixtures there was a goddamn spiral staircase part merging with the wall. Once you had spotted it you couldn’t miss it.

“Can I?” Danny double-checked, foot on the bottom stair.
“After you.” Steve rolled off the armchair and slowly got to his feet.

Steve ghosted after him as Danny slowly turned his way up the stairs. The second level opened up into Steve’s absolutely massive studio.

“Ah,” Danny breathed.

The window that let natural light into the room mirrored the semi-circle on the floor below. There was a central draughtsman’s table that dominated the room. It was bigger than a professional pool table; easily large enough to hold multiple projects.

“How the Hell did you get that up here?” Danny asked, ever practical.


“You designed this apartment, didn’t you?” Danny moved with him.

“I helped. My grandmother’s second husband was an architect. I wanted a pirate’s ship, Ben wanted a — I guess you’d call it a man cave, now — we worked together. Or to be more accurate, he taught and I learned.” Steve gazed down at the table. “Mamo’s always been part of it and a guy called Cates in the late 90s did a lot of the heavy structural work, like the spiral staircase. Grandmother insisted – I liked the ladders. It’s a work in progress.”

“Seems pretty finished.”

“I’ve been working on it since I was seven. Ben and Mamo were the soul behind it. They taught me everything I know about wood.”

“So what else have you made?” Danny asked letting his finger drift over a massive sheet of high quality architectural paper. There were sketches and precise pencil and fine ink drawings of a lighthouse from different angles and bits of the interior. The curves were fantastical. Danny wasn’t sure that it could exist in space and time, but there were calculations, angles, and other notations that Danny didn’t understand in neat text alongside the drawings.

Steve hadn’t answered the question. Danny carefully stopped pouring over his drawings and gave Steve’s his full attention.

“Designed. I don’t make much. Not a lot of time when I was with the SEAL teams,” Steve said sharply.

“Do you help Mamo in his workshop? Work with wood for real?”

Steve shrugged fractionally. “Sometimes.”

“What do you like doing more? Design or working with your hands?” Danny persisted.

“Design, I guess.” Steve stepped away, adroitly moving out of Danny’s reach. It was such a disconnect – since their first meeting they had been in each other’s orbit. Danny let him slide away, gave him space.

“So there’s more up here?” Danny asked quietly, looking around.

“Another room, not much in there, and my bathroom.” Steve nodded toward the far end of the studio. “My bedroom’s upstairs. Top of the house. Best view. Used to be where they used to set a
lantern during storms to warn seafarers off the peninsula."

Steve drifted further away towards the half-circle window. The diffuse light breaking through the dissipating storm clouds made him look gaunt.

“You sleep in a tower?” Danny grinned, deliberately teasing. “Like Rapunzel?”

“Bite me.”

“Grace would go absolutely apeshit.” Danny continued to grin. Man, he was tempted to clamber up to the next level of the spiral staircase, but his perceptive people reading skills were screaming him to back the fuck off.

Steve shrugged.

“Well, I came up here to ask you a favour,” Danny said.

“Yeah?” Steve turned away from the window.

Danny gently lobbed the bakery book across the room. Steve caught it like a football, grounding it against his right side.

“This is my grandmother’s book.” Steve held it close.

“I came looking for you to ask if you could make focaccia for my lasagne tomorrow. I thought that it would be the perfect complement. Rock salt and rosemary.”

“I’ve never made focaccia.” Steve looked adorably confused.

Danny rocked back on his heels. “Time to try new things, Babe.”

~*~

# 9 #

“So Amarone della Valpolicella Classico in the tomato sauce?” Chin leaned against the fridge and regarded Danny, who was crouched in front of the oven watching his lasagne slowly start to bronze a golden brown.

“Yeah,” Danny said slowly. Steve had said that the wine was organised chronologically on the wine rack and stuff on the top was ‘okay’. Danny had picked an Italian red wine. “Oh, that philistine. Sorry, Chin, I’ll replace it. Tell me where you got it.”

“It was the 2009?”

Danny nodded. He straightened and scanned the kitchen. The opened bottle of wine was stored in the cupboard with the oils and vinegars. Danny retrieved the bottle. There was a generous glass left. He presented it to Chin with a cheesy smile.

Chin snorted as he accepted the bottle. “Steve knows nothing about wine.” He set the bottle aside and then pulled out two deep round-bowl wine glasses from the cupboard above his head. Carefully, he teased the stuffed-in cork out of the bottle and divided the remainder into the glasses and offered one to Danny.

Danny accepted.
“It’s going to be a very good dinner,” Chin declaimed.

“I hope so.” Danny had been slaving away over a hot stove all afternoon. The antipasti was arranged on a couple of large serving plates on the table. It was eighty percent authentic — the available cheeses sucked and there wasn’t any peperoncini to be had — but Danny knew that Steve loved anchovies.

“Mamo’s not on the board but I figured that you wouldn’t mind if he and his wife joined us?” Chin said. “You’ve been teasing us with the aromas all afternoon.”

“I’d… I’d be honoured.” Danny started to throw his arms wide and remembered at last possible moment that he was holding a glass of rather good red wine.

“Salute.” Chin clinked their glasses together.

“Salute, amico mio,” Danny responded. It was definitely a very nice red wine, heavy with vine fruits but none of that aftertaste that Danny associated with a cheap cigarette.

“Have you seen Steve?” Chin asked. “I thought that he was helping you?”

“He went to check on the dough. He’s got some kind of cubby hole where he rises the bread?”

“Oh, usually the conservatory. It catches sunlight most of the day, so it’s warm.”

“You looking for me?” Steve sailed into the kitchen, balancing two trays draped with damp tea-towels in either hand. “They’re ready to go when you are. Sprinkle with your special salt and rosemary and drizzle with olive oil. Twenty to twenty five minutes at 400°F.”

“Letter.” Chin pulled a thick white envelope from his pocket.

Steve regarded the letter and the two trays that he held, and shrugged.

“Here, let me.” Danny took the trays off Steve — he was such a big kid — so he could take the letter off Chin.

Desultory, Steve flicked his bent little finger along the edge breaking the seal. “Why didn’t you open it?”

“Because it’s addressed specifically to you and not Seolh, and it’s from a lawyer.”

Steve pouted and pulled out the sheaf of papers. He scanned the first page. Moved onto the second with barely a breath, and then re-checked the first page. The ream of papers attached, he ignored. Finally, he sighed.

“Another offer. They don’t say who wants to buy the land — they’re just acting as an intermediary.”

“I thought so.” Chin plucked the letter from Steve’s outstretched hand. “You want to reply or shall I?”

“It’s your turn,” Steve said shiftily.

“It’s always my turn,” Chin said amiably and wandered out of the kitchen with the letter and his glass of wine.

“You get lots of offers?” Danny asked as he peeked under the dishtowel. The dough was dimpled with mathematical precision.
“It is as your ex said: ‘prime real estate’. But it’s not for sale. Not now or ever.”

~*~

Danny was not nervous. Not even remotely nervous. The table was set — it kind of reminded him of home; not a single plate or piece of cutlery matched. There were, however, good crystal glasses.

“Smells lovely.” Kono had dressed for the occasion -- wearing a little red dress that Danny appreciated wholeheartedly. “Tie, Brah?”

Danny’s tie was flipped over his shoulder where it wouldn’t fall in anything. He checked it.

“What?”

“No one wears a tie.”

“I wear a tie. Grace bought me this tie.” He wasn’t going to say that it was his lucky tie.

There was a little tap on the door which heralded Mamo and Mrs. Kahike’s entrance into the hub of the House.

“You’ve prepared a feast, keiki,” Mamo observed.

~*~

Steve hated olives, who knew? He would fight anyone to the death over anchovies, though. He was vicious with that little fork.

~*~

“You do realise that you’re going to have to spoil us every time you make dinner?” Kono grinned.

Danny grinned back at her. The dinner was an unparalleled success. He was going to have to call his Mom and thank her profusely. His Mom’s lasagne was damn tasty if he said so himself. And Steve’s first attempt at focaccia wasn’t half bad.

“Would you like some more, Mrs. Kahike — Maru?” Danny was already scooping out a small portion from the baking tray.

“Thank you, Daniel.”

Chin moved around behind them topping up everyone’s glasses like a trained sommelier. Steve hemmed and hawed and then let Chin top up his glass. He was digging into his second portion.

“More Amarone della Valpolicella Classico?” Danny noted.

“2001 this time.” Chin returned to his seat.

Danny raised his glass in salute.

“Yes,” Mamo intoned at the head of the table. “That is a good idea.” He raised his glass. “‘Ohana.”

Everyone raised their glasses in response; Danny held his high with them, “‘Ohana,” he echoed with the others.

Steve leaned over. “It means family,” he whispered.
“So everyone likes coffee?” Danny checked as Kono and Steve cleared the dishes. There was a round of affirmatives.

“This is a very simple dessert.” He portioned out six portions of vanilla ice cream in glass bowls on a tray and then set to work with the espresso machine. He had practiced in the afternoon. The machine hadn’t been used in an age, so he had cleaned it thoroughly and almost overdosed on strong coffee. Sue him, he liked coffee. In short order, he had six shots of hot espresso. In each tiny cup he dissolved a square of dark chocolate and then poured them over the vanilla ice cream.

“Affogato.” Danny set the dessert before his guests.

“So the first time that I met Chin,” Mamo said, “he was babysitting Kono and her brother Lani.”

“Nononono, don’t tell this story, Mamo, please,” Kono begged.

“Okay,” Mamo said, “even though toddlers are cute when they refuse to wear any clothes and run away from their babysitter.”

Kono thudded her head onto the table.

“You got any stories about Steve?” Danny asked as he quaffed on yet another glass of red wine.

“I’m going to call your mom, and tell on you,” Steve said.

“Okay, the first time you met Steve?” Danny persisted, because persistent was his middle name.

“That wouldn’t be too exciting because he was--” Mrs. Kahike held out her hands about a foot apart. “He was a very serious baby. You had to tickle him to get a laugh.”

Steve pointed the finger of death at Danny, even as he shifted away. “Don’t dare try!”

They stood on the veranda, waving, as Mamo and Maru were chauffeured away by their oldest grandson. They waited until the car lights ebbed away, swallowed by the dark Hawaiian night.

“That was fun.” Kono hugged herself.

“You staying over?” Chin asked, slinging an arm over his cousin’s shoulder and pulling her in tight.

“Yeah, I’ll crash in one of the spare rooms.”

“I stored the airbed in the studio next to Danny’s,” Steve said. “I didn’t deflate it.”

“Excellent,” Kono said.

Danny clapped his hands together. “Clean up or leave it until tomorrow?”

Glances were shared as they debated the pro and cons. Danny kind of leaned towards attacking the kitchen tomorrow morning. It wasn’t as if it was too bad -- they had been tidying up as they went
along. There was the dishwasher to empty, the good glasses to wash by hand, the table to wipe down…

“If we all work together,” Steve said, “it will just take a few minutes.”

“Sure, Steve.” Chin smiled. “Good idea.”

~*~

# 10 #

“Steve, I’m sorry, something cropped up,” Chin began apologetically. “I have to go into Honolulu and talk to Sidney at the Gallery.”

“But it’s Wednesday morning,” Steve whined as Chin delicately placed a set of keys on the kitchen table just outside of his reach.

“I know, Brah. The truck’s all loaded up. Danny said that he would help.” He looked beseechingly at Danny. “I have to go. I’m sorry.” And with that he was out the back door without a second glance, messenger bag swinging at his hip.

Steve stared at the keys, abject misery writ on his face.

“Babe, you’re scaring me. I thought that it was just the market?” Danny set his coffee aside.

“I’ll go and bring the truck around. Don’t forget your camera; it’s colourful.” Steve abandoned his breakfast and stomped out of the kitchen.

~*~

The picture that Danny had in his head was one of market stalls in a green verdant park. The market turned out to be an old, three storey 1920s warehouse on the dockside. The first floor was a massive open plan space. There were none of the stalls which Danny expected. There were shops: a coffee house; fish restaurant and an improbably named ‘Scrumpy Apple and Acorn Winery’ storefront (with an old Penny Farthing bicycle riveted above the entrance), which were tucked in nooks and crannies along the west wall. The open space was given over to butchers, fish mongers and wholesalers unloading high volume material like large bags of grain or crates of lobster. It was bedlam. Steve had switched off his aids before even exiting the truck. Danny had gleaned on the way over that Chin sold some of the excess organic vegetables and fruit from his garden plots. Thankfully, the recent glut of tomatoes were in the back of the truck. There was only so much passata, tomato sauce, and tomato soup that a man could make.

Steve weaved his way through the chaos, bypassing the mayhem downstairs and heading for stairs. He took them two at a time. Torn, Danny watched a fisherman sling a foot long golden fish across the length of the bay to one of the wholesalers, who caught it and spun around in a circle, it was performance art. He darted after Steve.

The second floor was a warren of stalls and booths, mainly devoted to vegetables and fruits; bakery goods; dairy; apiary goods; organic wines, oils and vinegars; plants -- vegetables and flowers. Twisting ropes of colourful chilli peppers, herbs, and other fruits and vegetables hung from the ceiling here and there.

“Hey, Mrs. Keawe.” Steve sidled up beside a tiny local woman minding a grocery stall and clumsily bent over for a hug.
“Stevie!” She disappeared, engulfed by Steve’s embrace. “Chin said that you weren’t coming. That he was bringing the new one? Little Danny?”

Little Danny? Danny thought, horrified.

“Sorry, Mrs. K. It’s too noisy in here, I get too much feedback. I switched my ears off.” Straightening arthritically slow, arm still around the lady’s shoulders, he turned and beckoned to Danny. “This is Danny Williams, he’s a photographer. He took some photos of Mamo that Mamo says are amazing.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Keawe.” Danny offered his hand. “I came to help Steve.”

“It’s lovely to meet you too, Danny.” Her face was wreathed in smiles – Danny liked her instantly.

“Actually, I figure we came to help you? What can I do?”

“Ah.” She patted Steve’s hand on her shoulder. “This one hasn’t told you the ropes? Typical.”

Danny shrugged. He couldn’t see why Steve didn’t like this place – it was awesome. Help Mrs. Keawe and then he could get his camera out.

“Go bring up Chin’s vegetables. You’ll be pleased to know that there’s an elevator at the back. Trolleys are stored round the side on the ground floor. Stevie likes to take the stairs because he’s on a training programme to get fit again. Use the elevator because I’d like to be set up before the doors open for real.”

“Yes, Mrs. Keawe,” Danny said obediently.

“Ah, you’re a good boy. Get to it.” She clicked her fingers and pointed to the back.

Steve took the hint, dropped an absent kiss on her peppery-grey top bun, and untangled himself from her loose embrace. He ducked and weaved through the stalls and owners and helpers setting up. Danny kept close. Steve might not like the market, but he was obviously no stranger to it.

The elevator was old-school: big enough for twenty people with a hand-pulled concertina gate. The gate was unwieldy as Danny loaned a hand to pull it shut. The machine clattered and groaned disconcertingly as it shuddered its way down to the first floor.

Steve bypassed the trolleys so Danny grabbed one and headed into the chaos of the warehouse. Suddenly he was one of the gang; he garnered a smile here and there as he doggedly chased after Steve.


Steve just smiled and with his foot pushed one of the plastic crates of Chin’s hard work across towards Danny. There were only four, three containing the fresh tomatoes. The other contained fruits and vegetable, some of which Danny didn’t recognise. Danny lifted the crate down onto the trolley as another was pushed into his reach. The crates came as fast as he moved.

“So what’s with the Little Danny? Chin been talking about me?”

“What?” Steve peered down at him, squinting in the sunlight.

“Little Danny?” Danny waved his hand at chest height. “Chin been talking about me?”
“Mamo more like.” Steve said as, hand braced on the side of the truck, he dropped down carefully beside Danny. “Don’t take it personally, even if you are smaller than the average bear. Half the time, I’m Little Stevie or keiki. If you ever call me Little Stevie, I will pants you.”

“You could try, Stevie,” Danny challenged.

“Like that is it?” Steve brought his hands up high in loose curls, foot dropping back for support and balance.

Some sort of martial art crap, Danny categorised, as he grounded and clenched his fists, protecting his face and left hand side.

Steve pantomimed a slow stab and, basically, a slap-fight followed. As Danny blocked and followed through with a glacially slow gut punch, he grinned in Steve’s long smiling face,

“Boys! Stop playing and come help.”

Danny bounced backwards out of Steve’s long armed reach and looked up. Mrs. Keawe was poking her head out of second storey window.

“Sorry, Mrs. K,” Steve apologised.

“And you wonder why she calls you Little Stevie,” Danny sniggered.

~*~

Danny certainly enjoyed himself bantering with Mrs. Keawe’s customers. Ninety percent of them were regulars, but a few tourists had found their way to the local market. Danny revelled in the mismatch of accents. Steve didn’t engage much, back to the wall watching, unless there were more than three customers.

“Hey, Nana.”

“Laka,” Mrs. Keawe hugged and remonstrated at the same time. “Why aren’t you in school?”

“Free periods in the morning. I’ll be in this afternoon, Nana.” She bent over and kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “Hi, Steve.”

Steve unclenched enough to wiggle his fingers.

“Danny.” He waved at the kid.

“I’m Laka. Do you live at the House?”

Danny nodded and patted his camera bag slung over his shoulder.

“And since you here, keiki, you can help me for an hour or two and give Danny a chance to look around and grab some lunch,” Mrs. Keawe said. “And Steve to get Chin’s shopping.”

“Yeah, sure,” Laka said agreeably. “I did come to help.”

“Shopping?” Danny asked.

“Oh, okay.” Steve said with all the enthusiasm of a kid being told to take out the trash. He pulled a backpack from under the counter where he had stored it earlier. Tucked in the front webbing was a list.
Danny fell in beside Steve. “What are we getting?”

“Hang on.” Steve pulled the remote control for his aids out of his pocket and tweaked. Danny waited patiently until he tucked the control back in his cargo shorts side pocket.

“So we’re going shopping?” Danny asked

Steve consulted the list. “Just a few things. Tea, some honey, green papaya and inamono plus some sesame oil. I guess that Chin’s preparing something interesting on his night. I want some milk. Anything you want?”

“I?” Huh, Danny wondered. He had a few dollars in his pocket. “I guess. I’ll just look.”

“This is where the food stalls are,” Steve said unnecessarily. “Upstairs is the arts and crafts.”

“Oh, do the guys in the House sell and display here?”

“Depends,” Steve said un informatively.

“How?” Danny prodded, because, hey, it was relevant to his interests.

Steve screwed up his nose thinking. “Chin used to. No one at the moment. People come to Mamo when they want one of his boards and he wants to make one for them. There was a lady — oh, what was her name — Auntie Pepper, she made ceramics things and she used to sell them here. Ask Chin, he’s been an actual resident much longer than I have.”

“Come on, let’s go look.” Danny led the way.

~*~

Steve leaned over and blew gently in Danny’s ear as he tried to pick the perfect pottery dragon for Gracie.

“What!” Danny batted at his ear.

“Food,” Steve demanded.

“What?”

“I’m hungry,” Steve whined.

“Whining is not attractive.”

“Neither is passing out from low blood sugar.”

“Oooh.” Danny straighter and rubbed his hands gleefully. “We could go back down to the second floor and try some of that Ka’u Coffee Cake or those—”

“I want lunch not sugar. Come on, I’ll introduce you to the ‘Scrumpy Apple’.”

“The winery on the first floor?”

“Well, they make organic wine, but it’s also a restaurant.”

“Aw, our first date,” Danny joshed.

Steve snorted. “My treat, buddy.”
“Man, there’s too much to choose from.” Danny set his hands on his hips as he consulted the blackboard bolted to the wall behind the counter.

“Can I have the falafel, no yoghurt, please,” Steve said politely. “Oh, and a vitamin water.”

“Oooh, ooooh,” Danny said his mouth watering. “Honey and ginger chicken breast with corn on the cob, sweet potato wedges and salad. And I would like a cappuccino. A large cappuccino, with chocolate sprinkles, and caramel syrup.” Danny’s hands described a veritable vat of coffee.

“Desserts?” the young woman who was just tall enough to peek over the counter asked.

“Decide afterwards?” Danny proposed, also thinking that they had eaten a lot yesterday evening.

“No problem.” She smiled sunnily, her freckly nose crinkling. “Steve, your favourite table upstairs is free.”

“Thanks, Annie.”

“You’re a regular?” Danny asked as he trooped up the narrow wooden stairs after Steve. He didn’t get an answer. Danny smacked the back of his head metaphorically – he’d learn.

They had barely sat, taking two seats at a four person table, when Annie darted up the stairs with Danny’s vat and Steve’s vitamin water. Danny made grabby hands and then inhaled happily.

“You’re enjoying that,” Steve observed.

“It’s very, very good. Annie is it? Hi, Annie. I’m Danny. Would you be kind enough to bring one of these delectable coffees for Steve? Vitamin water is all very good. But you’re allowed to splurge now and again.”

Annie glanced at Steve, checking.

He rolled his eyes but nodded. “Smaller size, please, and no syrup.”

“Okay, Steve. Back in a mo.”

Steve waited until she had dropped out of sight down the stairs.

“You trying to fatten me up or something, Danny?”

Danny shrugged and leaned back in his chair, letting himself loll in the coffee zone.

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# 11 #

“What are you doing, Babe?” Danny asked.

Steve was sitting on the doorstep lacing up hiking boots. Instead of shorts and a t-shirt, he wore cargo pants and a long sleeved shirt, even though it was warm enough for his habitual wear. He leaned back so he could see Danny without twisting around.

“I’m going to walk the line, see what’s needed.”
“You mean the markers?” Danny checked.

“You.”

Danny looked down at his jeans and t-shirt, and his glossy shoes. Steve caught the door frame and hauled himself upright. Following Danny’s line of sight, he nodded.

“The jeans will do. You’ll get hot, though. Those shoes won’t work.” Steve waggled one booted foot in the air. “Chin might have some boots that he can loan you. I think that my feet are bigger. Nah, my feet are bigger.”

“You’re bigger all over.”

Steve snorted and waggled his eyebrows.

“Grow up.” Danny stomped off to find Chin.

“Ask him if he’s got some light pants that you can borrow,” Steve called after him. “And wear two pairs of socks. You don’t want to get blisters.”

“Actually, my shoulders are wider,” Danny said, getting the last word in.

~*~

The humidity was horrible. Danny pushed his hair back trying to keep it under control. It was going to curl in this wet heat. This island was Dante’s Seventh Hell. When it was cold you could wrap up, but when it was hot, there was a point where you just couldn’t cool down anymore. He refused to dwell on the vague memory that New Jersey could be hot.

“It will be cooler when we’re on the edge,” Steve said, handing over a small plastic bottle of water.

“How many of those do you have?” Danny eyed Steve’s daypack slung over his back.

“Six.” Steve stretched his long legs over a fallen, mossy trunk.

“Six? Were you a boy scout? Always prepared?”

“Funnily enough, yeah. Navy training also has something to do with it.”

They trekked quietly. It was harder work than hiking along trails. Danny eyed the dense undergrowth uneasily. He could hear Steve huffing, careful, even breaths as he led the way.

“Are there any snakes?” Danny asked suddenly.

Steve paused, hand resting on a tree trunk. An imp of the perverse very briefly perched on his shoulder. Danny scowled; he had a seven year old daughter – he knew that expression very well.

“The only indigenous snake is not venomous,” Steve said slowly. “Idiots occasionally release invasive species. There shouldn’t be any on the peninsula.”

“Good.” Danny shook himself.

Steve pushed off the tree and continued picking his way through and around the undergrowth. It was thinning out, so Danny guessed that they were getting closer to the edge.

“So you’re not bothered by spiders,” Steve mused.
“What!”

~*~

The view from the edge was amazing. The sheer cliffs dropped down to pristine blue water. A flock of birds were circling and swooping down into the waters below, a concerted attack on a shoal of fish, Danny guessed.

“If we’re lucky we might see some dolphins or a whale,” Steve settled on a lichen covered rock, seemingly content to watch. “They’ll be attracted to the bait ball.”

“The what?”

“A shoal of small fish tightly packed in a sphere,” Steve held his hands as if grabbing a football. “It’s a defensive formation against predators.”

If they had a moment, Danny was going to take some photographs. Landscapes weren’t really his thing and he didn’t have a telephoto lens good enough to take an even partly useful photo from this height. Steve was doing the pouty thing, his bottom lip firm and downturned as he thought. Danny caught the profile shot against the clean, blue Hawaiian sky.

Manipulating the zoom function, magnifying the shot, Danny got closer to Steve. Concentration broken, Steve glanced at him sideways, eyes narrowing. Man, his eyes looked blue in this light, Danny noted.

“You’ve got the flora. You’ve got the fauna. Unparalleled views and you take pictures of people.”

Danny snapped off a couple of shots of Scowly Steve. “I’m a people person.”

“Well, just sit and listen. Get a sense of the environment.” Steve patted the rock beside him.

“Taking photos of animals is an entirely different skill set. It’s positioning and timing. You can spend a year getting one shot. I kind of lean towards the composing of images or capturing energy. No manipulation, well, a little, but I prefer to catch reality.”

Steve watched him mutely and patted the rock again.

Clutching the camera primly to his chest, Danny sat.

“Sssssh,” Steve shushed. “Just listen, feel, see.”

Danny sat. It was interesting that Steve had said listen, because, what did Steve hear? Was it less, or muffled, or was it intermittent? Feel? He was hot. He was sticky – although the breeze was nice. Danny could do see, seeing was what he did. He saw a pretty awesome bunch of rocky rocks.

“Come on.” Steve clapped him on the shoulder. “So if I recommended meditation, I don’t think that it would go down very well.”

“What? I sat. I was quiet. I never said a word. It’s… very… uh… organic out here.” Danny slapped a thing on his arm. The squished legs and body made it impossible to identify but he guessed mosquito.

“Come on, let’s check the edge.”

There was more of the up and down walking with added rock scrambling to make their hike more of an exertion. There was generally a good space between the perilous edge and the thicker vegetation.
Occasionally, there were a few spots where the so-called-space was a little narrower than Danny liked. He kept as far back as humanly possible since crashing to his death on the apparently tiny -- but no doubt actually large, sharp rocks -- sticking out of a freezing cold ocean below really didn’t appeal. Steve kept to an ambling, comfortable pace. He walked a little ahead, a little behind, and side by side when practicable. When they had to clamber up rocks, sometimes needing to use hands and feet, Steve checked back on Danny enough to make Danny feel like a complete newbie.

Danny kind of wished that he had brought a thermos of coffee.

“It’s really good of you to do this,” Danny said filling the quiet, because hey quiet, it needed to be filled.

Steve stopped dead, and cocked his head, quizzically. “What? Oh, you mean the markers? Gracie was the catalyst this time, but we check them a couple of times a year and if there’s been a really heavy storm. Chin’s nieces and nephews play here. Mamo’s family. Mrs. Keawe’s. They know the trails and the rules. We should have a barbeque next time Grace is over so she can get to know the little hoodlums.”

“So this is all cleared. Between the edge and the tree line? That’s a lot of work?”

“There’s always going to be less dense foliage because of exposure to the wind and elements. But it’s been managed a long time,” Steve said conversationally. “It’s easier to pull new vegetation than cut down trees. It’s doesn’t take a tenth of the time it used to when the area was first cleared.”

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There were only a couple of places where shrubby roots had taken hold to the point where axes and woodworking stuff would be needed, Danny noted.

“So I wanted to run something by you?” Danny said.

“Yeah, sure?” Steve gave him his full attention, stopping and regarding him full on.

“It’s nothing serious,” Danny began. “Well, it could be. But… I had an idea.”

“Quit beating around the bush and get to the point.”

“I want to do a series. I want to follow creativity. That’s what I’m going to call it. Creativity. I want to do a study at Seolh. I want to follow Mamo, Chin, you – I’m not entirely sure how to do Toast and digital art. I want to capture the initial spark and then taking a project to completion. I got the idea between shooting Kono surf and then that shot I took of Mamo in his workshop. I could photograph Mamo with a client, coming up with an idea, design, choosing the wood, shaping the wood, illustrating — is it illustrating, if it’s a surf board? -- and then using the surfboard. Same for Chin, picking something to paint, preparing a board, you get the picture?”

Steve gave it consideration, thinking. He nodded and then continued walking. Danny fell into step beside him.

“I don’t know how you’re going to capture that moment when the idea sets in. It’s internal,” Steve said. “And it’s not going to be particularly interesting watching me draw impossible things.”

“Oh.” Daniel hefted his camera. “Impossible. Frivolous thing. Something different. Something inspired by… this forest, these woods. This is real wood, what would you like to make here, at Seolh, with these trees.”
“Use the trees?” Abruptly Steve stopped. He scratched his chin with his thumbnail thinking hard. “Perhaps use the actual trees? Oh, that’s—”

Snap. Danny caught that scrunched up expression, mouth slightly open, eyebrows drawing together as he gazed away and to the right.

Steve blinked and then looked at him affronted. “I don’t believe you did that! That was -- That was--”

“Manipulative?” Danny asked, unrepentant. “Scheming? It worked, though, didn’t it? You had an idea.”

“Yeah,” Steve said, “I had an idea.”

“So can I follow you, while you make it come to life?”

Danny waited, bobbing a little from foot to foot. He guessed that Steve was intrigued and also a bit freaked out.

“Okay,” Steve’s finger came out, started to point. He aborted that gesture and crossed his arms instead. “Just photos. No psycho babble, just the process, right?”

“Just the process,” Danny confirmed.

~*~

# 12 #

It was an honest shot, although not a particularly attractive photo, Danny observed as he reviewed Steve’s inspiration face on the tiny screen on the back of his Canon. They were watching the ‘Big Bang Theory’ on DVD, or more accurately, it was playing in the back ground as Steve dozed and Danny looked cursorily at his shots.

Listing to the side, Steve’s head was pushed against the wing of his armchair. He was definitely asleep, fingers a relaxed curl on his lap.

“Pssst?” Chin’s whisper caught Danny’s attention.

Danny lifted his fingers to his lips. Shush.

‘You wanted to talk?’ Chin mouthed extravagantly, and Danny had a moment’s insight into Steve’s world.

Cautiously, Danny set his camera aside and levered himself off the couch. Steve didn’t even twitch. On his tiptoes, Danny crept across the room. He glanced back at Steve when he made it to the door without disturbing him.

“Wow, he’s tuckered out,” Danny whispered. “It is hot and humid out there.”

“Understandable,” Chin said as Danny quietly drew the door shut.

“Understandable?” Danny asked as he preceded Chin into the kitchen.

“It’s hot, siesta time,” Chin said adroitly, as he reached for a canister of his green tea pearls. “Tea?”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” Danny eyed Chin, who looked back at him phlegmatically.
“Coffee, then?”

“Yeah, sure.” Danny grabbed the French press from the draining rack by the sink. It was dry enough.

Chin made himself busy, filling the kettle with filtered water, portioning out tea into his favourite porcelain cup. Danny worked around him, getting the coffee grounds and his own mug.

“Hey, I’m going to ask. What do you mean ‘understandable’?”

“It’s Steve’s story, Danny. He wouldn’t be happy to know that we were talking behind his back.” Chin poured just-off-the-boil hot water in his cup and the French press, avoiding Danny’s gaze.

“Wow, that’s mysterious. Can I guess?” Danny settled the small of his back against the countertop.

“Because Mrs. K did say that Steve was on a training programme to get fit. And Steve said that he’s ‘currently’ retired, i.e. he hopes someday he won’t be retired. He told me that he got injured in Afghanistan by an IED. And that he had a physiotherapist. Do you think that I’m blind? Steve’s not a hundred percent; he’s as skinny as a rake and has the appetite of a gnat. He goes for a twenty minute jog and comes back lathered. I heard him huffing and puffing on our morning hike.”

Chin blinked. It was the only overt sign of astonishment.

“Chin. Chin, I’m a photographer. You’re an artist. We study people, things.” Danny brought his hands up bracketing his head. “We see.”

“He’s getting better,” Chin volunteered.

“Good. That’s good. Let’s continue to make it happen.”

“You’re a good man, Danny Williams.”

“Well.” Danny snatched up the French Press and his mug. “It hasn’t escaped my attention that you do a lot to keep this place running smoothly and you’re successful enough that you could probably get your own place.”

“True,” Chin didn’t hedge. “But this is my home and it was here when I really needed it. Steve and his Grandmother made a place for me when then was no one else in the world.”

“Oh.”

“My story is very simple.” Chin pulled out his seat and sat smoothly.

Danny joined him at the table, juggling milk, sugar, French press and mug. Chin waited, patiently, until Danny was settled with his perfectly sugared coffee.

“My family are cops, pure and simple. And I wanted to pursue art. They did not approve: it was a stupid decision; I would not be able to support myself; it wasn’t a ‘real’ career; I was letting the family down…. Believe you me, the entire Kelly Clan, and to be honest, ninety nine percent of the Kalakaua Clan back then, disapproved. They disapproved loudly.”

“And now?”

“I’m still not a cop. And a lot of words were said which are hard to get past on both sides. What I do isn’t real. But Kono can pursue a career as a professional surfer. My cousin Adam is a burlesque performer in Los Angeles. So it was worth it.”
“Man, that was brave.” Danny toasted him with his mug, thinking of his own family and how hard it would be to go expressly against their wishes. He’d been lucky. They had supported his desire to follow photography, although he knew in his heart of hearts that his dad would have loved it if he had become a fire fighter. “Steve said your nieces and nephews come by and play? He thought we should have a barbeque next time Grace is over.”

“My brother’s kids. My brother came around a few years ago and we made up.” Chin stirred his tea. “Really, we never fell out -- he’s my little brother -- but like everyone he sided with the Family.”

“And Kono?”

Chin shook his head and then smiled as if the sun was coming out from the clouds.

“Kono never stopped believing in me. She was a tiny scrap of a thing and barrelled over every objection, fight, and kept on coming. I was living in this shithole of an apartment, just after I’d been kicked out of my parents’ house. I was struggling to pay my rent and eat. My scholarship didn’t even cover the bare essentials. And there was a knock on the door. She was yay tall.” Chin sketched a height of mere feet. “She’d figured out the bus route and had a map from the back of the telephone directory -- no Googlemaps back then -- and made her way to me. I was so annoyed at her.”

Danny laughed because he understood.

“She had a scrap of paper clutched in her grubby little hand. She’s been to the market -- the one you visited yesterday -- with my Aunt. And she had met Steve’s Grandmother selling knitted sweaters of all things.”

“Sweaters? In Hawaii?”

“She liked knitting Arrans.” Chin shrugged. “To each their own. She did quite well, actually, especially when she got a website. Getting the wool was a pain. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Kono told Mrs. McGarrett all about you and your painting,” Danny nudged.

“Yeah.” Chin looked skywards, lost in the memory. “Kono told Audrey about her cousin and, funnily enough, not a lot about what was happening with the family, but about the paintings I’d done for her. Really, you’d have to pay me to paint dolphins now. Audrey wrote down the address and a telephone number and the word ‘Seolh’ underlined three times.”

“Did that mean anything to you?” Danny guessed that he still had that paper.

“Not to me, but I mentioned it to my tutor. And she, basically, stopped our class, frogmarched me to her rusty Ford and drove me to the House. I moved in a week later.”

“And the rest is history,” Danny said going for the cliché.

“Pretty much.”

“So you’ve known Steve since he was a kid?”

“Since he was in high school.”

“Was Mamo here?”

“Off and on. He worked as an electrician when his kids were younger, learning the art of making surfboards from his grandfather on nights and weekends. Audrey gave him the space. She loved the
idea of the first skills continuing. Boards nowadays are made out of all sorts of stuff. Mamo is old school.”

“Who else was here?”

Chin blew out a sigh. “Mad guy called Oat – I don’t know his given name – he started the vegetables gardens and orchards. He had few interesting plots out there.” Chin mimed sucking on a stubby little cigarette. “He did some weird stuff. Couldn’t sell much. A lot of his canvasses are stored in the attic. A lady called Pepper worked the kilns. There were some good parties. Party.” Chin looked speculative.

“Oh? You thinking of hosting a party?” Danny grinned.

“I think that it would be a good idea.” Unconsciously, Chin glanced in the direction of the television room and the slightest concerned frown marred his expression. Danny followed his train of thought and recalled Steve’s obvious dislike of crowds and loud noises.

“What about the barbeque?” Danny proposed. “Steve thought that it was a good idea. They can start mid-afternoon. They don’t go on late, unless you want them to. They’re not as noisy as a full on party.”

“Barbeque?” Chin said almost to himself. “But no fireworks.”

“Yeah, sure.” Danny didn’t mind either way. If they didn’t mention it to Grace as a possibility it wouldn’t be an issue.

“When is your daughter visiting?” Chin asked.

“I should have her next weekend, but I haven’t spoken to my ex.” Danny ignored the little fillip of anger in his gut.

“That’s a bit short notice. Next time?”

That was coming close to end of the suck-it-and-see-what-Seolh-was-like. It was hard to believe that he had only been here a week. A week, weird. He came back to Earth with a thump.

“Didn’t you want to ask me something?” Chin asked, evidently waiting for when Danny no longer lost in a miasma of thought.

“Oh, yeah. I did. I had an idea about doing a study here at Seolh on Creativity,” Danny began. He presented his idea of exploring the different creative processes to Chin. He couldn’t get a read on the man, but he doggedly pursued his proposal, wanting to document Creativity, that Steve was on board and…

“Well.” Chin held up his hand stopping Danny’s spiel. “I have no objection. But it has to be about the art, not Seolh.”

“I don’t understand.” And frankly Danny genuinely didn’t understand, because the backdrop of Seolh was amazing.

“Seolh exists to help people. We don’t promote Seolh. It’s a--” Chin went as opaque as the sphinx, “-refuge. You find your way to Seolh when you need it. Seolh doesn’t advertise.”

It sounded a bit too mystical for Danny, but if the president of Seolh wanted it that way, Danny was amenable.
“It could help with grants and things if, you know, the place was more on the map,” Danny couldn’t help but add.

Chin shook his head. “Grants come to the person if they want to get grant, not because they’re living and working at Seolh.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“It’s in the Charter. I agree, though.”

Danny shrugged. Honestly, he thought a little bit of promotion wouldn’t go amiss, but, the word of mouth thing had worked for him. It wasn’t his place to disagree with the structure of the place.

“Hey.” A sleep rumpled Steve wandered into the kitchen, aiming straight for the fridge. “What’re you talking about?”

“Chin’s okay with my Creativity idea.”

“What?” Steve said muzzily, poking his head around the fridge door. “Oh, the photos? Yeah. Good.”

“We were talking about having a barbeque,” Chin said half-questioning.

Steve looked at them fish-faced, processing.

“Just a small one, friends and family,” Chin continued.

Steve shook himself. “Yeah, I mentioned something like that to Danny before when we were out. Why not?”

“Why not indeed.” Chin smiled and his whole face changed. “Could be fun.”

Steve closed the fridge. Hilariously, he hadn’t taken anything out of it. “I thought that it would be nice for Grace to meet the kids.”

“What were you looking for?” Danny asked, and then clarified in the face of Steve’s perplexed expression, the dude was practically sleepwalking. “In the fridge?”

“Dunno, I was just hungry, but I don’t know for what.” And with that he wandered back out of the kitchen.

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# 13 #

Danny rarely used the word insomnia, since it would give the definite and productive ramblings of his brain a hook to hang on, and even though he was working on the Creativity theme, he actually wanted to sleep.

He had to break the train of thought, and a quick run down to the kitchen and a mug of warm milk was the recipe for sleepiness.

As he reached the kitchen, a flicker of light caught his eye. Danny froze. What? It was outside, Danny thought, peering across the gym and out through the conservatory windows. He picked his way through the dark and shadowy shapes.
“Holy Shit!” The Hall was on fire.

Danny ran, he bolted, he took the stairs three at the time, he ran down corridors…. Who was in the House? Chin and Steve. He drummed on Chin’s door.

“Fire! Chin, wake the fuck up.” He turned the doorknob and stumbled into Chin’s studio.

Chin came running out of his bedroom, knocking over an easel to the floor with a clatter.

“Danny?”

“The Hall’s on fire!” Danny’s thoughts spiralled. “Call the fire department.”

He spun on his heel. Steve? Steve’s apartment was directly over the Hall. The corridors were dark and twisty, he flipped a light switch and no lights came on. Danny scrambled up the steep wooden stairs to the little landing. He rattled the knob; the door was locked.

“Steve!” He slammed his fist into the wood. “Steve!”

Shit. He was an idiot.

He threw his weight again the door. It didn’t move a fraction.

“Steve!” he tried, futilely.

“Danny.” Chin scrambled up the stairs. He held a key ring.

Danny backed up in the tiny space, letting Chin get to the lock. The door opened inwards and Danny fell into the apartment. He darted across the living room, vaulting over the coffee table -- thankful of the pulled back drapes letting in diffuse moonlight. He scrambled up the spiral staircase, up the first level and onwards and upwards into Steve’s bedroom. There was a miasma of smoke hanging on the air.

“Don’t surprise him!” Chin yelled as Danny thudded into the base of Steve’s bed.

What?

Steve erupted from his nest of blankets, as naked as the day he was born. Danny blinked and between one blink and the next, he was thrown down on the floor -- back of his head bouncing hard. Steve was squatted over him, face a blank mask.

“Steve!” Chin was there, slamming Steve off Danny and into the side of the bed, bruisingly.

Steve yelped in pain. He twisted away, hand on the floor, hips swinging and his foot slammed Chin in the chest, kicking him back. Chin slid across the hardwood floorboards. Something silver flashed and a foot long serrated knife embedded point down beside Danny’s ear.

“Chin?” Steve’s froze, poised, in a crouched runner’s pose, bunched muscles caught mid-violence.

Gasping, Chin levered himself up on one elbow. “Fire in the Hall,” he enunciated.

“Fire?” Steve coughed lightly.

“Yes!” Chin nodded firmly.

Steve jack-knifed to his feet. He gathered up a pair of shorts from the chair beside his bed and yanked them on. He offered Chin a hand, hauling him to his feet.
“You okay?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Chin said, but Danny could tell that he was winded.

“Fire,” Danny said softly, still a little stunned at the precise wildness of Steve’s attack.

“Danny?” Chin asked, as both he and Steve levered Danny up.

“I’m fine.” Danny threw off their hands. “We have to get out of here.”

Steve was two steps ahead of him, metaphorically speaking, chivvying both Chin and Danny to the stairs. “Move. Move. Move.”

They moved, scrambling down Steve’s narrow twisty stairs, fumbling and bruising in their haste.

“Lights?” Steve asked loudly.

Danny turned for a millisecond at the bottom of the staircase. “Down.”

“What?” Steve loomed out of the darkness above Danny, brow furrowed in concern.

“Enough,” Chin said, caught between them, “let’s get out of here.”

Danny led the way, through the House heading back to the conservatory.

“What are you doing?” Chin demanded as he broke off towards the front door.

Steve had a fire extinguisher in his hand. Danny didn’t have a clue where he had picked it up from.

“Fire.” Danny pointed, leading the way to the best view of the back of the Hall.

A figure garbed in black moved past the conservatory windows. He held a bottle in his hand, rag burning at its neck. Window glass smashed and hot burning alcohol spread over the floor of the conservatory.

Reflexively, Danny flinched away. Steve was there, standing before him. The explosive hiss of the extinguisher blew, and a jet of floury powder engulfed the flames. Steve jumped over the mess of dying fire, slammed the base of the metal cylinder into the lock and broke through the conservatory double doors into the garden.

Danny chased after him, jumping over the mess of glass and alcohol. He caught sight of Steve swinging the fire extinguisher into the intruder, smacking him direct in the stomach. The man folded over and Steve followed through with a chop to the back of his head.

“Restrain him,” Steve ordered and hared off towards the Hall.

“How?” Danny asked, he was in pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt.

“Here.” Chin tossed over what Danny thought was a braided rope from the conservatory velvet curtains when he held it up before his face. Bending over he wrapped the man’s wrists and yanked the knots tight enough to cut off blood.

“Shit. Shit!” He could hear Steve yelling. He was an angrily pacing silhouette in front of guttering flames licking up the walls of the Hall, turning curtains and tapestries into Roman Candles.

The reverberating wail of sirens provided a horrendous counterpoint.
“I’ll direct them round the back!” Chin disappeared into the House. “Stop Steve getting into the Hall.”

“Fuck.” Danny ran towards him.

Anguished, Steve was screaming incoherently at the flames.

“Babe. Babe.” Danny skidded to a halt beside him. He held up his hands ready to grab, but Steve wasn’t running towards the conflagration. He paced, held back by the sight, eyes bright and moist.

Then the fire engines arrived, driving over grass and destroying a giant urn with a potted palm. A veritable army of fire fighters baled out of the vehicle. Another engine piled up behind it. Everyone knew what to do and everyone knew their place, deploying hoses as one fireman broke a Hall window. A man in a bright yellow coat and a helmet that bore the name Chief directed the action.

“Come away, Babe,” Danny cajoled, finally grasping Steve’s bicep.

“What?” Steve jerked around.

“Give them room to work.” He hoped that they were on time to save the rest of the House.

“I can’t hear you. My aids are in my bedroom above that!” He stabbed at the fire. “I’m going to kill him.”

He pulled free of Danny, intent on heading back to the intruder.

“No!” Danny got in his face, nose to nose, so he could read his lips. “We need the police. The police will help us.”

Steve limped across the lawn heading for the trussed up figure. He was still unconscious. Steve crouched next to him, re-securing the ropes and twining them high around his forearms. He pulled the limbs so tightly that if the guy moved he would probably dislocate joints.

“Tell the Chief that this was arson and that they need to search the house.” He scowled at Danny over his shoulder.

“Good idea.”

Chin came out of the conservatory, two uniformed police officers on his heels.

Halleluiah, Danny thought, Chin had also called the police.

“This is the man,” Chin spat. “He threw a Molotov cocktail into the conservatory.”

“Who hit him, Brah?” Cop number one asked, utterly unconcerned.

“Steve,” Chin said neutrally.

“Nice one, Steve.” He bobbed up on his toes.


“Right, right sorry. I’ll tell the Chief. Need to tell him that it was arson.” He beetled over to the tall man.

“Who would burn the House?” he heard the cop demand.
“I don’t know, kiddo,” Chin answered.

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Chaos reigned supreme. The Chief had already sent booted and spurred fire fighters into the house, but the fire seemed to be contained in the Hall. A total of four engines responded to the emergency. The fire fighters had broken a window closest to the flames and directly started knocking down the fire at the source. Danny marvelled at their professionalism and coordination. And kicked himself once again for not having his camera to hand. He tried to enter the house, but a young fire fighter stopped him dead. When he tried to explain, she had simply directed him away, resolute.

In an amazingly short time, the flames were beaten down. The Chief watched, arms crossed over his chest, as the fire fighters continued to soak the hot wood.

“Kept it contained to the Hall,” the Chief observed, pushing his glasses up his nose with a grubby finger. “It’s a mess, but in the scheme of things not too bad. Luckily, we’re just down the road.”

“What about the roof? The rooms above the Hall?” Danny asked.

“Here you go,” a woman who Danny didn’t know interrupted them. She held a massive tray with mugs of coffee.

“Thank you.” Danny pounced.

Between slurping down hot coffee and munching on a sandwich, the Chief advised, “A structural engineer should check the joists and timber framing once it’s cooled. No one should go on the third floor above the Hall until you’ve had that assessment.”

“Could it crash?” Danny’s coffee-free hand described the arch of the roof falling in and smashing.

“The only potential weak spot I can see is the ceiling-floor below the circular bay windows. The eaves should be bracketed, taking some of the weight. Best check -- better safe than sorry.”

Danny squinted but he didn’t have a clue what the Chief was talking about.

“Part of the Hall is gutted. Pity. You’re going to need professionals to clean the structure above. There’ll definitely be smoke damage,” the Chief finished. “Ah, about time.”

“What?” Danny asked as the man stalked off without another word. He greeted a short bespectacled Hawaiian guy with a handshake and together they moved right up to peer through the remains of the window. The back of the new guy’s jacket was emblazoned with ‘investigator’. Danny guessed he was getting arson evidence or something. They were joined by a third man wearing a blatantly out-of-place khaki pants and t-shirt. An oval badge gleamed at his waist.

“They’ll sort it out, sweetie,” a motherly voice at his elbow said. “My Koa is very angry that this has happened.”

“Mrs. Keawe.” Danny startled. She was wearing her dressing gown, but buttoned up to her throat for modesty’s sake. She must have gotten one of her kids to drive her over. “That’s your son, the police officer?”


Her Polunu was a short, stocky very young policewoman; James was taller and apparently was also a detective; Nui was even taller, but wore a uniform, and Little Laka was carrying another tray.
Danny wondered if the Keawes were related to the Kelly Family.

“Laka,” Mrs. Keawe continued, “hasn’t joined the police yet. My sisters are in the kitchen--”

“We’re not allowed in the House,” Danny protested.

“We are.” Mrs. Keawe patted his elbow.

Oh, that was where the coffee and sandwiches were coming from, Danny realised.

“Have you seen, Steve?” Danny asked.

“Yes, he’s in the ambulance out front.”

“What?”

~*~

# 14 #

“What? Steve’s in an ambulance?” He hadn’t been out of Danny’s sight for twenty minutes -- what had happened?

“He’s okay, Daniel,” Mrs. Keawe said comfortingly. “He cut his foot.”

Danny looked down at his own slippered feet. “Excuse me, Mrs. Keawe.”

She was right. There was a rig out front, all bright lights and chaos. Steve was propped up on a gurney, red blanket around his shoulders and a thunderous scowl on his face.

“Babe.” Danny poked his head in, shielding his eyes against the lights. “What happened?”

The paramedic bent over Steve’s foot squinted at Danny through coke bottle-thick glasses.

“The Lieutenant Commander stepped on a shard of glass. He’s cut the bottom of his foot quite badly.” He had swathed Steve’s foot in bandages.

“I thought I saw you limping.”

Holding his hand over his mouth, Steve coughed.

“Hey, are you okay?” Danny asked. Steve had been sleeping right over the fire; his rooms had been smoky.

“The Lieutenant Commander,” the paramedic said precisely, “has suffered slight smoke inhalation.”

“You taking him in?”

“What?” Steve asked.

“Indeed, yes, I do recommend that. There is glass still in the wound. It needs to be irrigated and cleaned thoroughly. And given the Commander’s propensity for running, it would be best that an orthopaedic surgeon placed internal and external stitches.”

“You know, Steve?” It was kind of a rhetorical question -- it was obvious that the squirrely little guy did know Steve.
“Yes. I spent one of my rotations at the military hospital at Pearl in the rehabilitation unit. I am currently on rotation with the King’s Medical Centre emergency department.”

“Okay, yeah.” Danny raked his hands through his hair. “I’ll go grab my keys and wallet and get the truck; I’ll follow you in. I’ll just tell Chin.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve demanded and coughed again.

“Please put the oxygen mask on.” The paramedic picked up the abandoned mask from Steve’s lap.

“I told you, Max, I don’t need that.” Steve pushed his hand aside.

Max held it before his eyes. “Yes, you do. You know the risks.”

“Fine.” Steve held it against his nose and mouth, but didn’t set the elastic band over his head.

“Which hospital?” Danny asked.

“Kings Medical Centre.”

“Hospital?” Steve snapped, sitting bolt upright. “I am not going to hospital for a cut in my goddamn foot. And don’t make fuckin’ decisions for me. I’m deaf not stupid.”

Furious didn’t begin to describe the expression marring Steve’s mobile face. And Danny did not blame him.

“Oh.” Danny gripped the edge of the door until his knuckles turned white. “Oh, Babe, I am sorry.”

Steve glared, face white and pinched.

“Sorry,” Danny repeated.

“Commander.” Max sat on the edge of the gurney, back to Danny. “I apologise. There is broken glass embedded deeply in your foot. It needs to be taken out by a professional. I would also like a doctor to listen to your chest, given your history. You need to go to the Medical Centre.”


“It may appear overkill, but I am returning to the Medical Centre as it is the end of my shift.”

“Stop with the over explaining, Max. What?”

“Please,” Max said. “It’s necessary.”

“Whatever.” Steve thudded back on the gurney and closed his eyes, shutting them out.

Max stood with a sigh. “I will apologise when he’s willing to listen. That was very unprofessional of me.”

“I’ll follow,” Danny said, much subdued.

“I need to find my supervisor, Lori. If you see a paramedic with bleached blonde hair -- the roots are showing -- please tell her to return.”

“Right. Yep, I can do that.” Danny said, wincing at the description. He hoped that this Lori was not within hearing distance.
Guessing that if they procrastinated, Steve was going to get out of that rig, Danny moved. He blew through the house, grabbed the truck keys from Steve’s bowl on the top of the fridge. Made a quick detour into the laundry room and snatched up the first, clean hooded top he found. A quick double check with a fire fighter who was enjoying flirting with Laka and he raced up the stairs to pull on a pair of jeans and get his wallet. He passed Mrs. Keawe en route and pointed out that her granddaughter was In The Kitchen With A Boy.

“Danny? Where are you going?” Chin asked as he passed through the foyer.

“Oh, good, I found you. Steve’s badly cut his foot. He’s going to the hospital in Honolulu. I’m gonna go with and bring him back after the docs have finished. Okay?”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s not happy. But the trainee doctor-paramedic guy…” Danny got down to the nitty-gritty. “He’ll be fine. You okay sorting out this until we get back?”

“Me and the Keawes and Kahikes. Everyone. Cousins, aunts and uncles, will be fine.” Chin handed over his cell phone. “Just in case you need to contact us.”

Amidst all the shock and panic and urgency, suddenly Danny felt okay as he accepted Chin’s phone.

“Go,” Chin said. “We’ll be here when you bring Steve home.”

Danny waited patiently-impatiently in the waiting room, hooded top carefully folded on the seat beside him. He kicked himself for not bringing a book with him. The clock on the far wall picked its way to seven am at a snail’s pace. He turned Chin’s phone over in his hands – how had Chin known that he had left his phone on the bedside table? The guy was psychic.

“Max!” Danny called out as he spotted the trainee doctor making his way to the exit, dressed in civies.

“Oh.” He stopped and glanced at the door. “Mr…?”

“Williams. Call me Danny, though.” Danny got between Max and the exit. “What’s taking so long? I thought that it was pretty straightforward. The receptionist won’t tell me anything.”

“Well, of course, not. The Lieutenant Commander is… uhm… a very private man. And, well…and you’re not a member of his family.”

“He’s okay, though? I mean, it’s just a cut on his foot.”

“Yes,” Max hazarded. “But we want to be thorough.”

“Thorough?” Danny echoed. “Fuck it. Where’s Steve?”

Max pointed cautiously back down the corridor. “Cubicle three. But I didn’t tell you that. He’s bored; you could distract him.” He bolted.

Danny took that as permission. He sauntered down the corridor, looking like he belonged and ducked into cubicle three.

“Hey. Holy shit!” In the bright, harsh hospital light, Steve was illuminated in sharp relief. Sideways on, he was sitting upright, cross-legged on a gurney, fingers drumming on his knees. A moulded
plastic mask over his mouth and nose misted up as he breathed. But what really caught Danny’s eye was the fine spider webbing of scar tissue across his left side. It was red and unhappy looking, not new, but recent, less than a year old. It started just under his armpit and reached down to the dint above his hip. The criss-crossing tracery was bisected by a straighter, more uniform scar – surgery. “That looks nasty.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but didn’t say a word.

“That’s why you wear the wacky tops,” Danny figured out instantly. “It’s to protect your side.”

The eye rolling was reaching dramatic proportions.

“So I was out there and bored. And I figured that you were in here and bored. So I came in,” Danny hurried on. “Normally when I’m in the ER it’s with Gracie. She got the ‘flu once, and it was scary. Her temp was like 104 and she thought that giant red spiders were after her. Another time she had tonsillitis, strep throat, some antibiotics cured that. I’m not used to being left out of the loop. Have they sorted out your foot?”


“You shouldn’t take that off, should you?” Danny asked.

“Not until he’s finished the treatment.” Surprisingly, a uniformed Navy officer entered the cubicle. “Commander.”

Obediently, Steve resituated the mask. Danny didn’t blame him; the guy was commanding – tall, with a shock of white hair and a lot of little blocks of colour stitched above his left breast pocket.

“Dr. Magnus, US Medical Corps.” Juggling two boxes, one the size of a large paperback and another the size of a packet of cards, the doctor freed up a hand and shook Danny’s hand firmly. “And you are?”

“Uh, Danny Williams. Friend,” he hazarded. “I was concerned. It was taking a long time and I figured I could entertain Steve.”

Magnus glanced at Steve, a question in his manner, who nodded and continued breathing in the misty vapour.

“I’m Steve’s primary physician. When I heard he’d come in I thought that I would come down and make sure that he was behaving.”

Danny was impressed; it wasn’t even seven in the morning.

Magnus passed Steve the larger box. “Here, I dropped by your audiologist’s office en route. You can have these until you can get your own back.”

Steve opened the box. His sigh was audible over the hiss and whirr of the machine. Inside the box sat the type of hearing aids that Danny was more familiar with from television: bulky and designed to hang over the ears. Steve did not put them on.

“You also need these.” Magnus tossed over the second box and Steve snatched it out of mid-air.

“When can I leave, sir?” Steve asked as he turned the box over, checking the label – antibiotics, Danny guessed.
“Ten more minutes on the nebuliser.” Magnus opened and closed his hand twice indicating ten.

“Why antibiotics? Even though?” Steve said, muffled behind the mask.

“Yes.” Magnus nodded.

“Instead of or in addition to?” Steve said.

“Instead of,” Magnus enunciated clearly. “One week prescription.”

“What?” Danny interrupted. “Hey, you’re speaking in the ‘I-know-what-we’re-talking–about’ shorthand code. You let me stay in the room, presumably so that I help, contribute, lend gimpy a hand…? What I’m seeing here is concern with a capital ‘C’. You’ve got this breathing thing on. More antibiotics instead of the ones that you’re all ready on? Are you ill, Steve?”

Steve wrenched off the mask. “Can you talk any slower? All I got was gabble, gabble, gabble.”

“How antibiotics, Steve?” Danny asked.

Steve rubbed his forehead, until it dinted white under his fingertip. “I don’t have a spleen, Danny. It means I’m more liable to get infections. Apparently, I also have a predisposition to pneumococcal infections like pneumonia.” He grimaced a travesty of a smile at Magnus.

“It’s common for low dose prophylactic antibiotics to be prescribed for the first two years after a splenectomy.” Magnus said, in typical doctor speak. “I agreed with the attending physician that a stronger course of antibiotics, given the deepness of the wound to his foot and the debris that had to cleaned out of it, was required. Mask, Commander.”

Steve pressed it against his face with all the melodrama of Grace in a snit.

“You’re such a child,” Danny chided. He threw the hooded top that he had been carrying around at Steve’s head and focused on the other adult in the room. “So basically keep an eye on him for fever, cough, sore throat? Anything else?”

“Rash, headache,” Magnus summed up.

“Good to know.”

~*~

# 15 #

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Danny said as he drove them back to the House.

“What? Oh, damn it.” Steve opened larger box that Dr. Magnus had given him and pulled out the bulky hearing aids. “I hate these damn things. They work like shit.”

Danny waited as he fiddled, finally hooking them over his ears.

“Okay,” Steve said loudly, pointing at his ears. “These aren’t set up for me. They’re loaners. Magnus will have got the best possible from Messel, my audiologist, but still.”

“I’m sorry that I took over,” Danny said. “I take over. It’s a bad habit. I get it from my mom.”

“Oh.” Pushing his hands deep in the pocket in front of his top, Steve sagged back in the passenger seat. “Fine. I understand. Don’t do it again.”
Danny flexed his hands on the steering wheel. He licked his lip. “Honestly? I can try. I will, and you can tell me when I step over the line. But nature and nurture has made me the man that I am today.”

Steve shook his head. “I think that you apologised and then took it back?”

Danny hemmed and hawed. “Yes,” he finally decided on.

“Because of nature?”

“Yes,” Danny said definitely.

“I think that you actually mean ‘bossy’ and ‘contrary’.” Steve softened the summation with, “and ‘protective’.”

“Can I ask a question?” Danny said, some ten minutes on when he felt like the silence could be broken.

Steve hummed what Danny took for agreement.

“This is all pretty recent for you. That scar is what, three-four months old?”

“Six.”

“So you lost your hearing a short time ago.”

“And?”

“You’re really good at lip reading.”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on it, I’m not completely deaf, so I do get some of what people say. And isn’t the aphorism that communication is sixty percent visual?”

“Still.”

Steve lifted his bandaged foot up on the dashboard. “Fine, I was in Naval Intelligence. I did a fair amount of surveillance, and that goes hand in glove with learning to lip read. Who knew that it would prove so useful? Happy?”

“Not particularly, no. I’m sorry that it happened to you. I’m just interested.”

Danny signalled and turned onto the road that led up to the House.

“That – Hey, who the fuck is that?” Danny half-yelped. The gates to the House were closed and a tattooed behemoth stood in front of them. Danny braked rather than drive over the top of him. Danny had assumed that the rusty gates -- usually open and half-buried in undergrowth on either side of the posts -- were purely decorative.

Reaching under the central passenger seat, Steve pulled out a metal lock-box. As he rotated the combination lock, the Hawaiian ambled up to the driver’s window.

Danny carefully primed the door, ready to slam it into the guy if necessary and leap out and stamp on his tattooed nose.

“Hey, who are you?” the guy asked.

“Who am I?” Danny stabbed his own chest. “I am Danny Williams and I live here. Who are you?”
“Blue. Prove it.”

“Prove it? Prove it! I don’t have to prove anything to you, Mr. Blue.”

“Hey, Blue.” Steve pressed Danny back into his seat and leaned over his lap. “I’m McGarrett and this is my place.”

“Yeah?” Blue rocked his head side to side taking in Steve’s hard stare. “You’re deaf.”

“Oh, did the hearing aids give that away?” Danny interjected. “Could you be any less disrespectful?”

“Kawika described you, McGarrett.”

“He up there?” Steve jerked his chin in the direction of the House.

“No, he’ll be along later.”

“Fine. Open the gates,” Steve ordered and settled back.

The second that they drove through gates, Steve opened the lock box and carefully replaced a snub nosed automatic back in cut-out foam space.

“What!” Danny had seen him pick up the box, but had not seen him extract the gun. “Was that always in the truck?”

“Yes,” Steve drawled. “Is that a trick question?”

“Grace has been in this truck!”

Steve slammed the lid shut and twisted the lock. “A grenade couldn’t open this box, let alone a seven year old.” He stowed the box back under the passenger seat.

“That’s a concealed weapon. Can you carry a concealed weapon?”

“Yes,” Steve said definitely.

“I don’t believe it. I don’t. I mean, a gun in the truck. I’ve been in this truck with a gun.”

“It’s safely stored,” Steve said with an edge of irritation.

“When Grace is in the truck, can you store it somewhere else?” Danny gritted his teeth. “Please?”

Steve regarded him, evidently thinking hard. Danny concentrated on the twisty drive. Three trucks of different shapes and sizes were parked along the side of the House. One was loaded up with scaffolding, another with a skip and the third was a closed top with Odom Construction written across the side. Danny manoeuvred around them, heading towards the garage abutting the workshop complex.

“Yes,” Steve said abruptly.

“Yes?”

“Yes. If I know ahead of time that we’re picking up Grace, I’ll store the gun even more securely.”

Danny pulled into the truck’s customary parking space. He turned in his seat and said seriously, “Thank you.”
Steve popped the passenger door lock rather than overtly acknowledge Danny’s thanks.

“Hey, hang on,” Danny ordered. “I’ll get your crutches.” He scampered out of the truck, snatching up the crutches stowed in the back, and got around to Steve’s side of the truck in record time.

He presented them to Steve and waited for the objection.

Steve glowered.

Dr. Magnus had been pretty emphatic about using the crutches for a week so that the wound would heal cleanly. The lecture on wound aftercare and the results of not following his advice had been pretty graphic.

“Thank you,” Steve said precisely.

“You’re welcome.” Danny smiled toothily. Steve was a prickly bastard. “Come on you, big goof. Let’s show Chin and Kono and Mamo and Mrs. K that you’re all right. They’ll be worried about you.”

~*~

The House was in an uproar. Steve froze dead on the step into the kitchen. Patiently, Danny placed his hand on the small of Steve’s back and waited.

“Stevie!” Mamo noticed him first.

“What did the doctor say?” Mrs. Keawe scurried over. She came up short in front of Steve and contained herself magnificently; Steve was as stiff as a board -- he did not want to be hugged.

“Just a bad cut,” Danny interjected. “A few stitches. Dr. Magnus wanted Steve to keep off it for a little while, hence the crutches.”

“Yeah.” Steve clod-hopped over to the kitchen table and dropped into a chair. Danny wondered if the damage under his left armpit made using the crutch difficult.

“Have you boys had any breakfast?”

Danny’s stomach growled audibly. He blushed.

“Eggs and bacon,” Mrs. Keawe decided and went over to the stove to make it happen.

“Steve.” Chin raced into the kitchen. “I saw the truck.”

“Chin,” Steve half got out of the chair, before Chin’s careful hand on his shoulder, gently pushed him back.

“Brah, are you okay?”

“Yeah, fine. It’s just the docs being overprotective schmucks.”

“Okay,” Chin cocked a glance at Danny and Danny primed himself to answer all Chin’s questions later.

“What’s happening? I saw Kawika’s man outside,” Steve said. “Do you know something? Who that bastard -- sorry Mrs. K -- was?”
“The Kapu appeared at the front door at six o’clock – said that Kawika ordered them to watch the place. The police took the intruder away. Koa’s in charge of the investigation.”

“My son,” Mrs. Keawe said unnecessarily.

“Kapu?” Danny asked.

“Long story,” Steve said in an aside. “I’ll tell you later. Chin, I saw the builders outside. What’s the status of the House?”

Chin settled back on his heels, composing his thoughts. “They’re still investigating. The fire investigator is in the process of gathering the evidence. It’s arson, as we know,” Chin reported over Danny’s snort. “As soon as he’s finished, Mr. MacDonald will get into the Hall. His cursory examination from outside indicates that there’s a potential weak point right above the north windows where the fire was concentrated.”

“Insurance?” Steve said, focused.

“In hand. But shoring up the circular bay window and the third floor constitutes an emergency so we can go ahead and get some sort of construction device installed asap. It’s en route.”


“The guy that you took out was taken to the Honolulu King Kamehameha Hospital. Two cops went with him, James Keawe and his partner.”

“Why—” Steven placed his hands very carefully on the table top. “--would anyone try and burn down Seolh?”

“That’s a very interesting question,” Detective Keawe said from the doorway.

“Has the arsonist said anything?” Chin asked.

“No, he’s still at the hospital,” Detective Keawe said flatly, “unconscious.”

Steve leaned back in his chair, unapologetic.

“I’m making second, or is it third, breakfast?” Mrs. K said. “Koa, would you like some?”

“No, thank you, mom.” Detective Koa slid easily into his mother’s orbit and pecked a kiss on her cheek. Between one breath and the next, he straightened, back into detective mode. “So, Mr. Williams, isn’t it. I’m Detective Keawe.”

The hackles rose on the back of Danny’s neck at the detective’s tone.

“Yes, as you seem to know.”

“I understand that recently you were involved in another arson attempt at the apartment complex where you were staying.”

“What!” Danny demanded, rocketing to his feet. His mind went a hundred different places and none of them good. He definitely did not like the detective’s opening gambit. “Some stupid crack heads were trying to kill themselves in their apartment. My so-called involvement was living in the same complex.”

Detective Keawe slid smoothly to the other side of the table, taking a stance directly opposite Danny.
“In my line of work coincidences usually aren’t.”

“Are you accusing me of,” Danny was momentarily without words, which was unconscionable, “setting the fire? What about the dude in the ninja outfit? The guy who was actually caught in the act.”

Keawe shrugged. “Chin said that you raised the alarm.”

Danny shot Chin a betrayed expression. Chin was stone faced – phlegmatic, watching the tableau as if it was a fight between a mongoose and a scorpion.

“What were you doing up at three o’clock in the morning?” Keawe persisted.

“I couldn’t sleep! I came down to get some milk.” Danny glanced at Steve who was white pale and staring at him, horrified. “Steve, I swear to God -- I swear on my mother’s life -- I had nothing to do with this! I couldn’t, this place is …. I didn’t. I swear.”

~*~

# 16 #

“I didn’t do anything….” Danny’s words trailed to nothingness. He hadn’t -- He hadn’t done anything. How could they even think such a thing?

Hollow-eyed, Steve was wraith-like, staring up at him. The skin under Steve’s eyes was smudged with grey. Slowly, Steve rose to his feet. Danny stood tall. He’d defend himself, but not until he was attacked.

“Danny,” Steve proclaimed, “had nothing to do with this.”

Danny felt his knees give way. But he didn’t fall; arms encircled his shoulders, and his head fitted into the scoop of Steve’s neck. Reflexively, he grabbed at Steve’s shoulders, clinging. Tall and lanky wavered against short and stocky, and they shored up each other.

“You okay?” A large hand cupped the back of his neck.

“Yeah,” Danny breathed into Steve’s collarbone.

“You wanna sit?”

“I’m fine.” Danny inhaled, smelling smoke and sweat, and then found the strength to step back back.

The kitchen was stunningly silent. No one spoke. Chin stood on Steve’s opposite side – he was still, as if cast in stone. Mamo waited, folded hands resting on the table top. Eyes narrowed, Detective Keawe judged Danny and Danny glared back at him. Steve’s hand was warm on Danny’s shoulder. The bacon popped in the pan and Mrs. K jumped.

“Oh, you silly boys. Koa, we know Daniel. He’s a lovely boy. He wears his heart on his sleeve – he’s no more capable of burning down Seolh than I am. Can that face lie?”

Danny could feel the heat of a blush across his face and the back of his neck. Damn his fair complexion.

“He could be a good actor,” Detective Keawe said coolly.

“Look, I’ll come down the station and take one of those lie detector tests.” Danny stood tall, chest
“But you’ll be wasting your time.”

“Time that should be spent looking for the real perpetrators,” Steve said with authority.

Danny didn’t actually want to submit to a lie detector; he had read that if you were a little high strung -- not that he would ever admit to being emotional -- that they weren’t as accurate as they were portrayed on television.

“I’m going to follow all the leads,” the detective said.

“Fair enough.” Steve moved from Danny’s side and pressed both hands on the table and leaned in Koa’s direction. “But it would be remiss of you not to talk to the perpetrator that you have in custody before starting to explore each and every possible avenue of investigation. Talk to the guy who was actually caught throwing firebombs into our home, Koa!”

Koa wasn’t intimidated. He raised his chin. “I’ll follow the leads. I’ll follow all the leads. And until the guy you knocked out is up for talking, I have time to follow any lead I like.”

“I think talking to the fire investigator, who Chin has just told me is still here, would be a good start,” Steve spat. “See if there are similarities between the fire at Danny’s old apartment and here.”

Koa turned on his heel and stalked out. “I’ve got what I came here for,” his voice drifted from the corridor.

Danny would have muttered ‘ass’ under his breath as the detective left, if Mrs. Keawe hadn’t been serving up his breakfast.

“Koa’s dedicated,” Mrs. K said. “He’ll find out what happened. And none of this being annoyed and upset with each other.”

Steve looked at the steaming bacon and perfectly fluffy eggs as if they were a cowpat.

“I need to see.” He limped heavily away.

“Steve.” Danny snatched up the crutches and chased after him.

~*~

There was a Transformer lumbering across Chin’s previously faultless lawn. A bunch of construction workers were directing the massive vehicle along the tracks worn by the fire engines the night before.

“Wow.” Danny said, Grace would be so excited.

“What the Hell is that?” Steve asked.

“Transformer,” Danny answered. It was pretty obvious to him.

Steve glanced at him as if he had had a psychotic break.

“It’s a T-Rex dual head roof support.” A deep voice preceded a red-headed man with the bulk of a quarterback. “Mr. McGarrett?”

“Mr. MacDonald?” Steve returned.

“Yup. Odom Construction.” MacDonald had a rich Scottish burr to his accent. He extended his
hand.

After a beat, Steve shook it. “Thank you for coming so quickly.”

“The fire investigator has cleared you to start working?” Danny interjected, grinning in the direction of the Transformer.

“Just left to file his report,” MacDonald said.

Balancing on one crutch, Steve was focused on the gutted wreck of the Hall. His free hand scrubbed at the scruff on his jaw.

“Cool, in’it?” MacDonald said, nodding at the roof support equipment.

“Awesome,” Danny said, as the construction gang worked to set the giant -- Danny scratched his head trying to figure out what it was -- metal extending piston into position. There was a loud hiss as the pneumatic support extended.

“Emergency. Acute response required, that’s my speciality. I’m linked with a number of insurers, including yours. Basically, it saves time, money and heartache, if we can work fast.” MacDonald grinned; Danny guessed that he enjoyed his work.

“So will you do the whole repair, or just the emergency stuff?” Danny asked.

“Emergency – making this place safe: stabilise the ceiling and the supports for the third floor and the loft. I don’t do the finessing. Have you seen that dance floor?” MacDonald asked rhetorically.

“That’s specialist work.”

“Can I get in? See the damage?” Steve asked.

MacDonald looked Steve up and down, taking in the crutch, shorts, hooded sweatshirt, and, Danny noticed gritting his teeth, the hearing aids. Danny’s glee at seeing the construction equipment was abruptly squashed.

“It’s not safe yet, Mr. McGarrett. As soon as it is, I’ll tell you. But that floor’s a right mess. Foot’s gonna stop you wandering around in there,” he said, a tad dismissively.

Steve’s knuckles flexed whitely on the crutch grip. “What about upstairs? When can I get up there?”

“Tomorrow maybe,” MacDonald judged. “Not going to be habitable though: smoke – mucky stuff.”

“Thanks, Mr. MacDonald,” Steve grated, and swung his crutch around and stalked off.

“Yeah, thanks.” Danny made himself shake the builder’s hand. It was firm and calloused. He used his grip to pull MacDonald just off balance.

“Oi,” MacDonald began.

“That man,” Danny said, leaning in closely, “is a Lieutenant Commander in the US Navy. A SEAL. He got those hearing aids serving his country overseas and injured his foot stopping a cowardly arsonist intent on burning his home. You should show him some respect.”

Danny held the man’s gaze until MacDonald dropped his eyes.

“Right.” Danny released MacDonald’s hand. “We’ll be back later. “
Danny caught up with Steve as he tottered along with one crutch. The left had been discarded; it must have hurt. He kept an easy pace beside Steve.

“So we gonna try for fourth breakfast?” Danny eventually mused.

“I’m not hungry.”

“You gotta eat, Babe.”

“I do not!” Steve snapped, turning on him.

Danny sunk his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “Really? ‘Cuz, you know, I’d expect that attitude from my seven and a half year old daughter, not a six foot tall Navy SEAL.”

“I don’t have to eat if I don’t want to.”

“Somehow that sounds even more like Grace. What is it? Do the antibiotics fuck with your digestion? If they do, I think that we can find different antibiotics. You don’t like cooked meat? A vegetarian diet can be very healthy if you do it right. If you substitute cheese for meat it’s just wrong. But the griping bear with a sore head isn’t cute. And you’ll feel one hundred percent better if we even get some oatmeal in you.”

“What?” Steve said, a touch befuddled.

“If you want a fight, I’ll give you one.” Pulling his hands from his pockets, Danny curled his fingers and tapped once, just under his own collarbones. “But you’re rung out and tired and hurt. And that guy back there just looked you up and down and sidelined you. Some bastard out there is threatening your home. You don’t need a fight. You need to sit down, have something to eat, and then organise a meeting à la Sunday evening with the whole crew.”

Steve’s eyebrows bobbed high with astonishment.

“I know that I’m right,” Danny continued. “So why don’t I give you a hand?” He manoeuvred carefully into position, but didn’t move that last step. “We can go back to the kitchen, apologise to Mrs. K for running out on her, and get some complex carbohydrates and caffeine.”

Steve hopped to the left and slung an arm over Danny’s shoulders. “Hey, you’re just the right height,” he noted, in lieu of an apology.

“Perfect height, please,” Danny corrected.

Steve fumbled, working on getting a smooth motion with the metal crutch and human crutch.

“Just like a three legged race,” Danny mentioned as he curled an arm around Steve’s narrow waist. “Grace and I rock at the three legged race. We won the cup in kindergarten.”

“That’s nice,” Steve said, with the tone of someone struggling to say something, anything, in the face of nonsensical conversation.

“A couple days, and if you wear a good pair of boots you’ll be able to get around much easier.” Danny glanced down at Steve’s flimsy Hawaiian footwear. “Flip flops aren’t the way to go.”

“Slippers.”

“I suppose slippers will work.”
“No, flip flops are called slippers in Hawaii.”

“Really, so what are slippers? House shoes?”

“I don’t own any. It’s not like you get cold feet in Hawaii.”

Danny had got the aforementioned oatmeal loaded with cream and sliced banana into Steve with little in the way of protest. Did Steve even know why he didn’t like cooked meat? The burned and scarred flesh on his side gave it away to Danny, but he was divorced from the war and the damage that could be inflicted by man. Steve had eaten the lasagne with obvious enjoyment, but lasagne didn’t look like a part-boned chicken leg or a slab of raw sirloin.

Or a man, woman or child torn apart by a bomb.

Danny set a glass of milk and buttered toast on the table.

Did Steve have a therapist? He obviously had PTSD – Chin knew it. Danny thought that Mrs. Keawe kinda knew it, but from a mother’s perspective. In the admittedly short period that Danny had been living at Seolh, he hadn’t seen Steve heading out to any appointments – but he hadn’t been looking. Danny brushed the hair behind his ear, remembering how close that foot long shiny knife had come to his ear when he had surprised Steve.

“Thank you,” Steve said softly.

“You’re welcome, Babe.” Danny sat and tucked into his own plate of cheese omelette.

# 17 #

“Danny!”

He was blindsided by Kono wrapping long arms around his neck and clutching him to her breast.

“Wow, Kono.” She smelled divine, but Danny opted for the squeeze and release, since Chin was sitting at the head of the kitchen table.

“Chin!” Kono moved on to grab her cousin, and start beating him around his head. “I had to hear about this from Hyo.”

“I’m sorry.” Chin tried to fend her off. “I’ve been a little busy.”

“Oh.” Kono latched on, hugging for all she was worth until Chin returned the hug. “I was so worried. Nobody was hurt?”

“Just the dude Steve knocked into next week,” Toast said, from where he was perched on the kitchen counter.

“I’m sorry, Cuz. It’s been insane.” Chin patted her side.

“So do we know who did this?” Kono demanded. Slumping, she moulded against Chin, her forearm resting on his shoulder, his arm wrapped around her hips.

Steve limped into the kitchen, Mamo on his heels.
“I thought that you said no one was hurt!” Kono tried to pull away from Chin, but he kept her close.

“I just stepped on some broken glass.” Steve hopped over to the closest seat to the door and sat.

There was a guy coming into the kitchen behind Mamo who Danny hadn’t met. He was a little taller than Danny with a luxurious head of dark brown curls. Danny first thought he was a kid, but on closer view the man bore a neatly groomed full goatee and he held himself as if respect was his due.

“Hey, Danny Williams.” Danny moved around the table, hand outstretched.

The man weighed him and didn’t move a muscle.

“Kavika,” Mamo chided. “Kavika, this is Danny. Danny, this is Kavika. My nephew.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Danny said amping up the politeness just to rub it in, as he shook Kavika’s hand.

Kavika narrowed his eyes.

“Anyone want anything to drink?” Toast carolled from the counter. He clicked the switch on the electric tea kettle and then leaned towards the fridge. “Or there’s beer on the table.”

Danny dropped onto the chair next to Steve, directly in front of Kavika. Steve hid the smallest of smiles behind his hand.

“Behave,” Steve whispered with barely a breath.

“So are you a resident? Were a resident?” Danny craned his head to look at the new guy.

“I’m here for Uncle Mamo and the heritage which Seolh works to preserve.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t a lot that Danny could say to that.

“Happy, Haole?”

“Kavika,” Mamo scolded on the next breath.

Danny was intrigued, especially given the big guy out front protecting the property had something to do with this Kavika. Vaguely appearing criminal types outside his home always pleased him, especially when they were somewhere where his daughter might visit. That Haole thing was the icing on the cake. It was an insult, Danny could tell. Danny had had a Hell of a day; a fight seemed like a good way of blowing off some steam. A soft pressure landed on his foot. Danny glanced sideways at Steve – the dude had put his sore, bandaged foot on top of Danny’s. The message was loud and clear: let it go.

“More the merrier.” Danny snagged a beer lined up on the table, twisted off the cap, and concentrated on getting to the bottom as the rest of the crew settled around the table.

Steve reached for a bottle of beer.

“Antibiotics,” Danny protested, sitting up straighter.

Steve outright glared, but passed on the bottle. He leaned back in his chair. “Toast, can you pass me a SoBe?”

Toast rummaged around the fridge, pulled out a bottle of green tea and ginseng, and tossed it over.
“Okay,” Chin called the meeting to order with a single word. “As you know, someone tried to burn down the House this morning. Thanks to Danny, they didn’t succeed.”

Danny shrugged. Part of him wanted to go: I was just getting a glass of milk -- it was a lucky accident. Honest. I had nothing to do with it. He opted to keep quiet.

“The construction workers are putting equipment in place to shore up the third floor and make a safety assessment. The police will file a report with Seolh’s insurance. I don’t believe that there will be any problems.”

“Apart from the fact that someone out there wants to burn Seolh down,” Danny pointed out.

“We’re well aware of that, haole.” Kavika slapped the table and half rose.

“What is your problem?” Danny demanded. He would have lurched in the man’s direction, but there was a foot resting on his foot.

“I spoke to Kao Keawe,” Kavika said.

“Well, gee, he’s obviously a professional,” Danny retorted. “I had nothing to do with this. I didn’t even know that this place existed a week ago. Why the fuck would I want to burn it down? Especially after I’ve been made welcome and this is the only roof I have over my head?”

“This isn’t helping,” Steve interrupted flatly. “Shut it, both of you. We need to figure out why this happened. And prevent it from happening again. The most obvious lead is to find out who wants to buy the land. If we were dead, Mary would inherit the house and lands and she hates Seolh. She’d sell it to the most lucrative buyer.”

“Isn’t that just a little too pat?” Chin said. “No reputable--”

“Reputable is the word. Whoever did this evidently isn’t reputable,” Steve pointed out. “If we’re out of the way, we’re out of the way.”

“It’s a valid line of investigation,” Kono said.

“Won’t we be stepping on the police’s toes? It is the job of the police.” Mamo asked, neatly playing Devil’s Advocate.

“We’re just finding out more information about prospective buyers. There’s nothing wrong with that,” Steve said. Butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth.

Chin tapped on his laptop screen. “There are two major investors and that weird one that we got the other day. Guffin Construction would like to buy the land and put a private hotel complex on the site with a golf course.”

The collective shudder round the table ranged from outright gagging to discreet shivers.

“Grant & Olsson want to set up some sort of laboratory research facility,” Chin continued. “The last one is speculative and focused again on acquiring the land for hotel development. The lawyers from Batch & Son were acting as intermediaries.”

“So what’s the plan then, Babe?” Danny asked.

“Kavika, would you like to find out about Guffin Construction?” Steve began. “They’re the biggest construction company on the island. I assume that some of your people work for the company.”
“Yes,” Kavika finally said.

“Thank you,” Steve said, with a soupçon of respect.

“I will speak with Grant & Olsson,” Chin spoke. “I’ve always been curious to know what lab they want to set up.”

“I’ll come with,” Kono volunteered.

“That leaves you and me, Danny, to find out more about Batch & Son’s clients.”

“Oh, okay,” Danny said. He could get behind that plan.

~*~

“SO--” Danny used his thumbnail to hang up on his cell phone, “--we have an appointment with Batch & Son tomorrow at eleven am.”

“Tomorrow,” Steve protested. His loaner aids had prevented him from using his cell phone with the Bluetooth enabled app. so Danny had had to make the phone call.

“It’s been a long day, Babe,” Danny pointed out. “It’s after five o’clock. Most of the staff are already on their way home. Only the diehards are there. They’re all going home in an hour and it would take us an hour to get to their office in rush hour traffic. It’s going to be tomorrow.”

Steve scowled darkly -- he put his whole body into the effort.

“So, dinner?” Danny continued, because food always helped in Danny’s world. “Whose turn is it?”

“I don’t even know what day it is.” Steve scraped his fingernails through his short curls. “Fuck it, pizza. Pizza will work.”

“Pizza? That’s a good idea. As long as there is no pineapple.”

“There’s a menu on the fridge. Giuseppe’s,” Steve said, pointing behind Danny. “Tell them that it’s for Seolh, we always order the same thing. Pick a couple of extras that you like. There’ll be enough for everyone and leftovers.”

The House had been full of people all day, as expected. Odum Construction were in the process of packing up for the day. The Transformer was in place. Insurance investigators were organised to visit tomorrow. The windows to the conservatory had been boarded up. The doors from the Hall into the House had been secured. Electricity had been switched back on earlier in the morning. There were a couple of members of the Kapu keeping an eye on the place.

That had been an enlightening conversation. Danny wasn’t clear on where the line was drawn between gang and protective community group, but given that someone had tried to burn down the House, he wasn’t complaining.

Danny leaned back and snagged the menu off the fridge, the magnet holding it in place falling to the floor.

“I’m going to use one of the showers in one of the other studios,” Steve announced. “Get this smoke off me.”

“You need to wrap your foot.” Danny was already standing, rooting in a drawer for large plastic food bags and tape. “Hang on? There’s showers in the other studios? Why did I get the room which
needed so much work?”

Steve shrugged a shoulder. “It’s sort of a test. If you’re not willing to put the effort in to fix up a studio, you don’t really need to be here. Plus, to make this place work you’ve got to like getting you hands dirty.”

# 18 #

The pizzas had proved to be the perfect choice for dinner, easy finger food with little or no clean up. Danny had ordered them for seven o’clock, giving time for everyone to shower, get clean clothes from the laundry, and start the process of washing all the fabrics in the House. The smoke in the west side of the House wasn’t that pervasive. Danny’s studio was fine after leaving the windows open most of the day.

They had eaten the pizzas while lounging in the television room watching the first ‘Die Hard.’ Comfort watching, Danny judged. It was his favourite Christmas film. Alan Rickman plummeted to his death and Steve called it a night, getting up carefully from the sofa.

“Can someone give me a hand with the airbed?” he asked softly.

“Airbed?” Danny bounced to his feet and moved into position on Steve’s left, so he could be grabbed. “You’re not sleeping on an airbed.”

“I’m not sleeping on the sofa,” Steve said, nose screwing up.

Chin was eying them doubtfully, but had obviously decided to stay out of the discussion and turned back to the reunion between John McClane and his wife, feigning total interest. Kono mirrored Chin a beat later. Toast had to be kicked in the ankle to get the hint to focus on the television.

“Come on.” Danny rocked on his foot in the direction of the door, and Steve took the suggestion, slinging an arm across his shoulders.

Danny kept quiet as they hop-lurched up the curving foyer stairs to the first floor. Steve abandoned the crutch half way, settling for one hand on the banister and one arm around Danny.

As soon as they were on the landing, Danny presented his argument, shuffling slightly sideways so Steve could see him better.

“Airbeds suck. They start out all right but before you know it your butt’s on the floor and you’re curled like a pretzel. That’s not going to do your side any good.”

Steve squinted at him. Danny had made a point to speak slowly and carefully with a full array of hand signals. A curled pretzel was a fist.

“It’s only one night, Danno. I’ll be back in my own bed tomorrow night,” Steve said, determined.

“You’re telling me that your side and back isn’t knotted to Hell trying to walk with those crutches,” Danny said perceptively.

“And what’s the alternative?”

“My bed,” Danny said obviously.

Steve cocked his head to the side and waggled his eyebrows mock-lasciviously. “I did not hear that
right.”

“Goof. I can use the airbed or even the chaise lounge. I don’t have--” Danny patted his own side, indicating gross physical intrusion of a medical nature. “I put fresh sheets on this afternoon. It’s not an issue.”

Steve lifted his chin and regarded Danny down his long, fine nose. Danny didn’t have a clue what he was thinking.

“I’m too tired to argue with you,” Steve announced. “Thank you.”

Danny got Steve into his room, angling through the door, accommodating the combination hop-creep-lurch. It was tiring.

“Do you need the bathroom?” he asked, pivoting in the direction of the room.

“Nah.” Steve shook his head.

“Okay, bed it is.” Danny got them both across the room. “Stand a second.”

Steve followed his direction, balancing badly on one foot. He wavered, tongue caught between his teeth. Danny yanked back the sheet and blanket, revealing crisp clean sheets. It had been a long day and the mattress looked very inviting.

“Sit,” Danny ordered.

Steve sat with alacrity. He slumped and Danny suddenly realised that Steve habitually held himself poised. Whether or not it was due to his side or innate Naval training Danny wasn’t too sure.

Charily, Steve unhooked his loaner aids, curled his fingers around them, and then placed them carefully on the bedside table. It was a curiously intimate act. He kicked off his single sandal, letting it fall to the floor.

“I’ll get you a clean t-shirt to sleep in.” Danny shuffled over to his chest of drawers. He had purchased a couple of t-shirts just after the apartment fire, one of which was too long for him. “Here-”

Curling on his side, Steve was fast asleep, and probably had been the millisecond after his head had touched the pillow.

“Aw, Babe.”

Practiced over many years, Danny teased the edge of the blanket out from under Steve’s feet, and then draped the covers over his friend.

~*~

“No, Sir. It’s quiet.”

Opening one eye, Danny rolled his head on his pillow. What? Oh, yeah, airbed on the floor.

Above him, limed in moonlight, Steve was sitting upright.

“Steve?” Danny pushed hair out of his eyes, and rolled onto his side. The mattress squeaked.

“I don’t like it. It’s too quiet.” Steve’s voice was too calm and flat steady. Danny didn’t like his tone

Oh, fuck, Steve couldn’t hear. He didn’t wear his aids when he was asleep. Danny rolled to his feet and switched on the bedside lamp. The suddenness of the illumination was a lightning spark against touch paper to Steve.

“Drew! For the love of god. Drew.” Steve turned to Danny, hand outstretched, bereft. “No!”

“Steve. Steve, it’s me, Danny.”

Steve lurched off the bed, tumbling them both the floor. He gathered Danny against his breast, hands running over Danny’s hair.

“No. no. NO!” He pawed at the side of Danny’s head, trying, futilely, to fit something back together.

“Steve!” Danny struggled to get free. He managed to wriggle around to the side, working one hand free to cup Steve’s face. “Babe, look at me!”

Sagging, Steve turned his cheek into Danny’s hand and sobbed. Reflexively, Danny pulled him down, gathering Steve in. Even pinned by the lankier form, Danny found that he could rock, soothingly.


Steve simply keened, low and mostly quiet, hot tears falling on Danny’s neck. Danny held on, communicating through touch in the absence of sound. Man, the horrors that Steve had faced, it didn’t bear reflecting on. Danny remembered that his Dad got quiet sometimes, the obvious hollow smile when he had had a horrific day. What did a soldier see? Danny had studied the history of photography. He had seen the imagery of Pulitzer Prize winning war photographer Eddie Adams and Huynh Cong Ut’s photograph of napalm victim Phan Thi Kim Phúc, to name but a few. A picture, the saying went, was worth a thousand words. Danny stroked the back of Steve’s head in sympathy.

The switch from waking nightmare to sleep was abrupt; Steve’s weight shifting, suddenly heavier. Danny’s quandary was immediate: wake him or stay squished in a tangle. Finding a sudden third option, Danny rolled them over to the left onto the airbed. Lying supine, he should have wriggled free. He had been married and shared a bed, and he knew how to creep out of bed without waking his wife. Steve’s breath hitched against his neck.

“Ssssssh.” Danny soothed, vibration deep in his throat.

Steve quietened. Danny relaxed back against his pillow, and watched patterns of reflected moonlight trailing across the ceiling until sleep took him.

~*~

Danny woke first. Steve was curled against his side, heavy head on Danny’s bicep. His arm was as dead as a doornail. Shifting carefully, Danny pulled his arm out from under Steve. It flopped.

“Dead arm. Dead arm.” Sitting up, he gripped his left wrist with his right hand and waggled, hoping to get the blood flowing.
“Danny?”

It was agonising. The pins and needles were agonising. His fingers were going to turn black and drop off.

“Danny.”

“Dead arm,” Danny explained. “Dead arm. Your head is heavy.”

“What?”

Danny rolled his eyes. It was pretty obvious, they were sharing a bed. Steve leaned behind Danny, stretching over to grab his hearing aids from the bedside table. Steve hooked them quickly over his ears.

“I--” he began, “I? What happened?”

“You had a nightmare,” Danny opted for brutal honesty. “Some sort of flashback? You thought that I was someone called Drew.”

“I.” Steve swallowed hard. “Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise,” Danny massaged his numb fingers, just for a second before continuing. “Seriously, don’t apologise. Or I’ll be very angry. You had a shit day yesterday. I don’t think nightmares are that unexpected, considering. Actually, I’m glad I could help.”

“I don’t remember what happened.” Steve spoke to his lap. “That’s kind of…”

Life was finally back in his fingers. Danny used said fingers to gently tip Steve’s chin so that Steve could see what he was about to say.

“It’s not creepy. It’s not uncomfortable. You didn’t wake up. You had a nightmare about Drew. I guess he died. And I’m sorry about that, Babe. You were upset. A bit of human contact helps when you’re upset. It’s proven. There’s been research.”

Steve folded his legs, sitting cross-legged. He licked his lips. Danny waited for him to say a word, but nothing was forthcoming.

“Man, you’re a hard nut to crack,” Danny said.

“Drew was a good friend,” Steve said quietly. “But everything else is classified. I can’t talk about it.”

“Can you talk to anyone about it?” Danny asked. “There must be some sort of support network in the Navy or are you all too tough?”

Steve snorted. “You have some really weird ideas about the armed services. Talking to people, sometimes, is mandatory.”

“I bet you say a lot,” Danny chided.

“There’s some things you just can’t say.” Frustrated, Steve closed his mouth in a mulish line.

“So tell me about Drew? The good times.”

Steve opened his mouth, closed it, chewed over unspoken words. It was almost painful to watch. Then Steve spoke,
“He was blond. A little bit towards the red-gold. More of a curl than your hair. He was taller.”

Danny thought it a little weird that it was all in comparison to his physicality, but Steve was talking, albeit in short staccato sentences.

“Did he like beer?” Danny prodded randomly.

Steve laughed. “And whisky – specifically a smooth Speyside rather than a peaty, tobacco whisky. Man, he would talk for hours about whisky. I got him a bottle of Japanese whisky once. I didn’t think that he was ever gonna let me live it down. Then he tasted it and I was forgiven.”

Steve slid into quiet, lost in reminiscence.

Danny weighed raising breakfast as an option, or another prodding question.

“I can’t believe it’s been two years,” Steve said.

Two years, Danny realised that this nightmare was not the One -- the One where Steve lost his hearing, lost his position in the SEAL teams.

“You got any whisky in the House? We’ll give him a toast tonight?”

“Yeah,” Steve smiled, “that would be… great.”

“Okay, let’s do that.” Danny settled crossed legged, mirroring Steve’s pose. Time for a subject change, Danny thought. “Right, let’s see your foot.”

“What?” Steve’s affronted expression was hilarious.

Danny clicked his fingers. “I got instructions from Dr. Magnus. Detailed, graphic instructions.”

“Wasn’t I actually supposed to have a temperature?”

“Ridiculous,” Danny dismissed that. “That would mean you were really ill. Foot, now!”

“The clicking fingers thing is really annoying. You don’t do that to Grace, do you?”

Danny pointed at his lap, expecting a foot in the next second.

Sighing extravagantly, Steve uncrossed his leg and carefully extended, settling his foot in position. Bent over, Danny carefully unwrapped the bandage around Steve’s foot and ankle. The adhesive dressing on the sole was centrally marked with dried blood. Picking with his fingernails at the tape, Danny worked on getting an edge to pull.

“No.” Steve yanked his foot away with a pained squeal. “Get off.”

Danny looked at him opened mouthed as he squirmed away. “Oh, yeah,” he crowed, “you are ticklish. Really ticklish.”

Steve folded his foot into his lap -- wow, yoga made him flexible -- protectively.

“Okay,” Danny didn’t give him a break, “you take off the dressing and give me your damn foot back.”

“Damn it, you’re so bossy,” Steve noted.
“You ain’t seen nothing yet, Babe. Foot.”

Teeth gritted, even though you couldn’t tickle yourself, Steve teased off the dressing. He extended his foot again, but leaned back, resting his elbows on airbed, making it easier to keep his foot up.

Supporting Steve’s ankle in both hands, Danny looked rather than touched. The flesh held together by a line of black knotted stitches was red and a little swollen, but that was to be expected.

“Looks okay,” Danny judged, a professional from many years of scuffed knees and cut fingers. He released Steve’s foot. “You stay. I’m going to get a fresh dressing from the first aid kit in the kitchen.”

“Woof.”

“Stay.”

“Woof.”

“Child.”

Danny left Steve lying on his airbed like a Roman Emperor. It was a quick trip downstairs to the kitchen. The House was quiet, and suddenly Danny realised that it was quite early. He snatched up another plastic bag and the kitchen first aid kit (which he had cursorily checked when Grace came to visit) and got back up the stairs in record time. Incidentally, before bumping into anyone, because he was just in his shorts -- decorum was important. Steve’s crutch was propped against the wall by his door.

Steve was exactly where Danny had left him. Danny was impressed. He had expected an escape attempt. Albeit a slow, bunny-hopping escape attempt.

“I brought a bag as well. I figured you’d want a shower.” He held it up.

“Thanks, Danny. I appreciate this,” Steve’s tone was sincere and profound.

Danny clutched the bag and first aid to his chest. It never occurred to him to not help. Steve needed help. And he deserved help.

“You’d do the same thing for me,” Danny said, and he knew that that was true.

~*~

# 19 #

“Penny for your thoughts?” Chin asked Danny.

“What?” Danny asked, disturbed from his contemplation of his cooling cup of coffee.

“Something Audrey used to say. Maybe I should offer a dollar? You were deep in thought, Brah.”

“Yeah, I was just thinking.”

“Evidently.” Chin sat beside him, angling a freshly prepared French Press full of coffee towards Danny’s cup.

“Thanks.” Danny pulled his hands away -- wary of drips -- and set his elbows on the kitchen table, head propped on his palms.
“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s not a problem. I was just thinking.” There were lots of thoughts percolating in his head.

“About Steve?” Chin said perceptively.


“Well, I had a thirty three percent chance of being right. I figured Grace, the House or Steve.”

“It’s just… we’ve become friends so quick. Like--” Danny licked his fingers and then snapped them together loudly. “Two weeks ago, I didn’t know you guys … Triteness aside, it’s like I’ve known him my entire life.”

“Do you want my read?” Chin asked.

“Yeah.”

“That happens. Sometimes friendship grows. But if you’re lucky, it does happen like that.” Chin clicked his fingers. “You’ve been good for Steve. I’ve seen more life in him in the last two weeks than since he got out of hospital. He moved around this place like a wraith, and spent most of the time stuck up in his eyrie. We’ve all been worried about him. And nothing we did really helped. But him helping you learn about Seolh has helped him rediscover Seolh.”

Wow, that was a sudden responsibility. Danny could tell that Chin was watching the thoughts scroll across his face.

“Analysing isn’t always a good thing,” Chin ventured.

“No, it’s fine.” Danny covered his confusion with a mouthful of coffee. An apparent non sequitur sprung to mind. “My brother, when my marriage broke up, was with me every step of the way. He put me to bed many nights. Held me when I was hurting.”

Chin’s eyebrows dipped low, brow scrunching. “That’s what brothers should do,” he said slowly.

Danny remembered that Chin had been ostracised. His brother had sided with his family. He had found a friend in Steve and a benefactor in Mrs. Audrey McGarrett.

“Thanks, Chin, that was really helpful. When are you going to Grant & Olsson?”

Chin took the subject change with aplomb. “Leaving in a couple of hours,” he said, after checking his watch.

“That’s about the same time that me and Steve have to be at our appointment.” Danny abandoned his coffee. “I’ll go find him.”

~*~

It didn’t take long to track down Steve. He was in the Hall. MacDonald had set down a line of MDF boards to provide a stable, flat floor, allowing Steve to get a handful of yards into the ruined Hall.

Danny nodded to MacDonald, acknowledging his efforts. The man shrugged in Danny’s direction and then headed off to talk to one of his workers.

In the centre of the Hall, a melted lump of plastic marked the remains of Steve’s yoga kit. Steve didn’t give it a second glance. The charred remains of the House Curse tapestry had all of his
attention. Only fragments of the left hand side, the storm and the dark night sky, survived.

“Aw, Damn.” Danny clapped his hand over his mouth. So much effort, time, and love taken away by the fire. He moved up alongside Steve on the walkway.

“I swear when I find out why this happened, I’m going to show them that pissing off a Navy SEAL is not a sensible thing to do,” Steve said tightly.

Danny winced. The guy had guns in his truck, k-bar knives under his pillow, memories of friends and companions blown to pieces, and the type of training under his belt that Danny could only have nightmares about.

“Have you heard anything from what-his-face, Koa Keawe? Has he called?”

Steve snorted. “Chin hasn’t said anything.”

Oh, yeah. Danny winced. Phones and Steve didn’t go well together without special apps. Detective Keawe would not have called Steve. More sidelining, more casual dismissal. Belatedly, Danny wondered if he needed to get any special downloads on his cell phone to make it easier for Steve. He would have to ask Toast.

“We’re going to have to head out to see Batch & Son in about an hour-forty five minutes. I was thinking that we might want to go dressed up?” Shorts and t-shirts were the dress code of Seolh. After his morning shower (in the studio next to his) Danny had put on nice slacks and a dress shirt, and was debating wearing a tie.

Steve canted his head to the side, considering Danny’s words.

“Mr. MacDonald,” Steve called abruptly.

The construction manager turned from his conversation with a smaller man, and made a ‘yeah, what?’ shrug.

“Can I get upstairs?” Steve said clearly.

MacDonald screwed up his face, and then nodded once as he gave Steve a definitive thumbs up.

“I had a guy up there first thing this morning,” MacDonald hollered loud enough for a football stadium. “There’s no obvious settling damage. You’re good to go.”

“Thank you,” Steve acknowledged. He spun on one foot, swinging both crutches around with him.

“Hey, you got better at that,” Danny noted.

“I went on YouTube this morning and got some hints. Did you know that you’re not actually supposed to rest on the top struts? I’ve also taken a couple of pain pills for my side,” Steve admitted, a flush high on his cheeks.

“Nothing wrong with that, Babe,” Danny said. “You want help going up the stairs?”

Steve shook his head. “There was a video for that too.”

“Okay,” Danny said easily. He was, however, going to shadow Steve up the stairs.

~*~
The smell of smoke was much stronger in Steve’s apartment. And drawing a finger over the woodwork framing the window lifted a grimy film. Someone had opened the semi-circular window and there was a good breeze blowing into the apartment.

“Yuck.” There was lots of soap and water and scrubbing in the future. He figured that he better check YouTube or Google for any smoke damage cleaning recommendations. The next floor and Steve’s Rapunzel tower might be okay – this was directly over the concentrated fire.

“You okay?” Danny hollered up the spiral staircase and slapped his forehead for the hundredth time: would he ever learn?

Danny stalked through the apartment. The doors into Steve’s study and the bare spare room had been closed, helping contain much of the smoke.

“Crutches coming down,” Steve yelled and dropped his crutches down the stairwell with a clatter.

Danny rolled his eyes and continued his exploration for possible damage as Steve hopped down the stairs. His horrible imaginings of bubbling paintwork and stained, charred wood hadn’t been realised. All the hard surfaces definitely needed to be washed down from top to toe and the soft furnishing might need professional cleaning, but it wasn’t that bad.


Steve was decked out in an obviously tailored, narrow-cut black suit. It hung on him just a little to Danny’s educated eye, but damn he looked fine. The thin tie had a 1960’s feel to it, emphasising the James Bond vibe.

“Seriously, photos. Please. sometime. Yes?” Danny asked.

Steve barked out a laugh. “That wasn’t even English. I’m not entirely sure what that was.”

“I was old school. I had a hard copy portfolio which I lost in the fire. I need to build it back up. When I spoke to Toast about Creativity, he actually wants his input to be creating a website to host Creativity. And then he started on about my web-presence and an e-portfolio. So while Creativity is the catalyst, I need to put other stuff on there.”

“Gabble. Gabble. Gabble.” Holding onto the banister, Steve bent over in some improbable yoga move, injured foot extended behind him, and picked up the crutches. “You really talk fast when you’re excited. I don’t have a clue what you said.”

Unusually, he didn’t seem to be that bothered that he hadn’t followed Danny’s inane blathering.

“Sorry.” Danny held his arms wide in apology. “How do you feel about modelling?”

Steve stared at him and then burst out laughing.

~*~

“I was serious,” Danny said sullenly as they made their slow way up the ramp access to the Batch & Son’s offices.

“Are you still sulking?” Steve shook his head. “Sorry, I just think that it’s hilarious.”

“It’s not funny, I meant it.” Danny said. If he did it right, it could be a distinctly valuable piece of
work. The trick was to not objectify Steve and underscore the imagery with the seriousness of his training and the price that he had paid. “That suit is iconic.”

“Iconic?” Steve sniggered.

“But how come your suit isn’t all smoky?” Danny asked. It was in the eyrie.

“Depends what you mean by smoking,” Steve joshed.

Danny rolled his eyes. “You’re so juvenile.”

“It’s a Giorgio Armani; I store it in a sealed suit bag, correctly.”

Danny yanked back the door, holding it wide for Laugh-a-lot McGarrett. Steve crutched his way through into the airy foyer. Random pedestals with metal zoomorphic sculptures were dotted throughout the open space. Danny was glad that they had dressed up; this was a seriously expensive set up.

“Strange,” Steve breathed.

“What?” Danny whispered back.

“I would expect lawyers fronting this sort of place to actually visit prospective clients. Not simply send a form-letter offering silly money.”

“Silly money? How much is Seolh worth?”

Steve tutted under his tongue, quietly. “It’s priceless.”

“Well, I know that.” Danny made his own over the top gesture, rolling his eyes. “But, hey, interested.”

“Anyway, shush.”

“Shush?” Danny said affronted. But reluctantly he did say it quietly.

The receptionist behind the desk in the centre of the foyer was watching them with a bright, professional smile on her face. “How may I help you?”

“McGarrett and Williams to see Mrs. Batch,” Steve said clearly.

“Ah, yes.” She consulted her computer screen, but it was evidently only for form’s sake, likely she had the day’s visitors memorised. “Mr. Hasan will be down momentarily to conduct you to Mrs. Batch’s offices. Ah, here he is.”

The silver elevator doors opened and decanted a young man of possible Indian descent.

“Gee, do you think we’re being watched?” Danny said quietly, too covertly, earning a quick, checking glance and a frown from Steve.

“Ah, Mr. McGarrett, I’m Alam Hasan, pleased to meet you,” he said, offering his hand. Danny identified his accent was upper-crust British. “Mrs. Batch asked me to greet you, since she finds the walk a bit of a trial.”

“Hello.” Steve balanced on one crutch and shook his hand.
Danny leaned around Steve and made his own handshake.

“If you would follow me.” Alam also framed the instruction in a series of hand signs and gestures – American Sign Language, Danny guessed.

“It’s okay,” Steve said, “I don’t sign.”

“As you wish.” Alam bowed slightly.

This was beyond creepy. They had obviously profiled Steve, but didn’t seem to mind him knowing it.

The ride up in the elevator was borderline uncomfortable. Steve seemed interested in the tiny box -- eyes flicking over the inside of the elevator, studying the carpeted wall and the bright shiny lights. They climbed for what seemed like an age, obviously heading to the highest levels of the building.

The doors opened into an open plan large reception room. More space than you could swing a cat-o’-nine-tails in an über high rent district. The money-reek is strong, padawan, Danny thought, containing a shudder.

Alam moved smoothly across the room, somehow leading the way but also keeping pace with Steve’s ungainly crutching.

They were conducted into an equally large office dominated by a single table angled for the best view of the skyline. Offset was a plush, posturepedic armchair and a small, elderly woman sat, regally, in it.

“Mrs. Batch,” Alam addressed the lady. “Lieutenant Commander McGarrett and Mr. Williams.”

“Thank you, Alam,” she said precisely, swallowing and rounding all the vowels.

Her diction reinforced Danny’s perception that she kind of looked like a doll-version of the Queen of England.

“Ma’am.” Alam inclined his head.

“Lieutenant Commander, Mr. Williams, please sit.” Mrs. Batch lifted her hand a fraction towards the two armchairs angled towards her chair.

“Thank you.” Steve hop-clopped over.

As he manoeuvred to sit, Danny took the crutches off him and set them beside the chair for him.

“Can I interest you in hot tea or coffee?” Alam asked, politely. “Perhaps an iced tea or soft drink?”

“Tea, please,” Steve said surprising Danny. He thought that he would refrain from eating in enemy territory. “Milk, no sugar.”

“Coffee,” Danny blurted.

“You remember?” Mrs. Batch said obliquely.

Steve leaned forwards in his wingback chair, a frown marring his forehead. “You knew my grandmother.”

“Yes, I knew Audrey very well.”
What was it with Steve? Or more accurately, he and his fellow co-ops seemed to know or be related to everyone on the Island, Danny thought.

“I vaguely remember you.” Steve cogitated, blowing out a noisy breath. “You introduced my grandmother to tea.”

“You weren’t too impressed the first time you tried it, I recall.” She smiled. “But you tried it and you were a very polite young man.”

“I like it now.”

“I’m sure that you’ll find the East Friesian blend that I favour at the moment quite delightful.”

There was a subtle order in her word -- Danny was fairly sure that it would taste like rancid dishwater.

Danny hoped that they weren’t going to spend time in idle ‘chit chat’ over tea. He had had enough of that with Rachel’s father and grandmother.

Steve, however, cut to the chase.

“I was surprised by the letter. And now remember you and Mr. Batch, I’m doubly surprised by the simple, straightforward nature of the offer in the letter,” Steve said frankly.

“It was a legitimate offer,” Mrs. Bather said as Alam returned with a tray holding a tea set and a stainless steel carafe of coffee. He set it on the low table between them and Mrs. Batch.

“That will be all, Alam,” Mrs. Batch said.

“Yes, Ma’am.” He retreated, smoothly.

“Shall I be Mother?” Steve said somewhat inexplicably.

“Thank you.”

Intrigued, Danny watched as Steve poured milk into one porcelain cup, watching Mrs. Batch until she raised an eyebrow. He unceremoniously dashed some milk into the second cup. Picked up the teapot, he gave it the gentlest of swirling shakes and then poured dark amber liquid into the cups.

As Steve pretended to be ‘Mother’ of all things, Danny grabbed the carafe and the paper thin cup that hadn’t been doctored and helped himself. It smelled pretty good. Happily, he added a glug of cream and stirred in a heaped spoonful of sugar.

Damn, that was good coffee. Danny squirmed happily, just a little bit on the spot.

Mrs. Batch waited until tea and coffee had been served. “I was perturbed to hear about the fire at Seolh. I understand that the Honolulu Police Department are undertaking an investigation.”

“Yes,” Steve replied. “Koa Keawe is in charge. Has he visited you?”

“He made an appointment and spoke with one of my associates. He was interested and wished to know more about the offer which my company had administered on the part of our client.”

“And?” Danny interrupted.

“Unfortunately, Client Confidentiality is an important part of our work,” Mrs. Batch continued
smoothly. “I believe that my associate directed Detective Keawe to obtain a warrant so that we could legally provide him with that information.”

If she hadn’t been like a hundred and twenty years old and about eighty pounds soaking wet, Danny would have picked her up and shook her like a Bulldog mauling a Chihuahua.

Steve sipped at his tea. “I was surprised at the simplicity of the offer,” he reiterated.

“It was a legitimate offer,” Mrs. Batch repeated. “It would have been unprofessional to attempt to engage in a drawn out negotiation. We advised the client and then fulfilled our obligations presenting Seolh with a more than generous offer. I advised the client that Seolh would not come to the table, regardless.”

Lawyers. Danny gripped the delicate cup so tightly he was afraid that it might crack. If he had had this lady when he was going through the divorce, he might have had custody of Grace. Of course he would be a penniless pauper paying off the bill until he died and they’d be sponging off his parents – but still.

“Mr. Williams, you’ve turned a little choleric,” Mrs. Batch said.

“What?” Danny asked. “Choleric?”

“Here have some more coffee.” Steve proffered the carafe.

“I don’t want coffee. I want to find out who tried to burn down your home, and incidentally kill us. And you two are beating around the bush.” Danny rocketed to his feet. He wanted to throw the cup at the wall but it was probably worth more than his bank balance. Gritting his teeth, he set it on the tray. “I appreciate that you won’t tell us, Mrs. Batch. But I don’t have to like it. You could be protecting a client who could have killed Steve. His rooms were right over the fire. And it was just damn good luck that I was up, because some nights I just can’t sleep. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be outside getting some fresh air.”

“I understand, Mr. Williams,” Mrs. Batch said quellingly. “I thank you for your candour.”

It was impossible to vent in the face of such a phlegmatic manner. Steve set his tea cup down, tea unfinished, and reached for his crutches. As he got to his feet, Mrs. Batch spoke,

“Please convey my regards to your ex-wife, Mr. Williams.”

“You’ve met Rachel?”

“Once at the Webster Foundation with her husband – that’s where we were introduced. I’ve met her new husband twice.”

Danny froze. “No way.”

Mrs. Batch smiled at him over the top of her cup of tea. “It was a pleasure meeting you both. Alam will see you out. You are of course, both welcome back at any time. This was rather refreshing.”

~*~
Co-operative Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Danny Williams, Professional Photographer, and his first month at the Seolh Co-operative.

# 20 #

“Rachel!” Danny screamed down his cell phone. “Tell me that Stan did not try and buy Seolh!”

“Daniel, I’m not aware of Stan’s--”

Steve dropped down onto a low brick wall hemming in Batch & Son’s carefully tendered flower plots, stretched his leg out and waited.

“You lie like a drain pipe. You know exactly what’s up. You told him where I’m staying and just mentioned, offhand, that it was -- what did you call it? -- prime real estate.”

The silence on the line was loud with truth.

“Someone tried to kill us the other night, Rachel. They set fire to the House. They tried to burn down Seolh. Incidentally just after Steve refused to even entertain selling the House and land.”

“What! Danny, was anyone hurt?” Rachel demanded loudly.

He wrenched the phone away from his ear, holding it down by his side.

“Danny!” Her voice was tinny and angry like a wasp trapped by a window pane. “Danny!”

Steve watched, eyebrows rising. Danny turned on his heel, pacing back and forth. Damn it, he could hear her shock, and under that, a painful thread, her concern.

Danny lifted the phone to his lips, “Steve got smoke inhalation and cut his foot, badly. He’s okay.”

Rachel was silent for a beat. “Are you okay?”

“Apart from righteously angry, yes, I’m not hurt.”

“And that lovely house?”

“The Hall’s gutted. Smoke damage. The insurance is dealing with it.”

There was a moment’s silence as Rachel digested those words.

“Stan had nothing to do with this,” Rachel said precisely. “That you could even think that is petty. He simply wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, right. Like I have any respect for a man who will sleep with a married woman.”

Rachel huffed and disconnected.
Danny raised his head high and growled at the heavens. If Stan Edwards stood before him he would punch the guy so hard, they would be finding his nose in Hoboken. He turned on his heel, tightly. Kill, maim, render, he entertained himself, imagining kicking Stan onto the street and handing him over to Detective Koa Cynical Keawe.

Damn it, Koa would assume that he was in on it, somehow. He was going to kill Stan.

“So Stan is Batch & Son’s mystery client,” Steve interrupted.

Danny braked to a halt before Steve. “Looks like. Oh, Rachel, didn’t confirm, she’s as good as intimidating as Mrs. Batch – they must get on like a house on fire. Fuck! Bad analogy.”


Danny sagged miserably. “Stan, or more likely, Stan’s company, employed Batch & Son. Rachel told Stan about Seolh and,” Danny knew that he was picking up speed, but couldn’t help himself, “Stan-the-Man only saw dollar signs.”

“And Stan would resort to arson since Seolh’s not for sale?” Steve asked calmly.

Danny speculated darkly on his ex-wife’s new husband. He came across as dull and bland. But there had to be some hidden depths or Rachel wouldn’t have married him.

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” he said finally.

“Well.” Steve juggled with his crutches and used them to get to his feet. “Why don’t we visit Stan?”

Danny bared his teeth.

~*~

Hands flexing on the steering wheel, Danny weaved the truck through the lunch time traffic, vigilantly watching the road and traffic, because he was used to a smaller and more responsive vehicle. Stan’s high-falutin’ offices were in a block that was pretty closely situated to the equally well-to-do Batch & Son’s overly ostentatious prick of a high rise – Danny wasn’t bitter, no sir. It was just a little too far to walk, or more importantly, crutch-hop. Steve was slumped to the right, twisting his long legs into the footwell and head pushed against the window. On first glance it appeared that he might be attempting to nap, but his form was too rigid.

“You okay?” Danny asked.

“I think we’ve got a tail,” Steve said surprisingly. “Black SUV.”

“What?” Danny demanded.

“It parked on the opposite side of the street just after we arrived at Batch & Son. Left when we did. And it’s followed us through your meandering trip through Honolulu,”

“I’m looking for a parking space close to Stan’s offices,” Danny protested. It was all because of Steve’s foot.

“Any rate,” Steve interrupted, “I think it’s following. I don’t have a good angle with this wing mirror. Can you see its licence plate?”

Danny glanced at his mirrors. He couldn’t see any black SUV. There was a black car five or six car lengths back, moving between lanes, but he couldn’t see its licence plate.
“What do you want to do?” Danny’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel. The traffic was busy and criss-crossing madly and he didn’t know Honolulu that well.

“Turn right ahead and then take your left. It will bring us out next to the Honolulu PD headquarters.”

“What?”

“It could be any of four groups of people,” Steve stated. “Someone co-incidentally going in the same direction; persons unknown tailing us; Kavika’s people on protection detail; or it’s the cops, because Koa thinks you’re a suspect. If we park outside the PD, it will be stretching coincidence if the SUV behind us is also going to the PD; the cops will park; Kavika’s people will leave – but we can confirm with Kavika that he’s got someone on us.”

“And the tail?”

“They’ll drive off like Kavika’s people.” Steve straightened and pulled out the gun box under the middle seat. “There’s too great a chance of collateral damage if we attempt to evade or even capture. We can only confirm that we have a tail.”

“Collateral damage? Attempt to evade or even capture?” Danny echoed. “Who do you think you are, Magnum PI?”

“No, I’m a trained SEAL. Turn,” he ordered.

Danny took the turn onto the wide drive. The Honolulu PD was a large, grey blocky building with wide set of steps leading up to a multi-door entry. The sidewalk was wide, and busy with civilians and police. A parking space opened on the side of the road opposite the steps.

“Park.” Steve pointed.

Danny quickly pulled in. “I’ve got eyes, I can see.”

Steve was out of the cab in a heartbeat. Pulling himself up on the door frame to look up and over the top of the Ford truck. Danny scrambled to get out and see, reaching for the handle. The black SUV screeched past, missing clipping the door and almost taking it off by a hairsbreadth. Danny dropped back into the driving seat, shaking.

“Damn!” Steve’s fist thumped down on the roof above Danny’s head.

Danny took a breath, and carefully got out of the cab.

“Did you get the plate?” he asked, moving to the front of the vehicle so he could see Steve, who was still perched, glaring in the direction of the long gone SUV.

“I got a plate. But I doubt it’s the real one. It was the type of plate that a salesman displays on a new car when you’re doing a test drive.”

“What?” Danny didn’t understand.

“The car didn’t have actual plates. It just had a temporary plate. Clever. It was pretending to be on a test drive.”

“Did you see the driver?”

“Male, white, possibly tall, based on his seated position. He wore a dark baseball cap and aviator glasses. Sharp jaw line. Couldn’t pick him up out of a line up.”
“McGarrett?” A voice called.

Danny scanned the immediate area. Detective Koa Keawe was walking up behind Steve, a Subway sandwich in one hand and a battered travel mug in the other.

“Steve,” Danny said clearly, “Koa is coming up behind you.”

Steve quickly jerked around, using the truck door for balance. “Koa.”

The detective froze. “Hey,” he ventured, expression sliding into perplexed.

Danny wondered what face Steve was pulling. Even someone knowing the barest of inklings about Steve would realise that coming up directly behind him was not a good idea. What was Koa thinking? Danny decided to give the detective the benefit of the doubt, since he always didn’t remember to accommodate Steve’s hearing loss. Moving off the road and onto the sidewalk, Danny kept an eye on both of them.

“Why you come here?” Koa drawled, part pidgin.

“We were on our way to a meeting, and I realised that we’d picked up a tail so we drove here,” Steve said. “They weren’t impressed by our choice of destination and drove off.”

Koa digested that statement, face puckering up.

“You get the licence plate?”

“False one,” Steve gave it, and the driver and vehicle description.

“I’ll run it. You didn’t recognise the guy?” Koa checked.

“No,” Steve said succinctly.

Koa glanced at the corner of the PD Headquarters, drawing their attention to the CTV camera high on the corner. Another camera was on the opposite side of the building, providing a wide view of any activity in front of the headquarters.

“We should be able to get video imagery of the SUV, I’ll check it out. Thanks.” Koa took a step in the direction of the PD.

“How’s the investigation going?” Steve asked.

“I really can’t tell you about an ongoing investigation,” Koa said following the letter of the law.

Geez, this guy’s a hard ass, Danny thought.

Steve glanced at Danny, and Danny wondered if he had spoken out loud

Steve widened his eyes, questioningly.

What? Danny pantomimed back, not following Steve’s train of thought.

Steve tensed and shrugged again questioningly.

“Oh!” Danny finally got it. Fuck, the guy was as subtle as a tonne of bricks.

Koa was watching them as if viewing a curious tennis match between rejects from Saturday Night
“I spoke to my ex-wife, Rachel Edwards. It appears that her new husband, Stan Edwards, was responsible for the offer on Seolh, mediated by Batch & Son,” Danny said.

He kinda really truly wanted to beat the answers out of Stan himself. And he wouldn’t have said anything to Hardball Keawe, but it wasn’t like he was a detective and could get answers. He wanted to punch Stan for trying to buy his home -- the passive aggressive bastard. The dick would probably say that it was business and nothing personal.

Danny forced a smile, but he guessed that it was a little strained.

“Stan Edwards?” Koa checked. “Do you know his number?”

Danny fished out his Blackberry from his back pocket and scrolled through his contacts. “No, I can give you my ex-wife’s number and the phone number of his house. But I don’t have his cell.”

Tucking his sub under his arm, Koa pulled out his own phone.

“Forward the numbers to me,” Koa said, reeling of his own cell phone number.

Rachel was going to be absolutely ecstatic when she got that phone call and the resultant visit, Danny thought, sarcastically. He was kind of looking forward to the fall out – he wanted to vent off some steam.

With a certain amount of satisfaction, he fired off a text to Koa.

“That’s helpful. Thank you,” Koa said officiously. “And if you’ll excuse me, I have more leads to follow up.”

“Hey?” Steve called out as Koa moved to cross the road. “What about they guy we caught?”

“Doctors say I can’t talk to him at the moment. Maybe later this afternoon. Next time don’t hit as hard, Brah.”

“Yeah, right,” Danny said, “we’ll restrain ourselves next time we’re attacked.”

Koa was not impressed and continued across the road without a backwards glance.

Steve muttered something under his breath and hopped back into the cab, slamming the truck door shut. Danny stayed on the sidewalk, to indulge in a second of seething and then darted around the truck to the driver’s side.

“Dude!” Danny remonstrated, as soon as he was in and sitting. “Way to be really fuckin’ obvious. And did we have to tell Koa about Stan? I though we were going to talk to Stan?”

“I was letting you make the decision,” Steve pointed out.

“Learn sign language or something. The face pulling is really obvious.”

“Excuse me,” Steve said pissily. “Koa didn’t know what I was asking you. Based on your ‘choler’ and the way you were driving, it’s probably for the best if Koa talks to Edwards. Being arrested for assault probably wouldn’t help your reputation in Koa’s eyes.”

“What?”
“You’re actually telling me that you’re not actively imagining beating the shit out of this guy?”

“Doesn’t mean I’ll do it,” Danny said dourly. Stan-the-man’s nose would pop like an egg when he jabbed it. Oh, okay, maybe Steve had a point.

“If he can afford Batch & Son as lawyers, hitting him is probably not a good idea. And how would Rachel retaliate if you beat up her husband?”

Grace, she would take Grace. She’d go to her lawyers and say he was violent. She’s stop him having time with his Monkey. Danny punched the steering wheel, setting off the horn with a blaring bleep. Startled, Steve jumped.

“Sorry, man,” Danny apologised. He slumped forwards, resting his forehead on the steering wheel and closed his eyes.

A large hand rested between his shoulder blades, cautiously. “It’s okay, Danny.”

Danny sighed. “I still want to look in Stan’s eye.”

“You’re mumbling into the steering wheel, Danny,” Steve said flatly.

“Sorry,” Danny apologised again. He leaned back, shifting in his seat to face Steve. “Let’s go to Stan’s building.”

Steve blinked.

“I’m not going to beat him up in front of witnesses, but we need to know if he’s capable of doing this. My Monkey lives with him!”

A little red devil on his shoulder pointed out that if Stan was involved, best case scenario would be the end of his marriage with Rachel, and Danny might get custody of his Monkey. Fantasy dream worlds were awesome.

Steve nodded, once.

~*~

# 21 #

Stan met them as they walked into Cuoco International. He had been sitting on the plush sofas by the rank and file of potted ferns, playing with his iPad.

“Williams.” He strode towards them, chin high.

“Rachel called,” Danny noted.

“Mr. McGarrett?” Stan’s focus switched to the six-foot, James Bond look-a-like in the black Giorgio Armani suit rather than his wife’s ex-husband. “I was dismayed to hear about the attack on your home. Please, be reassured that neither I nor Cuoco International had anything to do with this. We’re horrified. Our offer was purely speculative and Adrienne Michel, of Batch & Son, had informed us that likelihood of you accepting our offer was negligible.”

“Prove it,” Steve said.

“I can’t. But we have recently purchased two other plots of land on in Hawaii on the Big Island and on this island near Iroquois Point and are fully committed to building hotel complexes on these sites.
Your land is undeveloped, and has access to a private beach perfect for young families. But Seolh, while likely popular, is not as close to Honolulu and the International Airport, so it is less convenient and attractive,” Stan said bluntly. “I had some ideas about a smaller, high-end site, but they’re undeveloped thoughts, catalysed by Rachel’s enthusiasm about how beautiful Seolh was.”

“It’s not for sale,” Steve said equally bluntly.

“I know. And, honestly, I don’t think that Grace would ever forgive me, if I turned it into a hotel.” Stan smiling response was smoothly polished and Danny hated him just a little bit more. “I merely thought that if you were renting rooms, that financially speaking you’d be amenable to an offer. I did not at that time realise what Seolh was or its history.”

“And now you do?” Steve pursed his lips.

“I think so, Mr. McGarrett. Of course if you do ever consider selling the land, I hope that you will consider Cuoco International,” Stan said slickly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m expected in another meeting, which I have to fit in before a Detective Keawe arrives. And I do want to go home at some point this weekend.”

Danny watched him walk off, mentally congratulating himself on that fact that he had managed, by dint of gritting his teeth and clasping his hands behind his back, to neither yell nor punch Stan’s glowing smugness off his long, horsey face.

“Dick,” Steve summarised.

“Got it in one, Babe.”

~*~

“It’s Saturday,” Danny suddenly realised, standing outside Cuoco International.

“And?” Steve asked, eighty percent of his focus on the street, people, and cars.

“Fuck it, I have to call Rachel back. I don’t believe I forgot.” Danny tore at his hair. “I thought that it was Friday.”

“Look, we need to take this conversation off the street,” Steve said.

“What? Why?”

“People are following us,” Steve said tightly. “We’re out in the open. This is not a secure position.”

Danny stared at him aghast. “You haven’t put that gun away have you? I saw you pick up your box in the truck. Where is it?” Danny couldn’t see on the finely suited body where he could have hidden a bulky gun.

Steve stared at him inscrutably. “We’re moving to the truck, now, Ensign,” he ordered.

Ensign? Steve had that hollow eyed look again, accentuated by the dark tired patches under his eyes, drawing the skin tightly. They had been out walking and meeting people for a couple of hours; it had probably been more than four since he had taken some pain killers. Steve was getting tired.

“We need to move,” Steve reiterated.

“Steve, where do you think we are we? Like specifically?” Danny asked carefully.
Steve blinked, glacially slow. “This isn’t Kandahar?”

Holy shit, Danny felt a cold lump drop in his belly. “No,” he said firmly. “It’s Honolulu.”

A whistle of strained breath escaped between Steve’s teeth. “Wide street. I see a wide street. The trees are green. The air has the scent of the sea. It’s tropical. It’s not desert.”

“What day is it?” Danny wasn’t entirely sure what to do. This was completely different to the nightmare. Steve was awake.

“Saturday. Lunch time.” A shudder walked up Steve’s long frame. “In Honolulu. By the sea.”

“You want to go down to the beach?” Danny ventured. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Come on, let’s go.”

“This is downtown Honolulu, we’re in the high rise district,” Steve deliberately looked up, scanning to an older, shorter building with a copper-green domed roof. “Not desert. No minarets.”

Shit, flashback. Post traumatic stress thingy -- Steve was suffering a waking flashback. He didn’t think that Steve was fully tracking. The dude was right, though, they were being followed, and were out in the open, and that couldn’t not be a trigger for a medically retired Navy SEAL. Danny got a hand under Steve’s elbow, and couldn’t help the fillip of surprise that Steve allowed it.

“Come on, Steve, let’s get out of here.” Danny directed him to the disabled parking space he had illicitly appropriated earlier.

Barely even considering his injured foot, Steve got in the truck. Danny threw Steve’s crutches on the flatbed, closed the door on Steve, and got quickly around the truck and piled in.

“Steve? How are you doing?”

“Fine,” Steve said, which Danny knew actually meant: fucked up, insecure, neurotic and emotional.

“You want to put your gun away from wherever you’ve got it hidden?” Danny asked, as he pulled out his cell phone, because PTSDing SEALs and guns were not a good mix, and speed dialled Chin.

“Hey, Danny?” Chin answered immediately.

“Steve’s having a flashback. Advice?” Danny said succinctly.

“Get in sight of the sea,” Chin said, equally shortly. “Where are you?”

Danny reeled off the street name.

“Okay. Kono’s also downtown, she’s nearer than I am,” Chin said. “Follow the signs to Kaka’ako Waterfront Park. It’s touristy but that’s in your favour. Keep talking to him. Keep him present. Make sure he knows where he is.”

“Thanks.” Danny hung up and dropped the phone in his shirt breast pocket. “How are you doing, Babe?”

Steve had his hands of the dash board and was stroking the smooth, polished black plastic.

“Steve, talk to me,” Danny said, as he pulled out into the traffic. There was a road sign ahead pointing towards the Waterfront Park.
“I’m fine. I’m sorry, Danny. It just a little too close. We do have to be careful. Shit.” He kept stroking the plastic. “Armoured vehicles are not fancy. All metal.”

“We’re going to Kaka’ako Park, you been there before? I think that Kono is going to join us.”

“Open the window. Let the air in?” Steve asked.

“Sure.” Danny flicked the switch.

He screeched through traffic, earning blaring horns. The signs kept indicating straight ahead. And with relief, Danny saw the sea suddenly on the horizon as they moved up and over a rise in the road.

“Pacific Ocean,” Danny said jovially.

Danny drove straight through the parking lot, getting as close to the park as conceivably possible. He simply stopped, parking illegally, right next to the verge. The waterfront park was arrayed before them. Gardens and paths sloped towards the sea. Large palm trees were gently swaying in the warm wind drawn off the Pacific Ocean. The grass was carefully tended and perfectly green. About as far away from a desert as conceivably possible, Danny guessed.

Steve opened the door and hopped out of the truck before Danny could begin to string a sentence together.

Danny skipped out of the truck, slamming the door behind him. He got around to Steve’s side, closing his door. Steve was limping heavily across the grass heading straight for the water.

“Hey, Steve, wait up.” Danny got up close, just within grabbing distance, but he didn’t grab. “You okay? Talk to me, Babe.”

“I’m fine,” Steve said. He stopped, the toes of his hurt foot curled against the green grass. “Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to apologise for, Steve.”

Steve dropped, fast enough that Danny didn’t have a hope in Hell of catching him. For a heartbeat, he thought that Steve had fainted or something, but no he had just sat, straight down on the grass.

Warily, Danny settled down by his side. Shit, the grass was wet; his butt was getting soaked.

Steve pressed his hands palm down into the grass, body angled towards the sea.

Danny didn’t know if he should say anything. Steve seemed content to stare at the waves rolling up to the narrow rock armouring ahead of them. Danny shifted over just a fraction, so his shoulder brushed against Steve’s. He noted, with a little frisson of pleasure, that all of Steve’s height was in his legs.

Danny retrieved his cell phone and called Chin again.

“Brah, where are you?” Chin asked, sounding breathless.

“In the park, looking out over the ocean. Sitting.”

“How’s Steve?”

“Looking better. He’s got some of his colour back. Steve, do you want to talk to Chin?”
Steve shook his head.

“Chin,” Danny continued quietly. “We’ve been followed. There’s been a black SUV trailing us. We lost it when we parked opposite the Honolulu PD. Can you check if it was Kavika’s Kapu guys?”

“What?” Chin demanded. “You were followed?”

“Black SUV, false plates,” Danny confirmed. “We gave the description to Koa Keawe.”

“This gets weirder and weirder,” Chin said.

“Tell me about it.”

“Stay where you are. Kono’s coming to you, she’s bringing friends.” Chin went silent, but didn’t immediately ring off. “I’m going to call Kavika. I’ll call you back.”

Danny stared at the wallpaper on his Blackberry of his Grace smiling at him. “Have you ever seen such a pretty, little girl?” Danny held it up to Steve.

He blathered on, scrolling through the pictures. Eighty percent of them were Grace, but as he reached the earlier photos there were some of New Jersey. Steve’s eyes occasionally flicked from the seascape to the bright images.

“That’s my mom and dad, with my sisters Louise and Caitlin. I have a brother, Matthew.” Danny stroked his finger across the screen. “I’ll have a photo of him.”

“Hey, guys.” Kono was walking towards them, despite the parking lot and the Kaka’ako Park entrance being behind them. Evidently she had looped around so they would see her approaching. Her hands were full with colourful cones.

“Kono,” Danny greeted.

“Hi, Danny. Hi, Steve.” Kono sank smoothly to her knees on Steve’s left, so that she didn’t get in the way of the sea. “I’ve brought Shave Ice. I got you lemon, Steve. Your favourite.”

Kono held a cone piled high with yellow ice out and waited, patiently, as implacable as a mountain.

Steve’s gaze flicked from the sea to Kono, to the treat, to the grass, the trees. He shifted a little, looking back to his truck, where Kono’s open-top jeep and a battered blue truck were parked.

“Kavika’s men,” Kono explained.

Steve checked briefly on Danny and looked back to Kono.

“Thank you.” Steve took the paper cone, carefully.

“I got you coconut and vanilla, Danny.” Kono leaned around to hand over the cone with the white mound of ice and little plastic spoon stuck in the top.

“Like mixed or separate?” Danny asked viewing the contents, dubiously. It just appeared to be ice. Was this supposed to replace ice cream as a healthy treat?

“Hard to tell.” Kono settled back, crossing her legs. “Should be one side of vanilla and the other coconut.” Her Shave Ice was blue, green and purple.

He was hungry, it was lunch time. Danny figured that it would hold him over until they got some
food so he dug in. And, blergh, it was cold and sugary, and not much else.

They ate and somehow the silence segued into comfortable instead of strained and worried.

Danny wondered when Chin would appear, and as if by magic he did.

“You didn’t get me a Shave Ice?” He pulled a tragic face.

“Hey, you can have mine,” Danny said generously. He managed to get about a third of the way down.

“Thanks, Brah.” Chin settled at Danny’s side. “Nice view.”

It was pretty and all. The roiling grey December clouds broke up the blue-blue sky, painting a more dynamic picture than the usual spread of pure azure. But Danny thought that there might be a storm cloud brewing on the horizon.

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# 22 #

Danny was angry, but he couldn’t find the energy to explode. Rachel was punishing him for moving without telling her, which was just juvenile. She wasn’t talking to him now, other than clipped sentences which were not open to discussion, because he had more evidence that her new husband was a dick of the first order. The upshot was that he had had Grace last weekend, so that meant that he didn’t have her this weekend. And since his new digs were dangerous, it was for the best, and they would be revisiting the situation.

He loathed cell phone conversations with his ex.

Danny didn’t have a leg to stand on, because after the insanity of the firebombing and the fall out with Koa Keawe, he had lost track of the days, and they hadn’t had this conversation on Friday afternoon.

And he had forgotten about his Monkey. That was untenable.

The storm that he had forecasted battered against the kitchen windows, turning the world dark.

Rolling clouds touching the horizon had finally galvanised Steve as they had sat on the grass at Kaka’ako Park, watching the sea. Steve had been brittle as they had limped back to the truck. Danny could guess that basically having a breakdown in the middle of the street had been a serious step backwards on the road to recovery.

He was hiding now.

Unspoken, Chin, Kono and Danny had agreed to let Steve disappear somewhere in Seolh to curl up and lick his wounds. He wasn’t in his apartment. Mrs. Keawe had taken over the clean up, and a horde of aunties and cousins were cleaning the space from top to bottom. Steve’s expression when he had seen the work-in-progress could only be described as aghast -- people were in his private space.

As he had escaped, Steve had grabbed a sketch pad and mechanical pencil, so Danny hoped that he was holed up somewhere warm drawing impossible dreams.

Danny pushed his Blackberry across the tabletop with his middle finger, and then to the right and
then to the left, thinking.

He would give Steve another fifteen minutes and then he would winkle him out of whatever hole that he had found. Falling back on tried and tested methods of comfort, Danny used to time to fill the electric kettle, dig out some snacks -- the chocolate coco-puff things that Mrs. Keawe had brought to the House.

“Hey…” Steve limped into the kitchen, only using one crutch.

“Hey, Babe. I was making you tea, and then I was going to come find you.” Danny held up a glass jar. “Earl Grey?”

“Herbal, please. Peppermint.” Steve sat and placed his sketch pad on the table.

“Okay.” Danny put the tea away and rooted in the cupboard until he found herbs. There was a jar labelled peppermint. Sniffing the contents, Danny verified that it was peppermint. “How do you want this brewed?”

“Oh.” Steve levered himself to his feet and hopped over sans crutch. He picked up a stainless steel egg lying on the draining board by a metal chain. He twisted open the egg. “Herbs go in here and then you just dunk it in a mug of hot water.”

“Huh. Clever way of drinking tea.”

“It’s not actually tea if it’s herbs or flowers. It’s a tisane. It’s only tea if it contains *Camellia sinensis*.”

“Wow, you learn something new every day,” Danny said, lacking anything else to say.

Steve had yet to relinquish the tea egg.

Danny held out his hand.

“I’m sorry about today,” Steve said.

Danny carefully closed his fingers around the chain in Steve’s hand. “Nothing to apologise for.”

“You keep saying that. But it’s got to be freaking you out. Last night. Today.”

Danny bobbed just a little from side to side thinking of how to respond to the quiet desolation in Steve’s tone.

“Have I told you that my dad’s a fire fighter?” Danny opened with.

“No.”

“Dad’s seen some shit. Dad’s been in some seriously scary situations. He protected us from it when we were kids. He tried to protect us from his -- what he called his -- *moods* and largely he did. But I understand. I don’t know exactly what you’re going through, but this isn’t my first turn around the block.”

“I think that I’d like to meet him someday,” Steve said.

“I’m sure you will, once they’ve saved up. My mom is definitely intrigued about this place. Between talking to Grace and me, then me asking for recipes, I’ve never had so many texts. Do you like Bouillabaisse?” Danny pulled the tea pod from Steve’s fingers.
“Bouillabaisse? It’s been a long time since I’ve had Bouillabaisse. I was in Europe. It was good.”

“I’ve got my Mom’s recipe. Although she calls it zuppa si pesce.” Danny sorted out peppermint and the egg, and dumped it in a mug of hot water. “I think that I should start printing them out.”

“Printing what out?”

“The recipes my mom’s sending us.”

“Sending us? Lots of recipes, eh?”

“Weeks’, months’ worth.” Danny glanced at the kitchen bookshelf. “I could get a binder.”

“I’m sure that there a spare one lying around,” Steve said. “I’ve got a printer in my study.”

“Cool.”

Inexplicably, Steve was smiling. It was glorious. Danny wasn’t one hundred percent sure what he had said, but Steve had definitely relaxed.

“Sit. Tea.” Danny pointed helpfully at the seat and carried over Steve’s peppermint tea and a plate of sweet treats piled high. “So what have you been drawing?”

Steve hopped over, sat and picked up the pad. “You know what a trigger is?”

“Oh.” Danny darted back, grabbed his own coffee from the counter and returned to the table. “I guess, yeah.”

Steve opened the pad. He had drawn a wide, four lane road, dotted with leafy trees, the tall glass façade building opposite Stan’s offices and the ornate building three-storey on the right-hand corner with the domed roof, complete with flag.

It was detailed. Photograph-perfect.

“You think in pictures, don’t you?” Danny said, reaching over Steve’s shoulder and turning the sketch pad back and forth.

Steve shrugged. “Doesn’t everyone?”

“So something when you came out of Cuoco International triggered your flashback, and it’s in this picture?” Danny hazarded.

“It was more of a hallucination than a flashback,” Steve said evenly. “There were other things going on: I’d taken another Vicodin while you were yelling at Rachel; I was tired, and the other stuff going on,” he repeated.

“And?”

Steve flipped the page. He had drawn the corner of the ornate building. There was a line of newspaper vending machines and possibly a mailbox. The drawing was less detailed and the surface was rough from repeated use of an eraser. A figure was half hidden in the shadow of the building. A jagged star obscured his face.

“What’s this?” Danny asked, tapping the white space.

“Flash from a camera.” Steve took a mouthful of his tea. “We were under surveillance, by this man.
The street layout, the dome on the building, being watched, it reminded me of something I can’t tell you about -- and believe you me, I’m not taking Vicodin again -- and I lost the plot.”

“This is amazing. How did you remember this?”

“Meditation, sort of. A visualisation trick I’ve learned.”

“So this is what you were doing the last couple of hours?” Danny pushed Mrs. Keawe’s treats into Steve’s orbit.

“Yes,” Steve said succinctly.

“Okay.” Danny drummed his fingers against the table top. “We’re being watched. Creepy. Is it Kavika?

“No,” Steve shook his head. “Chin checked.”

“Is it just us? Or are other people in Seolh being followed?” Danny asked. “Chin and Kono? Mamo? Toast?

“If anyone tried to follow Mamo it would be the last thing that they did. Kavika would go apeshit.”

Steve pondered. “Chin didn’t see anyone, or Kono.”

“Would they know what to look for?”

Steve’s pencil was practically rotating at the speed of light over his fingers.

“No.” Once more Steve abandoned the table and hopped, this time a little unsteadily, over to the panel between the fridge and the door into the corridor and pressed the dinner bell button. Three times each: long, short, and then long – a Morse code SOS. The lights flickered, matching the pattern.

“Emergency meeting in the kitchen?” Danny guessed.

“Broadly, yes. We still don’t know what Chin found out today. If Kavika had found anything he would have called Chin. We need Chin’s report.”

Report? Danny wondered. Lieutenant Commander SEAL was back with a vengeance.

“Will Koa Keawe tell us what he finds out from the arsonist?” Danny asked.

“Eventually.” Steve sat. “Hyo Kelly might also mention something to Chin offhandedly, so-to-speak, in the meantime.”

Speak of the Devil -- Chin came in to the kitchen, iPhone plastered to his ear.

Danny retrieved Chin’s canister of tea pearls from the cupboard and shook it invitingly. Chin nodded, but still listened intently to his phone.

Mamo sauntered in using the back door. A fine coating of sawdust dotted his forearms and black t-shirt. He cocked an eyebrow at Chin. The artist was standing statue still -- mouth an open ‘o’ of absorption.

Steve shrugged and pointed at the chocolate treats. Sitting by Steve, Mamo snagged a square. And then Mamo waited, as patient as water, for Chin to join them.
“Okay.” Chin flicked his iPhone off, just as Toast and Kono wrestled each other into the kitchen. “Ahem?”

The seriousness of his demeanour stopped their antics. Freezing, Kono appeared to have the upper hand, arm wrapped around Toast’s neck.

“What’s happened?” Kono asked.

“The guy in the hospital escaped,” Chin announced.

“What!” The question was loud and everyone contributed.

“I thought that he was critical. Serious concussion? Brain injury?” Toast said wriggling free from Kono’s grasp. The inference was obvious: anyone hit by Steve was not getting up quickly.

“So he had to have help,” Steve pointed out.

“Yes,” Chin said succinctly. “Organised help. He had a police guard and the guard was taken out. Knocked unconscious.”

“What on Earth is this about?” Danny asked the world at large, as he juggled tea and mugs. “I mean? Why is this happening?

“Did the HPD identify the arsonist?” Steve asked. “Presumably they fingerprinted him?”

“If they did. I don’t know who he is.” Chin accepted the tea that Danny pushed across the table into his reach.

“Can we find out?” Steve directed his gaze at Mamo and Chin.

Chin answered the question by not answering the question and not looking at anyone in the kitchen. Mamo was less circumspect. “When Kavika knows. Kavika will tell us.”

Steve picked a puffed grain of rice off a chocolate treat and added it to the pyramid that he was creating.

“Danny and I were tailed before and after our meeting with Batch & Son this morning,” Steve said. “It’s entirely possible that everyone else in the House has also been under surveillance. We don’t know why Seolh was targeted or why we are being followed. I want everyone to not leave Seolh on their own, and we need to coordinate using the buddy system.”

“Stevie, you were followed? Did they try anything?” Mamo asked, concerned.

“No, sir. Chin’s spoken to Kavika, he’s going to want to keep you close.”

“This is very strange.” Mamo shook his head.

“Buddy system?” Toast asked.

“Cell phone contacts – your Buddy stays in the House. If you’re away from Seolh with your partner, you phone or text every twenty minutes reporting on your whereabouts and condition.”

Toast’s eyes went wide, but he didn’t object. Danny guessed that he was thinking of some sort of GPS computer thingy to augment the buddy system.
“Kono,” Steve continued, “I think that it might be best if you moved into the House.”

“I don’t create, Brah. It’s not allowed,” Kono said simply.

“Bullshit,” Danny interrupted crudely.

Shocked, Kono stared at him.

“You dance on water.” Danny extended his left hand palm uppermost, following the curve of an imaginary wave, dancing his fingers of his right hand on his left. Wave and imaginary figure separated and Danny spread his hands wide. “How is that different to a ballet dancer? It’s ephemeral; caught by art and photography.”

Steve pointed at Danny. “What he said. Yes.”

Chin shrugged. “About time.”

“Awesome,” Toast said.

“Holy Cow.” Kono pressed her hands against her mouth.

Steve abandoned his coco-puff deconstruction-construction and stood. He opened his arms. “I’m sorry that it took us so long to realise.”

Kono barreled into his hug, pushing her face against his shoulder to hide her tears. Steve curled around her. He whispered something into her ear, low enough that Danny couldn’t catch it.

Danny kind of wanted a hug himself. It struck him that out of all the shit happening, if it brought Kono properly into the fold, it was worth it.

~*~

# 23 #

Morning came far too quickly for Danny, especially given that it was a Sunday and, theoretically, a day for lying in. His bed was comfortable, and the sky was dark and lowering, which kind of made him want to snuggle down and grab a few more zzzzs.

He got up because he was probably missing something. The meeting yesterday afternoon had been important, but they had not managed to pin anything down about the ‘who and the why’ of the fire. Chin and Kono’s visit to the lab company, Grant & Olsson, hadn’t revealed anything other than a company that wanted to build complex outside of the city of Honolulu but within reasonable commuting distance. They were interested in aquaculture, hence the focus on the easy access to the bay where they hoped to set up ranching cages. Chin thought that they were on the up-and-up. Kavika had not reported in. Steve had made some crack about Island-time, Chin had nodded sagely, and they had left it at that.

Steve had then made an abortive attempt to help with the clean up in his apartment, but had been chased off. So they had helped Kono move into the House with three stuffed suitcases and four crates. Danny wasn’t entirely sure where she had stored them in her poky little hole of an apartment. Her lease still had to expire, but the sense that she was safe in the House was inexplicable given that they had been targeted.

Scratching his ass, Danny wandered into his bathroom, relieved himself and scrubbed a wet washcloth over his face. That was enough to keep him going until he had had breakfast – or more
importantly, coffee. He pulled on a light hooded top against the relative seasonal chill. In New Jersey, at this time of year, he would probably be wearing sweats and woollen socks.

The House had the feel that there were people about, even as Danny picked his way downstairs to the kitchen without meeting a soul.

“Huh.” Out of all the things that he had expected to see, Steve and a baby wasn’t even remotely at the top of the list.

Steve turned on his seat and raised a finger to his lips. The baby was snugly wrapped in a capsule that sat on the kitchen table. Steve was delicately rocking the carrier back and forth.

Danny spread his hands wide asking the question.

“Danny, meet Daniel.”

“No way.” Danny trotted over and leaned in close to meet his namesake. He was a minuscule scrap of humanity with a scrunched up apple-sized face. His eyes were at half mast, but Danny guessed that they were that vague bluey grey of all babies. “Who does he belong to?”

“I found him on the doorstep.”

“What?” Danny demanded. Who would do that? Why would they leave an obvious newborn outside Seolh? Although, on immediate reflection, it was perhaps the best place in the universe to leave a baby. What the Hell were they going to do with a baby? “Why are you calling him Daniel? How do you know his name is Daniel? Was there a note?”

“I’m kidding,” Steve interrupted. “He wasn’t left on the doorstep. It’s Mrs. Keawe’s daughter’s latest foster.”

“What? It’s? Steven, babies are not its. His name is Daniel.”

“Nani is a foster mom. She just got Daniel,” Steve emphasised. “I got roped into looking after him this morning. Mainly, I think, to keep me sitting quietly and not bugging them.”

“Oh?” Danny inadvertently looked in the direction of Steve’s eyrie. Yesterday, the coterie of aunties had cleaned Steve’s bedroom and made the first pass over the sitting room directly over the fire. Steve really had tried to help in the afternoon. But, firstly, he was injured and secondly, he was male -- neither of which he could do anything about -- which meant that he had been benched. Steve had had to settle for indulging in his autocratic tendencies by organising Kono’s move and directing his minions (Chin, Toast and Danny).

“Apparently, he’s likely to sleep for a couple of hours. The fact the Nani didn’t have a baby monitor lends credence--”

“Credence?” Danny echoed.

“Credence,” Steve continued, ignoring comments from the peanut gallery, “to my supposition this is about keeping me from underfoot and there’s the added entertainment value of baby plus incompetent. For some incomprehensible reason, Moms always give me their babies to hold.”

“Huh? You don’t seem incompetent,” Danny observed, stroking the tiny hand resting on the edge of the yellow blanket with his fingertip.

“I’m not,” Steve said calmly. “They’re hardly complicated when they’re this size: keep warm, feed
and clean when necessary.”

“And love. Don’t forget love.”

Steve raised an eyebrow.

“There’s been research,” Danny said voice rising. “If babies don’t get cuddles they become depressed and lethargic and…” He couldn’t say the word babies and die in the same sentence.

“Ssssh,” Steve said sibilantly as Daniel mewed.


“I ate.”

“K,” Danny said. Part of him wanted to ask what Steve had eaten, but the dude was a grown man. “Ooh, croissants. Who made the croissants?”

“Mrs. K brought them in. There’s chocolate hazelnut spread in the fridge.”

“Ooooh.” Honestly, one of the best things about Seolh was the food. He put four on a baking tray and threw them in the oven on a medium heat.

“Hey, Little Dee,” Steve said as the clatter of the oven closing disturbed him. The baby opened his toothless mouth and wailed.

“Sorry.” Danny winced.

“I kind of guessed that it was inevitable,” Steve said and he unclipped the baby from the capsule.

“What does that mean?” Danny demanded as he ferried milk, butter, chocolate spread, plate and cutlery to the table.

Wrapping his quite frankly enormous hands around Little Dee, Steve scooped the baby up, lifting him to his shoulder and gently patting his back. The baby’s whimpering dropped to little snuffles.

“And that’s good?” Danny hazarded. He thought that it was an okay description, better than mercurial or argumentative, or Rachel’s favourite: manic. Steve’s expression left a lot to be desired, though.

Steve suddenly smiled, eyes crinkling in good humour. “Yes, dynamic is good.”

“Okay, I can live with dynamic.” Danny said mock-sullenly. He finally poured his coffee and then wacked it in the microwave for a minute. A minute was a lifetime when it was a turntable spinning around. What felt like an hour later, he got his coffee, testing the edge of the mug, and deemed it:
perfect. “Perhaps, I should come up with a word for you?”

“Knock yourself out,” Steve said laying down the gauntlet.

The oven pinged. Licking his lips in anticipation, Danny used a folded up dishtowel to lift the tray from the oven. He set it direct on the table, grabbed his coffee and set to work constructing breakfast.

They sat in comfortable silence. Steve cradled Dee against his chest, humming under his breath, comfortingly. Danny wondered if Steve could hear the humming or only feel the sound. He liberally spread chocolate hazelnut over three of the croissants. The fourth, Danny simply buttered, thinly.

“I think that my eyes were bigger than my belly.” Danny pushed the tray across the table into Steve’s orbit. “Help?”

“You think that you’re subtle, but you’re really, really not.” However, Steve snagged the buttered croissant.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Danny batted his eyelashes.

~*~

Breakfast segued into brunch and more coffee. Danny chose to use the ancient coffee machine and make café lattes for them both. The day looked like it was shaping up into a wet and grey Sunday, burying down cosily was the name of the game.

It might be a perfect day for sorting through the photographs on his one remaining camera, uploading them onto his borrowed laptop and selecting prints to display on a stand at the market, Danny thought. He couldn’t believe that he had not had time to sit down and even look through his photographs.

“Can I take some headshots?” Danny asked Steve as he steamed the milk into a froth.

Steven leaned back in his chair, craning his head round, careful of the sleeping weight on his chest.

“What?”

Oh, idiot, Danny chastised himself, remembering once again to speak clearly and directly to Steve.

“Can I take some headshots?”

Steve looked at him blankly, before blinking. “I’m thinking what you mean by a headshot isn’t what I mean by a headshot.”

“What do you mean by a head — ewww. No, I don’t mean that. I thought, I’d maybe get a stand at the market and display my goods.”

Steve grinned lecherously.

“You’re such a child. I like taking photos of people. I’ve done portraiture before. I figure if I shoot -- by which I mean photograph -- the ridiculously attractive people that I’m living with at the moment and do my normal superlative job, I will have people lining up to make me take photos of them.”

“Do I have to wear my suit again?” Steve asked suspiciously, and, hey, that was agreement in that question.

“Yes, Steven, you have to wear your suit,” Danny pondered how far he could go. “And shave.”
“I thought that scruff was sexy?” Steve scrubbed at his chin with his free hand.

“Portraiture is a little different to modelling,” Danny managed to say, because man, composing scenes and catching energy was significantly more fun than portraiture. And thinking about taking photographs of Steve was beginning to take up a fair amount of his imagination. Portraiture brought a little cash in regularly. Modelling could bring in more cash, but unless you had a name, it was intermittent.

Little Dee squeaking interrupted Danny’s train of thought. Steve froze rigid, eying the baby like unexploded ordnance.

“Oh, I know that sound,” Danny said, as Dee went all tense, his little fingers gripping at Steve’s collar. Then the baby relaxed.

“What just happened?” Steve asked, even as he cupped Dee’s tiny butt. “No.”

“Yes,” Danny said with the voice of experience. “Where’s his stuff?”

“No,” Steve repeated.

“It’s not hard, Super SEAL. Where’s the diaper bag? I do have a daughter. I did change her diaper.”

“No. I don’t mean that I wouldn’t change his diaper. I mean that we can’t.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Danny said. Dee was comfortable at the moment, he was sitting in something warm and moist, but as the contents of his diaper cooled down, there was going to be crying.

“Dee had to have surgery just after he was born. Something to do with his bladder. Nani needs to change his diaper. I guess she’s got some instructions about wound care.” Tongue caught between his teeth, Steve shifted Dee into the crook of his arm. “Hey, little guy. Danny’s gonna get your Nani to make you comfortable.”

“I am? Oh, yeah, I am.” Danny guessed that a quick change was advised if Dee had stitches on his lower abdomen.

He zapped out of the kitchen and zipped up the stairs, following the twists and turns to Steve’s apartment. Whoa, it was busy with aunties.

“I’m looking for Nani? Dee needs his diaper changed?”

The choral laugh directed at him was rich. Danny held his hands up in surrender, accepting the mockery. He didn’t need to defend himself using Dee’s surgery as an excuse. Diapers bore him no fear.

“Oh, thank you.” Nani was as tall as Steve, dark haired and statuesque. She kind of made Danny feel like a gnome as she strode across the room. “Dee? Huh?”

“Steve didn’t want to change Little Dee – something to do with surgery?” Danny said quietly.

“Yeah, poor little scrap. His mom couldn’t cope.” Nani sailed past him, head high, and focused. Danny chased after her.

“I bet you make an awesome cop,” Danny blurted. Weren’t all the Keawes cops?

Nani paused on the stairs. “Oh, I’m not a cop. I’m a mom.” She wore it like a badge.
“K.” There wasn’t anything else to say. “Steve says you foster.”

“Yep. Normally short term, emergency.” Nani bounced down the stairs and Danny jogged after her.

“Must be hard?”

“Swings and roundabouts. It’s mostly rewarding.” She swung around the banister – minimal movement to get where she needed to go in the quickest way possible. She walked like a valkerie from his stories that his grandmother, on his dad’s side, told. “You’re Danny. The new one?”

“Yep.”

“So Daniel is now Dee?”

Danny shrugged. “It’s big name. You’ve got to grow into it. He’s a little ‘D.’”

Nani laughed. “I’ll give you that.”

Unhappy wails greeted them as they made it to the kitchen. Steve was jiggling Dee carefully, crooning under his breath.

“Oh, oh.” Nani commiserated as she plucked Dee confidently from Steve’s grasp. “It’s a hard life being a baby.” She kissed Dee’s forehead.

“Your mom put Dee’s diaper bag in the television room. I gave her a couple of towels to put down on the sofa.”

“Thank you.” Nani sailed out the door. “Hey Big Dee, there’s a bottle of milk in the fridge. Can you heat it up?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Big Dee?” Steve chortled.

Danny bounced on his toes. “She likes me.”

“Heat the milk,” Steve ordered, pointing at the microwave.

“Heat the milk,” Danny parroted, opening the fridge and finding the baby bottle tucked in the shelf in the door. “Do you think that someone will adopt him?”

“Probably not,” Steve said, somberly. “Nani mentioned this morning that his problems -- he’s gonna need more surgery in a couple of months and then maybe when he hits puberty -- will make it difficult to find a family to adopt him. I’m pretty sure that Nani’s thinking about adopting, or at least fostering him long term. I think if she fosters, the State will handle his medical bills?”

“Dunno.” Danny pondered. “Will he be able to get specialists? Does he need specialists?”

Steve regarded him glumly. “I’ll talk to Mrs. K.”

“What? Why?”

Steve shrugged. “Family. We’ll figure out what he needs, and make sure he gets it.”

“Just like that, Babe?”
Scrunching his nose up, Steve considered Danny’s words. “ Basically, yeah.”

# 24 #

“Does the name Sang Min mean anything?” Chin asked, interrupting Danny’s tidying up of the random selection of crap that was on the DVD shelf. ‘Tales of the Gold Monkey?’ Danny didn’t even recognise the series.

Over by the television, Steve straightened, tucking a duster in the back pocket of his cargoes. There was a question in his manner.

“Do you know a Sang Min?” Chin repeated.

Steve squinted. “Rang?”

“Sang Min.” Chin tossed over his iPhone to Steve.

Danny went over to Steve, rather than making Steve limp to him. Steve angled the phone so that they could both see the fetching member of humanity leering at the camera. It was a mug shot, which probably didn’t lead to the best photograph. Danny considered professionally, but making the greasy mullet work was beyond even his mad skills.

“This the arsonist?” Steve checked, glowering at the image. It had been dark and frantic when he had taken down the attacker.

“Yes.” Chin nodded.

“The one who escaped from the hospital? They took his prints or something?” Danny asked.

“Yes.”

“So what do we know about him?” Steve probed, twisting the iPhone back and forth as if he could shake answers out of the cell phone.

“Human trafficker. Gang member. High up, if not leading his gang. But it’s part of a larger organisation.” Sagging, Chin dropped on to an armchair. Daniel didn’t think that he had ever seen Chin look tired.

Steve cocked his head to the side. “So why didn’t he send one of his gang? A subordinate member? If he’s part of a gang why wasn’t there a gang of arsonists?”

That was sharp; Danny was impressed.

“I don’t know.” Chin seemed to gain a little energy.

“We need to ask Kono, Mamo, and Toast if they know this guy.” Steve rubbed his jaw thinking. “Danny?”

“Never seen him before in my life.” Danny shivered. The guy’s eyes were bright and shiny, like a rodent’s.

“I spoke to Kono. She doesn’t know him either. Toast is at University, running some code. Mamo and his nephew Al’u went with him. Ostensibly, as buddies, but I think that Mamo wanted Al to see the U of H.”
“Fire’s personal -- it’s about destroying, vengeance, punishment,” Steve mused, thinking out loud. “I guess we talk to the residents, new and old. See if any of them know this Sang Min.”

“Or they wanted something in the house?” Chin proposed.

“Art?” Danny asked. “Statue?” They could have the one of the lady with the flower urn; she gave him the heebie jeebies.

“Again, fire would damage anything.” Steve scowled. “This is very frustrating. We have insufficient intel and no resources.”

“We have Kavika.” Chin folded his hands together. “Kavika will either know or know of Sang Min.”

“And we expect Koa Keawe to continue the investigation,” Danny said, playing Devil’s Advocate.

“Trail’s going to go cold,” Steve said mulishly. “Keawe won’t be able to spend resources on a cold case.”

Chin nodded, obviously unhappy. “We have a lead, as my father would say. I’ll call Kavika.”

There went Danny’s planned quiet afternoon sorting through his photographs.

~*~

Danny yawned as he trooped after Steve into the kitchen. They had spent a damp afternoon-early evening, talking to various ex-members of the Co-operative, who were living nearby. They weren’t numerous, but they were all garrulous, and extremely fond of reminiscing about the Seolh in the early days. Danny’s kidneys were floating in coffee and juice. But they weren’t all old timers with tales. One guy, Wong, who had spent a month at Seolh a couple of years ago, but hadn’t found it fitted, was in his late twenties.

None of them had recognised Sang Min.

Chin had got the job of telephoning a couple of ex-residents on the Mainland on the off chance they had links with Human Trafficker gangs. Danny thought that they would be interesting conversations….  

“Oh, you guys look tired,” Kono commiserated as they entered the warm environs of the House.

Steve shrugged out of his light jacket and hung it on the back of the door. Automatically, he held his hand out for Danny’s, who handed over his jacket.

“You have no idea.” Danny looked around the table, everyone was sitting: Mamo, Kono, and Toast. “Oh, it’s Sunday. Chore wrangling.”

Toast snorted. “Chore Wrangling.”

“I like the sound of that,” Kono said.

Steve propped his crutches by the bookcase and hopped across the short distance to the table, hands outstretched for balance.

“We had no success. No one knows Sang Min.” Danny drooped into his chair, opposite the fridge and the kitchen sink, beside Steve. “You guys, any luck?”
“No.” Chin, standing at the counter, slammed a drawer shut. “Food first and then we can talk about matters affecting Seolh.”

Terse and Chin didn’t really go well together in Danny’s humble opinion – it was quite out of character.

“What about Blue and the other Kapu?” Steve asked, changing the subject. “Are they eating with us?”

“I invited them in,” Kono said. “And Blue said that if Kavika knew that they’d come into the House to get something to eat he would beat them black and blue with a stick.”

“We took them out hot roast pork sandwiches,” Mamo said. “And yes, Kavika, would not be happy.”

“They were very appreciative,” Kono reported.

The timer on the oven pinged, and Chin announced, “Food.”

“Oooh, what we got?” Danny licked his lips.

“My special pork with vegetable rice.” Using oven mitts rather than the dishtowel method that Danny preferred, Chin pulled out an oven proof pan. It was roast pork in a rich burgundy-red sauce. Scents of ginger and garlic and possibly lemongrass teased Danny’s nose. Little red tomatoes were dotted between the cutlets. It was very photographic. Chin set it in the middle of the table as Kono carried over a wok filled with rice. The rice was also red and loaded with corn, green beans, scallions, mushrooms and the ubiquitous tomatoes.

“I’m so hungry.” Danny spooned generous portions onto his plate without any ceremony.

The focus in the room was on filling hungry stomachs and the silence was comfortable. Chin had cracked a bottle of red wine and it was breathing on the table. Danny hemmed and hawed as he tucked in the meal, but wasn’t in the mood for wine. Steve, typically, poked at a mound of rice with a little bit of sauce. Danny debated calling him on it, between mouthfuls, but decided to let it go.

“I want some juice. Anyone want some juice?” Danny stood. “Steve? Kono?”

“No, Brah, I’ll have wine,” Kono decided, picking up the bottle.

Steve nodded mutely and ferried a teaspoon sized portion to his mouth. There was a vast selection of juices in the fridge. The thickest and most nutritious looking was a mango blend with papaya. Danny eyed the suspended seeds dubiously, but picked it up.

“The things I do for love,” he muttered under his breath as he poured two big glasses.

Danny rapped on Toast’s studio door with his knuckles, and waited.

“Hey,” Toast’s voice drifted laconically through the door.

Danny took that as a request to enter. Toast’s studio was a temple dedicated to the god of electronics. If there was a bed somewhere in the mess of computers and hard drives, servers and towers, it wasn’t immediately obvious.

“Hi, Jersey.” Toast sat in the centre of ‘L’ shaped desk with no less than four monitors streaming
On reflection, Danny decided, he was never letting Grace come in this room; the background radiation was probably astronomical.

“Toast.”

The post-grad student leaned far back in his chair, head hanging over the back. “What can I do for you, man?”

Danny fished his phone out of his pant’s pocket. “I was wondering if there was any phone thingies that you could put on my phone that would help Steve.”

“Phone thingies?” Toast mocked, even as he held his hand over his head.

Danny passed it over, without biting.

“Steve’s phone,” Toast said as he fiddled with Danny’s phone, “is actually linked to his ITE aids. But I can put a ‘mobile translation’ app on your phone, which means if -- for any reason -- he had to use it, he would be able to see text of what someone was saying, as well as what he can hear. He doesn’t like the ‘amplify sound’ app. You want the ‘Learn American Sign Language’ app?”

“Steve doesn’t sign.”

“True,” Toast observed. He swung his chair around and delved into a crate by his foot. He pulled out a cable connection and hooked up the phone to his desktop computer. “You wanna try something?”

“Depends,” Danny said cagily.

Toast angled his pointy chin to what looked like an old fashioned walkman with heavy padded headphones lying on top of a pile of ancient, boxed hard drives. There was a loop so you could hang it around your neck. Danny picked it up and realised that it wasn’t an old cassette player, but it was an —

“What is this?” Danny asked.

“It’s an acoustic-to-electric transducer, it converts sound into an electric signal. It’s a mike, essentially. But I’ve tweaked the way that the headphones interpret the electrical audio signals. I’ve cut out the high frequency sounds, everything over 750 hertz is filtered. And I’ve added a really annoying feedback element. That was fun.”

“Why?” Danny tested the weight of the heavy headphones.

“The circumaural padded headphones attenuate any external noise,” Toast said, brightly.

“Again why?”

“You put them on, and you hear an approximation of what Steve hears. I don’t know his levels, the dude’s private, but I can guess.”

“Oh,” Danny said intrigued, and popped the headphones over his ears. The world went silent.

‘Switch it on.’ Toast mouthed and pointed at the box, gesturing grandly.

“Oh, yeah.” And that was damn weird, he couldn’t really hear himself speak, but he could feel it.
He thumbed the switch on the base unit, and the world was muffled, but it wasn’t that strange.

Toast didn’t say a word, he just pointed a remote at the stereo music system by the far wall and hit play. The music was dull and intermittent and far away. It was if Danny had passed through a tunnel on a fast train and his ears were blocked. He could make out sounds. There was a piano playing a repetitive chord. He heard what he thought was the word die. The female voice sang a drawn out sound and Danny knew that it was melodic, but he didn’t have a clue to what he was listening to even as his foot beat out the rhythm.

The tones ratcheted higher and abruptly disappeared.

Danny yanked the headphones off, and Adele’s ‘Set Fire to the Rain’ filled the room. He stared at Toast, speechless.

Toast shrugged. “You can take them off.”

~*~

Danny drifted down the stairs, one hand on a banister. He should, he knew, wear the headphones that Toast had doctored for a day or two. But he wanted to ask Steve first. Just appearing wearing the headphones and surprising Steve seemed crass. He wasn’t entirely sure why Toast had created the headphones. But when push-came-to-shove Toast was a kid -- kids didn’t always think things through.

There was a clatter and a thud, and he heard Steve swear from the direction of the television room.

“Hey, you okay?” Danny skidded into the room.

Steve was sitting on the sofa looking as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, but the coffee table was off kilter and his crutch was lying alongside the far side of the table.

“Fine.” Steve growled.

Danny wasn’t stupid. “You tripped, didn’t you? You okay?”


“Yes, Steve,” Danny said clearly. “Are you okay? Did you hurt your foot?”

Steve answered by propping his foot on the coffee table. “It’s fine.”

Danny straightened the table under Steve’s foot and bent to pick up the crutch.

“I’m fine,” Steve said through gritted teeth.

“Dude,” Danny said, echoing Toast.

“I’m an adult,” Steve said, tightly. “I’m not a kid. I can pick up after myself. I Am Okay.”

Danny rested his arms on the top strut of the crutch and considered his next action. There was a feral glint in Steve’s eye that spoke of a need to fight.

“What?” Steve demanded, derailed by the lack of reaction.

“Yeah, sorry,” Danny said, he shrugged.
“Why are you apologising?” Steve straightened indignantly.

“Rachel always said that I was annoying. Smothering. When,” Danny continued sing-song, “she wasn’t throwing things at me. I did occasionally throw things back at her. I have a temper.”

Steve was watching him, mouth slightly open.

“I have a full on *I like to scream at the heavens* bad temper. I’ve gone through a horrendous divorce, acrimonious doesn’t even begin to describe it. But I also have a daughter who’s seven. So I understand frustration. Frustration with a capital ‘F,’ Babe. You want to yell at me, bring it on.”

Danny rested his chin on his arms.

Steve closed his mouth with a clack.

_Come on, Babe, say it._

Steve heaved out a sigh. He thumped the cushion beside him, somewhat invitingly.

Danny dropped down beside him, letting the crutch fall to the side with a clatter. He twisted back against the armrest, so that Steve could see him. Perhaps if he hadn’t had thirty seconds living in Steve’s world he might have defused the incipient temper tantrum in a different way or inflamed it by yelling back. But at this precise moment he was willing to indulge Steve until the end of time.

“I’m not a kid, Danny. Yeah, I need help--” Steve ground his teeth. “--sometimes. But not all the time.”

Danny stayed quiet, letting Steve find his words.

“My balance is compromised. The inner ear is important in balance. And my ears are, to coin a phrase, fucked. My muscle memory is superb,” Steve said, without an iota of exaggeration. “You come at me with a knife, and I’ll put you down. But it is really frustrating. When I’m not concentrating or sometimes when I am, or maybe over concentrating, where I am gets confused. I never used to stumble, even when I was tired. I suck at yoga now. I’m like a beginner. I fall over when I do Vriksasana, it’s --”

“Annoying.”

Steve shook his head. “You’ve no fucking idea.”

“So what happened?” Danny pointed at the crutch that he had let fall to the floor.

“I tripped. I just tripped. It’s not the end of the world. Everyone doesn’t need to run through and check on me. I’m not made of glass. I’m a goddamn Navy SEAL. Retired-SEAL. But I can look after myself.”

Danny laced his fingers together and set them on his bent knee. “Isn’t that what Seolh is about, looking after each other? Like Little Dee yesterday – we’re going to figure out how to help him. Chin when his family abandoned him. Me, when I tipped up on your doorstep a mere two weeks ago, homeless. What did you call it? Ohana?”

Even though his bottom lip was jutting out, dejectedly, Steve nodded.

“Family looks after each other, Babe, or it isn’t a family. If you trip up, someone helps you up. That’s what family does.”
“But.”


“What.”

“Stand up,” Danny ordered.

Hesitantly, Steve stood. He viewed Danny with a modicum of trepidation. The kilter of his shoulders screamed: why?

Danny held his arms out in invitation.

“Hug?” Steve guessed, tentatively.

“You’re a goddamn Navy SEAL; you can’t be stupid. Of course it’s a hug.” He slung his arms around Steve’s shoulders and tugged him in tightly. Part surprised, part too tired to protest, Steve tumbled down against him. Everyone needs a hug sometime, Danny thought.

“Men… don’t.” Steve protested half-heartedly. “My dad.”


“Deal?” Steve echoed.

“Did you really want to have an out-and-out fight? If you wanna box tomorrow, I’m game. I’ll show you a thing or two. None of that martial arts crapola.” Danny said directly to the cradle of Steve’s delicate ear.

Steve squeezed him tightly then eased off. Danny read the incipient body language and released him.

A hint of a flush brought welcome colour to Steve’s pale face.

Danny tapped a finger in the middle of Steve’s chest. “I figure we check the fridge out, grab a beer or two – only one for you because you’re on antibiotics -- and some snacks and watch some crap on the television. Get Chin and Kono and Toast to join us. I think, though, that we should pick the film. Game?”

“Reservoir Dogs?” Steve proposed, brightening.

“A classic, man. Why not?” Danny rested the palm of his hand on the centre of Steve’s chest. He would stay here, just a second longer, letting Steve soak up the warmth, before grabbing the rest of the crew.

~*~

# 25 #

Mug of strong morning coffee at his elbow, Danny fired up his borrowed laptop. As he waited for the computer to boot up, he unfurled his USB cable and attached it to his Canon.

They had had a good night. Kono had never seen Reservoir Dogs – Danny had considered that a crime against humanity. They’d discussed movies and it turned out that Steve hadn’t seen some of the recent classics, probably because he’d been stuck in the middle of nowhere when they came out. Chin proved to be as much a movie buff as Danny and he had a collection which edged towards European and Asian cinema. Toast’s contribution had been: name a movie and I’ll get it for the next
movie night.

A tap on his door interrupted him, and a voice — Steve.

Danny abandoned computer and camera, and rapidly crossed the room, pulling open the door. Steve was dressed to go out; cargo pants and turquoise polo shirt.

“Hey? What’s up?” Danny asked.

“Kavika called, he’s got some intel. We’re to meet him at the Hawaii Hilton.”

“Why’s he not coming here?”

“He’s Kavika, people go to him. Mamo will give him an earful, later. But I also want to go to the Technical College in Honolulu.” Steve held up a folder. He smiled. “You want to buddy up?”

“You’re asking me to buddy you, buddy?” Danny threw his hands high. “Of course, I’m your buddy.”

“You okay to come now?” Steve asked, looking at the laptop and coffee on the table.

“Yeah, gimme five. I’ll just shut the computer down and hit the bathroom. Go make me a fresh vat of coffee in a travel mug and I’ll catch up with you in the kitchen.”

“Yes, sir.” Steve mock saluted, but it was a neat and professional looking salute.

Danny shut down his computer and detached his camera. At some point he was going to sit down with his equipment and do some work. But in the meantime, he could take his camera with him and get some shots as he and Steve drove around Hawaii. And it was always more fun shooting than processing.

~*~

“We’re going to the Technical College first,” Steve told Danny, pulling out a local map from the glove compartment as Danny turned onto the Farrington Highway. “Kavika doesn’t do mornings, unless there’s a wave.”

“Why are we going to the college?” Danny asked.

Steve flipped through the map. “Excellent, it’s just off of the Queen Liliuokalani Freeway. I thought that we could grab lunch afterwards and then see Kavika.”

“I appreciate that you have operated under basis of ‘need to know’ for many years, Steve. And keeping things close to your chest is probably ingrained. But you’re allowed to talk now. What’s the mission?” Danny indicated and changed lanes.

Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s about the Hall. We can use the insurance specified builder to repair the infrastructure. But I figure…. Me and Mamo figured that we could get a handful of the more advanced students working in the carpentry-woodwork programme at the college to help us restore the floor. It’s a specialist job. There’s really no one on the island that specialises in turn of the century dance floors. Funnily enough, there’s no demand. The insurance will pay, but there’s no supplier.”

“And you think students can do it?” Danny said, dubiously.

“No, they’ll learn and be around for the heavy lifting.” Steve reached behind him and pulled out a cardboard tube. “These are the old blueprints of the Hall and the design specs of the floor. I can read
these. I know what to do. Mamo can act as foreman. There are a couple of guys we know who are skilled wood crafters who will happily do the work and can pass on their skills. But this needs a team.”

“Group project? Good idea.” Danny thought that it sounded like a good idea. He wasn’t too sure if Seolh’s insurance provider would go for it, but he figured that Chin probably had that in hand.

“Do you know who we’re seeing?”

“Yeah, friend of Mamo. Addison.”

“You guys know everyone on the Island?”

“Pretty much.” Steve slumped down in the passenger seat and studied the traffic.

~*~

Addison turned out to be a tiny little guy, built of corded muscles and tendons. He smelled of liquorice, which probably had something to do with the stub of a brown cheroot tucked between his bald head and ear.

“So Mamo tells me that you want some of my kids.”

Steve looked him up and down, and came to a decision. “Yes, sir, cheap labour -- we will part fund their scholarships -- and they learn something of the job doing something unusual. But I want the best. Hard workers.”

Addison circled his busy workbench positioned in front of a forest of empty workbenches. The air smelled of sawdust and varnishes. There wasn’t a single kid in sight. The college campus had been sparsely populated as they had walked through it and Danny figured that that had something to do with the approaching holidays.

“Lemme see the blueprints.” Addison pointed a brown-stained, knobbly finger at the tube.

Steve handed it and the folder over. “Details of the floor.”

Addison carefully decanted the old blueprints and smoothed them out on a clear bench. Danny moved to help, weighing two corners down with a hammer and hand-held lathe.

“Keep it on its side,” the teacher directed. “Don’t rest it on the blade.”

Steve was content to rest against the adjacent table and stare into middle space as Addison looked over the prints in between consulting the photographs and drawings in the folder. Danny was quivering by the time Addison spoke,

“Some dick burnt this? For kicks?”

“We don’t know why,” Steve said flatly.

“Okay, you can have my best kids, if…” he trailed off.

“If?” Steve said obediently.

Addison smiled. A little like Rumpelstiltskin would, Danny imagined. “I get to bring a few of my classes to Seolh to study the building, see the reconstruction in progress, do some field work – sketches, design drawing and the like.”
“It is our home, Mr. Addison,” Steve said, shoulders back. “That’s a lot of kids.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not. The students in the advanced class, and the kids from the special class, they work better if they can see what their work can become.”

Steve blew out his lips a fraction but didn’t release the breath.

“You’ll inform us well in advance?” he finally said. “No more than twelve students at a time and two visits for each of the two classes.”

“The classes are fifteen students.” Addison said.

“Mamo mentioned that you had some equipment that would be useful?” Steve responded a beat later.


“Fifteen students, it is.” Steve had his own, perfectly respectful, shark-toothed smile.

“Laser lathe?” Danny asked.

Addison reached for his cheroot, aborted the move, and picked up the page of architectural paper which showed the intricate detail of the knotwork pattern of the floor complete with measurements and sketches of the interlocking blocks.

“Yeah, we can programme in these measurements and the laser can cut these interlocking blocks. It’s a lovely piece of equipment. It can’t do everything and doesn’t match a craftsman -- we’ll have to hand-finish the pieces -- but it saves so much time.”

Steve held out his hand. “It’s a deal, Mr. Addison.”

“Call me Addison,” he said. “Would you like to see the lathe?”

~*~

“That went well,” Danny observed as they drove into Honolulu to find a place to grab lunch.

Steve nodded.

“You kind of knew that it was a done deal, didn’t you?”

“He’s a friend of Mamo’s and he wants the best for his students. The project’s good. It’s a viable way of restoring the floor. Addison needed to see the specs to be convinced. Everyone benefits.”

Steve set his foot on the dashboard. “There’s only one laser lathe on the Island.”

“Why didn’t Mamo come over? Not that I’m lazy but, you know?” Danny asked.

“I wanted to see the laser lathe.” Steve turned and grinned toothily at Danny.

“Oh, Babe.”

~*~

The Hawaii Hilton was a little too plastic in Danny’s opinion. Any photographs would be generic and inherently boring. He tucked his camera back in its bag.

“Why’s Kavika here?”
Steve shrugged, concentrating on crutching along. He was definitely getting better using the crutches, helped by the fact that he did occasionally use his toes. Danny followed Steve into the cabana bar. Kavika was holding court in the corner, his back to the wall. Similarly tattooed, but considerably larger than the slight Kavika, henchmen were dotted around the room.

Danny contained a snigger by pure force of effort. He really wanted to introduce these guys to his Uncle Mario, they would get on like a house on fire. Light touch paper and stand back.

"Kavika." Steve inclined his head a fraction, but sat opposite the leader of the Kapu before Kavika lifted his hand in permission. Danny dropped down next to Steve.

"Drinks, gentlemen?" a waitress asked.

"Sparkling mineral water;" Steve said.

"I’ll have what he’s having.” Danny pointed at Kavika’s orange and ruby red drink. He liked the way that the red at the base was bleeding into the orange like a sunset.

"Yes, sirs.” She sauntered away.

"Kavika, you wished to talk to us?" Steve said calmly.

"My people in Guffin Construction tell me that the company had nothing to do with the attack.”

"Sang Min?” Steve asked.

Kavika leaned back in his chair, contemplating them.

Danny clicked his fingers. “Quit with the Al Capone impersonation. You called us here because you wanted to tell us something. The Guffin thing is a one sentence conversation, so you brought us here because of Sang Min. Why?”

Kavika growled. Three of his large henchmen immediately stood. Steve bristled, reaching for the pocket of his pants.

"Sit," Kavika directed and his people obeyed. He glowered at Danny, who met the censure with a glare of his own. This was just pissing to mark territory and it was a waste of time.

"Kavika, can you help Seolh or not?” Steve said.

"I can, for Seolh.” Kavika took a long pull from his drink, and then set it down. “Sang Min is a blot. He treats people as less than animals. He is, as you know, a Human Trafficker. But he also acts as a lieutenant for Chinese Gangs, easing their way when they come to the islands. He’s a facilitator.”

"So what does that have to do with Seolh? Why try to burn it down?”

"Do either of you have anything to do with Chinese Gangs?” Kavika leaned across the table and speared Steve with his heavy eyed gaze. “I know that my Uncle doesn’t. I know Chin and Kono don’t. That leaves you, the haole and Toast, whose head is always in the clouds.”

"I have no fuckin’ idea about any Chinese Gangs!” Danny rocketed to his feet. “I’ve been on this island for barely three months.”

Kavika matched Danny’s stance. “And what were you on the Mainland, haole?”

“Photographer.” Danny held out his camera bag and wrenched it back as Kavika automatically
reached for it.

“Calm down,” Steve commanded, voice level, “both of you.”

“You don’t know this man, McGarrett. You’ve known him for two weeks,” Kavika snapped out.

“I trust him, Kavika.” Steve reached up and set a hand on Danny’s shoulder, tugging him down to sit.

“He’s a haole.” Kavika remained standing.

“Kavika, do you know this Sang Min?” Steve said loudly, he slapped his hand sharply on the table top. “Can you guess why he would be interested in Seolh?”

Kavika kicked the seat behind him backwards. Steve merely leaned back in his chair and waited. The leader of the Kapu set his hands on the table and leaned into Steve’s personal space.

Danny perched on the edge of his seat, ready to react to the incipient violence. Steve merely sat, but the Navy SEAL’s hands were on the table top, mirroring Kavika’s. Somehow Steve seemed taller than the standing Kavika.

Danny remember what Steve had said about muscle memory and wondered how fast he could react if Kavika attacked.

Damn fast, he decided.

And it looked like Kavika knew that.

Kavika sat and the moment passed. All bluster and threats dispersed by a calm response to posturing.

“The only thing that can think of is the private access to the bay. And the bay -- gentle sloping bay and beach. You can run a boat straight up that beach. It’s a natural harbour, protected from casual view by rock outcropping headlands on either side.”

“You’re thinking smuggling.”

“People and goods,” Kavika concurred.

“Burn the House down and buy the Seolh?” Steve checked.

“Could be.” Kavika drew a slurp from his juice drink.

Perfectly timed, the waitress came back over, balancing a mineral water and Danny’s treat on her round tray.

“Gentleman.” She served the drinks.

“Thanks.” Steve handed over a folded bill. “Keep the change.”

“Thank you.” She smiled brightly and moved on to the next customers.

Danny picked up his glass and took a curious sip, braced for anything. Holy Shit, he wasn’t going to be driving back to the House if he drank this. He was drinking the strongest Tequila Sunset known to man.

“You good to drive?” he mumbled around the straw.
Steve stared at him, eyebrows knotting together. Scowling, he looked back to Kavika. Danny set the cocktail aside, realising that Steve hadn’t understood what he had said, and wasn’t willing to ask for clarification in front of the Leader of the Kapu.

“It’s still speculation at this point,” Steve continued. “Assuming that you’re right, Kavika. The only thing that we can do is impress on them that Seolh is not for sale – now or ever.”

Kavika’s expression was implacable as granite. “I can impress people,” he said, loading a thousand meanings on a single word.

Steve picked at a piece of dry skin on the centre of his palm. “Do you know where Sang Min is?”

Oh, Danny didn’t like where this was going. “The police have something of a vested interest in this.”

Kavika looked at him with contempt. “The Kapu protect the land.”

“As do the police. To prevent anarchy,” Danny pointed out for the benefit of all listening. “Sang Min was caught in the act, there’s got to be a warrant for his arrest. He should be turned over to the police. If he’s arrested and put in jail that sends a message.”

Steve pushed back in his chair. “Danny’s right. Koa Keawe’s still on the case. If you find Sang Min, giving him to the police, to Keawe, will show that we’re all working together.”

“It’s a diluted message, McGarrett.”

“No, it’s not. It’s a consistent message: Seolh, the Police, and the Kapu all saying back off.” Steve glanced sideways at Danny. “And it is still only a working theory that they want the land. We need to talk to Sang Min.”

Kavika weighed his words. “Agreed.”

“Thank you.” Steve stood, hooking around his crutches from where they were propped against the table behind him. “Come on, Danny.”

Danny abandoned his barely touched drink and stood. He waited a couple of seconds letting Steve move away from the table.

“Pleasure meeting you again, Kavika,” Danny said brightly.

Kavika stood. They were about the same height, Danny noticed.

“I don’t trust you, haole. You appear out of nowhere and Sang Min tries to burn down the House. You’re followed. You put my Uncle in danger.” He jerked his chin at the door. “It’s time for you to leave.”

The henchmen stood. En mass they outweighed him by at least eight times. If one of them sat on him he would be squished flat.

“Kavika. Danny,” Steve said chidingly. “This isn’t helping.”

“What the man said.” Danny pointed over his shoulder. Head held high, Danny stalked after Steve.

They worked their way down the verdant paths of the hotel complex. The carefully tendered mimosas and palms gave an impression of privacy in the busy garden.

“I thought that you were the adult in our little group. Well, you and Chin, were the adults,” Steve
said conversationally. “What was that about?”

Danny sighed. “He just rubs me up the wrong way.”

“Why? You barely know him.”

“I dunno,” Danny scrubbed at the back of his neck. “I have nothing to do with this, Steve. I swear. But Kavika thinks I do. Koa Keawe thinks I do. These guys are your support network -- maybe me being at Seolh is stopping them doing what needs to be done. Okay, not Kavika and his borderline criminal acts but definitely Keawe. And Rachel – she thinks that it’s too dangerous for my daughter to visit.”

“What?” Steve stopped dead in the centre of the path. “What are you saying?”

“Maybe it would be for the best if I leave Seolh?”

~*~

# 26 #

“No. No way.” Steve’s mouth firmed. “No way.”

“But think about it--” Danny began.

Steve’s hand came out in a cutting gesture. “You’re not thinking this through correctly. You’re just reacting.”

“Excuse me, I think that I know my own mind.” Danny bristled. “And I want my daughter to be able to visit me. She can’t at Seolh.”

“Okay. Okay. I’ll accept that as something to consider,” Steve butted in. “But think it through. We don’t know why the attack happened. Kavika will find Sang Min and will have a conversation with him before he hands him over to Koa Keawe. You’re part of Seolh now. Taking yourself off to some rat trap that you can barely afford will only make you vulnerable and, by extension, your daughter when she visits. There’s protection at Seolh. We will get answers. And when we get answers, then you can make a decision about staying or going, but from an informed position.”

“Kavika and Koa don’t trust me.”

“And?” Steve was flushed in high dudgeon, his nostrils flaring. “Kavika does not dictate Seolh’s policy. It’s a community. And the community says: Danny Williams stays.”

Danny snorted. “I don’t remember there being a vote.” But he did feel a little better.

A rumble of far off thunder underscored Steve’s words. Another rumble rode its heels. Rain plopped, spattering large circles on the dry path.

“It’s going to piss down,” Steve said, regarding the sky.

“Interesting euphemism.”

“Truck, now.” Steve set off at a fast clip, the rubberised tips of his crutches marking the path. The intermittent giant drops were coming faster. Each drop was cold at its heart. Danny sped by Steve, jack-rabbit fast, camera bag clutched protectively to his side like a football. He extended car keys and triggered the door locks in the truck parked ahead of them. The truck bleeped, lights flashed, and the doors unlocked.
Danny skidded to a halt beside the truck, pulled open the passenger door and scrambled up and over into the driver’s seat. He craned his head, looking back for Steve. He was hopping and limping towards the truck, an expression of fierce determination on his face. Steve threw his crutches on the flatbed and pulled himself up into the truck as the heavens opened and the rain lashed down.

“Schizophrenic weather. The sun was shining five minutes ago,” Danny grumbled, one hand wrapped around the steering wheel, the other around his camera case. Until it let up, they weren’t driving anywhere. Or to be accurate, Danny wasn’t driving anywhere until it let up. He couldn’t even see through the windscreen. The rain hammered down against the roof. If they were in New Jersey, he would have thought that it was hailing.

“It’s December,” Steve said philosophically, rubbing his fingers over his damp, short hair. “We had an uncharacteristically good September. December is normally pretty stormy, but it’s shaping up to be a doozy of a month.”

Abruptly, the world lightened a fraction, and thunder rolled in its wake.

“So, we were having a conversation,” Steve said.

“It was more like a statement of opinions. I don’t remember a discussion,” Danny rebutted.

“Okay, now we’ll have the discussion.” Steve settled back in his seat, folding his arms over his chest. “I think that my points stand.”

“Really.” Danny twisted around in his seat. “Which one specifically springs to mind?”

“That at Seolh there’s a procedure in place to ensure that we’re all safe, and the team -- Ohana -- is looking out for each other.”

Danny guessed that this was Lieutenant Commander McGarrett in action -- or, perhaps not, since he wasn’t ordering Danny to stay. His High-Handedness, Emperor of Seolh, Danny revised.

“You’re right. And you know that you’re right. But--” Danny waggled his finger back and forth, “--the smugness, it isn’t attractive.”

“So you’re staying,” Steve grinned.

“So not attractive.” Danny shook his head sadly.

~*~

Curiously entranced into a waking doze by the rain sluicing down the truck’s windscreen, Danny jumped when Steve’s cell phone rang.

Steve hauled it and his ITE remote out of his cargo pants side pocket. “Hey, Chin.” He thumbed on the loudspeaker on the phone.

“Are you still in Honolulu?”

“Caught in downpour. I give it another couple of minutes and then we’ll head home.”

“Can you stop at Costco?” Chin asked.

Steve pouted at the phone cradled in his hand. “Yes,” he said, reluctantly.

“I’m texting the list.”
The phone in Steve’s hand immediately vibrated and chimed loudly. “Got it,” Steve said. “Really?”

“Yes, Steve. The washing machine has been going twenty-four seven since the fire. Go get laundry detergent.” Chin hung up.

“Dreft?” Danny asked, with a grin.

“As long as it’s environmentally friendly,” Steve said neutrally, obviously not aware that Dreft was recommended for babies. “Normally, we buy in bulk from Suma, through a farmers’ Co-op up past Kahaluu, but that takes a week or so. I figure we need some now – and conditioner and bleach and dish washing liquid and Febreze. I suppose that there have been a lot of people in the House over the weekend.”

“And a lot of cleaning.”

“Beer and light bulbs,” Steve continued reading. “Ah, the delight of a mundane existence.”

“You know, Steve, don’t take this the wrong way, but in your previous non-mundane existence did you go up against Chinese Gangs?” The thought suddenly occurred to Danny.

Steve glanced at him sideways. His eyes narrowed in contemplation, and Danny felt himself wither under the considering stare.

“Classified?” Danny hedged eventually. It was too quiet.

“I was on some ops in Asia. Chinese Gangs may have been affiliated with the groups I was--” Steve gnawed at his bottom lip, “--interacting with, but there was no direct action. I spent more time in Korea, when I was in that part of the world.”

Steve turned away, to watch the final pattering of rain against the windscreen, ending the conversation by dint of not looking at Danny.

Danny kind of understood that he wasn’t going to get even a jot more of information. Steve couldn’t have been more obvious if he had taken out his aids.

“Classified. Smashified,” Danny muttered as he twisted the key in the ignition and flicked on the wipers. He pulled out of the parking lot and onto the main road.

Steve was quiet, a thousand yard stare of absorption on his face. Danny wondered where he was, and decided a little distraction was in the cards.

“You going to direct me to Costco or do I have to guess? Jersey Boy, here!”

~*~

Chin caught Danny halfway up the foyer stairs on the way to retrieve his laptop.

“Can you give me a hand?” Chin asked, as he set a hand on the newel post at the bottom of the curving staircase.

“Yeah, sure. What’s up?”

“You’ve caught the weather forecast?”

“No.” Danny shook his head. He had hardly watched any television, apart from a few movies and cartoons, since arriving at Seolh. The radio in the kitchen on top of the freezer beside Steve’s basket
had never been switched on in Danny’s recollection.

“There’s a tropical storm warning.”

“Ah. Err?” Danny knew that a tropical storm was a storm in the tropics but little else. “Gonna be bad?”

Chin shrugged phlegmatically. “Could be. Probably not. But there’s a few things around the House that we need to do.”

“Okay. What?”

“You and I need to board up the conservatory windows. They’re old glass and delicate. MacDonald and his crew have come over and they’re securing the Hall.”

That sounded bad, given MacDonald was an emergency insurance responder.

Rain was hammering against the decorative circular window in the foyer ceiling.

“What about that?” Danny asked looking up.

“Reinforced. You can’t see from here, but there is actually a Plexiglas layer over the top of the old glass.”

Danny trotted down the stairs, ready to do what was needed.

“There are slickers in the mud room that we can use.” Chin led the way.

Steve was already in the mud room carefully pulling a rubber boot over his foot. He had doubly wrapped it.

“You can’t help, Babe,” Danny immediately said, “You’re wounded.”

Steve froze mid-pull and glared. “I’m going to check the generator. I can do that while limping.”

“Oh, I though you were gonna try and help with the boards.”

“I’m fully aware of my limitations,” Steve said tightly.

Danny winced.

“Here.” Chin thrust a yellow rain slicker at Danny. “The storm’s not due until six, but there’s a lot to do.”

From Danny’s experience with storms on the East Coast, he figured that that meant that all the local weather stations were reporting NOAA’s modelling of the approaching storm and providing estimates of its arrival on Oahu.

Danny pulled the slicker over his head. The rain was falling heavily and he knew that he would probably appreciate it the next few minutes, but right now it was a little like wearing a garbage can liner.

“Boots.” Steve pointed at a pair propped upside down on the drying rack.

This was going to be awesome. Danny could tell.
One blackened thumbnail later, Danny staggered back into the House. He was soaked to the bone and the slicker had only been useful for the first half hour or so.

He shrugged out of the yellow coat, holding it by his fingertips and letting it drip as he toed off his boots. His feet squelched. Chin squeezed in behind him, determined not to be outside any longer than necessary.

It had been a neat set up. Danny had vaguely expected to be using big MDF boards and lots of nails. But there had been latches in place on the window frame and wooden slots to fit the boards. Once he had put up one under Chin’s direction, they had found a rhythm and managed to board up the conservatory very quickly.

Danny had given zero thought to the decorative shutters around the house windows. It turned out that they weren’t decorative.

Danny hung the slicker on a hook, letting it drip freely. His underpants were riding up his ass and he pulled at the fabric through his slacks, trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable.

“What else?” Danny asked Chin.

“We’ll check with Toast and Kono and Steve.” Chin shook his head, spraying water. He hadn’t taken off his hooded coat. “Hopefully, one of them has gone up on the second floor balcony and closed the shutters up there.”

Danny decided against changing. He probably would not bother wearing the slicker again.

“What about Steve’s apartment?”

“Roll down. Operated from the inside.” Chin mimed a rotating action on an imaginary lever.

“Hey?” Steve poked his head into the drying room. ”Ooh, nasty.”

Danny stuck his bleeding thumb in his mouth. He was probably going to lose the nail. Board, latch, and slot had conspired against him.

“Has the second floor been shuttered?” Chin asked

Steve hobbled into the room without his crutches. He was wearing a wet suit along with his rubber boots. Part of Danny wanted to laugh, but he was probably warm, so Danny was just jealous.

“Yeah, Toast and I got them shut.”

“Storm lamps?”

“Kono brought them in before she took Mamo home.”

“Kono’s out in this?” Danny jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

“This is nothing, Brah,” Chin said dismissively.

Steve consulted his chunky waterproof watch. “ETA isn’t for another two hours. Kono will be back before eighteen hundred hours.”

“And to us mere mortals that is?”
“Six o’clock,” Steve said, deadpan

“Food? Water?” Danny asked, and then remembered the Zombie Apocalypse Siege Pantry. These guys were prepared.

“Mamo and Kavika’s guys shut up the workshops.” Steve informed them. “Before you dry off, can you check MacDonald’s work in the Hall? I figure some rain getting in is inevitable, but…?”

“Best check,” Chin said seriously. “I can do it. I’ll come and get you, Danny, if I need a hand.” Leaving little puddles of water, he headed off to inspect the Hall.

“Anything else need doing?” Danny asked.

Steve rubbed the knot between his eyebrows. He then held up his thumb, then forefinger, followed by middle finger, ring finger, obviously mentally counting.

“Where’s Toast?” Danny asked, the little imp of the perverse that rode on his shoulder just wanted to disrupt that counting.

“Backing up everything on his computers. He doesn’t trust the circuit breakers.”

“Circuit breakers?”

“You must have noticed that the House is on the top of a hill? There’s a lightning rod on the roof and it earths out the back. Circuit breakers were installed when the entire house was rewired in the early 1990s.”

“So we don’t need to unplug everything?”

“We usually unplug the computers and delicate electronics – that’s just sensible.”

“I guess we’re playing Monopoly tonight.”

“I like Trivial Pursuit,”

A draught screamed though the house like a banshee and a door slammed loudly – Danny jumped. The thud was flowed by the unmistakable shattering-crack of breaking glass.

~*~

# 27 #

“What was that? Where was it from?” Steve asked, looking around, unable to identify the source. But he was turning to the direction of the passage of the wind.

“Breaking glass. Front door.” Danny headed off in the direction of the sound. Steve limped at his heels.

It sounded like the main foyer. Steve eelied around Danny, determined to be in front. And Danny suddenly realised that it might have been a foreboding sound of another fire bomb attack.

Kono was wrestling with the front door. It had evidently got away from her in the growing winds and slammed in to the wall.

The long central plane of glass was shattered and the wooden floor was strewn with shards.
“Kono, are you okay?” Steve demanded.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Help me with the door.”

Steve stomped over the glass in his rubber boots and loaned his weight to force the off kilter door shut.

“Did you get cut?” Danny looked her and down. She was wearing a bright red slicker which practically covered her from head to toe.

“Nah, Brah. Luckily, I’m dressed as a traffic cone. It could have been nasty.” Glass cracked as it crunched beneath her feet.

Chin came sprinting out of the reception room corridor. “Everyone okay?” he demanded.

“We’re fine,” Steve said for them all

The floor was a mess and the door was no longer a door.

“We’ll have to board this up,” Steve said.

“I know where the stuff is.” Danny turned on his heel and almost fell over a large insulated box lying on its side on the floor. “What’s this?”

“Dinner,” Kono leaned over and picked it up. “Tradition when a storm’s coming.”

Danny luxuriated under the hot shower. Running around in the heavy rain hadn’t been too onerous compared to a full on storm in New Jersey in December, but he was still chilled. Danny wanted to get warm and dry before the tropical cyclone touched down at eighteen hundred hours (Steve could be kind of hilarious at times).

He rested his forehead on the tiles and let the stream of hot water work out some of the knots in his back. His thumb throbbed with every beat of his heart.

Seolh? Should he stay or should he go, he wondered. He felt like he had found a perfectly shaped niche for him to slip into, and even with the fire, the mystery hanging over their heads, and his fight with Rachel, it was damned comfortable.

An antagonistic, negative little voice yelled: it’s too good to be true.

“So what?” Danny asked the shower curtain and slashed at it with the blade of his flat hand for good measure. “Aren’t I’m allowed to be happy? As happy as I can be without Grace living with me.”

The shower curtain didn’t answer.

Danny grabbed his shampoo and lathered up.

The wind was full on howling as he picked his way downstairs. The lights were on throughout the house even though it was only a little after six.

He darted into the downstairs bathroom to get the larger first aid kit – he thought that kitchen kit was getting a little low after dealing with Steve’s foot a few times. Making a mental note to put supplies
on the shopping list, he came up short before the space on the bathroom shelving where the kit lived. He studied his sore thumb and contemplated.

“Steve?” he hollered. And, Jesus, would he ever learn?

“We’re in the television room,” Kono yelled back.

“Ask him where the bathroom first aid kit is?”

“We got it here,” Kono said clearly.

Danny darted into the corridor and crossed over the television room. “Why?” he demanded.

“We’re okay, Brah,” Kono said from her boneless loll on an arm chair. “Steve’s just checking his foot.”

Steve was twisted in a half-lotus, injured foot on the opposite thigh and sole turned upwards.

It made Danny’s knee hurt just looking at it.

The long line of stitches were black knots against the pale skin.

“Give.” Danny dropped beside him on the long sofa.

“I can see my foot.” Steve protested even as he uncurled.

Danny cupped his hands, accepting the foot. “Yeah, but you can hardly wrap it, twisted up like a pretzel.”

“Don’t tickle,” Steve said, narrowed eyed.

“I wouldn’t, Babe.” Danny couldn’t resist blowing on the sole.

Steve twitched and glared.

“You two!” Kono carolled.

“What?” they demanded simultaneously.

“If you don’t know, I’m not telling you.”

The wound was healing cleanly and was much improved from Saturday. There was a small spot where it had separated slightly, but the flesh was dry and there was no weeping.

“I think maybe a little dab of antibiotic ointment would be a good idea,” Danny only half suggested, because it wasn’t really open to discussion.

“I’m going to leave you two alone and see how Chin’s doing heating up the dinner. And find Toast.”

“Sure,” Danny said absently, as he pulled a tube of cream from the kit.

“Isn’t it a little early for dinner?” he asked as he dealt with Steve’s foot, holding his ankle lightly so he wouldn’t flinch away.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry.” Steve’s stomach growled and he startled, surprised. It gurgled again.
“Heh.” Danny grinned. “What did Kono get?”

“Indian food. It is a Kalakaua-Kelly tradition. I think it’s to save her Mom and Chin’s Mom when the entire family was battening down the hatches before a storm. Chin introduced us to the ‘Storm Takeout’ when he came to Seolh. Kono always used to stay at the House when a storm was forecast -- her place was likely to be blown away."

“Do you like Indian food?”

“As a treat. I wouldn’t want it every day.” He squinted suspiciously at Danny. “It’s a little rich for every day.”

Danny shrugged innocently. He had no plans to rush out and get Indian food everyday.

A rumble of thunder sounded over the lashing rain outside. The Rain Gods were determined to drown them. They hadn’t pulled the drapes since the shutters were closed, but through the slats, all that could be seen of the outside world was: pitch black nothingness.

“Is this unusual?” Danny asked.

“The rain?” Steve sort of waggled his fingers, letting his hand drift down illustrating falling rain.

“Yeah.”

Steve considered. “Nah, December’s often wet and stormy. It’s been atypically dry -- so time for a storm.”

Foot thoroughly creamed up, Danny carefully pressed a strip of gauze over the wound. The ointment kept the dressing in place as he tried to find the edge of the micropore tape. His bruised and bloody thumbnail made it difficult.

Steve clicked his fingers. “Give it to me.”

Danny tossed it over and took the opportunity to give his thumb a medicinal suck.

Steve found the edge in record time. Reaching into a voluminous pocket, he pulled out a switch knife. The flicked out blade was jet black.

“Geez!” Danny said around his thumb as he yanked it free.

Steve sliced off a strip of tape.

“What’s the point of that? You just wanted a sexy black blade? What else have you got on you? Have you got a gun? You do have a gun, don’t you?”

Steve regarded him levelly. “No, I do not have a gun on me.” He cocked a thumb and finger at Danny. He had stuck a strip of tape on his finger-barrel.

Danny whipped it off. “How come you don’t sign?”

Steve occupied himself cutting off another strip of tape. “Don’t you think that I’ve got enough on my plate without learning another language?”
It sounded a bit defeatist and unlike Steve, Danny thought.

“All you guys would have to learn as well,” Steve continued.

“We would.” Danny carefully smoothed the tape over the dressing. “Me, Chin, Kono, Mamo, Mrs K….. I’m pretty sure that Toast would probably develop some sort of app.”

“Any rate. I can hear, after a fashion,” Steve said pouting. He extended the knife with a second piece of tape.

“Yeah, but sometimes they’re a pain. Literally. You get feedback and shut them off.” He fixed the tape to the edge of the dressing. “I bet sometimes you just switch them off secretly with your remote because listening hard all the time is a pain.”

Steve didn’t confirm nor deny, he just passed the third strip of tape over. Danny applied it, picked up a roll of clean bandage and started to wind the length up and over and across Steve’s foot, wrapping it securely. Once mummified, he patted the top of the foot on his lap, fondly.

“Your turn, Danny,” Steve said, reaching out.

“What?”

“Thumb.” Steve captured Danny’s hand and enfolded it in his two larger ones.

~*~

“You’ve got to feel sorry for the guys in the truck watching the house,” Danny said around a mouthful of fragrant pilau rice.

“Nah, they’ll be warm and dry,” Toast said. ”Have you seen that truck? It’s a man cave. There’s a stove, beer fridge and bedding.” He was obviously enamoured.

Danny ladled some butter coloured sauce over his multi-coloured rice and grabbed a torn corner from the large nan bread. Delicious, he thought.

“Guys,” Kono said rolling her eyes. “They’re in the kitchen. You could hardly expect them to hang out in the van in this.”

She pointed at the ceiling, drawing their attention to the gale pummelling the house. The low droning burr of the wind was constant.

“They could hardly watch the House from the van,” Steve explained. “Visibility is less than ten feet.”

“Why didn’t they join us?” Danny waved his fork at the veritable banquet on the table. There were cartons of pilau rice; two different types of bread, nan and oily paratha; sides of vegetable, and lentil dishes; a selection of main courses, none of which Danny recognised. The scents on the air were heady and drool inducing.

“We offered.” Chin said. “They politely declined.”

Steve paused, a scoop of rice balanced on a piece of nan bread, and nodded.

“Fair enough,” Danny said, a little weirded out at the thought of bodyguards and bodyguards that refused to engage.
“I spoke to Blue. He said that he was here to keep an eye open and not fill his over large stomach with delicious smelling food and them fall asleep in a carbohydrate food coma,” Chin expanded.

“And talking about delicious, try this,” Kono held out a tray of bright red coloured sauce and what Danny hoped were chunks of chicken.

“Hot?” Danny asked, eying the volcanic red colour.

Kono nodded happily. “Best vindaloo on the Island.”

Danny spooned a dollop on his rice.

“You trying it, Steve?”

“Nope,” Steve said easily.

“Is it too spicy for you?” Toast made kissy-lips as he helped himself to a generous portion.

“I have nothing to prove,” Steve said laconically, looking down his long fine nose at the post-grad student.

Kind of forewarned, Danny took a tiny lick off the edge of his spoon. It took a second for the hit, but his lips tingled and his tongue shied away from the intrusion.

Kono laughed richly.

Toast was flushed red, perspiration dotting his brow. He kept a straight face, gamely. Sitting crossed legged by the low coffee table, he skooshed closer, to investigate a green spinach-looking dish.

“Hot,” Danny forced his voice level.

“Yeah, kind of.” Kono agreed, pouring more onto her plate and handing it off to Chin unasked.

Danny fished through his dollop and speared the single chunk of chicken. The taste was growing on him as his mouth numbed.

The chicken smoothed the bite of the chillies. Danny would have snuck into the kitchen and got some of Steve’s bio-active natural yoghurt if, firstly, he could be bothered, and, secondly, he wanted to weather the inevitable ribbing. Sweat beaded on his upper lip.

Content, Steve was making decent inroads into his rice.

“Is there anything that’s milder?” Danny addressed the question at Chin; he didn’t trust Kono. Danny stuffed a piece of nan bread in his mouth, hoping to control the fire.

Without hesitation, Chin selected a pale, golden dish and held it towards Danny. “Shrimp korma.”

Steve intercepted it, scooped out a portion of sauce and plump shrimps onto his plate and passed it onto Danny. Danny dumped a mound on top of the volcano.

“You want?” He held it out to Toast whose face had turned the same colour as the vindaloo.

“No,” Toast squeaked, and helped himself to another mouthful, albeit tiny, of the hot curry dish. He had added the green thing to his plate. It made a violent and interesting contrast.

“What is that?” Danny asked.
Across from Toast, Steve answered, since the student’s mouth was full. “Saag aloo. Spinach and potatoes. It’s good.” He leaned over and helped himself to a generous spoonful.

Danny didn’t hate spinach, but it wasn’t close to the top of things that he liked.

“This is amazing,” Danny said enjoying his melange of the creamy thing and the vindaloo much more. “This is your Mom’s tradition? Doesn’t she cook?”

“No. No. “ Kono laughed. “She will be preparing Korean for tomorrow night. We should invite ourselves.”

“We always used to do this,” Chin said introspективy. “A storm treat. After you’d spent all day preparing for a storm, the last thing my mom and Auntie wanted to do was cook. So takeout. When I came to Seolh, Audrey introduced me to Indian Cuisine. So the tradition came to Seolh.”

“Sometimes it just has to be raining.” Steve said, smiling. “Pass the Kashmiri Aloo Chaat over, please,” he asked, looking at Kono.

Kono scanned the takeout boxes by her knee and selected a dish with, to Danny, a mound of lumpy things, over to Steve.

“Is that spicy?” Danny asked.

“Mild to medium. It’s garbanzo beans with potatoes and onions.”

“Sounds healthy.”

Steve angled the dish capturing the light of the lamps dotted around the room, the dish glistened.

“Healthier than the butter chicken,” he said diplomatically.

Danny’s lips had gone numb as he ferried another spoonful of spiciness in. It was damn tasty.

Kono grinned at him, heavy eyed.

“So are we going to play Triv or watch a movie?” Toast asked.

“Movie then Triv?” Chin proposed.

“How likely is the power to go out?” Danny asked.

Steve looked heavenwards, calculating. “Better than eighty percent. We have a generator,” he finished, supremely unconcerned.

Toast flopped onto his back and snagged the remotes balanced on top of the DVD player and fired both television and player up.

“What do we want to watch?” Kono asked. “Chin?”

“Horror? I have the subtitled Japanese version of The Ring. Perfect for a storm.”

“Is that the one with the television and --” Danny crept his fingers like a creepy giant spider across the top of the coffee table around the takeout cartons.

Chin nodded. Chin was a horror fan – who knew?
“No!” Kono and Danny chimed simultaneously.

“Something silly with lots of comic book action,” Steve threw into the mix.

Toast rolled over onto his stomach, propped himself on his elbows, and viewed their collection.

“Thor?” he proposed.

“The guy with the hammer?” Danny checked.

“Oh, you’ll like it.” Toast grabbed a hard drive on the bottom of the shelving. “The set designs are awesome. Seriously awesome. If the Oscar people weren’t snobs it would win awards.”

No one protested so Toast continued setting up the film -- hooking hard drive to the DVD, daisy chaining it to the television.

~*~

Danny picked desultorily at his food as he watched the improbable action unfold on the television. Toast was right; Asgard was amazing. The ridiculousness of the storyline left something to be desired. He sniggered as Loki sat next to Thor and basically double dared him to invade Jötunheimr.

Danny’s lips were still numb and his thumb was no longer throbbing. He drifted to the side, head propped up against the wing of the armchair.

Actually, he felt weird, sort of divorced from his body. He tried to lift his hand and failed. He managed to huff out a squeak instead of asking everyone what was up. The dirty plate on his lap slipped to the side.

Kono sagged bonelessly on the sofa, falling against Chin’s legs. Her neck was twisted and in no way did it look comfortable.

Danny could see in his peripheral vision that Toast was lying face down on the rug instead of propped on his elbows watching the movie.

“Kono?” Steve asked, pushing off his sofa. “Are you okay?”

Danny managed another squeak. Steve didn’t hear him.

“Chin?” Steve knelt before the cousins. He shook Chin’s knee as he set the pads of his fingertips against Kono’s throat.

Whatever he felt galvanised him. Ridiculously easily, he had Kono off the sofa and rearranged on the floor in the recovery position quickly and professionally, next to Toast.

Steve spun on his heel, checking Toast and Danny in one glance. He shifted Toast slightly on his side bending his right leg at the knee.

Danny felt like his eyes had dropped to half mast.

“Danny? You with me?” In a blink, Steve was filling his line of sight. He rested a warm hand against Danny’s neck. “Danny?”

Danny huffed out a breath. There was a dull pop-popping in somewhere in the distance, and Danny didn’t know if he’d dreamt it or if it was real. Thor continued on the television, ignored. He was curiously detached from reality.
“Danny, blink if you’re aware?” Even as his eyes were fixed on Danny’s face, Steve fished out his cell phone from one of his many pockets.

Danny tried and failed.

One handed, Steve thumbed the buttons on his phone. With his other fingers, he ruthlessly nipped Danny’s earlobe. The low rumbling groan Danny managed earned him a slight smile.

“This is McGarrett--” Steve began, focussed on the phone resting on his palm.

“Put the phone down, Commander,” an Irish tinged voice growled.

Steve span on his heel, concerned expression segueing into horrified.

“Hesse!”

~*~

# 28 #

“Put the phone down, McGarrett. Now or I’ll shoot the girl.”

Danny tried and failed once more to move his head. His scope was limited to straight ahead and his peripheral vision, but it was a little wavery, as if he was looking through tears. He couldn’t feel any wetness on his cheeks.

Steve lifted his hands high, showing that they were cell phone free. He had to have dropped it close to, or even on, Danny’s lap.

“What are you doing here, Hesse?” Steve demanded.

“I see you don’t like vindaloo. Ah, that’s a pity. Complicates things,” the voice continued. He had yet to step close enough to Danny. “Or maybe it makes it easier, more fun?”

Steve rose smoothly to his feet, loose and easy.

“You don’t need to stand on my account. I prefer you on your knees.”

“Why the Hell did you send Sang Min to burn down my house?” Steve said loudly.

“I didn’t. “ A scrawny man swaggered towards Steve. He held a gun, the sort that Danny had seen mobsters on TV wield -- overly large and pretentious. “That was Sang Min being an idiot. Something that he’s good at.”

“What do you want?” Steve demanded.

“I want you on your knees, while my team finds something.”

Steve remained standing.

The gun drifted in Kono’s direction. Steve shifted infinitesimally, it was more of a relaxation. Unerringly, the gun came back to him.

“You try anything and Anton will shoot the girl.”

Shit, there were two of them, Danny realised. Steve moved to the side, in between Kono and the
threat.

“Danny Williams, then.” Hesse moved from profile to face Danny directly. Rain had plastered his dark hair against his skull and with his chiselled jaw line and hollowed cheeks, he looked macabre. There was not one ounce of humanity in his face.

“What have you done to my team?” Steve demanded, un-cowed.

“My team?” Hesse mocked swinging back around to Steve. “Aw diddums. Steve, you’re not a SEAL anymore. You can’t have a team. There aren’t any deaf SEALS, hasn’t anyone told you? Oh, but you couldn’t hear them, could you?”

Steve pursed his lips, a hairsbreadth from attacking.

“Kneel!” Hesse shouted. “Or I shoot your team.”

Steve knelt.

“Hands behind your head. Interlace your fingers,” Hesse ordered.

Glacially slow, Steve weaved his fingers together and then placed them behind his head. An irreverent drugged portion of Danny’s mind thought: that would be a good photograph. The fire in Steve’s eyes promised death.

“What have you drugged my team with?” he demanded.

“You don’t expect me to answer that question, do you?” Hesse slowly shook his head, mock-disappointed. “Can’t you guess?”


“Found it.” A young woman, bright eyed and pixyish, ran into the room. She stopped dead on seeing the tableau. “Oh, I thought that you said that they all would be asleep!”

Hesse shrugged, unconcerned.

“Why,” Steve asked, “do you have Danny’s camera?”

She startled, clutching the Canon to her breast. “No reason,” she lied, incredibly badly.

“And?” Hesse said an edge of anger threading through his words.

“It was the only camera. I checked the card.” She held it up between her thumb and forefinger. “I wiped the hard drive of his computer. Peter is running my electromagnet over Mr. Charles’ computers. But I found no evidence of any photographs being uploaded from any of Mr. Charles’ accounts. Mr. Williams doesn’t seem to use his computer.”

“Shut up,” Hesse ordered.

“Sorry,” she mouthed. But apparently couldn’t help herself, and said, “I don’t think he’s very computer savvy.”

Hesse glared and she scrunched down, intimidated. Hesse’s attention oozed back to the kneeling Steve, who met his scrutiny blandly.

“Leave,” Hesse said, his back to her.
“So,” Hesse began conversationally, “deaf, eh? How’s that going for you?”

Steve did not answer.

“I had thought about kneecapping you, but watching you over the last couple of days, fumbling your way around, it seems like overkill. The panic attack was hilarious.”

“Sociopaths often have a strange sense of humour,” Steve observed flatly.

Hesse showed his teeth. “Take out your hearing aids.”

Danny was fairly sure that he had managed to scrunch his face into a ‘what the fuck?’ expression, but Steve didn’t react an iota.

“Do I have to threaten young Kono again?”

Steve freed his fingers and pinched both aids out of his ears at the same time.

“The geek hacked your records. I know that you’re really fucked now,” Hesse said with a laugh. “Drop them on the floor.”

Holding both hands just before him, Steve released them simultaneously. They fell on the hardwood floor and bounced once before slithering to a stop.

“Heh.” Hesse carefully set his booted foot over the closest one and then crushed it. “Ah ah ah!” He jerked his gun in Steve’s face.

With great deliberation, he made another step forward and flattened the second into a mess of plastic and tiny electronics.

As Hesse smirked, Steve reacted. He came up like a rocket, pushing Hesse’s gun and letting it discharge harmlessly in the ceiling. Twisting sinuously around Hesse, he tripped him, and thrust him out of Danny’s line of sight, no doubt into the unseen Anton.

There was a huff and thud and an improbably horrible sounding wet snap and a muffled scream. The gun fired again. Danny tried and failed to move.

“Bastard!” a third voice, Anton, swore.

Steve grunted, the loudest sound, as a series of fleshy thumps following smacking kicks described a vicious fight. Danny would have given up his last supper to have the ability to turn his head.

Hesse swore viciously and there was an almighty crash. Steve came flying back into Danny’s line of sight. He tumbled, limbs flailing, backwards straight over the coffee table. Completely off balance, he came down hard -- the back of his head smacked down with a cracking thump against the hardwood floor.

Sprawled, twisted in a knot, he didn’t get back up.

“What a shit,” Anton said, pained, far off to the side. “I thought that you said he was fucked?”

“He is now.” Hesse strode over. He leaned over Steve, grabbing him by his shirt front, yanking. Steve hung, unconscious, head hanging back, his throat bared. Hesse set the barrel of his gun against Steve’s temple. “I ought to kill you dead.”
“No!” the woman spoke up from somewhere Danny couldn’t see. “The police scanner. The police are coming. We have to leave. You know that you’re not supposed to kill anyone. Even thou—”

Hesse glared over his shoulder. “How the fuck do they know what’s going down?”

“I don’t know,” she blurted.

He released Steve, letting him fall back with a thud. And suddenly he was in Danny’s space. Momentarily, Danny was glad that he couldn’t move, as Hesse rooted around by his thigh. Hesse held up Steve’s cell phone and then, violently, hurled it at the wall.


They were gone. Danny tried and failed again to move. Tears of frustration marred his vision. What the fuck had they done to them? Poisoned the vindaloo with something – a neurotoxin? What the fuck was a neurotoxin? Tetris-something?

Danny growled deep and low, but it just sounded like a dying ox. The bodyguards, what had happened to the bodyguards? They hadn’t eaten the vindaloo. His breath sounded harsh and laboured to his own ears. He felt like shit, vaguely nauseous and short of breath, and he had only eaten a couple of mouthfuls. The others had eaten much more.

Chin was sitting on the sofa opposite Danny, mirroring his posture: head to the side and hands lying on his lap. His eyes were closed and lips slightly parted. He could only see Toast’s back. Danny thought that he could see his back moving a fraction – breathing. Kono was obscured from view by Steve’s body. Steve had been worried about her; he’d moved her into the recovery position with alacrity. Steve lay where Hesse had dropped him, expression lax in unconsciousness. It wasn’t a good sign, when unconsciousness lasted longer than a few seconds, Danny knew.

There was a crash from somewhere in the House and Danny heard someone yell: police.

Thank God, Danny breathed.

There was more crashing and heavy footsteps. They seemed to be taking an age to come through the House.

Hurry up, hurry up, Danny groaned. It sounded like a deformed whine to his ears.

“I’ve got victims. Four adults,” an unseen woman reported, “in the sitting room off the main corridor.”

A SWAT officer slid into the room. She and her partner scoped out the boundary of the room, checking behind the sofa pulled away from the wall, before moving onto the victims. Danny looked into warm, brown, concerned eyes, as she knelt on one knee before him. There was the sound of more running feet, like an army was running through the House.

“Sir?”

Mentally, Danny yelled at her to check Steve and Kono first. But she couldn’t hear him. Her partner briefly checked Toast, Steve, Kono -- he paused, evidently struggling to find a pulse -- and then Chin.

The other officer thumbed a radio velcroed to his flack-jacket. “Confirm: four victims. Alive. I need paramedics, now.”
Danny’s SWAT officer rested a cool, wet hand on his cheek. He could sort of feel it.

“I think that they’ve been drugged?” she proposed tentatively.

Danny grunted in agreement. She swung back around to him.

“Nnnnn.” Danny would have ground his teeth in frustration if he could have.

The SWAT guy cocked his head to the side listening to his radio “We’ve got gunshot victims in the kitchen.”

“What went down here?”

“I dunno, Missy.” SWAT guy listened carefully to his radio. “House is clear. Paramedics coming in.”

Finally, finally, finally, Danny thought.

“Clear the way. Clear the way.” The two paramedics, which Danny had met during the arson attack, jogged into the television room.

“Can you tell me what’s happened?” Lori -- Max’s supervisor, Danny remembered -- asked, as she lugged a heavy box, setting it between Steve and Toast’s legs.

“I think that they’ve been drugged,” Danny’s SWAT officer said.

“Nnnnn,” Danny struggled to say ‘neurotoxin.’

“Check the young lady first,” the SWAT guy said. “I can barely feel her pulse.”

“Right.” Lori stepped over Steve to Kono’s side. “Max, confirm with dispatch that we need at a minimum three other buses. How many in the kitchen?”

“Three. One dead. Bled out.”

“Max, tell dispatch that we have six victims. Two gunshot -- currently unassessed. Four others – status unknown.” She bowed over Kono, her wet hair dripping in stringy rat-tails. “Max, after you’ve checked with dispatch, go to the kitchen. You.”

SWAT guy pointed at his own chest.


Phlegmatically, the older man headed out in the direction of the kitchen.

“You,” Lori addressed Danny’s SWAT officer. “Missy?”

“Melissa.” She flashed white teeth at the paramedic. “Only Dick calls me Missy.”

“Melissa, help me get this young woman onto her back.”

Melissa stepped over Steve and crouched to help Lori efficiently tip Kono onto her back. Danny wanted to avert his eyes as Lori bared Kono’s chest and, using a stethoscope, listened to her heart and lungs. Pulling the prongs from her ears, she settled back on her heels.

“Melissa, have you used a BV mask before?” Lori reached over to her equipment bag and pulled out
a transparent mask with a bulbous red blob attached to it.

Melissa nodded.

“I need you to bag Kono,” Lori demonstrated, pressing the mask to Kono’s face and squeezing the plastic bulb. “Once every five seconds.”

“Got it.” Melissa set herself by Kono’s head and began counting under her breath.

On her knees, Lori crossed the short distance to Steve’s side. “Sir?” she patted his face. Setting the stethoscope in position, she slid the bell under Steve’s t-shirt and listened. An edge of confusion crossed her face. She dispensed with the scope and leaned over Steve to gently lift an eyelid and flash a penlight over the pupil. He groaned.

“Mr. McGarrett? Can you hear me?” she asked, flashing a light in his other eye.

He’s deaf! Danny yelled without saying a word.

“Mustapha and Reynolds have just pulled up.” Max came back into the television room. “I directed them to the kitchen.”

“Check the patient on the rug,” Lori directed. Vigilantly, she palpitated Steve’s skull, moving slowly down from his crown, over his temples and around. She paused at the back of his head evidently feeling something.

“Max, can you leave your patient?” Lori asked.

“Yes,” Max said succinctly, already moving around. “Respiration low but even.”

“Stabilise his head and neck. I need to get a neck brace on him. He has a wound on the back of his head. His symptoms are head trauma related, not drugs.”

Max bracketed Steve’s head between his knees, as Lori pulled a brace from her TARDIS equipment bag.

“Hey, Lori.” Another bunch of paramedics entered the fray.

“Thank god,” Lori said. “Get your asses in here.”

“What we got?” The older, a salt-and-pepper beard lending him authority, medic led his younger, equipment laden, partner into the room.

“As a guess: drug overdose, but not a type I’m familiar with.” She pointed at Kono. “Patient One is in severe respiratory distress – bag her and transport her out of here, asap.”

Melissa patiently squeezing Kono’s ambu bag nodded fervently. The two new paramedics immediately stepped over Steve.

Danny managed to hee out a note of pure distress.

Lori, her hands full stabilising Steve, glanced at him. “As soon as we have his neck brace on, Max, check that guy. And Ben, no one has assessed either of the guys propped on the sofas.”

“Cluster fuck,” Ben said succinctly, scratching at his bearded chin. “Evie and Charles are on their way, they should be here soon.”
“Mustapha and Reynolds are with two gunshot vics in the kitchen.” Lori returned her attention back to Steve, carefully fitting the brace around Steve’s neck with Max’s help. “Go.”

“What?” Max asked, and on the tail end of the question realised what she meant. He shuffled on his knees to Danny’s side

“Hello, Mr. Williams. Danny.” Quickly, Max pulled off his glasses and buffed rain smears away using the edge of his t-shirt. Setting his glasses back on his nose, he squinted directly at Danny.

“Nnnnnnn,” Danny managed.

“If you understand what I’m saying,” Max said, even as he lifted the prongs of his own stethoscope to his ears, “make that sound again.”

“Nnnn!”

Max cocked his head to the side. “Are you experiencing paralysis?” he asked, as he unbuttoned Danny’s shirt. “Excuse me.”

“Ssss,” Danny said emphatically and sibilantly.

Briskly, Max listened to Danny’s chest. Resting back on his heels, Max unfurled a small oxygen cylinder with a nasal cannula from the equipment bag lying just behind him. Deftly, he looped the tubing around Danny’s head and positioned the nose piece. Cold rushed up Danny’s nose.

“Nuuuu,” Danny exulted in the vowel.

“Are you attempting to tell me something specific?” Max asked.

Danny tried to widen his tearing eyes but he only managed to clear his vision slightly as tears probably rolled away down his cheeks.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Does it relate to your housemates’ condition? Something beginning with N? Nu?”

Danny grunted. He was exhausted, breathing was terribly hard, and his head was throbbing.

“Neurotoxin,” Max said definitely.

“Sssssss.” Danny would have sagged in relief, if he wasn’t a bag of disconnected joints and muscles.

“Would you happen to know which one?” Max asked patiently, as he palpitated Danny’s torso with glove covered hands.

There was more than one, Danny despaired. He couldn’t get his tongue involved with the ‘t’ sound.

“It is okay, Mr. Williams. That is still helpful.” Max turned to his supervisor. “Lori, Danny has indicated to me that his friends have been drugged with a neurotoxin. I’m afraid I don’t know which type. But definitely a paralytic agent which affects muscle cell contraction leading to difficulties in breathing, but doesn’t appear to impinge on cardiac tissue function. Additionally, Mr. Williams is conscious.”

“Right,” Lori said, evidently thinking hard.


“Excellent,” Ben stopped the speculation dead. “Focus. Let’s get our patients out of here.”

Message delivered, Danny relaxed into the exhaustion which had been clawing at him since Steve had screamed: Hesse!

～*～

# 29 #

“Mr. Williams, I understand that this is very distressing…”

Following the voice, Danny clawed his way back to the waking world. The ceiling lights above his head were bright and harsh. He couldn’t move his head.

The voice continued speaking to him. Evidently there had been a conversation going on for some time, which he had missed. Danny guessed that he was now in an emergency room somewhere in Honolulu. He had slept through being taken to the hospital.

“I’m deaf, you idiot. Yelling doesn’t help.” There was the sound of retching followed by a gushing splat.

Danny breathed a sigh of relief: Steve, somewhere close by, and judging by the volume, he was okay.

“I appreciate--” Steve coughed and spat, “--that the ER is busy, and you’re obviously a new intern. But can someone who is listening to me yell at this idiot -- someone who isn’t a functional moron -- confirm that they understand what I’m trying to tell you. I do not need to relax.”

“Now, Mr. McGarrett,” a French accented voice began somewhat patronisingly.

“They’ve been poisoned with a Tetrodotoxin-derivative,” Steve hollered loud enough to be heard on the Mainland. “It’s an artificial derivative, not extracted Tetrodotoxin. You need to manage the victims’ airways. There are complications with hypotension with this neurotoxin – you need to use alpha adrenergic agonists. Do not use -- fuck off!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Williams,” the doctor, leaning over Danny checking his eyes, spoke, “I need to talk to that guy. Firstly though, Chen, put Mr. Williams on BiPAP -- inspiratory pressure to 30cm H\textsubscript{2}O and PEEP to 12cm H\textsubscript{2}O. Get the leads in place.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Chen said.

The plastic mask over Danny’s mouth and nose was pulled away and quickly replaced with something bigger with a multitude of straps.

Curtains swished back and forth.

“Halleluiah,” Steve said. “Shit, I don’t sign. Look my name is Lieutenant Commander Steven McGarrett, US Navy. I’m familiar with the toxin which was administered to my friends. It’s favoured by a terrorist called Victor Hesse. It’s related to Tetrodotoxin, but do not administer Anticholinesterase agents, they’re contraindicated. You need to use alpha adrenergic agonists to prevent complications with hypotension. Aggressively support their airways. The toxin is metabolised relatively easily, within four to eight hours. Do you understand what I am saying? Nod!”
Evidently Danny’s doctor nodded, because Steve continued, still loud enough for everyone to hear.

“You need to call USAMRIID at Fort Detrick on the Mainland. Ask for—” Steve clicked his fingers loudly, “—Dr. Bruno Roux Jr.”

“Thank you, Commander. Now will you please lie back, so my intern can help you? You’re bleeding.”

“What?” Steve said, volume unabated. “Go help my friends. I need access to someone who isn’t that idiot. I need them to call Commander Joe White, at Pearl Harbour- Hickam. There’s a terrorist cell on the Island. Move, people.”

Danny didn’t think that he could like Steve more, but the dude was amazing. Who knew -- the way that he was yelling at and ordering people about, he could give Danny a run for his money.


Danny let himself zone, as the doctor explained loudly that, yes, they would contact Pearl, and, also, that Steve would allow himself to be treated. She then yelled for a note pad and pen.

Danny let his eyes drift shut, he was purely exhausted.

~*~

Various indignities had been visited on his person. Danny was kind of relieved that the numbness meant that he had not felt the catheter, and wasn’t that just a creepy, creepy thing to do to a man. He lay on a probably very comfortable bed -- he couldn’t really tell, he was still semi-paralysed -- looking at a dull and uninteresting ceiling.

Dr. Pam Alcide has told him everything that she was doing, and Danny didn’t have a clue what she meant. All he knew was that he had been poked and prodded and, according to someone who was named after a white sauce, he would be feeling better in a couple of more hours. Sensation was returning but it was dull and distant.

The mask strapped to his face pushed air up his nose, up his mouth and, improbably, out his ears.

He kept trying to ask about his friends, but he couldn’t enunciate.

“Danny?” A familiar -- beloved voice -- whispered.

Steve, Danny whispered back, if only in his own head.

“I’m sorry. I can’t hear you. Hesse destroyed my aids, the bastard. Your doctor says you’re doing well.” Steve heaved out a breath. “Kono ate so much, she’s so thin – there’s nothing to her, she’s just skin and bones. She’s in ICU. But it’s looking good, I promise. I really mean that, I do. They’ve got her hooked up to all this equipment that’s breathing for her. But Roux told the doctors here how to treat pseudo SE-Tetrodotoxin poisoning. It’s a weird kind of thing. It breaks down quickly in your body. Hesse is such a bastard.”

Steve was rambling.

Steve didn’t ramble.

“Chin’s doing fine. He’s fit, you wouldn’t know it, but he works out. The docs say, if you’re
physically fit it leads more efficient oxygen usage. That helps Kono too.”

Rambling -- Danny was officially worried. Surely, Steve had also been admitted to the hospital. There had been hard thumps and bleeding.

“Toast’s okay. Yeah, I know, hardly fit. But he didn’t eat that much. They figure like you, he’ll be feeling better in a couple of hours. You got a low dose.” Danny felt a hard head thud against his bicep. “I’m just going to rest here a minute. My Commanding Officer, Joe White, is on his way here. I wish I knew why Hesse wanted your camera.”

His breath sounded harsh, in through his nose and out his mouth, gustily.

“I’m sorry that I said that you’d be safe at Seolh, Danny,” he whispered. He went silent on the edge of the apology, and stayed silent, until Danny thought that he had fallen asleep.

“Right, okay,” Steve said, abruptly. The weight on his arm lifted. “Joe should be here now. I’ll go find him.”

Get back here! Danny screamed inwardly. What idiot was letting him walk around?

The monitor somewhere above his head beeped loudly in protest.

Steve, of course, didn’t react.

Oh, for fuck’s sake! Danny swore.

The alarms went off and a horde of medical personnel descended.

The fuckers sedated him.

~*~

Danny shifted, snuggling down further into the crinkly pillow. His brain decided to remind him just what had had happened in the last twenty fours hours in one fell swoop. And Danny jerked upright, and then groaned as every muscle in his body pointed out that they hated him.

“Ow!” Danny whined, melodramatically, curling around his sore abdomen. His head was throbbing. He pulled the plastic thing stuck up his nose away and cast it aside. There was distinct jab down in his cock and Danny froze. The catheter made its presence known. Gingerly, Danny lay back, and took stock.

Hospital, cruel and unusual punishment – check.

It was dark, but Danny didn’t know if it was early or if the storm still raged. Sitting in the light of a single lamp, a leathery-tanned bald guy wearing a dress uniform of some sort -- Danny wasn’t up on Army and Navy uniforms -- watched him neutrally.

“Who are you?” Danny demanded. The man was ensconced on a padded chair between Danny’s bed and -- “Steve!”

Steve slept on undisturbed, cocooned in warm blankets in the other bed. Danny’s head throbbed with each beat of his heart.

“Commander Joe White,” the stranger said. He uncrossed his legs and set down his paperback on the edge of Steve’s mattress. Scooting forwards on the chair, he asked, “How are you feeling?”
“Like shit.” Danny knuckled his forehead with the hand which didn’t have a needle and a tube stuck in the back of it. “How’s Kono? Chin? Toast? Steve for the matter?”

“Mr. Kelly and Mr. Charles are in the adjacent suite, sleeping off the effects of SA-Tetrodotoxin. Ms. Kalakaua has been moved out of ICU and is now in Critical Care, but her doctor expects that she’ll be moving down to General Neurology by the end of the day.”

A heartfelt sigh of relief blew over Danny’s lips.

“Commander McGarrett,” White continued, “has a minor concussion and will be under observation like yourself and your friends for another twenty four to forty eight hours.”

“And you are?” Danny shifted his attention from the sleeping Steve to White. “Yeah, yeah, I know you’re a Navy person, but Steve was pretty insistent about getting in touch with you.”

“What do you know about Hesse?” White did not answer the question.

“He’s a sociopathic fuckwit,” Danny said pithily.

“You’ve met him previously?” White said neutrally.

Danny glowered at the man. He had a headache but he wasn’t stupid.

“No! No, I have not met him before. Not until he poisoned me and then broke in Seolh and came this close—” Danny held his thumb and index finger a fraction of an inch apart, there was some sort of white peg on his middle finger which made it difficult, “—to killing us all with some kind of neuro-thingy.”

“SA-Tetrodotoxin.”

“Whatever. Steve didn’t have any of the vindaloo -- I’m never having Indian food again -- so Hesse had to threaten him with Kono’s life. People who are well wrapped upstairs generally do not threaten other people with guns as long as my forearm!” Danny’s voice got louder and more strident.

“Why did Hesse want your camera?” White asked placidly.

“I have no idea.” Danny huddled back on his mound of pillows and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars. “No idea.”

He genuinely didn’t have a clue.

“Have you backed up your photos?”

Danny lifted one hand a fraction and considered the man before him, under the shading veil of his palm.

“No, I never got around to it. The squirrelly woman was right. Computers aren’t my thing.”

“This is the computer geek that Commander McGarrett told me about?”

Danny was going to go for a succinct answer, but succinct really wasn’t in his nature.

“Yeah, she didn’t seem to fit at all. She was scared of Hesse.”

“What sort of accent did she have? Steve couldn’t tell me.”
“Uhm, American.” Danny wracked his sore head. “Don’t you guys dust for prints? I’m assuming you’re special ops of some sort. She wasn’t wearing any gloves.”

“You noticed that?”

“She was touching my camera!” Danny said indignantly.

White braced his elbows on his knees and rested his mouth against his clasped hands, contemplating.

Danny let him get on with it. He wanted Aleve and strong coffee. He glanced sideways at Steve, who had rolled over, presenting his back to Danny. Scrunchd down under a beige blanket, only the back of his head, complete with a white rectangular dressing, was visible.

“You have no idea why they wanted your camera?” White asked again.

Shit, another person thinking that he was a bad guy, and this time in collusion with terrorists. He was probably going to be shipped off to Guantanamo Bay.

“Honestly,” Danny said seriously, “I have no idea.”

~*~

Steve slept on, buried under the blankets until not even the top of his head was visible. During the six am check, the poor nurse who had attempted to judge his level of consciousness had just escaped a broken wrist or worse, when she had tried to wake him. Joe White had moved blindingly fast, grabbing Steve in a quick restraining hold. Danny guessed that the staff were now drawing lots to figure out who checked Steve at eight o’clock.

White had taken himself off sometime after the altercation to talk to people.

He had assigned two guards outside their room before leaving. The two men weren’t police, but they held themselves tall and proud, and exuded professionalism. SEALs. Danny kind of guessed that it was their presence, and White’s previously, that allowed Steve to sleep the sleep of the just.

There was a clatter down the hall and Danny definitely smelled coffee. And then the two guards didn’t allow the pair pushing a heavy trolley with his breakfast, and more importantly, coffee to enter.

“Oh, for the love of God,” Danny beseeched, hands outstretched to the Navy People preventing the delivery of breakfast. “Coffee, please!”

Tall, beefy and pale, glanced at his smaller, lither and darker partner for guidance, who shook his head.

“You can’t not feed us,” Danny protested.

“You’ll be fed, Mr. Williams,” the obviously senior officer spoke

“When?” Danny asked, because he was a pragmatic man. “And why not now?”

The two hospital staff had evidently grown bored with the discussion and were manouevring the chest high trolley away.

“You were poisoned, Mr. Williams. You’ll get food that we’ve vetted.”

Danny’s thoughts went a hundred different places at once. He thudded back on his pillows and
pulled his blankets up high. What had his world come to?

~*~

“Good Morning, Mr. Williams.”

The ‘Mr. Williams’ thing was getting pretty old. But he could smell coffee so he cracked open an eye.

“Dr. Magnus.” Danny pushed up on his elbows, but had what really caught his attention was the large paper bag that the doctor held and the two coffee cups situated in a cardboard holder emblazoned with Kala House Coffee.

Steve’s doctor was a medical professional bearing gifts.

Danny made grabby hands.

“Well, I see you’re feeling better,” Magnus said, placing the bag and coffees on the table beside Danny’s bed. “Sorry to disappoint you, but it is decaf.”

Danny sagged. That was a low blow to a man that was already down. He rooted in the bag, pulling out familiar looking food: hot sandwiches. The scrawling writing on the paper wrappers identified an egg and a bacon sandwich. He selected the bacon, leaving the egg for Sleeping Beauty.

Dr. Magnus lightly placed his hand on Steve’s ankle and squeezed. The form under the blankets stiffened, flipped over, and a riotous bedhead emerged. Steve was cruelly and easily awake between one beat and the next – that wasn’t human in Danny’s considered opinion.

“Good morning, Commander,” Magnus said.

Or perhaps not, since it took a moment for Steve to respond.

“Hi, Dr. Magnus. Nice to see you again,” he said, a little too precisely.

“How are you feeling?” Magnus said, enunciating clearly, as he moved into Steve’s personal space. Slowly, he picked up Steve’s wrist, checking his pulse.

Danny concentrated on his bacon sandwich and decaf coffee and pretended not to watch as Magnus smoothly checked Steve over: looking in his pupils; gauging his reflexes (fast, in Danny’s considered opinion); cognitive function (it was early for math questions), and pronouncing him okay.

Equally, Steve watched like a hawk when Magnus turned towards Danny.

“How are you feeling?”

“Nothing that a cup of caffeinated coffee wouldn’t cure,” Danny answered.

“Sorry, contraindicated for forty-eight hours.”

“The headache will destroy my will to live.”

“You can have some Aleve,” Magnus said unsympathetically. “Muscle tremors? Any areas of dull sensation?”

“There’s one place which is highly sensitive at the moment and would like the drain pipe shoved up it, removed.”
“Ah.” Clinically, Magnus looked at the bag hanging at the base of the bed. “Good output.”

Danny waved the hand with the needle in the back of it, attached to the IV. “Given the number of bags of water that you people have had hanging up there, I’m not surprised. But I’d like to handle things myself.”

Magnus moved around the edge of the bed. “We’ll let the saline run.” He freed Danny’s right foot from the blankets and presented the palm of his hand. “Push your foot against my hand as hard as you can.”

Danny decided to comply rather than question. Magnus tested one foot and then the other. Danny’s muscles were aching, a little like he was coming down with the flu, but not badly. Magnus let Danny squeeze his wrist and then made him hold his hands directly in front of him, fingers extended.

“Everything seems fine.” Magnus clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll talk to your doctor.”

“Have you seen Kono?” Steve interjected.

“Yes.”

“Is she okay?”

“Yes.” Magnus held up a finger and then pulled a note pad from his pocket. He scribbled, sentence after sentence producing a full on informative paragraph for Steve. He gave the pad to Steve.

Steve scrunched his nose, squinting as he read. He evidently also had a headache. “Good. Good news. Confirmed SA-Tetrodotoxin. Short half-life. Breathing on her own.” He smiled incandescently.

“Yay, Babe.” Danny punched the air.

Steve tossed the note pad over, allowing Danny to read it himself. The top of the page kind of made sense, but there was a diagram at the bottom of Os and Hs and a few Ns joined together with jaggy lines.

“What?” Danny pointed at it.

“That’s SA-Tetrodotoxin, Danny,” Steve said brow furrowed. “You can tell from the extra OH group on the terminal oxygen.”

Danny glanced at the diagram. “Yeah, sure, of course.”

Magnus accepted his notepad back with a smile. “Chemistry not your thing?”

“Nah,” Danny said preferring not to dwell on his tenth grade teacher, Mr. Hasbroke and the altercation. He held up the egg sandwich and proffered it to Steve. “You want?”

Steve glanced at it, lip automatically curling.

“Please,” Danny said sweetly to Magnus, “can you pass the egg sandwich to Steve.”

Danny let Magnus play at Steve-sitter, he guessed that a senior officer in the Navy might be successful at getting food into a reluctant SEAL. Although in all fairness, he usually managed.

Danny manhandled the controls on his bed, getting it set in a sitting-lounging position, and devised plans to inveigle caffeinated coffee.
The coffee plans failed.

The medical staff were sadists.

# 30 #

Steve was ambulatory, albeit the lurching was Frankenstein-esque, but he made it into Chin and Toast’s room to check on them. When he returned to his and Danny’s room, he reported that both of them were doing well. On his second outing, it took him a little longer to check on Kono, but finally he reported back that she was conscious, annoyed, and wanted to kick Hesse’s ass.

The pensive expression on Steve’s face as he reported that fact weighed on Danny.

Steve was pretending to sleep now. The lines of his long form spoke of restraint, not relaxation. The lack of functional hearing aids and Steve’s firmly closed eyes made communication difficult.

Luckily, Danny had a pen and a notepad courtesy of Magnus.

_I don’t know why Hesse wanted my camera. I assume that I took a photograph of something that he’s interested in. That’s a given. But I don’t know what it was. I guess that they——_

“Williams?”

Danny looked up from where he was trying to put thoughts in order and faced Koa Keawe.


Koa looked a lot smaller than normal as he worked his way around them. Danny told himself not to be vindictive in his enjoyment at the man’s discomfort. It was glorious.

Danny lazed back on his pillows, waiting for Koa to speak. He didn’t know what the detective knew, and he wasn’t going to give him an opening.

“I’m getting the run-around from the US Navy. Can you tell me what happened at the House? McGarrett called me, and I heard him talking about poisoning and Sang Min setting fire to the House, so I called SWAT in.” Koa laid his cards on the table.

Danny wasn’t that fond of Koa Keawe; he was a bit of a hard ass. But in all fairness he was only trying to do his job and he was Mrs. Keawe’s son. And sending in SWAT had probably saved Steve and Kono’s lives.

“No word of a lie,” Danny opened with. “There was this guy called Hesse, who is an actual, real terrorist. He poisoned us with a neuro-toxin thingy so that he could steal my camera. I don’t know why.” Danny crossed his heart. “I guess when I was taking photos, I took a photo of something … criminal. I don’t know what it is. I swear. I’m out and about, I see something interesting, I take a photo. It’s what I do.”

“Hesse?” Koa emphasised the ‘s’ sibilantly. “You had never seen him before?”

Danny shrugged. “No.”
“Do you know a Sang Min?” Koa paced at the end of Danny’s bed.

Oh, Danny wasn’t too sure how to answer that one. He knew that Sang Min was the arsonist and was associated with Chinese Gangs, but he was fairly sure that he wasn’t supposed to know that.

“A Sang Min?” Danny parroted, questioningly.

Koa pulled out his Blackberry and showed Danny the unattractive picture that Chin had acquired somehow.

“Nope, never met a Sang Min,” Danny said honestly. But Koa had heard Steve saying that Sang Min had started the fire. “Kavika told us that Sang Min was the guy that threw the Molotov Cocktails in the House.”

Koa turned on his heel and paced in the other direction.

“So your apartment complex was fire bombed because of the photograph or photographs that you took -- presumably by Sang Min,” Koa said. “And then when Sang Min realised that he hadn’t destroyed all of your cameras -- perhaps it never occurred to him that you had more than one -- he attacked Seolh.”

So Koa had spoken to Steve earlier -- or even White -- since he knew that the camera had been the catalyst for Hesse’s attack, Danny realised.

Out of the corner of his eye, Danny noticed that Steve was watching Koa Keawe like a hawk.

“Why, Steve,” Koa turned to the other inhabitant of the room, “would this Hesse also want Williams’ camera?”

Steve waited a beat, evidently parsing the sentence. “That I can’t answer. But you need to find the link between Sang Min and Victor Hesse.”

Koa scowled. “This case is going to be taken from me, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know if you have access to the resources carry out this investigation,” Steve said honestly. “It’s international.”

“What the hell was on your camera?” Koa asked, turning on Danny.

“I don’t know. And I didn’t back it up,” Danny admitted. The tone of Keawe’s voice was typically accusative.

“And you know this Hesse, don’t you, McGarrett? Sang Min burns Williams’ apartment. Homeless, he moves into Seolh. Sang Min tried again-- failed.” Koa gripped the baseboard of Danny’s bed until it shook. “Then Hesse, who McGarrett happens to know, enters the mix. That’s a big coincidence -- Williams moves in to Seolh, where McGarrett lives.”

Steve had the scowly knot between his expressive eyebrows that meant that he was struggling to follow the detective’s words. No aids and a concussive headache no doubt made following the spoken word very difficult, especially when coupled with Keawe’s tendency to speak in short, staccato sentences.

“Let me answer Koa, Steve,” Danny said. “You’re a deeply, deeply suspicious man, aren’t you?”

“I like answers,” Koa rejoined.
“You’ve obviously done police things and figured out that -- hey -- I’m a photographer from New Jersey who came out here to be with his daughter. I obviously took a photo of something that the subject or subjects prefer that I hadn’t. Sang Min doing something? I moved into Seolh with Kono’s help. I didn’t even know what it was.” Danny stopped, thinking hard, because he wasn’t supposed to know the Chinese Gang link, and he kind of figured that he must have taken a photograph of something to do with gang activity.

“Then after Sang Min’s failed attempt to burn Seolh, he ended up in the hospital,” Steve continued. “If Sang Min works with Hesse, he’s part of a big network of criminals and terrorists. Until he was hospitalised, Sang Min was trying to clean up alone. Hesse took over securing the evidence -- because…” Steve glanced inwardly, expression abstracted, thinking hard, “because if I saw the photograph or photographs I’d recognise their importance. They must have shit a brick, when Danny moved into Seolh. They didn’t kill us, because they knew that we hadn’t realised their importance, since I hadn’t contacted Naval Intelligence, or even the FBI or CIA. The geek, the computer geek, must have been monitoring us. They knew that Danny hadn’t uploaded any photographs to Photobucket or whatever.”

“It’s still a hell of a coincidence,” Koa said suspiciously.

“How do you sleep at night, with that little brain going like clockwork looking for links and suspicious coincidences and criminals?” Danny asked, interested.

Koa glowered. “I sleep very well, thank you.”

Steve was gnawing on his thumbnail, staring blindly at the stormy clouds battling outside their hospital room window.

“How do you know Hesse?” Koa demanded, but Steve wasn’t looking at him.

“He can’t hear you,” Danny said softly. “Give him a break. He probably can’t tell you, any rate. It will be classified.”

Koa snapped a scowl at him.

Danny glared right back at him. “They got what they wanted. Maybe it’s all over?”

Koa was studying Steve as he answered, “Maybe, Williams, maybe. Okay, let’s suppose you did take a photograph of something incriminating.”

“Yeah?” Danny shifted a little straighter on his pillows.

“It was probably the same day or the day before Sang Min set fire to the drug den in your old apartment. What did you photograph?”

“Oh.” Danny carefully drew his legs up to sit crossed legged, thinking hard. “It was Wednesday, Thursday. I was taking photos of Kono on the North Shore on Wednesday. I definitely took some shots on the beach. There was a fishermen’s market on Thursday on the docks. But I walked down from my apartment.”

Koa scribbled on his notepad, tongue caught between his teeth.

“If you want answers, Koa,” Steve said surprising them. “You need to find Sang Min. He knows what Danny photographed. And it was sufficiently incriminating to gain the interest of an international terrorist.”
Koa started to speak, but Steve’s attention was still on the wild weather. He was barely breathing; the depth of his focus was abyssal. Danny waited, caught by play of contemplation on Steve’s face.

“How,” Steve finally spoke, “did the neurotoxin get in the vindaloo?”

“Hesse doctored the curry?” Koa said, exuding duh.

“Yes.” Steve rolled his eyes. “When and where? Yes, we do takeout during a storm. But Hesse hasn’t been watching Seolh for months to figure that out. So if it was doctored at the restaurant, someone had to tell him that we do takeout and that’s our favourite restaurant. That’s possible but unlikely. He’d have to get into the restaurant kitchen, and he’d stick out like a sore thumb. Much easier to poison the takeout in the kitchen of the House, before we reheated it. That means that he had access to the House.”

Steve stared at both Koa and Danny waiting for a response. When none was forthcoming he continued, “I would talk to MacDonald’s crew, because they came by to shut up the Hall. And Kavika’s people, who were in and out kitchen all afternoon.”

Keawe snorted. “That’s going to be a fun conversation.” He seemed to relish the thought.

Danny held up a finger. “Kavika’s men were shot. One of them died.”

“They’re dead?” Steve checked.

“No,” Danny held up one finger, and then two. “One -- dead. Two -- injured.”

“Kavika’s going to be pissed,” Steve said introspectively. “Interesting, though.”

Interesting? Danny thought, it was actually tragic -- Steve’s SEAL brain was a strange and screwy place, all cause and effect.

Koa pushed off Danny’s baseboard and stood tall. “I was going to talk to Blue and Paulo, next.”

“Yeah, sure, course you were,” Danny scoffed. “If you feel like sharing what you find out, that would be helpful.”

“You’re not a detective, Williams. You’re a photographer,” was Keawe’s parting shot. Danny didn’t bite, because his attention was on Steve, who happened to be studying the officer guarding their door, who was talking discreetly into his shirt cuff. The other solider, the beefy white guy, was following Keawe.

It appeared that Keawe’s investigation was going to come to a crashing stop.

~*~

Day inevitably segued into night. Steve napped off and on, popped painkillers at regular intervals and contributed little or nothing to Danny’s vague attempts at conversation. The cogs were definitely creaking away up there, though.

Once Danny was released from the catheter of cruelty, he got himself into the tiny bathroom and showered for an age (he wasn’t telling anyone that he might have had to sit on the bathroom floor for a little while).

Steve watched his unsteady perambulation back to the bed without comment and let him nap undisturbed for a couple of hours.
Danny’s next mission, on awaking, was to check on his friends. Toast had been playing on a DS. The post-grad student wanted out, to get back to the House and check on his computers. Danny found Chin sitting with Kono, who looked far too wan for Danny’s liking. Chin didn’t appear even remotely off colour.

Danny got a hug from them both, which had almost made him cry.

As he had shuffled back to their room, the subordinate guard appeared with an uninspiring dinner -- Kentucky Fried Chicken. Steve managed to eat some of the fries. Danny was kind of thankful when the overwhelming urge to sleep blanketed him.

The morning was escape time.

~*~

# 31 #

Mamo had borrowed the biggest and most threatening SUV that Danny had ever seen in his life. He viewed the giant wheels with something close to awe.

“Is that thing even allowed on the road?” Danny asked.

“Of course it is, Kaniela.” Mamo patted him on the back. “You want to get in?”

“I, uhm.” It was a doozy of a step upwards, but he was damned if he was going to let anyone help him up. Steve’s fingers were twitching. It was difficult to read his expression behind the black Ray Bans that he had donned. But Danny guessed that he was a millisecond from bodily lifting him into the truck. Toast ducked by Steve and scrambled in and Danny rapidly clambered in after him.

The doctors had decided to keep Kono for another twenty four hours and Chin had opted to stay with her -- along with two of Kavika’s people and a stockier guard, who had turned out to be a Navy SEAL.

Steve hauled himself in after Danny and Toast, allowing the skinnier officer -- also a Navy SEAL -- who had been assigned outside their room to sit upfront with Mamo.

Danny wondered what you called a flock of SEALs. Toast sniggered. Belatedly, Danny realised that he had spoken out loud.

“I think that it’s a harem and a rookery, dude,” Toast offered.

“A team,” the man up front said drollly.

Steve drummed his fingers across the top of the side door by the roll down window, and didn’t contribute.

Ensnconced in the middle seat, Danny felt like he was four again and in his Uncle Christopher’s sedan. He resisted the temptation to ask ‘Are we there yet?’ as Mamo pulled into the traffic.

~*~

The front door had been repaired as if it had never been broken. Mamo smiled proudly. On entering the House, they scattered without a word. Toast picked his way carefully up the curving stairs in the foyer, focussed on getting to his studio and checking his computers. Despite the use of the electromagnet, he didn’t appear to be that distressed.
Steve, inscrutable behind his sunglasses and dressed from head to toe in black t-shirt and cargoes, limped into the television room, his fellow Navy Seal in pursuit. Danny thought that Steve should go lay down, but he doubted that Steve would take the suggestion very well. Danny glanced into the room, but his camera was no longer lying on the sofa. White must have taken it for fingerprinting or something, he guessed.

Annoyed, Danny went to the kitchen. Coffee was the name of the game. Mamo had read his mind and was setting up the espresso machine.

“Sit, Keiki,” Mamo directed. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” Danny judged, looking inward, introspectively. He tapped his fingertips rhythmically against his thumb, one at a time. “It was weird. But now it’s just the memory.”

“Can you have coffee?” Mamo checked.

“Oh, yeah, sure.” If Mamo wanted to ensure that Danny didn’t bite off everyone’s head he would stop teasing him and make the damn coffee.

“I’ll put lunch out,” Mamo said, as the coffee maker heated up. He opened the fridge, and started to pull out the sandwich and salad makings.

Normally, Danny would have helped, but he was tired. “Where is everyone? I expected the House to be teeming with people.”

“We came yesterday after the storm and cleaned up.” Mamo glanced down at the kitchen floor.

Belatedly, Danny remembered that someone had been shot and killed in the kitchen. There wasn’t a sign.

“Kavika is very angry,” Mamo volunteered.

“Why? At who?” Danny couldn’t stop looking at the floor.

“Everyone. Blue told him that he thought that Gareth was working with Hesse.”

“Gareth was the member of the Kapu that was killed?” In the kitchen, probably very close to where Danny was sitting. Danny didn’t consider himself a religious man by any stretch of the imagination, but the thought that someone had died just here was disturbing.

Mamo nodded.

“So what happened? Has Blue said?” Danny knew that Blue was still in the hospital, gut shot -- only his immense weight had saved his life. He had been left for dead. Paulo had come off more lightly and was recuperating at home.

“Yeah, what happened?” Steve appeared at the doorway, with his quiet, tailing Navy SEAL. Evidently, he had had time to get upstairs to his apartment. He had retrieved the old-fashioned hearing aids, the ones that he hated. Bulky and obtrusive, they immediately drew the eye. He still wore the Ray Bans; headache, Danny guessed. Or else he knew how good he looked in the combination, but that seemed a little narcissistic for Steve, in Danny’s humble opinion.

“Blue said that he and Paulo were coming back from checking the ground floor. There was a man in the kitchen with Gareth. He shot them with a--” Mamo hunted for the word. “--a gun with a long barrel, like on television.”
“Silencer?” Steve supplied.

“Yes.”

“So Gareth drugged the vindaloo?” Danny said.

“Assuming that Blue’s telling the truth,” Steve said cynically.

“Stevie,” Mamo pointed out, “Blue is not and has never been very good at lying. Sit, eat, and then I think you all should have a nap.”

It was difficult to argue with someone as grandfatherly as Mamo.

“So, Stevie, are you going to introduce us to our new friend?” Mamo chastised them all equally for not introducing the SEAL.

Danny winced, because he really hadn’t given the guy or his partner a single thought other than: hey, disturbing guards, and, get me coffee.


“Nice to meet you, son.” Mamo shook his hand. “You’ll be joining us for lunch.”

“Nice to meet you too, sir,” Simons returned politely.

—*—

Danny followed Mamo’s order and napped after lunch. He couldn’t remember the last time that he had napped in the afternoon. But the snooze, lazing on his bed in the sunlight, had helped immeasurably.

On awaking, he mourned his lost photographs -- the loss of the one of Mamo working in his workshop cut him deeply. That would have been the cover of the book of Creativity that he had been devising in his head. Steve’s inspiration face had been a thing of beauty. Danny had learned his lesson. If he had uploaded and backed up his photographs, none of this would have happened. Or, if the computer geek had hacked all his files, it would have been a big fat hairy clue that his photographs had initiated this whole affair. Assuming that he noticed, of course.

Antsy, full of wriggling worms under his skin, Danny rolled of his bed and padded barefoot into his bathroom. He dealt with his ablutions -- gingerly because who knew that a catheter would make him feel raw and sore. Opting for shorts and a hooded sweatshirt, he contemplated his image in the freaky Hogwart’s mirror that dominated one wall in his room. He would never have dressed down in New Jersey, but Seolh was eroding his professional demeanour -- next he would stop smoothing his hair and the world would come to an end.

Still somewhat out of sorts, he went hunting for Steve. Hunting was perhaps the wrong word, because he headed straight for the eyrie. Surprisingly, the door was unlocked, and he let himself into Steve’s apartment. Mamo had insisted on them all going for naps -- the big, bossy grandfather -- and probably told Little Stevie not to lock himself in his apartment.

You wouldn’t have thought that the rooms had been smoke damaged. The area was clean and sparkling. Tidy to the point where it didn’t look lived-in. Walking a little heavier than normal, Danny picked his way up to the second level, and finding it empty of people, he paused at the spiral staircase up to Steve’s tower.
“Yo, Steve? You up there.” He tapped his hand against the banister, hoping the vibrations would transmit. He did not want to sneak up on a stressed and edgy SEAL.

As he turned the top twist, it brought him at eye-level to the floor of Steve’s bedroom. Carefully, he continued up the treads, stepping heavily. He had only been up on the top floor once, in the darkness, in panic, rushing to wake a sleeping Steve before they all died in a fire.

Steve’s bedroom was the old circular lantern room of the house. The walls were windows – north, east, south, and west. The view was panoramically awesome. Danny felt like an eagle, as if he could launch himself into the sky.

The object of his search was napping in the middle of the California King bed in the centre of the room, hardback novel abandoned by his side like a stricken bird.

The scene made Danny think of a black panther slumbering in a patch of sunlight (he inwardly chastised himself for being a little overdramatic). In all honesty, it was probably the single, most pretentious bedroom that Danny had ever been in, in his entire life. It was either an agoraphobe’s worse nightmare, or a claustrophobe’s dream room.

There was no furniture apart from the bed and the squat, empty shelving and cupboards under the windows. Danny figured that Steve basically used the bedroom on the second floor as a dressing room. This was simply a room for a bed, and the biggest bed possible. Even sprawled on his back, arms and legs akimbo, Danny wouldn’t be able to reach the edges. It was a bed big enough for a family of six. The bed, like the rest of the apartment, was designed to match the overall décor – the head board and side tables merged into the base, and the discreet halogen reading lights were dressed in maritime brass.

Belatedly, Danny wondered how rich Steve was?

Pretty well off was the assumption, but perhaps most of it was tied up in Seolh.

Steve had a room just for sleeping in, and nothing else... He noticed the telescope, and it was a top of the range piece of equipment based on its breadth and inherent shiny glossiness. The views afforded from Steve’s eyrie were spectacular.

Danny crossed to Steve’s bed. Carefully matching Magnus’ method, he stretched over, almost overbalancing (but he didn’t want to touch the mattress and disturb Steve unduly), and gently rested his hand just above Steve’s ankle. He waited a beat and then squeezed.

The long muscles and tendons under Danny’s hand firmed. Steve rolled his head a fraction on the mattress and opened one eye.

“Hey,” Danny murmured softly.

“You okay? Everyone okay?” Steve asked, blinking sleepily as he pushed up on his elbow.

Danny plonked down on the edge of the mattress. He pointed at his own chest.

“Me? I’m fine. It was designed to break down or something. That’s what Dr. Roux said. You got hit on the head. You were unconscious. That Hesse guy was a complete bastard. I can’t believe what he did to your aids … Oh.” Danny stopped his angry spiel dead. “That was too fast, wasn’t it?”

“Strident, as well.” Steve rubbed his face tiredly. “I’m sorry this happened, Danny.”

“No. No. NO.” Danny held up his hand. “Put your shitty aids in.” He pointed at them helpfully.
Steve paused a beat, rolled onto his stomach, slithered over, and grabbed them off the bedside table.

Danny waited impatiently, fingers drumming on his knees, until Steve had them settled to his satisfaction.

“I can--” Steve began.

“Ah. Ah. Ah.” Danny waggled his finger. “My turn.”

Steve looked a millisecond from grabbing that finger and snapping it back. Danny pulled it out of reach, holding it behind his back. A flicker of amusement crossed Steve’s mobile face.

“You are not responsible for Hesse,” Danny said. “You did not drug us. You tried to stop him and you bought us enough time for the police to arrive so we weren’t executed as we lay there like paralysed victims in a horror movie. Hesse wouldn’t have come to the House if I hadn’t taken some photos. Do you blame me? Do you?” Danny prodded when Steve didn’t immediately answer.

“No,” he said, succinctly.

“Good. I don’t blame you. Kono doesn’t blame you. Chin doesn’t blame you, and I think Toast sort of enjoyed the experience?” Danny raised an eyebrow.

“Possibly,” Steve judged.

“Students,” Danny mused. “He’s probably going to dine out on this story for months. So you’re not thinking of, I don’t know, leaving Seolh to protect us? Or installing a gun turret on the roof?”

Steve looked speculatively out over the expanse of the west roof below them, evidently calculating.

Danny reached over and batted his shoulder. “Goof. You can’t install a gun turret.”

“True,” Steve noted. The ‘pity’ went unsaid. “I do think that it’s time to update the security system, though.”

“That seems a reasonable and measured response,” Danny said primly.

Steve looked at him blandly, but refrained from commenting. “So to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit up to my eyrie?”

“Do I need an invite?” Danny bounced to his feet and stuffed his hands in his shorts pockets. “You got hit on the head. You’ve got to be checked, even if the hospital released you. You could fall into a coma.”

“Possible, but not very probable.” Steve sat up, arms braced behind him, moving right into the light of the setting sun.

Danny cocked his head to the side, consideringly. He liked the way that the light was falling and the colours. The evening light turned the amber flecks in Steve’s multi-coloured eyes molten. Steve gazed right back at him, impassively. Danny guessed that Steve knew that he was framing a shot.

Intrigued by the light, Danny turned, staring right out over the peninsula to the north and the ocean beyond. The sun was touching the horizon to the west, setting amber and ruby glows across the water. Once he got his camera back, and he was definitely getting his camera back, even if he had to picket Pearl Harbour-Hickam, this might be a good place to do a shoot.

“Isn’t this a little open?” Danny wondered, turning back to face Steve. To the east and the west, he
could see the coastline stretching to the horizon. But looking to the south, past the boundaries of Seolh, there were some discrete private estates and, in the far distance, the start of suburbia. Danny felt like the whole world was staring at him up here, even if they weren’t. Potentially, Steve was something of an exhibitionist.

“I can always pull the drapes,” Steve pointed out. “Mostly, I just close the ones behind me looking back towards land. You’d need a kick-ass scope to see —” A pensive expression crossed his face. “And if someone wants to observe you, you can’t really stop them.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to remind you.” Danny drifted around behind Steve and pulled the sapphire blue curtains just behind the bed closed.

“The windows are actually Tuffak, if that helps,” Steve said, turning around to follow Danny’s perambulations.

“What?”

“Colloquially known as bulletproof glass, but really it’s transparent layered polycarbonate.”

Curious, Danny tapped the pane closest to him. It felt different to glass, not as cold. “Why?”

Steve mulled that question over, obviously trying to select the most accurate answer without either being too graphic or contravening State Secrets.

“An active imagination and experience,” Steve finally answered.

Danny eyed Steve, still not getting it.

“Snipers,” Steve summarised.

Danny felt his mouth drop open. “For real?” His brain discombobulated for a moment. “Why do you sleep up here?”

“I like the views. And it’s a great place to sleep. I’ve made it as safe as it can be. It’s the Knight and the Horse scenario. I’m not going to sleep in the basement in a safe room.”

“Knight and Horse scenario?”

“Yeah, it’s a fable. The Knight’s preparing to go and fight in the Crusades. He puts on his chainmail. His wife is concerned that it’s not enough protection. He adds some armour. Thinking about it, he then puts some armour on his horse. And it’s a long trip, so he wants to take some food. And a bag of money would be useful, but that will make him more vulnerable to thieves, so he adds another sword and shield to his equipment. He remembers to strap on a lance to the saddle. There are a lot of things to think about, it’s a long journey—”

Garrulous, story-telling Steve was kind of endearing, Danny observed.

“So he kisses his wife, promising to come back in four or five years. His serf opens the castle gate. As he crosses the drawbridge, the weight of his armour, weapons, food, money, armoured horse — makes the drawbridge break. He plummets down into the moat. He’s got so much stuff that he can’t get out and he drowns.”

“And the moral is?” Danny asked.

“You can’t live your life by being overly careful and dwelling on everything, to the point where you
don’t actually achieve anything.”

“Huh.” That philosophy explained a lot about Steve.

A curl of a smile graced Steve’s lips.

The dinner bell rang. There were no lights on in Steve’s eyrie so no signal was triggered for Steve. He glanced at Danny, quizzically.

Danny pointed at the sky. “Dinner bell. I wonder what we’re having? Wasn’t it Chin’s turn?”

“Oh.” Steve winced, vaguely uneasy. “Mamo might have cooked. Maybe Maru’s popped around. I hope Auntie Maru’s came around.”

“Why? Mamo can’t cook, or something?”

“He cooks with spam,” Steve said, pouty-faced.

~*~

# 32 #

Danny felt like they were welcoming royalty home as they stood on the veranda waiting for Mamo to bring Chin and Kono back to the House. Steve’s fellow SEAL had also joined them.

“I feel like I should be wearing a butler’s uniform,” Danny said.

The non sequitur drew a confused eyebrow bob from Steve.

“It’s like British Soap drama things that my ex likes. The staff wait outside the mansion for the Duke and Duchess to arrive,” Danny explained, sketching a pompous bow at the same time.

Steve snorted. “Funnily enough, Kono is descended from royalty.”

“What?”

“King David.” Steve took a deep breath, and concentration obvious, said, “David La’amea Kamanakapu’u Mahinulani Nalaiaehuokalani Lumialani Kalākaua. He was also known as the Merrie Monarch.”

“For real?” Toast asked.

“Yes.” Steve nodded, inscrutable behind his Ray Bans -- you couldn’t tell if he was joking.

Mamo’s giant black SUV turned up the drive.

“That’s awesome,” Toast said. “I’ve never met royalty before.”

“Don’t tease too much,” Steve directed, as Mamo drew to a halt in front of the steps, and the back door of the truck opened.

Kono smiled down at them.

“Your Majesty.” Toast curtseyed deeply. “Welcome back to Seolh.”

Kono pulled a face at Steve. “You didn’t?” she croaked, voice still raw from the intubation tube.
“Isn’t that better?” Danny asked rushing forwards and reaching up to help her down from the SUV. The tips of her fingers were cold as he gripped them.

“A little,” she said, voice like glass. “The docs said it would take a couple of days.”

“They also said,” Chin spoke up from behind her, “that you shouldn’t talk for a couple of days.”

Kono accepted Danny’s gentle hold and dropped lightly down from the truck. Still holding her fingers, they turned to Steve at the top of the steps, watchful and removed.

“Steve?” Kono said quietly.

“Kono.”

“Idiot,” she said fondly. “I’m okay.” She scrambled up the steps and flung herself into his arms. He folded her in, hand mapping the back of her head.

“Group hug!” Toast decided, latching onto Steve.

Danny wasn’t going to be left out. He got up the steps and flung his arms around Kono and Steve simultaneously and squeezed. Steve’s hand slipped down from Kono’s head and around Danny’s shoulders.

“Hey,” Chin said softly, and slotted in between Kono and Toast.

Mamo stomped up the steps and, twice the size of everyone, somehow he managed to hug them all.

~*~

A constant low, droning voice wasn’t what Danny expected to hear as he puttered around his room, tidying up. Curious, he followed the sound out into the corridor and down the curving foyer stairs all the way to the kitchen.

There was a half-naked, bare-footed old man in the kitchen.

“Who the fuck are you!” Danny demanded.

The stranger wore a red sheet like a toga, complete with plaited green headband and carved staff. The guy extended a tattoo covered arm, with the staff, and smiled. He had a tooth missing.

“Hi,” the vagrant said.

“Hi?” Danny echoed.

“Casual way of saying hello,” the stranger explained.

“CHIN!” Danny hollered, backing off. “There’s a creepy naked guy in the kitchen!”

In the distance he heard a combination of thud, a single expletive, and running. Kono came out of the television room, trailing a blanket.

“Danny?” she croaked, voice failing between one vowel and the next.

Danny got between her and the stranger. Steve was right about the need to update the security. Behind him, Kono patted Danny’s back.
Chin came down the stairs like a fire cracker, jumping the last few feet. He swung around the newel post, and slid to a complete stunned halt.

There was more thudding and running and Danny guessed that more cavalry was on the way. Danny backed up, arms outstretched behind him, hemming Kono in securely.

“Danny, it’s okay,” Chin said, between breaths. “I’m guessing that this gentleman is a friend of Mamo’s?”

“Yes. I’m Keōua.”

Running footsteps were coming down the stairs. Looking up, between the stair posts, Danny recognised the Lieutenant SEAL and that he held a large stocky, black gun.

Chin, hands widely spread, yelled, “It’s okay. It’s okay. He’s a friend.”

Like Chin, Simons jumped the last few steps. Holding the gun two-handed, keeping it targeted on all parties, he scrutinised the tableau before him. Danny froze, and he was pretty sure that everyone else was terrified.

“This is Kahuna Keōua,” Chin said, calmly turning to face the lieutenant. “He’s come to bless the House and settle the spirits at Mamo’s behest. I think that he surprised Danny. We didn’t know that he was coming.”

Keōua poked his head around Chin. “Sorry,” he said, wincing.

Between one blink and the next, Simons dropped his weapon low, pointing it at the floor. He did not holster it.

“You’re a freakin’ what?” Danny demanded. Kono’s hand snaked over his mouth, clamping it shut.

And it was at that point, Steve came in the front door. “What the Hell?”

There wasn’t yelling, at least not much. But for some obscure reason, it appeared that Mamo had invited a witch doctor to scare off bad mojo or something. It really didn’t make any sense. At that point, just as Danny was trying to wrap his head around the whole shebang, Mamo came in from the workshops and started telling everyone off. Toast hung over the banister above them and added his own two pennworths.

“Calm down,” Steve belted, drowning them all out. “Everyone, shut up.”

Danny swiped a moist lick over Kono’s palm and she released him with a rusty squeak.

“Quiet,” Steve barked. “Okay, Chin, explain to me what’s going on.”

“Mamo invited the Kahuna.” Chin pointed first at Mamo and then at Keōua. “But he forgot to mention that the Kahuna was here. Danny—” Chin paused a moment, trying to pick the right words, “—wasn’t expecting to run into him. And given the events of the last few days, Danny alerted us to the presence of a stranger in the House. There was some confusion and a little bit of yelling.”

Steve raised a finger, demanding a moment as he parsed that overly diplomatic explanation.

“You okay, Danny?” Steve asked.

“Yes.” Danny bristled. “Of course, I’m okay. I just—” He’d got a freakin’ fright. It had been a stressful couple of days. And coming face to face with a complete stranger in a toga had been…
disturbing.

Kono rubbed his back, soothingly.

“I’m sorry that I startled you,” Keōua said to Danny.

“Yeah, right,” Danny said, looking him up and down. The guy was about the same age as Mamo, maybe a little younger, and dressed up like a Roman senator. “Sorry, yes, it’s been a rough couple -- rough two weeks.”

“If you’d like to finish the blessing?” Chin directed Keōua back into the kitchen, with Mamo trailing after them.

Danny ducked away from Kono’s comforting hands, skirted around Simons, and tried and failed to get around Steve.

“Steven?” Danny questioned the wall of lithe muscle preventing him from running upstairs to his room.

“Daniel,” Steve returned.

“Steven.”

“Beer?” Steve offered.

“Hell, yes.” Danny thanked the Gods.

Steve steered him into the siege pantry and through into the cold room. He presented Danny with the selection of beers and wines set on shelving on the north wall.

“Take your pick. Fire Rock Pale Ale is drinkable. There’s a darker porter from a local microbrewery which has a drop of Kona coffee in, if you like? There might be some Budweiser.” Steve scanned the dusty, bottom shelf.

“Philistine.” Danny grabbed a six pack of Pale Ale. Steve reached over his head and grabbed a bag of chips.

“Come on.” Steve ducked back out of the cold room. Belatedly, Danny noticed that Steve had dispensed with the crutches and had opted for wearing a laced up pair of supportive walking boots.

Steve led him out through the other door into the pantry, and out the back via the mud room. Steve grabbed a couple of rolled up mats from a pile of camping equipment propped on a bench. Outside, as they passed by the kitchen window, Danny glanced through it, and then rapidly away as he caught sight of the Toga Guy, regarding him steadily.

Following Steve, he headed in the direction of the bay, but instead of going down the twisty path to the beach, they headed north, up and down another path. Abruptly, Steve set off at a tangent from the path, and picked his way through the undergrowth. Danny followed quietly, opting not to ask. They emerged above a sheltered parapet, over looking the bay. The natural shape of the rocks and growing undergrowth provided a windbreak. The dip caught the afternoon and evening sun. Steve scrambled down the short drop to the sun-warmed flat rock.

Steve flicked out one of the mats, unfurling it on the rock platform. He placed the other on top of it. Comfortable with silence, Steve sat, and leaned back on the rocks facing the sun.
“Neat hidey hole,” Danny said, as he sat beside Steve.

“Been mine since I was thirteen.” Steve smiled. “Sun trap.”

Danny pulled two longnecks from the six pack and considered the bottle caps. Mutely, he presented the two bottles to Steve.

Steve didn’t disappoint, pulling out a Swiss Army knife from one of his pockets and flipping off the cap. Danny accepted one back, and took a long, refreshing glug. The feeling of the cool settling in his belly released something held tight. He rested back against the rocks and stretched his legs in front of him, matching Steve’s pose.

“So,” Steve said when Danny was about halfway down the bottle, “better?”

Danny took a mouthful, mindful that Steve had lost the plot a couple of times in front of him in the last few days. Danny’s first instinct was to bluster and yell, but in all honesty that wasn’t going to be helpful to either of them.

“Yeah. Just freaked me out. The dude is wearing a skirt. I guess I am more…..” Danny didn’t actually know what to say. “I am more wound up than I thought. What the Hell is he?”

“The dude in the skirt--” Steve actually made speech marks with his fingers around the word ‘skirt’, “-- is a highly respected Kahuna. He came to cleanse the House and bless Seolh. It’s an honour.”

“Bless Seolh?” Danny said sceptically. He grabbed a mouthful of chips and stuffed them in his mouth.

“Like, I dunno--” Steve gazed heavenwards as he hunted for an example, “-- a Native American smudging ceremony or a Roman Catholic priest sprinkling Holy Water. Same thing different traditions.”

“Oh,” Danny said around the chips.

“You don’t believe?” Steve cocked his head to the side.

“I believe what I can touch, what I can see, and not airy fairy stuff.” Danny wafted his fingers in the air.

Steve grimaced.

“You’re a logical man. You’re a scientist. You’re pragmatic. You’re a SEAL.” Danny rolled his beer bottle between his hands. “It’s make believe.”

Steve scratched the back of his head, wincing. “I don’t believe that we know everything. “

“Yeah, but eventually, we will,” Danny explained.

“So no Higher Power. No afterlife?” Steve probed.

“Fairy tales.”

“Wow.”

“Hey.” Danny glugged on another mouthful of beer. “I respect your wish to believe. But I don’t get it myself. Seriously, though, we need to change the subject, because it’s not a topic that people can discuss rationally. As hundreds of years of wars and strife can attest to.”
Steve was so flummoxed that he took a handful of chips. Danny thought that they were probably the first greasy, tasty chips that he had eaten in years.

“You’re an atheist,” Steve double checked.

Danny finished his bottle in one more glug, set it aside, and reached for his second. “Yep.”

Steve grabbed it before Danny, cracked the top, and handed it over. “I’ve always believed in reincarnation, you know. I remember when my mom took me to church, I was really mystified that no one was talking about being born again, and experiencing a new life. I asked the reverend — I guess I was six or seven -- and he said that I was confused and I didn’t understand. He couldn’t even begin to talk to me about it.”

“You remember being born again?” Danny said dubiously.

“No,” Steve said, absently taking more chips. “I just remember always knowing that you continue. But it wouldn’t have been something that I learned at home. My Dad wouldn’t have talked about reincarnation. And my mom was Presbyterian. I didn’t even know the word reincarnation when I was first trying to figure out why what I was hearing at church didn’t make sense.”

Danny clinked his bottle against Steve’s. “To each their own,” he said, determined to change the subject. “What did your Dad do?”

“He was a cop.”

“Like Chin’s family and Koa Keawe’s.”

“Yep.” Steve laughed a little. “A normal cop.”

“Is he around?” Danny suspected not since this was the first time that Steve had mentioned him.

“He died. Mom and Dad died in a traffic accident when I was thirteen. And I came to live at Seolh with Grandmother and Mary.”

“I’m sorry, Babe.”

Steve shrugged. “It was a long time ago.”

“Your sister lived here? I thought that she hated Seolh?”

Steve shrugged and took a draft from his bottle. “Yeah. Always has. Don’t know why. Eventually, she went to live with an Aunt on Dad’s side of the family in Florida when she was fourteen. I dunno, she always hated it. As Chin says, it’s not for everyone.”

“Do you talk to her?”

“At Christmas. Birthdays. If she answers the phone.” Steve looked a little pensive. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to get replacement ITE aids before Christmas.”

“Does she know you were hurt?” Danny asked, gesturing with the bottle at Steve’s lanky form.

“Nah. No reason.”

“No reason?” Danny started to twist to directly face Steve, but he sagged back against the rocks.

“Okay.” Steve pointed at his ears. “This was serious. But she was informed once before when I got
injured on an op, but she didn’t call me or follow up. You talk to your Mom and sisters. Me and Mare don’t have that. Never had. No reason why we ever will.”

“That’s sad.”

“Possibly, but it takes two to tango.”

Danny wrinkled his nose, disconcerted. “What?”

“I call her. She doesn’t always pick up. I was at the ‘Naval Base San Diego’ once and she was in the city. Tried multiple times to just meet up for a beer or coffee. She’s just not interested.” A thread of hurt underscored Steve’s tone.

“It’s her loss.” Danny clinked his bottle against Steve’s bottle.

“Someday maybe, she’ll come visit? Could even be this Christmas.”

Christmas?

“Christmas? Christmas? Shit, it’s got away from me this year,” Danny realised, dismayed. How could he have forgotten? “It’s like the second week of December. Why are there no decorations up in the House?”

“We put them up on the twentieth.”

“So late?”

Steve pursed his lips, thinking hard. “Grandmother put them up then. You have to remember that this is Seolh. There are always people from different traditions and religions living here. There has to be balance. I really like Hanukkah. Chin’s got really complex beliefs, talk to him about it.”

“We’ve come back around to discussing religion.”

“You’re an atheist but celebrate Christmas. Hypocrite,” Steve said half-jokingly.

Danny accepted the criticism. “So there’s Christmas Dinner and presents on the Twenty Fifth, though?” he checked, and pondered on the contents of his wallet. He couldn’t even take photographs at the moment.

“Yeah. And if you were Jewish, we’d do Hanukkah, if you wanted, and exchange small gifts or contribute to charity. It’s a Sunday night discussion to figure out what plan we’re following. There was a guy here once who wasn’t comfortable sharing his traditions and vice versa.”

“Did he stay?”

“Yeah, few years. Then he moved over to the Mainland to make films.” Steve contemplated a second. “Will you have Grace over Christmas?”

“Yes,” Danny said absolutely, even if he had to kidnap her.

“You know--” Steve appeared for all intents and purposes very interested in the tiny writing on his bottle of beer, “-- I have access to an extremely good lawyer.”

Danny stared. He didn’t think that he could get any more indebted to Steve, and still look at himself in the mirror with respect. But maybe for Grace, he could. He was strapped for cash, and now he had an unexpected medical bill looming in his future. He simply couldn’t afford a lawyer.
“Hey, the offer is out there, consider it,” Steve said quietly.

“I should have Grace this weekend. Let’s see what Rachel says. I guess Hesse got what he wanted? He won’t be coming back?” Danny asked, thinking: is it safe enough for Grace to visit?

Steve took a sip from his bottle as he considered. “He’s unpredictable. But if he wanted to kill us, he would have. He doesn’t consider that I’m a threat.” The assessment was delivered flatly.

“Well, the geek said that he’d been told not to hurt us.”

“What?” Steve twisted around on the mat.

Danny shied back from the burning focus suddenly turned on him.

“Say that again,” Steve ordered.

“Uhm, I dunno. She came back to tell the Hesse that the police were coming. Hesse was pissed, he was going to kill you. She stopped him. I don’t remember exactly what she said, but she said something like ‘you’re not allowed to kill them.’ I don’t remember exactly.”

“Did you tell Commander White?” Steve asked intently.

Danny tried to recall White’s grilling. He had had an astoundingly bad headache at the time, and figured that White had used that to test his honesty and gauge his responses.

“I don’t know. I think I said that the geek stopped him -- told him that the police were coming.”

“Fuck, I don’t have a phone that I can use,” Steve swore.

“Steve, what’s the matter?”

“Someone ordered Hesse,” Steve said obliquely, as he stood, “and Hesse obeyed the order. Do you know where you are relative to the House?”

“Buh?” Danny asked. He pulled his Blackberry from his back pocket and held it up. “Who do you want me to call?”

“Hesse is a predator. He’s the top dog.” Steve’s eyes were wild. He was one lunge away from bolting back to the House. “It’s almost inconceivable that someone could give him orders that he would follow. Why did we lose your camera? What the Hell did you photograph?”

“I don’t know, Steve.” Danny scrambled to his feet. He thrust his phone so that it was directly before Steve’s nose. “Who do you want me to call? White?”


Keeping one eye on Steve -- his nostrils were flared and he was breathing like a racehorse -- Danny tapped out the number. White picked up fast.

“Hello, Commander White, it’s Danny Williams. Steve McGarrett’s friend.”

“I remember. What can I do for you?”

“Steve kind of wants to talk to you, but he doesn’t have the right hearing aids, because of Hesse?”

“Yes?” White said impatiently.
“Sir.” Steve leaned over the phone. “When you were debriefing Danny, did he mention to you that Hesse had been ordered not to kill us?”

“No,” White replied.

“He said ‘no,’” Danny relayed.

“Okay, sir, we’re coming in to Pearl Harbour-Hickam. We’ll be there in about an hour and fifteen minutes. Thank you, sir.” Steve stabbed at the phone in Danny’s hands ending the call.

“Both of us?” Danny asked, standing their like a statue, phone resting on his palm.

“Yes, you need to be debriefed properly.” Steve started corolling the rubbish from their impromptu picnic.

~*~

# 33 #

Danny was so tired that he wanted to cry -- not that crying had been on the agenda since Grace had had croup and he and Rachel had reached Day Four of consecutive sleepless nights.

There were only so many ways that he could reiterate: the geek made Hesse stop because someone said not to kill us.

Danny was fairly sure that the US Navy had now researched his background to kindergarten. A tad vindictively, he had pointed out that since Toast had not been that heavily drugged, perhaps he had overheard something -- which had given him a break while they had called Lieutenant Simons and Toast back at the House.

The upshot was that they were exactly where they had been six hours previously. Hesse was taking orders from someone higher up. Also, after a six hour debriefing by paranoid, psychotic SEAL commanders, Danny wasn’t as fond of Steve as he had been when they had been lazing on a sun-warmed slab drinking beer.

“You do realise that that was a complete waste of time,” he said conversationally as they trooped wearily into the kitchen.

Steve ignored him, whether deliberately or not, Danny couldn’t tell.

“Oh, fuck, whose turn is it to cook dinner?” Danny demanded on seeing the empty kitchen. He had the horrible thought that it was probably his turn.

“Uhm?” Steve pulled the door to the corridor too, and studied the whiteboard on the back. “Yours.”

“Damn.”

“Look.” Steve hobbled over to the fridge, yanking it open. “Go call your ex -- sort out Grace coming over this weekend. I’ll start something and we can finish it together.”

He stuck his head in the fridge, preventing any further conversation.

Danny stood, hands on hips. Steve had done this a couple of times now – stopping discussion dead, by dint of tuning him out.

“We’re not married, you know,” he said to the butt sticking out of the fridge, and then stalked out to
make his call in private.

~*~

Significantly happier, he bounced into the kitchen.

“I’ve got Monkey!” he crowed, jiggling his hips from side to side. “I’ve got Monkey.”

“Great,” Steve said, straightening from the oven. “So we pick her up after school tomorrow?”

“Yes.” Arms in the air, Danny turned in a tight circle on the spot.

Steve smiled fondly.

“What?” Danny asked. “What’s the face for?”

“Nothing, I’m just happy to see you happy.” He dusted his floury hands on the dish towel half stuffed in the front pocket of his jeans.

“Monkey!” Danny wiggled once more, and then put it aside. “What are we cooking?”

“Cheating, actually. I found a Moroccan Tagine and a beef stew in the freezer.” The microwave pinged.

“Is that two different things?” Danny asked, pressing open the microwave door and examining the contents. The lump of frozen orangey sludge stared back at him. Prodding it with the spoon in the mug set beside the microwave, he judged it still too hard. He wacked shut the door and turned the dial for another round of defrosting.

“Yeah. One’s garbanzo beans and squash, the other’s beef and tomato.”

“Moroccan?” Danny checked, even though he had heard correctly.

Steve nodded.

“Couscous as a side? Will that work with the beef stew?”

Steve canted his head to the side, considering. He shrugged, which Danny took as a yes.

They danced around each other. Danny worked on stirring the main course in a pot on the stove and the other in the microwave, and setting the table. Steve started finely chopping onions, tomatoes and bell peppers to add to the couscous, because he didn’t have a bandage protecting a healing thumb.

Working in tandem, without saying a word, they prepared dinner.

~*~

The following morning, Steve found him in the conservatory, desultorily reading a magazine.

“Danny?”

Danny cocked an eyebrow over the top of a battered National Geographic. Steve held a small plastic crate in his hands. He looked proud.

“What you got?” Danny asked, curious.

“I went rooting around the reception rooms,” Steve said, typically not answering, and set the crate on
the wicker glass coffee table before Danny, and lifted the lid. “You said that you were old school.”

“Huh?” Danny leaned forwards. The box held a couple of cameras. “Wow.”

“Good, aren’t they?” Steve picked up the Box camera, ancient, practically an antique, and grinned as he handed it over.

It was. The old camera was a simple Box affair with a fabric lens housing, which you had to ratchet forwards on a little plinth. The soft focus lenses looked intact.

Wherever it had been stored, it had been stored correctly. The brass workings were dull but uncorroded. Danny carefully turned the knob on the adjustable base, and the lens extended, bellows unfolding.

“This belongs in a museum.”

“I think that it would prefer to be used,” Steve said.

Placing it, two-handed, on the table top, Danny then rooted around in the crate. There was an old tin, which once upon a time might have held photographic paper. He cracked it, because even if it did still hold paper -- it would be long deteriorated. The tin actually held the brushes and lint, the tweezers and oils, to look after the camera. A velvet purse held a replacement lens.

“Can you still get photographic paper?” Steve asked.

“Very difficult, especially for this baby. But you can make it with the right stuff.” Playing with the camera could be a lot of fun. It was designed for portraiture -- it would be interesting to see how it worked, how it took pictures and compared to the new SLR’s digital imagery.

“Chemicals?” Steve asked enthusiastically. “Silver nitrate.”

“Which is explosive,” Danny said.

“I know.” Steve grinned. “We talked about setting up a dark room for you in the workshops.”

“Yeah, we did, didn’t we,” Danny noted.

Steve glanced in askance at the neutral tone, or expression -- Danny wasn’t too sure which one he got.

Danny picked up the Minolta. It was circa 1970s and needed a 35mm chemical film. There was a separate ten inch lens that looked like it had been through the wars.

“Yours?” Danny asked.

“My Grandfather’s actually.”

“He was a photographer?”

“Not like you,” Steve said simply. “You going to try them?”

Danny regarded Steve measuringly. Ten to one, the guy actually had a top of the range Canon or Nikon DSLR in his eyrie, which he had probably mulled over lending to Danny -- but decided rightly that that was close to overdosing a certain New Jersey national with goodwill.

“What?” Steve asked.
Then again, presents didn’t appear to be Steve’s thing -- he was generous to a fault, but he wasn’t material.

“Could be fun. We’ll need to make a run to get some 35mm film.”

“What about the dark room?” Steve asked.

The Box camera looked at Danny and demanded, plaintively, to be used.

“Seems like a lot of work, Babe,” Danny said softly, looking at him straight on.

Steve shifted on the table. “Are you telling me that you don’t think that you’ll be staying after a month?”

There it was -- out there -- laid on the coffee table like the Box camera.

His name was on the Chore Board; he had a front door key, which he barely used; he had a room of requirement; he had new friends; an Ohana.

“I want to stay. But!” He held up his hand and Steve closed his mouth with a snap. “The month is for you guys, as well. Ah. Ah. Ah. I know what you’re going to say. But it’s a month for a reason.”

Steve had a drooping, contemplative look on his face, as if a predator observing a particular juicy prey.

“I understand,” Steve said finally. “And I concur, in the New Year, then.”

“I haven’t said yes, yet,” Danny said failing to contain a smile.

“You said --”

“I said, I wanted to stay. Let’s do this properly, Babe. There’s a reason for the Charter. The Charter that I haven’t read yet.”

“That’s easily remedied.”

Danny guessed that it was time to read the Charter.

~*~

The office was dressed in the same dark, mahogany wood as the rest of the House. An antique leather-topped desk dominated the room. The juxtaposition of the ergonomic computer chair, Apple iMac desktop, and row of filing cabinets against the far wall was a little disconcerting. Old world and new technology seemed to be at odds. Danny scratched the side of his neck, wondering what it was that unsettled him.

“Here.” Two-handed, Steve lifted a framed print off the wall and set it on the large table on the opposite side of the chair.

Doctor’s office, Danny realised. The setting reminded him of his childhood doctor’s forbidding office, although there had been no computer back then. He leaned over the gold frame. Two slightly yellowing pages of text were carefully protected behind a plate of glass.

Seolh Co-operative

Purpose for forming the co-operative
The co-operative (hereafter called Seolh) has been created for the body of people (the residents) that live at Seolh, to help their development as creative people and to be part of a mutually helpful community that supports them.

1. **Definition of a resident**

1.1. A resident at Seolh is a person who endeavours to create on a habitual basis.

2. **Membership requirements**

2.1. The ability to create.
2.2. To need the support of Seolh rather than to want the benefits Seolh.

3. **Activities the co-operative will be involved in**

3.1. Creativity with a definable, definite output.
   3.1.1. *An output is a physical, tangible entity.*
3.2. Ongoing development of a supportive community.
3.3. Upkeep and maintenance of Seolh and the House for now and the future.

4. **Names of the incorporators**

4.1. See the Agreement.

5. **Powers**

5.1. The owner holds the legal power of the co-operative. But the owner, or appointed proxy, will abide by and listen to residents of Seolh in all matters, as determined by open discussion at regular weekly community meetings and/or extraordinary meetings and democratic voting.
5.2. The owner, or the proxy, will ensure that all residents are aware when meetings, both regular and extraordinary, are held.
5.3. A resident can call for a meeting (regular or extraordinary) and contribute to the agenda.

6. **Voting rights**

6.1. One resident is entitled to one vote at all co-operative meetings.

7. **Residency**

7.1. A potential resident will live at Seolh for the period of one month, or a period as agreed by the residents. The potential resident will then decide whether or not Seolh is a suitable community in which they can live. A vote will determine whether a potential resident can remain at Seolh as a new resident.
7.2. The new resident will be subject to a probationary period of six months from the date that they became a new resident. Probation will be lifted following a second vote after six months, by which the new resident may become an ongoing resident or asked to leave the co-operative.
7.3. A resident’s spouse/partner or other dependents may live at Seolh, subject to the vote of the community.
   7.3.1. *The resident is responsible for the actions and behaviour of their spouse/partner or other dependents while they are in residence at Seolh.*
7.4. A resident (potential, new, or ongoing) can leave at any time.
7.5. A resident may prove unsuitable to continue to reside at Seolh, for example, through carrying out criminal acts against fellow residents of Seolh or others in the wider community (or in the case of similar behaviour from the residents’ spouse/partner or dependents). In this case, the owner will
organise an extraordinary meeting, and following an open discussion, a vote will be held, to determine continuing residency or not.

7.6. A resident will contribute to Seolh to enable the activities (point 3) of Seolh to be carried out.

7.7. A resident will endeavour to attend meetings to ensure that democratic processes are adhered to.

7.8. Tolerance and open-mindedness in all aspects of people’s life choices and behaviours is appreciated and advocated.

“’It’s not really a co-operative, is it? It’s more like a benevolent dictatorship,” Danny finally observed, after carefully reading through the document twice.

Steve’s face scrunched up and he crossed his arms over his chest. “No, I disagree -- there’s a community and vote. Okay, it’s not perfect, but a lot of work went into drafting it, and keeping it short and succinct. My grandmother never wanted it to be too prescriptive.”

To be honest, Danny knew that he was going to have to read the Charter again, and think about it a lot. There was a lot of trust in the residents built into the document.

“And what does that last line actually mean?” Danny asked.

“You can’t make people not act like dicks. You can only ask them to try to not be dicks.” Steve gazed heavenwards and blew out a sigh. “And maybe learn from their mistakes.”

~*~

“Danno!” Grace came screeching down Stan’s ostentatious mansion drive.

Ecstatic, Danny knelt and opened his arms.

~*~

While they hadn’t discussed it, no one mentioned the events of the past week: fire and poisoning. Admittedly, Danny was worried that a third nightmare might occur, but the “bad guy” (to coin a phrase) had got what he wanted. Danny couldn’t figure out what they might come back for.

Okay, if he thought about it too much, he might have moved into a hotel -- but he simply didn’t have the funds. Not having Monkey would have been the thin end of the wedge of despair. Seolh was safe. There was a Navy SEAL, Kavika’s men, the police driving past pretty much continuously.

He was terrified that something was going to happen.

Grace didn’t protest the extra hugs that he was bestowing on her. She was absolutely horrified at the state of the Hall. MacDonald’s crew had been working fourteen hour days and there was some sort of iron (Danny doubted that it was iron) now embedded into the supporting wall that had borne the brunt of the fire. Once plastered over -- another contractor’s responsibility -- it would be hidden from view. Another insurance-approved contractor was working on restoring the broken windows to match the existing framing.

The floor was simply horrendous.

They were still all tired. And Steve wasn’t admitting to a bad headache. Grace had had a long week at school. Feeling somewhat like the Father Bear of the whole motley crew, in Grandfather Mamo’s absence, Danny sent them all to bed early.
When Danny finally emerged from his blankets on Saturday morning, he once again found a note propped beside the coffee pot telling him that Grace and Steve were on the beach. Kono had scribbled her name at the bottom of the message with a little heart symbol.

This time he made himself a traveller’s mug of coffee and grabbed the whole box of sugary doughy treats, which no doubt had thousands of tasty calories, left invitingly beside the pot.

He still didn’t have a pair of swim trunks, and he was not going to swim in his boxers. Having a finite wardrobe, courtesy of his apartment fire, was a pain. There was a bin in the laundry room, however, that contained old clothes to be donated to charity.

Danny pondered, a fillip of false pride stopping him from checking immediately. However, he knew that it was false pride -- so he went, because he was fairly sure that there were a couple of pairs of old jeans that he might be able to cut down.

“Danno!” Grace carolled.

Once again Steve had kept her out of the water until he arrived. It was considerate. They weren’t building a sandcastle this time -- with Kono’s help, they were sculpting an octopus as tall as Grace. Its tentacles stretched across the sand towards Danny. Bulbous eyes were decorated with colourful shells around pupil-like black lava stones.

“Like the shorts.” Kono winked appreciatively.

“They look familiar.” Steve squinted (Danny made a note to recommend that he go to the opticians, because Steve squinted a lot).

“I got them out of the rag bin.”

“Oh, they’re my old jeans. They’re too big now,” he added, offhand.

Danny glowered, but Steve was concentrating on sculpting a flared tentacle tip with his bare hands.

“That’s because you’re too skinny.”

“What?” Steve glanced back.

“Maladaada?” Danny held the box up by its pink bow and grinned cheesily.

“I think I deserve one,” Kono decided, plucking one from the box and settling down on a towel lying on the sand.

Danny sat beside her, conscious of the need to rest. Kono looked much more tired that he felt. She bore a deep purple bruise on the side of her neck, just down by the collarbone, and few more on her skinny wrists. Covered by large translucent band aids they matched the bloody bruise staining the back of Danny’s hand.

Coffee was drunk, malasadas consumed, and a giant octopus constructed.

“Picture?” Grace dropped her Nixon Cool PIx into Danny’s eager hands.
“Okay.” Danny scanned the scene. “Gracie, do you want to get on the octopus’ back, and we’ll get Kono and Steve to play victims.”

Kono laughed, and began digging a hole under a tentacle so that she could pretend to be ensnared.

Steve hunched, mulishly.

“Buck up, SEALy. It’s bigger than you. Get lying down.”

“You do know that the octopus’ brain is above their eyes.” And, yes, Steve had smoothed a bump between the two large, pebbly shelly eyes. “Which, when the octopus has pulled me close enough, I’m going to stab my knife in and kill it.”

“Steve!” Grave shrieked.

Abashed, he muttered, “Sorry.”

“Get tangled up, me hearty,” Danny directed, laughing. “I’ll even let you pull your knife out.”

As if by magic, the jet black knife appeared.

“Steven,” Danny chided as Grace shrieked, joyfully, this time.

~*~

“I was wondering if you’d be able to help a friend of mine?” Kono asked as they watched Steve and Grace rock pooling along the rocks under the path leading back up to Seolh. Steve was crouched before Grace examining something that she held in both hands for him to study.

“If I can,” Danny said willing, but circumspect.

“It’s not going to pay a lot.” Kono clasped her arms around her knees.

“I thought that it was a favour.”

“I’m getting ahead of myself.” Kono smiled at him. “A friend, Ben, designs clothes -- eco friendly clothes -- using a variety of fabrics. He needs promotional stuff. High impact. I’ve asked Toast to help with the webpage.”

“And I’ll take the photos?”

Kono nodded like a little kid, or one of those noddy dogs on the dashboard of a car.

“Sure,” Danny agreed. “I will have to rent some stuff -- lights, camera, but I can figure out exactly what I need after talking with him. I assume you got some models lined up?”

Kono scrunched her nose up.

“I thought that you might think of a couple.” She gazed out at Steve, now standing tall on the edge of a rocky outcrop studying the breadth of the gently rolling sea up to the horizon. “I’ve seen the way you look at him, Brah.”

“How do I look at him?” Danny asked, honestly confused.

Kono eyed him like a profoundly disappointed new puppy owner.
“I suppose,” she said sing-song, “you are an artist.”

“You’re not making any sense, Kalakaua. Yes, I’m an artist. A photographer.”

“And you like staring at people with your heart in your mouth?”

“What? What? You mean…” Danny waved his hand between himself and Steve, who was carefully picking his way back to Grace’s side over the uneven rocks.

“You mean,” Kono echoed, “you haven’t thought about it?”

Danny stuffed a piece of a malasada in his mouth.

Kono watched him chew, unimpressed.

Danny swallowed, hard. “I hadn’t gone there in my head, until you mentioned it.”

“And?”

“Okay, I’m gonna say something and I don’t want you to hit me.”

Kono leaned, vaguely threateningly.

“I’m not blind. I can appreciate the male form, and the female form.” Danny automatically leered, and flushed immediately. “But I haven’t thought about Steve that way.”

“I guess you do coddle him,” Kono observed.

“What?”

Kono settled back, relaxing into the circle of her arms.

“And he let’s you.” Kono set her chin on her knees. “He’s not -- well. He’s getting there; he’s been through absolute shit in the last six months. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up, Brah.”

“It’s okay,” Danny hand-waved, thoughts a thousand miles away. Was he attracted to Steve? Was Steve attracted to him?

~*~

“Steve?” Grace sidled up to Steve, as he stood at the kitchen table taking out any frustrations that he had on an innocent ball of bread dough.

“Hey, Grace.”

She held her camera up. “Can we look at our photos?”

“Oh, on my laptop? Sure, give me a moment.”

Danny watched as Steve prodded the bread mix knowingly.

“Yeah, it’s ready, time for second rise,” he said cryptically, and covered the bowl with a damp tea-towel. He set the bowl on the kitchen window sill in the December sun.

Danny put down his latest National Geographic (he was lost without his camera).

“I wonder where Mrs. Keawe’s put my laptop…” Steve began to say and then froze, an intense gaze
focussed on Grace.

“Babe?” Danny asked, concerned.

“You know, Mrs. Keawe thinks because it’s a notebook that it belongs on my bookshelves,” Steve stated.

“And?” Danny said, concerned. A hint of a flush touched Steve’s sharp cheekbones, lending him a feverish cast.

“Gracie, you are without a doubt the best girl in the Universe.” Steve bent over and dropped a little kiss on the top of her hair.

“I like you too, Uncle Steve.” Grace grinned up at him.

Steve looked fit to burst. “Remember last time Grace was here? She made a screen show on my computer?” Steve waggled his eyebrows.

Danny glanced at Grace and then at Steve.

“Holy shit, she backed up my photos.”

~*-~
Co-operative Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Danny Williams, Professional Photographer, and his first month at the Seolh Co-operative.

# 34 #

Steve raced up the stairs well ahead of Danny. The man moved like a machine when focussed. Danny scrambled after him, Grace at his heels.

It was a wild run. Their stomping like a veritable herd of elephants drew Chin from his studio. Danny and Grace raced past him; Chin followed a beat later.

“What are we doing, Daddy?” Grace asked as they all bunched together in the top landing before Steve’s apartment. A millisecond later, Steve had the door open and they all piled into the eyrie.

Steve went straight to the diamond bookshelves that dominated the far wall. He scanned them rapidly.

“Oh, Mrs. Keawe, where would you put it? Damn, they’ve all been rearranged.” The books were now in order of size. Steve and Danny automatically started scanning. Steve lunged forwards and drew out the über thin black notebook from between an Encyclopaedia of the Living Earth and a Scooby Doo annual.

“What’s happening?” Chin asked.

“Grace put photos on Steve’s laptop,” Danny explained, as Steve set his laptop on the floor in front of his television. He pulled his PS2 out from its nook and disconnected the cabling. The laptop chimed, booting up.

“Hey, Monkey.” Danny drew out the battered Scooby Doo annual, circa 1985, and handed it over.

“You sit yourself down and read, until we’ve looked over the photographs.”

“But--”

Danny leaned over and kissed the top of her head, just about where Steve had pecked a kiss. “Just read the book, Monkey. There might be pictures that I don’t want you looking at.”

Rolling her eyes dramatically, Grace sat by the kitchen counter, placing the book on the tabletop, back to the television.

Steve was sitting crossed legged before the giant LCD television, remotes to hand. The screen flashed to AUX and a desktop of Microsoft golden wheat fields filled the screen.

Steve opened Windows Explorer and navigated to the picture folder. Hundreds of tiny icons opened. The beige creamy ones in the top folder were old. It was hard to tell from the resolution, but they looked like scanned, old family photographs. Steve zipped down the navigation pane to a new folder at the bottom called: Grace & Danno. A double click opened the sub-folder.
“Yes,” Danny exulted.

Grace had indiscriminately uploaded a lot of photographs. Danny settled beside Steve, fingers crossed, hoping that she had uploaded both the images from her Nikon and his Canon.

“Order them by ‘date modified,’” Danny advised.

Chin sat on the couch behind them, elbows resting on his knees as he leaned forwards.

“Okay!” Danny said as he scanned the list of file names. “My camera is there. Start viewing the photographs from a week before I came to Seolh. Hang on. What programmes do you have to view images?”

“Paint, maybe. Windows Picture and Fax viewer?”

Danny gagged dramatically. “Gimme your laptop.” He snatched it off the floor, stretching the cords to the point where he had to yank them out. “Chin?”

“What?” Chin said, over their heads.

“You’re like, good with computers, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Chin said smoothly, somehow implying that he was very, very good with computers.

“We need to download a computer programme called Picasa or Digikam to best look at my photographs.” Danny leaned back and handed the laptop over to Chin.

“I know how to download a programme from the internet,” Steve protested. “And why? My laptop can open photographs.”

“I shoot in RAW format, Mr. Science.”

Behind them as they squabbled, Chin tap-tapped away at the laptop, connecting to the wireless internet and, no doubt, navigating to the Picasa website.

“Here.” What felt like a hundred years later, Chin leaned down, passing the laptop back so that they could reconnect it to the television.

Tongue caught between his teeth, Danny opened the files with the new programme. As the first photograph opened, Steve angled the laptop, so that he could manipulate the touch pad. Danny let him take over.

Image followed image with each finger click. Danny wanted to go faster. But Steve controlled the mouse. He scanned each picture, top to bottom, left to right, blinking regularly. Danny generally took two or three shots of the same scene, and Steve bestowed each with the same degree of concentration. He had obviously professionally scrutinised photographs before. He opened a little Word window and every once in a while typed the filename of an image that needed further scrutiny.

“Do we have any idea what we’re looking for?” Danny asked.

“Suspicious activity,” Steve said, focus uninterrupted, as he finally clicked through a picture of a fence and the interplay of light.

“Unsuspicous fence,” Danny observed.

“Fences generally are,” Chin said, deadpan.
There might have been something beyond the aim of your shot.”

“Can we not scroll thought fast and see if anything jumps out and then do it glacially slowly?” Danny asked.

The suggestion garnered a break in Steve’s formidable concentration. Danny thought that it was a good idea. He nodded fervently at Steve, emphasising that his idea was, indeed, a good idea.

Steve turned back to the screen and, while he didn’t say anything, he did start clicking significantly faster.

Palm trees; ripples of sand; people shopping for chillies; a puddle of water on otherwise dry stonework; an abandoned sucker on the sidewalk and a beetle gorging; people crossing the street in a hurry. For the first time in his life, Danny bemoaned his tendency to photograph anything that caught his attention. A line of boats on the dockside, in the early evening light; a fishing pot with broken netting; a guy sitting on his boat mending a net; the guy smiling toothlessly up at Danny; the line of the dock and the fish processing units.

Steve leaned forward like a hunting dog. He manipulated the touchpad, zooming in on the third unit.

“Hesse.” The terrorist was exiting the Luopo Shellfish Processing Plant, half caught in the shadow of the roll up metal door. The next photograph showed him a little more clearly as he evidently walked further out of the unit. The third in the same series caught a man walking behind Hesse. Steve zoomed in on the unknown person. Danny took high resolution photographs in RAW format for a reason: maximizing image quality, pixels, and memory. He never knew which part of a photograph he would use.

“Do you know him?” Chin asked.

“No,” Steve said, leaning closer to the screen.


Steve clicked to the next photograph. It was boat, a beam trawl net hanging off an A-frame, the Hawaiian winter sun behind making the lines of the gear stark black against the golden sky. The next photo was indistinguishable from the previous photograph. The following photo was of a Barbie in a pink diaphanous gown -- one of Grace’s.

“What did you do immediately after taking the photographs on the dockside?” Steve asked.

“I had to book. I was picking Grace up from school. We went for ice cream.”

“I guess if you had hung around, you probably would have been mugged,” Steve said clinically.

“Shush!” Danny hissed, jerking his thumb at Grace.

“So what do we do next?” Chin asked.

“I’ll go get a memory stick from my office.” Steve rose gracefully to his feet and stalked into his office behind the staircase.

“Should I email them to someone?” Danny asked Chin.

“I don’t know, Brah.” Chin joined Danny on the floor so that they could talk circumspectly. “Toast
is keeping a watch on the internet to see if anyone is ‘bugging’ us. He hasn’t found anything.”

“How does that work?” Danny whispered.

“It might not be the internet.” Chin smiled slightly. He waved his fingers in the air. “The network.”

“We should give the laptop to Toast, shouldn’t we? He’ll be able to... uhm... hide the photographs.”

“You mean encrypt?” Chin ventured.

“What does encrypt mean, Daddy?”

“A secret code, Monkey.”

Steve crossed back over the length of his apartment. “It’s using an algorithm to make information unreadable unless you have access to a key.”

“What’s an algorithm, Uncle Steve?”

“Bhu buh!” Danny waved his finger to the side. “Math lessons later. Let’s back up these photographs and give them to -- Commander White, I guess?”

“Yes.” Steve crouched down, and inserted the USB stick, quickly and efficiently copying the files onto the empty stick. “Okay. Give my laptop to Toast. I want the photographs copied and encrypted with an algorithm and backed up.”

~*~

Danny watched as Steve drove off, stones spitting up from under the tyres of his truck. Danny had offered to go with, but he had been ignored as Steve focussed on the objective of getting the information to his superiors as soon as possible.

“Will Uncle Steve be okay?” Grace asked, slipping her hand into Danny’s grasp.

“Yes,” Danny said resolutely. The idiot hadn’t even taken Simons with him, preferring to leave the protection for the residents of Seolh. He damn well better be, Danny thought, giving in to paranoia, scanning the area and hoping that they weren’t being watched. Toast had reported that he wasn’t picking up any electromagnetic signals other than the obvious suspects and there was no evidence that their phones had been tapped or cloned.

Toast was kind of scary.

Damn, Steve, Danny thought, you should have taken someone with you.

~*~

In an attempt to distract himself, Danny spoke to Kono, and Ben came around to talk about his designs with some samples and his sketch book. Danny wondered if he was a potential resident, but decided to leave that in Kono’s capable hands.

Ben’s designs were on the casual side of the clothes spectrum, Danny thought as he leafed through the sketch pad lying on the conservatory coffee table. The designer had a preference for elegant long flowing lines, which were best suited to the tall and lithe. Kono and Steve would make good models. He kind of wondered if Chin would play along -- but thought that he would let Kono ask. And watch her work from a distance, to get pointers.
“So what’s this stuff?” Danny asked, tapping his finger against drawings of underwear or swimwear.

“Ben’s dad is part of Coral Prince,” Kono non-explained.

“What’s Coral Prince?” It kind of rang a bell.

Ben stared at him as if he just crawled out from under a rock, a particularly deeply buried, damp one.

“Number One surf company – academy on the Islands, Brah,” he said slowly. “Third ranking in the world.”

Danny slid a glance at Kono. If Ben was part of this Coral thing, presumably he was actually quite well off. So he didn’t need a down-on-his-luck photographer to help him. Kono-machinations, Danny guessed. Or Ben didn’t have much to do with his dad.

“Are you only wanting to promote your clothes? Or clothes and swimwear?”

“Both,” Ben said, obviously thinking on the spot. The guy was clearly a very new, tenderfoot.

“I need to see the clothes and the swimwear stuff,” Danny said. “The fabric. See how it looks in light, and especially when it’s wet. I’ve got some thoughts. I like the idea of shooting action. And if we can get a H-RES video camera, let’s get some mpegs that we’ll put on Toast’s site.”

“I’ll bring the stuff out that I’ve got in the car.” Ben jumped to his feet and ran out of the conservatory.

“Kono,” Danny said chastisingly.

“I know. I know. His clothes are awesome. He’s got the business sense of a gnat. He’s about protecting the environment and conservation. He figures this is one way of supporting his foundation. Fifty percent of sales are going to support MarineLifeHawaii. He’s more comfortable protesting and campaigning.” Kono shook her head from side to side. “I figure, he’s figured since someday he’ll inherit Coral Prince, he has to learn how businesses work, and this way he can learn doing something that he likes.”

“And you’re helping him?” Danny said. It wasn’t really a question. Kono had a sense about her: she saw a need, assessed it, and found a solution.

“MarineLifeHawaii does good work. I like Ben.”

“Like Ben?” Danny raised his eyebrows and cocked a grin at her.

“I like Ben, like you like Steve,” Kono riposted.

His glare slid off Kono like water off a duck’s back. “Excuse me, I’m just going to check on Grace.”

Kono chortled as he escaped.

Grace was in the corridor of receptions rooms, playing explorer. Steve’s only contribution to the planned adventures of Grace The Explorer™ had been: try not to break anything.

“Hey.” Danny nodded at Lieutenant Simons, who was at the front door, watching Ben get stuff out of the car, he guessed.

“Mr. Williams,” Simons returned, slanting an assessing glance at him.
“Have you heard from Steve?”

“No, sir,” Simons said blandly, turning to face him.

“Can you call what’s-his-face, White? I’ve got the number.” Danny rifled in his chino pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “He’s out there on his own. Hey--” Danny stabbed the number in the memory.

The line rang, interminably.

“Commander White’s office,” a young, bright male voice finally answered.

“This is Danny Williams. Is Commander White there?”

“No, sir. Can I take a message?”

“Have you seen Steve -- Lieutenant Commander McGarrett?”

“No, sir. If you would like to leave a message?”


“Nothing, sir,” Simons said, settling into parade rest.

“Did it not occur to you to go with Steve? He’s out there and there’s a whole bunch of people who might be after him. Aren’t you guys a team?”

“Lieutenant Commander McGarrett ordered me to stay at Seolh, to protect the assets.”

“Assets?” He had never been called an asset before -- ass, maybe.

“The photographs, Mr. Williams.”

“And you just listen to orders? I was under the impression that you were guarding all of us, including Steve,” Danny continued, because he knew what the real assets were: Steve’s Ohana.

“No, sir. That would have required an entire team. I am here as a liaison.”

Terrifyingly contained and scarily intense liaison with a giant gun, Danny noted. “Liaison, right? A trained Navy SEAL liaison -- wow, that’s an efficient use of resources. What, you’re like a phone call away from calling in a SEAL team, and running interference until they parachute in?”

Simons didn’t confirm or deny.

Danny got in close. “Right, and that is in no way sensible, given that you let the most--” it felt like betrayal on his lips, “--vulnerable of us leave.”

“Lieutenant Commander McGarrett may be medically retired but he is no more vulnerable than the rest of you,” Simons said unequivocally. “In fact he is considerably less vulnerable than you may believe.”

“He’s got a fucking concussion. He’s doing the scrunchy headache, McHeadache face all the time.”

Simons reached into his pocket -- Danny froze -- and extracted a cell phone. Without looking at the keypad, he hit speed dial.
“This is Lieutenant Simons. Put me through to J-TAC.” He paused, dark impenetrable gaze fixed on Danny. “Lieutenant Simons, sir. Yes. With Commander White. Please can you confirm that Lieutenant Commander Steven McGarrett is on the base?”

Danny waited, fingertips drumming against his Blackberry.

“Thank you, sir.” Simons pocketed his phone. “The commander is safely on the base.” He deliberately raised a fine eyebrow.

Danny backed off. “Thank you,” he managed without sounding surly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I was going to check on my daughter.”

Simons pointed in the direction of the reception room. “Explorer Grace is in the room that she’s calling The Library -- third on the left.”

Danny waved his hand up by his ear as he strode off to the double doors. “You guys are scarily intense -- in the best possible way, I think -- possibly.”

~*~

# 35 #

“Okay, we’re going to experiment.” Danny put the Veganepicuran cookbook on the table before Grace. “It’s my turn to cook tonight. But we’re going to try something new -- we’re going to cook vegan.”

“What’s vegan?” Grace asked, settling beside Danny so that they could look at the book together.

“No meat, or milk, or fish, or even honey. Vegetarian with bells and whistles.”

“Oh, not a thing like lasagne, then.” Grace was already skimming through the book. “Why are we making vegan stuff?”

“It’s always good to try new things.” Danny peered over her shoulder. “Look at the celebration recipes -- we’ll make something nice and rich.”

Grace turned back to the index and scanned the chapter headings -- selecting Thanksgiving and Party recipes -- and turned to the requisite pages. Danny skimmed the recipes with Grace. Nothing jumped out as edible.

“Everything is spicy, Danno.”

“Everything?” Danny asked. But she was kind of right, chillies and peppers featured largely in the recipes. He really did not want to eat anything spicy. Grace didn’t like spicy and Steve didn’t like spicy.

Grace turned back to the index and started randomly calling out names of potential dishes.

“Valpolicella,” Grace stumbled over the word, “Pizza with Caramelized Onions & Vegetables in red wine. That might be nice.” She flipped through to the page.

“Cheeseless pizza?” Danny intoned, horrified. “No, we’re not going there.”

Grace continued to leaf. “Hadyn stew with rosemary dumplings?” She drew a smooth fingernail along the title.
Danny scanned the ingredients, and judged it comfort food without the chicken that his mom would have automatically added. He thought that he might bake some chicken breasts with olive oil and a sprinkling of herbs and chop them up, so people could add them if they wished.

“Okay, let’s hit the siege pantry.” Danny picked the cookbook up.

“Can we make dessert, Daddy?”

“How’s about Apple crisp?”

“With ice cream?”

“Can you have apple crisp without ice cream?” Danny wondered out loud.

“Is ice cream vegan, Daddy?”

“Probably, I think. Maybe? It might depend on the type of ice cream. We’ll figure it out.”

Danny checked the kitchen clock again. It was getting late. The stew smelled rather good, and it was the sort of dish which improved with age. The dumplings were almost ready to drop in for the final step. Danny checked the clock again. The crisp was baking away in the oven, the scent of apples and cinnamon, rich and mouth watering.

Grace munched happily on a carrot as she sat by the kitchen table, clumsily and messily making golf ball sized dumplings with two spoons in between bites.

A key in a lock clicked and a door opened. Danny, crazily, glanced at the kitchen door, the normal mode of entry to the House. But it remained firmly closed. Danny teleported into the corridor leading to the foyer.

Steve was carefully locking the front door behind him.

“What the Hell have you been doing!” Danny said stridently, stamping his foot. “I’ve been worried sick.”

Steve jerked, almost dropping the keys. Stunned into silence, he stared at Danny, key ring hanging between his thumb and index finger.

“You’ve made me channel my mother!” Danny continued. “I might never forgive you. Would it have killed you to text? That doesn’t need hearing. You set up the buddy system for a reason. Hesse could have dragged you off the street. There are more of them than you!”

Still trapped by the door, Steve was making a fish-faced expression.

“Aren’t SEALs supposed to work in teams? More than one of you, that means, not going off on your own.” Danny got a finger jabbing action going.

Steve’s eyes narrowed, following the stabbing finger.

“You’re not getting any of this, are you? Or you’re getting half of it. Because I’m yelling at you! You’re not allowed to go off on your own, okay. Okay?”

“I--” Steve began, and stopped, words failing him. He pocketed his keys, and frowned at Danny.
“No. Don’t tell me that this was about leaving protection here at Seolh,” Danny continued. “You could have got me to make a phone call for you and got White to come here. Or you could have asked Simons. I would have even pretended and invited White for lunch. Have you been at Pearl Harbour all this time?”

“I get that you’re angry, Danny,” Steve trailed off frustrated. He stared at Danny looking for clues.

Grace poked her head out of the kitchen, behind Danny, and said clearly and precisely, “You’d best apologise for worrying Danno, Uncle Steve.”

Steve flashed a smile at Grace, and then faced Danny seriously, “I’m sorry for scaring you, Danno.”

With great deliberation, Danny wrapped the fingers of his left hand around his pointy finger and bent it down to stop it jabbing angrily at the annoying, overprotective, independent, imperious Emperor of Seolh.

“You’re the one that talks about Ohana. Remember, your Ohana thingy -- working together.” Danny sniffed. “Grace has cooked dinner, and you’re going to like it.”

“I’m sure that it will be delicious,” Steve said, which proved pretty conclusively that he hadn’t eaten much kid-prepared food.

“We made vegum.” Grace darted around Danny, grabbed Steve’s hand and towed him into the kitchen.

“Excuse me?” Steve said plaintively.

~*~

The gang, including Lieutenant Simons were sitting around the kitchen table. Grace was a quivering ball of excitement. Danny figured if this went well, he had a budding contender for Junior Master Chef on his hands.

Kneeling on her chair, she pointed at the central pot. “This is Hadyn Stew with rosemary dumplings. It’s really good for you; it’s filled with vegetables,” Grace proclaimed. Dotted around the stew pot like satellites were warming dishes suspended over individual candles. Grace continued explaining, “These are stuff to add, if you like. This is roast chicken with rosemary and basil; these are jalapeno chillies in oil, it’s very spicy, so be careful; I don’t like broccoli, so we cooked the broccoli separate. If you like it -- you can add it to the stew. These are cro—cr--, cru?” She looked at her Danno for help.

“Croutons –- little squares of garlic bread to sprinkle on top if you like.”

“So.” Grace dropped back on her chair with a thump. “You can start now.”

“Grace,” Danny chastised lightly.

“Yes, Daddy?”

“It would be more polite to make that less of an order.”

“Really?” Grace said dubiously. “Okay, you can start later if you like, but it’s going to get cold.”

Toast laughed into the piece of paper towel that he was using as a napkin.

Steve laughed outright as he ladled a generous spoonful into his bowl, and then darted back to corral
a couple of dumplings.

“It smells lovely,” Chin said, accepting the ladle from Steve, and filling his own bowl.

Food was doled out, and as Danny expected Kono scattered a generous handful of chillies over her bowl. Simons proved to be a chilli lover too.

Another successful meal à la Williams, Danny thought, proudly.

~*~

Carefully, Danny picked his way down the foyer staircase after settling a sleepy Grace on her Princess bed.

“So, Dude, what happened at the Navy place?” he heard Toast ask.

“Let’s wait for Danny,” Steve said.

“I’m here.” Danny presented himself, making jazz hands, as he stepped into the television room. “As on old Scottish mentor of mine used to say: what’s the crack?”

The gang turned towards his theatricality like moths to a flame. Steve paused a beat, parsing, failing to follow the wording, but evidently deciding to just get on with the information download. Simons was conspicuous by his absence -- Danny assumed that he was patrolling the house being an overpaid, over-experienced liaison.

“The person of interest with the terrorist, Victor Hesse, is currently unknown. But given the effort that they went to, to prevent any photographs being circulated -- he is evidently a significant player in the terrorist arena.”

“And?” Danny probed, dropping on the sofa beside Kono.

The sag of the old long sofa brought them together. Kono shuffled into his warmth; she was chilled. Cocking a checking glance at Chin standing by the windows, Danny stayed where he was sitting, knowing that he ran hot.

“Oh, did you get my camera back?” Danny asked.

“Ah.” Steve looked a little furtive.

“What have you done with my camera?” Danny snapped.

Steve jerked his thumb absently over his shoulder. “I forgot about it. It’s in my truck. In the glove compartment.”

“Did the fingerprints turn up anything on the computer geek?” Danny forced himself to remain seated beside Kono, putting out heat like a Nuclear Power Plant. He, badly, wanted his camera back in his own two hands.

Now that expression on Steve’s face was one that he wanted to capture, preferably when Steve was lounging in a Dolce and Gabbana black suit, and maybe even possibly playing with his jet black knife.

I’m such a perv, Danny thought, chastisingly.

“Who is the computer geek?” Chin asked carefully, turning from his study of the dark gardens
beyond the windows.

Steve settled back in his armchair, back straight, arms arranged precisely on the rests.

“I can’t say,” Steve said stiffly. “However, if any of you see her -- do not approach her. Tell me or contact… tell me.”

“We don’t know what she looks like,” Chin pointed out, underscoring that they had been paralysed, hardly even conscious.

“Actually,” Kono interjected, suddenly grey-pale under her normal warm tan. Danny moved his arm around her narrow shoulders. “Can we get photographs of these people? I don’t know what they look like. They could walk past me on the beach, and I wouldn’t have a clue who they were.”

Steve jerked back as if slapped. His intense gaze segued into scary.

“I know what Hesse looks like,” Chin added. “I saw Danny’s photographs. And the other guy.”

“Babe? Why can’t Chin and Toast and Kono know what these people look like?" Danny nodded at Chin, Toast as ever sitting on the floor, Kono curled up at his side. “They could be watching any of us outside of Seolh.”

“It’s entirely possible if you don’t recognise them and they approach you, you’ll be safer. The drug of choice was about incapacitating, rather than killing,” Steve said, horribly clinically.

“Or they get in really close, and we never know what happens,” Toast said, veteran of PS2 Mortal Kombat.

Steve was looking at Kono as he responded. “I’ll get a briefing document.”

“Thank you,” Kono said tensely.

Inhaling carefully, Steve’s fine nostrils flared. “There’s a lady,” he said, as if each word was weighted gold, “that I talk to. She’s good. I can talk to people and make appointments if you want. For everyone.”

Wow, Steve had a therapist, and the private man had both admitted to that, and used that knowledge to help his friends decide if it was best for them. Danny didn’t honestly feel the need to talk to anyone about his experience. But he had been conscious, he had not been close to death, and while vulnerable, he had managed to help -- albeit it hadn’t been necessary.

“On a more positive note,” Chin said, obviously changing the subject. “I was going to bring this up tomorrow at Chore Wrangling, but I got the Governor’s Christmas Ball invites the other day.”

“Excellent.” Kono brightened immediately.

“They still do that?” Steve asked incredulously. “We have to go?”

“Yes, Steve. We--” Chin paused a beat, “--really should go, for the good of Seolh and the community.”

Steve’s pouty face was the epitome of disgruntled poutiness, Danny noted. Grace couldn’t have done it better.

“You actually know Governor Jameson. Patricia Jameson. Audrey’s friend,” Chin clarified when Steve didn’t react.
“I get that this is a social event,” Danny interjected, when the pouting was actually starting to colour the air around Steve a dull, sullen grey. “And really short notice. But why is it a good thing for Seolh?”

“Networking,” Chin said succinctly. “For the residents. I got my first commission at Governor Dubois-Celine’s Ball. But we also pick up intel about prospective Land Planning developments which may impinge on Seolh.”

Steve perked up at the word intel.

“We all have an invite?” Danny checked.

“Yes. We knew the date. But we got the actual paper invites the other day. You’ll get to meet my fiancée Malia at the Ball, Danny.”

“What!” Kono shrieked. “Fiancée! You’re engaged. That’s awesome. That’s the best news.” She scrambled away from Danny’s side and flung herself into Chin’s arms. “When did this happen?”

“Er, congratulations,” Danny said, his side cold from Kono’s abandonment.

“Recently,” Chin said, circumspectly, and Danny wondered if the attack had been a wake up call.

“You’ll get married here at Seolh?” Steve half-questioned, half-asked and all parts ordered.

“I wouldn’t want to get married anywhere else in the world,” Chin said seriously.

“You’re going to live here, aren’t you? You’re not thinking of moving away, are you?” Kono leaned back in Chin’s arms to better see him. “Seolh and Chin. It’s peanut butter and jelly.”

“The Charter allows partners to live with their resident… partner.” Steve stood and held out his hand. “Congratulations, Chin.”

Chin leaned over the coffee table and they shook hands across the length.

“You’ll be my best man, won’t you, Steve?”

“I’d be honoured.”

“This is so cool.” Kono detangled herself from Chin. “I have to call Malia.”

“She’s on… shifts…” Chin said to the empty space where Kono had been a heartbeat before.

“This calls for a celebration.” Steve disappeared after Kono.

Toast gave Chin the thumbs up from his sprawl on the floor. “Best news, dude.”

“Shifts?” Danny asked.

“Malia’s a doctor at the King’s Medical Centre.”

“Are you going to stay?” Toast asked. “‘Cause as Kono says, you’re kinda the soul of Seolh.”

Soul of Seolh, Danny liked that. He’d been calling Chin ‘The President’ in the privacy of his own head.

“So what does that make Steve?” Chin asked, curious.
“Head, man.” Toast said, like it wasn’t even open to discussion.

Steve returned with five tall champagne glasses interlaced between the fingers of one hand and a matt black bottle with a red-gold label in the other.

“The ’73. We’ll keep the ’59 for your wedding,” Steve said.

“Awesome.” Toast scrambled to his feet. “I’ve never had real champagne.”

“If you’ll do the honours.” Steve offered Chin the bottle and set the glasses on the coffee table.

Accepting it, Chin popped the pressurised cork. Thumb in the bottom well, he professionally poured the golden bubbles, producing only a slight head in each glass, with a deft twist of his wrist.

The aroma of the champagne was sharp and tangy against Danny’s nose. He carefully picked up a glass, suddenly mindful of his marriage and resultant divorce.

“Congratulations, Chin.” He clinked his glass against Chin’s. The chime was a perfectly pitched ting that spoke of fine, classy crystal. Danny decided to take it as a good sign.

The rest of the crew came in at the other sides, so that they all came together in one heartfelt toast.

“Thank you,” Chin said sincerely.

“So do you have any plans yet?” Danny asked. The tickle of the champagne in his stomach was refreshing.

“It’s all up in the air at the moment.” Chin settled on the sofa at right angles to the long saggy-baggy sofa. “We’re still figuring it out. Sooner rather than later, though.”

Steve commandeered the other sofa, leaning forward, crystal glass cradled between his hands, he said, “We’ve had weddings at Seolh before, haven’t we?”


“Births?” Danny asked.

“Before my time,” Chin said offhandedly.

“Not Steve?” Toast said, with a giggle.

Steve’s top lip curled. “I’m pretty sure I was born in a hospital. And I know that my baby sister was.”

“I’m a maid of honour.” Kono danced into the television room and executed a pirouette. “Ooh, champagne,” she said pouncing.

It was glorious to see her joyful on Chin and Malia’s behalf and barely even croaking. She settled beside Chin, snuggling, as they clinked their glasses together.

Steve placed his half full glass on the coffee table and lazed back with a content sigh, stretching his long legs under the table.

“Steve, you should take your boots off.” Danny perched on the edge of the sofa. “You’ve had them on all day. Let some air get to your foot.”
“What?” Steve asked. But he had clearly understood, since he waggled his injured foot in the heavy boot.

“Cod--” Kono coughed into her fist, “--dle.”

Danny glanced at her. It wasn’t coddling, it was sharing his vast experience of dealing with cuts, bumps and bruises. Steve was already unlacing his boots. His socks were thick woollen hiking socks -- the perfect choice for cushioned comfort.

“That feels good,” he said, happily wiggling his bare toes as he pulled off the sock.

“Let’s see,” Danny said, the click of his fingers was automatic and ordering. It was in no way parental. He glowered at Kono.

“They’re pretty stinky.” Steve didn’t comply. “I mean, boots all day.”

“Foot.”


He twisted on his butt so that he was lying on the sofa and stretched his legs out. Danny caught his ankle. The wound was healing cleanly with only a little touch of red at the edge closest to the heel -- maybe most of his weight fell there.

“First aid kit.” Toast dropped it beside Steve’s knees.

Danny hadn’t even seen him leave the television room. The lid was already tipped back, the contents displayed. Grabbing the antibiotic cream, he squeezed a dab of ointment on his fingertip.

“I’m going to tickle you.” Danny grabbed Steve’s ankle in a vice-like grip, ignoring the unmanly squeak. He stroked the lightest of lightest coatings over the edge of the healing wound. “It’s going to be a Hell of a scar.”

Steve pulled his foot free with a squirm. “Hardly.” He wriggled up the long sofa, propping his head on the rounded armrest and stretching out. “Entertain me. Movie,” he ordered, just like a Roman Emperor.

“Romantic comedy. I mean, this is an engagement party,” Kono joshed in the face of what could only be described as dismay. “The Back-Up Plan.”


“Alien,” Chin offered.

“You really are a total horror movie fan, aren’t you.” Toast laughed.

Possibly a good choice, Danny mused inwardly, escapist make-believe with a definable bad guy as a monster rather than a person.

“Have you seen it?” he asked Kono, checking.

“Yeah, Brah, long time ago.” Kono chewed her bottom lip, pondering. “I was fourteen, maybe.”

“It’s a good film,” Danny said.

“Alien, it is.” Toast twisted around on his butt on the floor and shuffled over to the shelves of dvds
and old VHS tapes. He muttered under his breath, “Anything’s better than romance.”

“Don’t you have a girlfriend, Toast?” Chin half-pointed out.

“She likes sci-fi,” Toast said, tongue caught between this teeth as he placed the dvd on the player’s tray.

Steve was heavy eyed, lids drooping. Danny doubted that he would make it through the opening credits. He smiled a little soppily at Danny as Danny levered off the sofa to grab his glass off the table, and finish his champagne. Rather than flop back on the sofa, and probably disturb that encroaching sleep, Danny dropped on the armchair closest to the door.

“This is a great movie,” Toast said, choosing to curl up on the armchair next to Danny’s chair.

Steve rolled his head on the armrest, and as Danny predicted, his eyelids slowly slid shut. Before Sigourney Weaver’s name came up, he was breathing slowly and evenly.

“That’s a record,” Toast observed. “The movie hasn’t even started yet.”

They still left the close-captioning running.

~*~

# 36 #

Sunday presented itself as a ‘what are we going to do today?’ sort of day. Danny made French Toast and ended up making it for everyone in the House including Lt. Simons (who had a room now, but only furnished with an air bed) and Kavika’s two men. It was amazing how popular something as simple as bread dipped in beaten egg and fried could be. Steve asked for his eggs without sugar and cinnamon and then, the horror, put ketchup on his bread. Danny considered it a crime against breakfasts. Grace pronounced it ‘okay,’ when she speared a corner of toast off Steve’s plate. Danny had snapped off a photograph of his astounded expression.

“That’s the way that Grandmother made ‘eggy bread,’” Steve had explained.

“So what are we going to do today, Monkey?” Danny asked, as he finished drying the dishes.

Grace pushed up on her chair until she was kneeling. “I like exploring. What’s in the attic? Can I go in the attic?”

“I don’t think that you’ll find the attic as interesting as the rooms along the corridor,” Steve said with studied nonchalance as he put plates away. “Plus it is a sunny day; do you really want to spend it indoors? We could go surfing.”

“Surfing. No,” Danny said.

Steve was engrossed in the phone that he had acquired from somewhere, stroking the screen nimbly.

“Forecast is perfect for kids and learners.” He looked up and his face fell before Danny’s expression. “That’s a: no.”

“Yes, that’s a: No.” Danny’s hands came up sharply. “No. No. NO.”

Danny drew capitals in the air, spelling out N. O.

“Danno,” Grace whined.

“The beach slopes gently. To be honest, I’d hardly even call it surfing,” Steve continued earnestly.

“What part of NO are you two not understanding?” Danny asked, indignant.

“What are you yelling about?” Chin came into the kitchen, riding the wave of Danny’s indignation.

Steve held his hands up, lips pursed mutely, disavowing all knowledge of the conversation a millisecond ago.

“This genius--” Danny pointed at the so-called-genius, “--thinks teaching my Monkey to surf is a good idea.”

Grace quivered on the spot, fit to explode into tiny pieces of kid all over the kitchen in glorious living Technicolor.

“In the bay?” Chin checked.

Grace nodded short, sharp and repeatedly.

“Haven’t seen the forecast.” Chin angled his head to peer out the kitchen window. “But it’s probably good for beginners; doesn’t look like there’s much wind. Check surf-forcecast.com and the O’ahu tab.”


“Yes, twice,” Chin said calmly.

“Man-eating sharks.”

“You do know that surfing is the national sport of Hawaii?” Chin said. “It’s kind of hard to avoid, Brah. Might be best to let Grace learn in a safe place like the bay, with Steve. And you do know that Kono is a champion-surfer? Why don’t you get her opinion?”

“I think that I know what Kono will say,” Danny said pissily.

“True,” Chin acknowledged with a tiny smile. “But, Danny, you’ve got the best training to hand within reach, take advantage of it.”

That sounded reasonable, Danny pondered. In his heart of hearts, he knew that at some point, regardless of his wishes, Grace was going to jump on a board. Maybe Chin -- damn him -- had a point. Grace jumped off her chair and smushed up against his hip. “Thank you, Danno.”

“I don’t believe that just happened,” Danny said, shaking his head. “I don’t believe it. You, Chin Ho Kelly, are an overly reasonable, manipulative man.”

Chin shrugged, the words rolling off him. “I’ll go tell Kono that we’re having a beach day.”

Danny glared at Chin’s retreating back. It bounced off the older man, as if he had a force field. He turned his ire on a certain retired Navy SEAL.

“I can see you smiling, Steven.”
Moi, Steve mouthed. Straightening: shoulders back; he set his hands behind his back. His mobile face morphed in to a mockery of impassivity.

“Yes, you.”

“It’s hard not to.” Steve suddenly grinned, blindingly bright. “Day on the beach. Let’s have a barbeque.”

“Yes!” Grace squeezed even tighter around Danny’s waist.

~*~

Danny hauled himself out of the water, defeated by the tiny waves. Who knew that standing up on a piece of plywood -- or whatever it was -- in water was so difficult? There was sand in his butt crack, in his hair, behind his ears -- how was this supposed to be fun?

He dragged his ass up the beach towards their picnic encampment.

“Hey, Mamo,” Danny said to the elderly gentleman, basking in the sun on a camping chair, manning their portable grill.

“You’re not trying, Kaniela,” Mamo said perceptively. “You won’t learn unless you let the hate go. The ocean is above you; your hate is immaterial.”

Since he was kind of fond of Mamo, Danny managed not to roll his eyes. How could the ocean be above him? It was out there, beneath his feet. If he was so inclined he would have to dive down into it. Mamo would be telling him to go with the flow next.

“You all right, Danno?” Steve bounded up the beach, long board tucked under his arm. His hair was twisted into a mass of wet spikes. He looked happy and relaxed, teeth displayed in a shiny white smile. He did not look photogenic in his black rashguard and matching shorts because his weird little black, waterproof ankle booties made him look like a dork. “Hey, Mamo.”

“Stevie. Having fun?”

“Yeah.” Steve half laughed as he pushed his board into the sand, standing it upright. “You giving up, Danno?”

Danny double-triple checked that Chin and Kono were still with his Monkey, before turning his full attention on Steve.

“I am having a break,” Danny spoke clearly because Steve wasn’t wearing even his shitty aids.

“Practice on the board again, on the sand. Remember what Kono showed you about standing, getting your balance and not looking at your feet,” Steve instructed. “Are you a natural or a goofy foot?”

Kono had told him after she had tried to push him over. “I’m a natural.”

“Remember to get both feet on the board at the same time,” Steve continued earnestly.

Danny let his board drop on the sand unceremoniously, and planted his butt on a beach towel beside Mamo. He did not need to say that he was having a rest, it was clearly obvious.

“So,” Danny said to Mamo, ignoring Steve and his unrelenting focus on getting wet and sand encrusted, “does your nephew know anything about Luopo Shellfish?”
“Luopo Shellfish?” Mamo asked as he flipped a foil wrapped parcel on the grill. “Why? What’s that?”

“Apparently, that’s what the photos were about. Something going on at Luopo Shellfish. It’s fish processing unit on the quay, down in Honolulu.”

Steve was rooting around in his bag of snorkelling equipment. He pulled out his aids.

“I could ask Kavika.” Mamo glanced up at the path leading up to Seolh where two of Kavika’s men were sitting on the driftwood wooden bench set halfway up for weary walkers.

“Ask Kavika what?” Steve asked, twiddling with his right-hand aid unit tucked behind his ear.

“You know, the photographs, down at the quayside,” Danny explained sketching the square block of a pre-fabricated unit on the docks in mid-air.

Steve shuffled on his knees between them. “Hang on. No. This is not for the Kapu. This is a Navy matter. Or more accurately, International Agencies. Stay out of it.”

“But Stevie,” Mamo began. “We can find out about this -- what did you call it?”


“No,” Steve downright ordered. “This is dangerous. We’ve got a break. Hesse outfoxed himself. If Sang Min and Hesse had left well enough alone we would have never found out about this Top Player.”

“Yeah, but don’t you want to know more?” Danny asked.

“Leave it alone, Danny,” Steve said intently. “Professionals will deal with Hesse.”

“But? It would be interesting to know more.” Indeed Danny wanted to know. “What? I’m curious. Would it be better to know? If we find out who this guy is, he could be arrested.”

“We can’t arrest him for being in the same place as Victor Hesse,” Steve said categorically.

“Kavika could find out more,” Mamo said easily.

“Please.” Steve reached out and enclosed the old man’s gnarly hand in his own two. “Let it go. It’s dangerous to antagonise these people. There is an ongoing investigation, which I’m part of. I have background in Naval Intelligence, and I know the Hesse brothers. But you can’t play the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew.”

“You liked the Hardy Boys when you were a little boy,” Mamo reminisced with a soft smile.

“I don’t want you to get hurt, Mamo.” Steve glanced at Danny, beseechingly.

“Steve’s probably right, Mamo,” Danny said. “I’m sorry for asking you.”

Steve flashed a tiny, thankful smile at Danny -- who felt in no way warmed.

“Okay, Stevie, if you think that’s best. Kavika would be able to help, you know.”

“Possibly,” Steve said, patting the top of Mamo’s hand. “But these are dangerous people. I don’t want Kavika poking the hornets’ nest. I’ll talk to him, so if the hornets come out of the nest, he’ll be prepared.”
“Okay, Stevie.” Mamo tugged Steve off centre into a clumsy hug.

“Thanks, Mamo,” Steve reached around and lightly slapped his back.

“You’re a good boy, Kiwi.” Mamo released him and patted his cheek. “You’ve just got to look after yourself. Don’t take all the weight on your too skinny shoulders.”

“Mamo.” Steve heaved out a sigh. “I--”

“Lean on Daniel,” Mamo continued without a pause, “he’s got solid shoulders.”

Danny flexed them, because he might be short by most standards, but his shoulders were indeed impressive. Unfortunately, neither Mamo nor Steve were watching. Rotating his neck to the side with a crack, Danny realised that exercise hadn’t been on his agenda for over three weeks.

“I know, Mamo,” Steve was saying.

“Chin, listen to that man, he’s wise beyond his years.”

“Just like you, Mamo.”

“Ah, well, I’m getting old, and a little dodderly and set in my ways.” Mamo patted Steve’s cheek again. “And don’t forget, Kono, our little finder.” He smiled at Danny.

Danny grinned back at him, content for a deliciously long span of a heartbeat.

“What are you grilling, Mamo?” Steve asked, deliberately changing the subject.

“Shrimp, mahi mahi and scallops. I’ve brought some konbu maki, with no monosodium glutamate, just for you, Stevie. I’m grilling some huli huli chicken. There’s sticky rice in the cool box.” Mamo picked up his spatula on the side of the grill and began pick out marinated chicken thighs from a Tupperware placed on the top of the cool box. “Go back in the water -- lunch will be ready in half an hour.”

Perfect space of time for a nap, Danny thought, as Little Stevie was sent off to play in the surf.

Danny settled back on the towel. Folding his hands behind his head, he closed his eyes and concentrated on getting some rays.

~*~

Danny waved his hand in silent question at Steve as they sat astride their boards in a zone of slack water beyond the tiny lapping waves.

“Mmmm?” Steve mumbled, contently, happy to bask in the sun. They had had a delicious lunch, courtesy of Mamo. Danny had opted for the chicken and the pork. Steve had had a long kebab of shrimp and scallops interspersed with pineapple and cherry tomatoes lying on top of a mound of sticky rice. An hour of digesting and lazing had followed. But Steve was like a toddler, once he had recharged his batteries he was raring to go. He had dragged a protesting Danny back into the water.

“See the way that the waves are rolling through, up to the beach?” Steve pointed and Danny realised that he was not basking like a lizard, he was studying. “That’s the angle that you want to take, to best follow through.”

“Okay.” Danny reinforced his words with a nod. They would have to paddle about fifty feet over.

“I brought you here so you could see that. But if you weren’t with someone who knows the water,
you’d do your studying from the beach, before coming out. The cove is well protected; there’s no rips and the rocks are along the peninsula.” Steve pushed up slightly on his board and pointed south behind them. “You see that darker water? You might think that was deeper water, but there’s a rocky reef.”

Danny craned his neck. “But we’re not going out that far?” he checked, it was calm.

Steve turned back to him intently.

“We’re not going out that far?” Danny repeated, jabbing a finger at it.

“No. But on another day, the waves might let us surf from that far out. Ideally, you should study the wave formations from higher up. Say, up where Simons is sitting.” Steve pointed at the foliage on the cliff side, where no one appeared to be sitting watching.

“You can see him?” Danny scanned the line of green trees and bushes above the shear rock face

Steve rested back down, arms braced behind him. It made a nice line of his torso -- very photographic.

“It would be accurate to say that I can see where he has been and can make an educated guess as to where he’s staged. I’ll mention that to him later.”

“Huh,” Danny said. Perhaps Steve had a future in raising baby SEALs. He made a mental note to mention it to him later when he had his hearing aids in.

“Okay, come on.” Steve smoothly flipped onto his stomach and started paddling towards the tiny waves.

Heaving out an aggrieved sigh, Danny got onto his stomach, made sure that his feet were hanging over the sides of the board for stability and began doggy paddling after Steve.

“Don’t forget to arch your back,” Steve called without even bothering to look around.

Danny arched his back and it did make it a little easier to paddle through the water. Finally, he caught up with Steve as he waited for him just before where the waves started breaking. Danny had done this a few of times, earlier in the morning, with Kono. They had ridden the waves in on their stomachs, just getting the feel for it. Despite being some sort of Goddess of Surfing, Kono had appeared happy to simply laze in the water. But every time that he had tried to stand up he had gone ass over teakettle and face-planted into the water.

Steve grinned at him. “Okay, you ready? Remember, pop up. Don’t look at your feet, and enjoy yourself. I’m going to catch the next wave. The one following is all yours.”

Steve powered forwards, driving into the tiny wave. He smoothly ‘popped up,’ arms outstretched for balance and rode the wave. Danny grinned at the back of his head, belatedly remembering that Steve’s sense of balance was a little fucked. He made it all the way in. And with a happy yell, Steve jumped off in that last moment with a backwards somersault into the water.

Danny whooped in glee with him. Inspired, he paddled into the surf. Tongue caught between his teeth, Danny popped up, and crouching low found his balance. The wave took him. And he stayed steady riding it. He knew that he was grinning. He could hear his Monkey yelling encouragement. He was doing it; he was surfing.

It all came to a crashing end as he made sure to fall backwards off the surfboard close to the beach.
But he had done it -- he had surferd his first wave. The water cascaded around him, and Danny struggled to get his feet under him, scrunching his toes into the sand. Water bubbled over his head.

An iron hand clamped around his bicep and hauled him to his feet.

“You okay, Danno?” Steve grinned in his face.

“I did it!”

“I saw.”

Laughing, Danny thumped Steve just over his heart. “Ah, you big goof, put that smile away. I sucked.”

Steve contained a smile by pursing his lips together, and nodded. Laughter bubbled up between them.

“Daddy. Daddy. I saw.” Grace splashed through the surf and flung herself into his arms. Danny hauled her onto his hip. “Uncle Steve, you got Danno to surf.”

“I did.” Steve straightened, proudly.

Still in Danny’s grasp, Grace latched onto Steve and hauled him in close for a hug. It made for a tangled three way hug, which was pretty awesome. Steve smiled, open, happy, and relaxed, and close enough that Danny could smell the ocean-ozone scent on his skin.

“You gonna try again, Danno?” Steve said softly.

“You know, maybe I will,” Danny said, staring straight at Steve’s changeable eyes.

“Me too?” Grace piped up.

Steve nodded and moved back a step, and Danny took that as Mr. SEAL telling him that he could wrangle two novices in the water.

“Okay.” Danny swung her down. “Go get your board; we’ve got time for a couple of more tries before we have to get you home.”

“Aw,” Grace began.

Danny sent her on her way with a pat on her behind. “The more you dillydally the less time we have for surfing.”

Grace scrambled up the beach, yelling for Kono to come and join them.

“What?” Danny asked Steve.

“You’re good with her.” Steve shrugged. He bent over and grabbed Danny’s board, washing around their knees, back and forth, and pushed it into Danny’s hands. “Here, let’s surf.”

~*~

“So what’s so special about the attic?” Danny asked as they drove back the House, after dropping Grace at her mother’s. “That was adroit misdirection at breakfast, by the way.”

Steve cocked a grin at him as he turned onto the Moanalua Freeway. “Ah, you noticed.”
“Yes, Steven, I noticed.” And this man was a trained Navy SEAL. Danny thought that he would be better at subterfuge.

“There’s stuff up there made by residents. Some is for storage. Others are gifts to Seolh.”

“Is there valuable stuff up there?”

Steve automatically glanced skyward, calculating. “Yeah, a few pieces. And other bits might become valuable -- in terms of money -- in the future.”

“You got Monets up there?” Danny plucked an artist’s name out of the ether.

“Monet? There’s no paintings by Monet -- he’s before Seolh’s time.”

“Anyone famous?”

“Depends what you mean by famous.” Steve glanced at his wing mirror, indicated and moved into the faster lane.

“I appreciate evasive is your middle name, but seriously, any artists that I would know?”

“Just artists? Ava Freeman. Kent Turner. Kahuna Kala Arnald. Henri Matisse. Chin’s got some stuff up there. There are sculptures up there too. There’s a sculpture of a Nandi Head that is really impressive. Toast’s been working on digitising the cine film and video archived material,” Steve finished absently.

“Shouldn’t they be in a museum?” Danny asked, somewhat agog at his spiralling thoughts, picturing a rank and file of shelving and cabinets stretching the entire length of the attic.

Steve shrugged. “Maybe someday,” he said, offhand. “It’s stored safely -- hermetically and securely.”

“Huh, your own personal museum in the attic?”

Steve shrugged again. A museum in the attic didn’t even strike him as unusual.

Danny just had to say it. He couldn’t stop himself. “You know most people don’t have museums in their attic.”

“That I didn’t follow.” Steve was focussed on a green BMW being driven by an idiot in front of them.

“Okay, I get that most people don’t live in a place like Seolh. What else is in the House? What’s in the basement? Armoury? I know a -- what do you call it -- a place where you live if there’s a nuclear apocalypse.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m concentrating on driving. Knock yourself out with speculation. I don’t have a clue what you’re saying. I caught nuclear apocalypse, though.”

The green BMW driver was an idiot. Danny told him so at the top of his lungs and added a gesture for emphasis. Steve backed off a little, foot off the gas. Without-signalling he changed lanes and, in a thoroughly illegal manoeuvre, got off at the next exit.

“Steve?” Danny asked, prying his hands off the dashboard.

Steve shrugged again, even as he checked the mirrors. “Just being careful.”
“Puuloa Road,” Danny read out loud. Another sign came up indicating that Joint Base Pearl Harbour-Hickam was six miles ahead.

“We going to the base?”

“Not unless we need to. We’ll swing onto Salt Lake Boulevard and back on the Queen Liliuokalani Freeway if I don’t spot anything untoward.”

“Untoward?” Danny asked, as Steve sped up and took the intersection at ten miles above the speed limit.

“It’s unlikely anything is going to happen. Hesse thinks that they got the intel. There’s no reason why Hesse will try anything else other than revenge,” Steve addressed the windscreen. “I’m… no longer SEAL. I’m no longer an active SEAL,” he revised, with a sideways glance at Danny.

Go on, Danny waved his finger in the air, encouragingly.

“If he was going to do anything in revenge, because of the several successful ops I led against him—” there was a smidgen of a preen in his voice, “—he would have done it -- unknown top dog not withstanding -- because he’s a psychopath. He doesn’t consider me a threat. And he is kind of is getting a kick out of … seeing me.”

“So why’s Simons still knocking around?”

“White likes to cover all the bases.”

“You have knowledge, though, don’t you? That’s why you’re going to the base. You’re looking at stuff.”

“Yes, Danny, I’m looking at stuff.” Steve rolled his eyes massively and impressively managed to drive in a straight line.

“Okay. Okay. You’re analysing data,” Danny said triumphantly, as he got the phraseology correct. “So you are a threat. And Hesse is underestimating you.”

Steve shrugged, but a curl of a smile graced his face. “Hesse doesn’t understand the value of team work. Most criminals and mercenaries don’t. They may work in a team, but they don’t trust their team.”

“What exactly are you doing for Naval Intelligence?”

Steve swallowed. “Can’t say.”

“How does that work if you’re on… medical leave?”

“Needs must,” Steve said unconcerned. “I have a certain skills and I know the Hesse Brothers. I’m useful.”

“So you’re reading reports and advising other people? SEALs?” In the back of his mind, Danny added silently: so you’re out of the line of fire.

Steve eyed him, warmly. “You’re just going to keep prodding, aren’t you? I can’t tell you, Danny.”

“So you have a gun on you?” Danny asked raising his voice just a fraction. He was interested on a number of levels. One, because Grace had just been in the massive truck and, two, how paranoid was Steve actually, and, three, was Steve safe?
“The Smith and Wesson is in the lock box in the *locked* glove compartment,” Steve said and Danny knew that he was part answering the question.

“Thank you for that,” Danny said honestly. “And do you have a gun on you?”

Steve had evidently decided that the BMW driver was just an idiot and not a potential attack as he signalled to turn onto Salt Lake Boulevard.

“Yes, I have a gun. I have a Kel Tec PF-9.”

“Is it a little gun?” Danny asked scanning Steve’s long limbs.

The look that Steve shot at him could only be described as horrified.

“Watch the road. Watch the road!” Danny stabbed his finger at it helpfully. “Driving.”

“Is it a little gun?” Steve echoed, affronted. “It’s a nine mm caliber, recoil operated, locked breech, semi-automatic pistol. Have you ever fired a gun?”

Danny scratched the side of his neck. “Hmmm. At an amusement park in New Jersey, most summers.”

“Say that again,” Steve ordered.

Rolling his eyes, Danny complied slowly.

“You’re talking about an air rifle, aren’t you?”

“It’s still a gun,” Danny defended, huffily.

“I’ll show you how to handle and fire an assortment of weapons, tomorrow.” Steve said autocratically.

Danny wasn’t adverse, but… “Just so you know, I’ll be taking some photographs.”

~*~

# 37 #

“Danny?” Chin called, catching Danny as he wavered between going for a walk or retreating to his studio -- or, more accurately, continuing to study the dregs of his coffee for answers like a soothsayer.

“Hey, Chin.” Ants were crawling under his skin. It was time to do stuff -- create. He was settling; he had recovered from the neurotoxin-thingy; he wanted to structure chaos.

Chin set a paperback-sized sheaf of fine quality cardstock on the kitchen table. “Your invitation.”

Danny leaned over without touching it. “Wow.” Gold and red ink drew attention to the rapidly approaching festive season. “This Thursday?” Danny checked, incredulously.

“Yeah. Sorry, Brah.” Chin shrugged. “It’s been a busy couple of weeks.”

“Black tie?” Danny chewed the words. “Black tie?”

“Yes, is that a problem? Oh--”
“Yes, because I just happen to have a tuxedo in my single suitcase,” Danny said sarcastically.

Chin stared at him phlegmatically.

“I guess I’m not going then,” Danny said, satisfied -- because there was no way in Hell that he was forking out what was left of his funds to rent some cheap suit for the freakin’ Governor’s Christmas Ball.

Chin continued to scrutinise him.

“Say something, dude,” Danny said.

“Kono,” Chin replied, surprisingly, and turned on his heel, leaving Danny with his cold gritty coffee dregs with no answers.

Danny waited, fingers drumming on the side of his mug. What on Earth were the cousins going to come up with? In the echoing space of the House, he heard Chin calling for Kono, who, as ever, responded happily.

Kono bounced into the kitchen ahead of Chin. “What’s the matter, Danny?”

“Nothing’s the matter, Kono,” Danny said sensibly, content not to go to the Ball and dress up like a Rockhopper Penguin in Honolulu’s Zoo.

“We need to outfit Danny for the Governor’s Ball,” Chin explained behind her. “My old suit won’t fit him.”

“Oh,” Kono said, understanding immediately. She rubbed her hands together.

“I am not a Ken Doll,” Danny said.

“Of course not, you’re too--” Kono held her hands apart, alluding to something that Danny hoped related to the breadth of his shoulders, or potentially another portion of his anatomy.

“This isn’t going to happen. It’s three days away. It’s impossible.” He was not going to tell the cousins that he simply couldn’t afford the rent. Buying a tuxedo was impossible. And Kono’s observation was accurate: rented suits were normally generic -- Danny was shorter than the average bear and built. He was not going to turn up looking like one of the Beverly Hillbillies. He remembered what he looked like in his rented tux at his wedding, and shuddered.

Chin rubbed his face in response to the metaphorically thrown-down gauntlet.

“Danny, who is my best friend? What does he do?” Kono asked.

“Ben,” Danny said instantly, “designs clothes for tall, willowy elves from Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, without the embroidery.”

“True,” Kono acknowledged, coming around the side of the kitchen table. “But that doesn’t mean that he can’t do other stuff. And he doesn’t make clothes in isolation. He’s got a couple of friends that he works with and learns from.”

Danny eyed her as she set a hand under his elbow and levered him to his feet. “Go get ready. We’re going out in five.”

“What?”
“You wanted to see more of Ben’s designs and fabrics and get a feel for his work. We’ll go to his place. You can think about the photo shoot and we can start on your suit for the Ball. Kill two birds with one stone. Go on.”

Danny didn’t move. “Steve said that he was going to teach me how to fire a handgun.”

“Steve’s out. He went to Hickam first thing.” Kono bounced her hip into his, pushing him off balance. “He won’t be back until lunch. You can go on your date in the afternoon.”

“Date!” Danny spluttered, as Kono pushed him to the door.

“Hurry.” Kono shooed. “We’ve only got three days.”

~*~

“Black tie,” the venerable lady said around a mouthful of pins, “allows variation around the traditional components.” She smoothed dark rheumatoid-ridden fingers down the front of his shirt, testing the weft and weave.

Danny refrained from slapping her hands away, telling himself that, while appearing intimate, it was clinical. Kono’s laughing eyes peeked over the old lady’s head. Danny lifted his chin and ignored her.

“My husband, Gustav, had your build. He looked exceptionally good in a bespoke shirt. Do you have a tailored white dress shirt?”

Since that was the first question that had been addressed to him, since arriving at Ben’s house, Danny answered. “No.”

“There was a fire, Auntie Yaayaa,” Kono explained. “Danny lost everything he owned a couple of weeks ago.”

“And now you’re going to the Governor’s Ball. Things are looking up,” Auntie Yaayaa observed, button bright. “Would you object to wearing one of Gustav’s bespoke suits altered to fit you?”

“No, ma’am,” Danny said looking at her sore, red hands. “I would be honoured. But I don’t want you to hurt your--”

“No worries. Ben will be doing the work. I will be doling out the benefits of my vast experience. It will be good project for Ben. He’s a bit of an idiot.” Auntie Yaayaa reached behind Danny and patted his ass. “We need to get some measurements, love. Very nice, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Danny said, for the lack of anything better to say.

~*~

“Mrs. Yaayaa?” Danny guided her to the side after she had finished directing Ben in taking suit measurements and then sent him off to retrieve Gustav’s suit from her home. “How much do I owe you for the suit?”

He hoped that she didn’t mind waiting until after Christmas and they could figure out some sort of monthly payment system.

She stared up at him from her four foot eight inches and somehow made him feel like he was a three foot tall kid again.
“Nothing, Sugar. It’s a good project for Mr. Airhead. My Gustav’s suit wasn’t going to be used again. You’re perfect for it.” She judged.

Danny moved fractionally out of reach.

“You’ll be wearing our suit at the Governor’s Ball. So, if anyone asks, Ben’s company made your suit.” She grinned libidinously. “You’re a walking advertisement.”

Danny remained stock still as she leaned to the side, using her cane, and ogled his backside.

“I’m not objectifying you, Son. I’m admiring. It’s very admirable.”

Danny blushed.

~*~

Danny’s cell phone vibrated in his breast pocket, announcing the arrival of a text in all its nipple-tingling importance.

Still keeping a hand firmly wrapped around the roll bar of Kono’s suicidally dangerous open-top jeep, Danny manipulated his phone, goofy-handed.

The number was unknown, but Danny recognised the sender of the message immediately -- the guy even used punctuation and correct grammar in his text.

_Danno, I have to unexpectedly stay at Pearl Harbour-Hickam this afternoon. I will return to the House no later than eighteen hundred hours. We will have to reschedule your lesson for another day. McG._

He can be taught, Danny observed, checking his watch -- five hours then.

“What’s the matter, Brah? You’ve gone all lu'ulu'u.” Kono turned to him and the wind whipped at her hair.

“Lu'ulu'u. What does that mean?”

“Depressed. Sad. Everything okay?”

“Fine.” Danny didn’t like to give her any more ammunition; Kono was rapidly becoming his youngest and most aggravating baby sister.

Driving one-handed, Kono flicked hair out of her mouth. “Brah?” she probed.

“Change of plans this afternoon. Suddenly, I’m free.” Danny shrugged.

“Oh, okay?” Kono directed the jeep up the road leading to Seolh. “So you want to try to get some photos?”

There was a bulging suitcase stuffed in the back of the jeep. They had brought a selection of clothes for Kono, Steve, and Chin (and maybe even Toast) to model. Okay, he and Kono hadn’t actually had a discussion with Steve and Chin yet, but he was pretty sure that he could get Steve to join in.

“Sounds good.” That was a productive use of Danny’s time this afternoon. The light was good today: bright and vibrant. In a perfect world, he would have had an entourage and lights and reflecting plates, but there was nothing stopping him from scoping out sites in Seolh and taking preliminary shots to firm up his ideas.
“Right now?” Kono asked.

“We’ll grab a sandwich or something and get straight out there,” Danny decided. “Do you know where Steve’s tree is?”

“Steve’s tree?” Kono slowed before Seolh as Kavika’s man hauled open the gates.

The member of the Kapu waved them through. Feeling somewhat like a superstar, Danny stared back over his shoulder, watching as the gates closed behind them.

“How long do you think we’re going to need protection?” Kono asked, suddenly wilting.

The gravel crunched beneath the tyres of her old ratty jeep.

“Steve’s the best person to ask that,” Danny said. “But there’s no real reason for them to come back. They think that they’ve got what they came for.”

Kono appeared to ponder his words as she pulled into her parking spot besides the construction company’s white truck with a screech of poorly maintained brakes.

“True,” she said finally and seemed to brighten. “So Steve’s tree, hmmm? Tell me about it.”

Danny peeled his white-knuckled grip off the jeep’s roll bar above his head.

“It’s just a tree. An old gnarly thing, covered in twisted vines. Mossy. It’s massive. Its… uhm… bushy, leafy canopy is enormous. There’s a carved rope swing. He took Grace there the first day she visited.”

“Oh, the great-grandfather ‘ulu tree,” Kono said, knowingly.

“‘Ulu? If you say so.”

“Google it. Look up the Legend of Ku. It’s the oldest tree at Seolh and a grandfather, great-grandfather of a tree. You want to take photos there now?”

Danny pointed at the midday sun directly overhead. “We should get an interesting dappled affect with the interplay of leaves and light.”

“Okay,” Kono said, game. “Do you want me to go and put some make up on? Do anything with my hair before we troop out there?”

Danny angled his head to the side and regarded her visage studiously. Her bone structure was a subtle, robust foundation for immaculate, luminous skin. She actually wore a dusting of foundation and touch of mascara, but deftly applied.

“Brah?” Kono said, after a long contemplation. “No wonder you give off mixed signals.”

“What?” Danny jerked. “Do you have a small bag of make up and a mirror you can bring with you? Bring green and brown, you know, forest colours. I want you as you are, natural -- but maybe -- yeah -- more eye make up later.”

“So this is creative Danny,” Kono observed.

“Ben packed that emerald green dress with the silk under the lace net? Think what make up you might wear with that -- what you need do to make your eyes stand out.” The high neck of the sculptured bodice of the jewel green dress, coupled with the decadently low back and full skirts
would accentuate Kono to perfection. Pragmatically, her bruises would be masked.

“Jesus,” Kono shook her head. “I’ll go get my make up and meet you in the kitchen in fifteen. Make me a sandwich, Danny, and pack some bottles of water.”

Danny point-blank refused to have Kono swinging on the swing since it was trite and contrived -- it was tempting though.

He used the LCD screen on the back of his camera to study the latest series he had shot. The cut of the dress was a deep vee down Kono’s bare back, gathered together in a neatly stitched knot at the base of her spine. Concentrating on the line of her back with the interplay of the long vee and the continuing flow of the skirt adjacent to a tangle of creepers vying for the sky made for an interesting photo. But the fine lacy netting over the fabric wasn’t coming through clearly.

“So you’re not selling sex,” Kono interrupted his chain of thought.

“What?”

She was peering over his shoulder at the LCD screen.

“I’ve seen photo shoots in magazines and the model’s lips are parted, she sucks on her fingers, suggestively,” Kono said. “You’re actually presenting the person and the clothes.”

“Thank you for noticing. If a job wanted that I could do it -- and have. But I can actually do something different with this since Ben doesn’t know what he wants.” Danny clicked to the next picture. “The light’s not quite there. Might be able to compensate post-production.”

His phone vibrated. Setting this camera down on Ben’s suitcase, he fished it out of his pocket.

*Where are you? Simons doesn’t know where you are. Kavika’s man doesn’t. Report. ASAP. McG.*

“Sheesh.” Danny angled it toward Kono.

“You’re in trouble,” she said sing-song.

“Plural is implied in this text.” Danny drew his fingertip under **where are you** in bold in the message.

The phone vibrated in his hand.

**Toast. GPS. You’re on site. N’Woods. Remain where you are.**

Danny pressed the central button calling up the menu, clicking the top button he selected messages.

Another text arrived, Danny swore because they were coming faster than he could respond. Kono snatched the phone out of his hands, and thumbs blurring responded to the text, as fast as Grace.

“What did you say?”

Kono held the phone before Danny’s eyes.

**We’re at great-grandfather ‘ulu. The tree you introduced me to on our first date. Love U xxx**

“What!”
Kono danced out of reach, laughing. She snapped off a photo as Danny lunged.

“Give that to me!”

She turned her back and hunched over the phone, cupping it close to her breast. She tapped frantically on the keypad.

Danny had sisters, and he had been married. He caught her by her waist and lifted her off her feet. She squeaked laughingly as he dug his fingers in her side and tickled. As she squirmed, he corralled her with one hand and plucked his phone out of her unresisting grasp. She laughed up at the sky, head against his shoulder.

Danny thumbed to sent items. She had sent Steve a picture of his livid face, eyes startling blue against his flushed skin. Kono squirmed free and raced away. Danny dropped his phone, somewhere, he didn’t care, snatched up his camera and the chase was on.

~*~

Kono poked her head around the tree, smiling impishly. There were leaves in her hair. Danny added another image to the day’s photographs. The camera beeped; the card was full.

“Geez.” Danny stopped dead. In their playful, mad dash around the trees, he had somehow flicked the camera into sports mode. He had taken thousands of photographs.

“Is it broken?” Kono asked breathlessly.

“No. Taken a few million photographs, though,” Danny said, giving in to hyperbole. He wanted to check them before doing a mass delete. “I should have brought Toast’s laptop.”

“Danny! Kono!” Steve yelled from somewhere in the undergrowth.

They both looked guiltily in the direction of the voice. Steve sounded a lot frustrated and annoyed. Danny scanned the maze of trees and brush around them. They had wandered some distance from the great-grandfather tree.

“You know where we are?” Danny asked.

Kono nodded confidently between the trees. “The House is that way.” Delicately picking up the hem of the emerald -- now somewhat grass stained -- green dress, she padded barefoot in the direction of trouble.

~*~

“Damn,” Danny groaned under his breath.

Steve stood directly under the canopy of the great-grandfather tree, arms crossed, biceps bulging. Mouth downturned, brows furrowed, his eyes were agate hard with ire.

“You berated me for going to a naval base because you considered that that wasn’t responsible behaviour. You knew where I was. Simons knew where I was. Commander White knew my itinerary.” Steve said, words like bullets, tense and bitingly low. “Anything could have happened to you. You could have been snatched as easily as a kid playing on the sidewalk. Taken out by a drive-by. A sniper bullet from a mile away. And no one knew where you were.”

Steve didn’t really need to belabour the point, Danny thought, wincing.
“I’m sorry, Brah!” Kono said running over. She flung her arms around his neck apologising profusely. Steve remained stiff, barely engaging.

“We weren’t expecting you back until after six,” she said, pulling back a fraction.

Danny winced.

“That’s no excuse,” Steve said tightly, dropping her to the earth. “I put the buddy system in place for a reason -- a reason for which you should be very aware of the importance of. No one knew where you were.”

“Steve.” Kono backed off, hands over her mouth. She sunk in on herself.

“Steve.” Danny echoed, as he moved into the arena of Steve’s anger. “You’re right. We understand. We won’t do it again. But you need to stop hammering at us. We’re not your soldiers in the army.”

“Navy. And if you were I’d have you cleaning the latrines with your tongues.”

Danny gagged. That sounded vile.

“KP duty for a month.” Steve’s mouth was still that firm downturned line.

“Steve.” Danny made another hesitant step forward -- furious Steve was a different kind of animal. “We’re Kono and Danny. Residents at Seolh. We understand. You gotta stop yelling. Lesson learnt. We’re safe.”

Steve processed -- standing tensely, subjecting them both to the laser-focus of his intense stare. Kono chanced a tiny, apologetic smile. The fear ebbed from Steve’s changeable eyes. He rubbed his face, wearily.

“I came home and no one knew where you were,” Steve said.

“No one actually checked up, except you,” Danny pointed out.

Voicing that observation had been a mistake, Danny knew it as soon as he opened his mouth. Steve scowled, darkly.

“Chill, Brah,” Kono said, bouncing back to effervescent. “I think everyone’s at dinner tonight. We can discuss the buddy system. Get Mamo to stay late and Kav’s guys to join us.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Danny agreed, nodding.

“Oh, hasn’t Danny told you?” Kono stretched her arms out like a ballet dancer about to pirouette. “Danny got a job. We’re helping him.”

The little knot popped up between Steve’s eyebrows. “We are?” he drawled.

Kono nodded. “We can’t afford models. It’s best if you, me, and Chin wear Ben Bass’ designs and Danny can take the photos.”

Steve flicked a glance at Danny, who met the rampant question in that somewhat horrified glance with equanimity. Kono was really rather good at rail roading.
“Time out.” Steve held his hands up in the classic ‘T.’ “Modelling? I haven’t agreed to do any modelling.”

Oh, perhaps Kono wasn’t as good has he hoped. Pity.

“But, Steve.” Kono set a delicate hand on his forearm. “It’s for Danny. This could get him known on the islands as a photographer.”

Maybe a little too maudlin, Danny thought, as he dropped his shoulders and widened his eyes, beseechingly -- backing her up.

Steve’s stared at him, expression flat. “You have got to be kidding. You two should take this show on the road.”

Kono laughed, and Danny couldn’t help but join in.

“Seriously, Steve. Ben--”

“Ben Bass,” Steve interrupted with a snort.

“Yes, Ben. He made this dress. I love it.” She executed a turn on the spot, the scalloped hem flaring around her ankles. “He’s got a line of clothes. Designed locally, made locally, with environmentally sustainable materials. It’s about the local economy, highlighting the Islands. Proceeds are going towards a conservation charity. Danny’s doing the promotional stuff.”

I am? Danny thought. But he had been talking to Toast about websites, video, displaying photos.

“And to keep costs down, we’re all helping. So are you in?” she finished seriously.


Kono nodded firmly.

“And Chin?” Steve checked.

“He will,” Kono confirmed.

Steve glanced again at Danny, who did a much more toned down version of Grace’s most beseeching expression and nodded.


“Oh, thank you.” Kono jumped on Steve again, demanding a hug. This time he lifted her with one arm and spun her in a circle, before dropping her back to earth.

Steve looked down at the suitcase. “You don’t expect me to change out here in the woods?”

“No point.” Danny held up his camera. “I’ve filled the card. Need to look at the images. Okay, I can see them on the screen on the back. I really want to look at them on a monitor. Tomorrow, maybe?”

Steve checked his watch. “Fine. It’s only a couple of hours before I have to start dinner, at any rate.”

“Oh,” Kono said, suddenly dubious. “What are we having?”

Steve sulked at her, mock-betrayed. “Thought I’d root through the freezers. Or pasta.”
“Pasta with what?” Danny crouched by the suitcase, retrieving his camera case, carefully stored on top. His phone was lying on the grass beside the case.

“Uhm.” Steve hooked his foot through the straps of a smaller bag and lifted it up to grab it rather than bend over. “Sun-dried tomato pesto and tuna?”

Danny pulled a face, grimacing.

“Not fish?” Steve asked.

“Steve, no.” Kono stuck her tongue out, gagging. “Pasta and tuna? We’re not students.”

“Beans?” Steve ventured.

“Pesto and beans?” Kono hung her head.

“I’ll help you, Babe.” Danny slung his camera bag around his shoulder, and picked up the case as he stood.

“I’d help but I’ve got washing up duty.” Kono scooped up the plastic bag that contained the remnants of their packed lunch. “If you give me pesto pasta and beans, I’m siccing my grandmother and mother on you to give you cooking lessons until the end of time.”

“Is that a bad thing?” Danny asked as he fell in beside Steve.

Kono stalked ahead. “You wouldn’t ask that if you knew them,” she called over her shoulder.

“They’re lovely. You know Kono; it stands to reason her family are lovely,” Steve said, diplomatically. “A little volatile, maybe. You’d probably get on like a house on fire with them. Huh?” He bounced ahead, to join Kono.

An extended family which had, if Danny remembered correctly, ostracised Chin for daring to pursue a career as an artist.

“I’m not volatile. I thought you said I was dynamic!” he called after them.

~*~

Danny caught up with the long-legged Tolkien elves when they waited for him on the outskirts of Seolh’s woods.

“Hey, Steve, I was thinking?” Danny said as Steve relieved him of the suitcase, to lug it the final stretch.

“Hmm?” He set the case down at his feet and gave Danny his considerable attention.

“About the modelling…. Do you want to do it with or without your hearing aids?”

Steve’s mouth fell open a little as he stared, turning that question over in his head.

“Your call,” Danny continued, aware that Kono had stopped just ahead of them, and was watching wide eyed.

“I’m not ashamed,” Steve snapped defensively.

Danny raised his hands, fingers splayed. “That never even occurred to me. But I’m asking you if you
want to wear your aids?” he said evenly.

Steve was bright eyed and not in a good way.

“They’re part of me.” Steve broke off frustrated. “I can’t believe that…”

“Babe.” Danny latched on, pressing both his hands against Steve’s chest. “I’m not asking you to hide. I’m not asking you to flaunt them. I don’t actually know what you’re thinking I’m implying. This is about your comfort zone. And your needs. No judgment. No pressure. I’m just asking. If you want to wear your aids, cool. If you don’t, cool. I’m photographing, you the person, Steve McGarrett. It’s what you want.”

Steve picked the case up, and made a sharp parade turn. “I’ll be wearing my aids, Danny.”

“That’s your decision, babe,” Danny said to his back.

Steve marched past Kono, heading arrow-straight for Seolh, without a pause. Kono watched him go mutely. Danny slid up beside her. Kono bumped her hip into his with a rueful, commiserating air.

“Tricky, Brah, but I’m glad you asked,” she said.

~*~

# 38 #

Danny kind of thought that Steve might have overreacted. He figured that he would let Steve calm down, and maybe stew in his own juices for a while. Steve’s blow up had been uncharacteristically a little over-the-top and Danny guessed something had set him off -- perhaps at Pearl? But even while intending to give Steve some space, Danny had volunteered to help him with the evening meal.

Danny rooted through the pantry, considering the provisions stored within. If he remembered correctly Kono hated beets, and there was a crate of dirt covered beets on the floor.

Roasted beets with a little balsamic vinegar and honey were delicious. Beets would be perfect for his new annoying sister.

“Danny?” Steve interrupted his menu planning.

“Hey, McGrumpy,” Danny said, not giving him a break.

Steve pulled a disgruntled face.

“Yeah, I guess I deserved that.” Steve was a hairsbreadth from stubbing his toe against the hardwood floor.

“You think?” Danny leaned back against the shelving storing the tinned goods. “I wasn’t trying to insult you. It was a honest question. And I was trying to think of you.”

Danny regarded the miserable lump of six foot SEAL standing before him. Steve rubbed at the back of his neck and stared at the bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling.

“Someone giving you a hard time, Babe?” Danny asked, aware that he had used that exact tone with Grace after a bad day at school.

“People are ignorant idiots,” Steve opened with. He waved at his left ear. “I’m still getting used to this. But I do not like being yelled at and spoken to like ... like I’m an idiot.”
“People are shits,” Danny agreed.

“I’m a lot of things… not being able to hear…. Being deaf is only one of them. I don’t like being defined by one thing: the Deaf Navy SEAL.”

“So I’m guessing that something happened on the base?”

“Something happens every day, Danny. Every time I leave Seolh. Look, I shouldn’t have gone off at you -- I apologise.”

“Apology accepted,” Danny said easily. “I shouldn’t have asked you to model.”


“Geez, sensitive much. No, because you’re not comfortable in your body. People are shits. I usually try and ignore people who are shits or point out at great length that they’re being shitty.” Danny really wanted to give into his incandescent temper, but even when Steve frustrated him beyond belief he just had to look at that hangdog expression.

“Look, Babe,” he continued. “I’m kind of guessing up until you were hurt you hadn’t actually experienced being sidelined, being overlooked, because what other people saw was a six foot tall, graduate of Annapolis, Navy SEAL, who was experienced, qualified, and you were backed up by your competent, experienced, qualified team members. And now someone looks at you and goes: hey, deaf. So Babe, you just got to show them that you’re Steve McGrumpy, Emperor of Seolh, US Navy Intelligence Officer, trainer-to-be of Baby SEALS, and you don’t care a flying fuck what other people think of you.”

Steve blinked owlishly.

“If you need people to talk slower,” he was aware of the mockery of his words as he rained them down on Steve, “tell them to talk slowly. Or if someone calls you, tell them to use a video conference phone so you can see them. They have to accommodate you or otherwise they’re missing out on your invaluable experience, and that’s their loss.”

Steve’s brow was a furrow more knotted than a ball of yarn attacked by a kitten. Danny hoped that Steve wasn’t going to ask for a repeat, because he didn’t think that he could be as eloquent again.

“I am happy to do your modelling,” Steve said, surprising Danny with the non sequitur, “and I definitely will wear my aids.”

Danny manufactured a casual shrug, inside he was cheering. “Whatever you’re comfortable with, Babe. Whatever you’re comfortable with.”

“So why are you hanging out around the pantry?”

“Trying to figure out what I’m going to help your ass with. I’m going for roast beets and butternut squash as a side. Haven’t decided on the main course.”

“Could cook some rice or quinoa and make a pilaff with squash,” Steve offered.

“What about meat? Protein?” Danny was a meat and two veg man through-and-through.

“I like the sound of it, actually,” Steve said introspectively.

“Tell you what.” Danny ducked down, picking up the top tier of the crate stack. “You get started on
your pilaff thing. And I’ll think about something else.”

Steve accepted the box. “How do you roast beets?” he asked.

“Did they not teach you how to prepare food in SEAL school?” Danny said mock-disgruntled.

“I known how to peel a potato,” Steve said with a grin. “KP and all.”

~*~

When the knock on his bedroom door woke Danny the following morning, he pulled his head from under his sheet and blanket with disbelief. Chin had cracked a bottle of rich, syrupy red wine that had complemented both Steve’s weird pilaf and his own mock coq au vin (which had been chicken breast broiled in a cheaper red wine with carrots, mushrooms and onions with – horrors – a stock cube).

Danny didn’t have a hangover per se but he was feeling a little thick headed. He scrambled for his alarm clock on the bedside table.

“Go away.” It was freaking nine o’clock -- possibly the latest that he had slept since arriving at Seolh – or maybe not? Another couple of hours would be perfect. He stuck his head under the pillow and sagged back into sleep

~*~

“Danny!” Steve thumped the door, bringing Danny straight out of his deliciously somnolent doze and into the day. “Danny?”

“Jesus,” Danny blasphemed, and automatically ducked, protecting his ears as he checked that his Mom wasn’t in the immediate vicinity

“Hey?” Steve poked his head in the room.

“Steven,” Danny returned, hoping against hope that he could sleep for another hour or two.

“It’s ten o’clock,” Steve said, like that was reason enough to get out of bed.

To be honest, on Saturday or Sunday that was not a good reason, but on Tuesday maybe it was… Danny pushed up on to his elbows.

“Can we go to the market tomorrow?” Danny asked, aware of the pass of days in the week and his accomplishments.

Steve cocked his head to the side, still hanging onto the door. “The market?”

“I know that you don’t like the market. But I’d like to talk to the supervisor about having a stall.”

“Okay,” Steve said hesitantly. “Are you getting up?”

Danny supposed that he better, or he would be spending the days with his guts in a knot because he had been too lazy.

“Why?” Danny asked, channelling his inner teenager.

“Are you ill?”

“No.” Danny threw off his blankets. “Coffee. Biscuits with butter. Go forth and accede to my
wishes.” Danny waved his hand at Steve. “Coffee.”

“Aye, aye, sir.” Steve mock-saluted. But since he didn’t hang about, and disappeared to make coffee, Danny didn’t call him on it.

Danny hauled his ass out of bed. He kind of guessed that Steve wanted to go out and shoot at innocent vegetation and maybe some birds. Danny wasn’t fond of birds. The pigeons in New Jersey were vermin. Strong coffee first and then he would get dressed and face whatever plans Steve was formulating.

Seolh was definitely eroding his sense of decorum.

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“So are we going to play with your guns today?” Danny asked over the rim of his coffee mug.

Steve squinted, and Danny dropped the mug a fraction so Steve could see his lips and repeated the question.

“Yes.” Steve nodded enthusiastically. “No wind, clear skies. We’ll go right up onto the headland. The next stop on the horizon is the Philippines.”

“What?”

“Any fired rounds will fall into the sea,” Steve explained.

“What happens if someone flies past?”


Danny rolled his eyes, dramatically. “I don’t know. You know, on a flying thingy. A paraglider?”

“I’d expect we’d see them,” Steve said, raised eyebrow. “You know, if you don’t want to learn how to fire a gun, that’s okay.”

“No, I’m not saying that.”

“But I will insist on showing you how to safely handle weapons.”

“No, I’m not saying that. It’s a good opportunity. There’s a shirt in Ben’s collection that is perfect.”

“What?”

“It’s teal. At least I think that what it’s called. I’m thinking you wear the shirt with -- do you have any black cargos?”

“You’re planning on me modelling while I teach you how to shoot?” Steve asked astounded.

“Yeah. Kill two birds with one stone. I figure the colour will work really well with your weird eyes.”

“Weird eyes,” Steve echoed.

“They’re very changeable. And the gun works really well. Just don’t point it at any birds or marine mammals because we are taking photos for a conservationist’s charity. Hey, pretend you’re shooting whalers.”
“Unreal,” Steve said.

~*~

“Okay. The cardinal safety rules are as follows: you always treat every firearm you have as if it is loaded -- no arguments, even if you have unloaded the weapon yourself -- you still handle it as if it is loaded; always keep the firearm pointed in a safe direction -- downrange, at the dirt -- so if it goes off it will not hurt anyone; always keep your trigger finger off the trigger and outside the trigger guard until you have made a conscious decision to shoot. And, finally, know your area -- be focused on your line of fire -- target, backstop, and beyond.”

Steve had brought them right out to the tip of the headland. The view was awe inspiring. The rock beneath their feet jutted out in a sharp point rising up like a prow of a boat. At the tip of the formation there was a stubby cairn. A shear drop on either side was massively intimidating. Danny kind of wanted to shuffle up to the precipitous north-eastern face on his stomach and look over the edge. The bay that stretched up to the next jagged headland was hemmed by the rock face and was as deep and as blue as Steve’s eyes when he wore that teal shirt.

“Where do you go in your head? These rules are important,” Steve interrupted Danny’s contemplation.

“I was listening. Honest. Treat a gun very carefully, keep your fingers away from the trigger and don’t point it at anyone on the planet.”

Steve sucked on his bottom lip, hemming for a moment. “I hope you never have to point it at anyone.”

Danny crossed his fingers and toes.

Steve crouched down and zipped open the black triangular holdall that he had toted along the trails. It held a rifle.

“Rifle?” Danny asked, sulking a fraction. He wanted to see Steve with an array of firearms.

“Start easy. You’re probably going to hurt by the end of the day, if you don’t listen to me.” Steve straightened, balancing it on both outstretched palms, parallel to his body. “This is a bolt action rifle. You have to manually open and close the breech of the gun to eject a spent casing.”

Steve with a gun was strangely hot -- Danny felt the answering flush on his cheeks.

~*~

Steve was a bit of a martinet and probably perfect to undertake the training of new SEALs. Danny knew that he had thought about mentioning this career prospect to Steve but couldn’t remember if he had.

Steve had set a breadfruit on the top of the cairn and demonstrated three stances: lying down, kneeling, and standing. He had worn ear defenders as he said, pithily, he valued his hearing.

The photos were excellent even if Steve wouldn’t let Danny lie down directly opposite him and take a photo right down the barrel.

There really was no justification to use them in Ben’s modelling submission because shooting and conservation didn’t go hand in glove even if Danny was imagining whales gambolling on the horizon being pursued by evil, moustached whalers.
Also his shoulder was really beginning to hurt.

“Your concentration is abysmal.” Steve set his foot on the small of Danny’s back as he lay on a mat and sighted at the latest in a series of breadfruit balancing on the cairn. The previous three had been decimated by Steve’s unerring aim.

“If you keep standing on me this is going to end in tears,” Danny said conversationally.

Steve crouched down, leaning in close. “This isn’t like television. This is a deadly weapon. People die every day from mishandling weapons. Usually kids. If you can’t concentrate we can end this lesson now,” each word was carefully measured, and weighty.

“No. You’re right, Steve. Sorry.” Danny resituated his ear defenders, pulled the stock firmly into his shoulder and sighted along the barrel, lining up the sights. He inhaled and then fired on the exhale. This breadfruit was obliterated.

“Did you see that? Did you see that!” Danny pushed up on his elbows. “I did it!”


~*~

Danny pulled at his shirt collar -- there was a mottled blob of redness over his collarbone touched with a brush of purple on the knobbly bone jutting at the shoulder joint.

“Didn’t hold the rifle firm enough,” Steve said, bending in close. “Gonna have a nice bruise.”

“There is no such thing as a nice bruise,” Danny griped.

“Rotate your shoulder,” Steve asked, demonstrating, as he invaded Danny’s personal space even more closely. If he moved a step closer his nose would brush Danny’s chest. There was a touch of silver at Steve’s temples, which Danny hadn’t spotted before. He slowly rotated his shoulder back and around following Steve’s direction.

“Any severe pain?” Steve asked.

“Nah, I’m just aware of it.”

“Surface—soft tissue bruising. You’re all right. Ice it when we get back to the House.” Steve rocked back on his heels, setting his hands deep in his pockets. Danny had the strangest insight that Steve had been about to put his big hand on his shoulder.

“I think that that’s enough for one day,” Steve said.

They had reached the point where Danny was standing up to kill breadfruit -- so he counted that as a win.

“It’s time for lunch,” Danny agreed, crouching to corral the ear defenders and assorted shit that Steve thought appropriate to bring to a shooting lesson. The first aid kit was a little worrying. “After lunch can we go down to the rocky shore?”


“No! I didn’t mean that.” Danny nodded at his camera sitting on fallen tree trunk. “The shooting photos are good and all, but I figure I need something more environmental. Let’s go rock pooling.
You can show me some marine stuff like you showed Grace.”

“Marine stuff,” Steve echoed dubiously, but shrugged agreeably.

~*~

Before heading down the bay and the rocky shore on the south side of the peninsula, Danny sorted through the suitcases selecting a blindingly white shirt made from thin cheesecloth with a grandfather collar and a black cotton t-shirt with some improbable gold design that Danny thought was some kind of decorative version of a marine beastie.

He had felt a little weird carting them down to the twisty path to the shore on hangers to stop them getting creased. Luckily, a Tuesday afternoon meant that there were relatively few people in Seolh’s Bay.

“What made you get into photography?” Steve asked out of the blue as they set camera and bags on a flat boulder above the meagre strandline of dried seaweed and a flex of knotted fishing line. Steve bent over and untangled it from a frond of drying kelp and tossed the rubbish on top of a clothes bag to take home later.

Danny had thought about that topic a lot.

“I like capturing moments like laughing or crying -- that sort of emotion. It’s about memories really. When I was kid I’d go through our vacation Polaroid photo albums. There were pictures taken before I can remember: as a toddler at the zoo, small enough to be held by my dad. And then when you’re older, and you should remember but you don’t. There were photos of an air show when I was seven. And then I got to thinking how I would have taken the pictures. I would have got Matty and Lou both looking up at the sky at exactly the same moment but mirroring each other with the plane’s plume directly over head. And then it became art. It’s always been people, though, and patterns -- not really landscapes.”

“Okay,” Steve said simply, bouncing up on his toes. He wore black sandals without any socks (thankfully). “What exactly do you want to compose here?

Danny regarded his scene. The tide was well on its way out. The narrow rocky shore was displayed before them in a rough grey, black textured contrast of rocky ups and downs, which probably meant something if you knew anything about marine stuff.

“Where’s the best place to look at things? Creatures?”

“I guess you mean things like crabs and seastars? Because the whole shore has ‘creatures.’” Steve toed a spotty lump of white specks on grey rock by his foot. “These are buckshot barnacles.”

“Humf,” Danny summarised, unimpressed.

“Crabs and fish, then? Pools at low water. Come on.” Steve set off surefooted over the rocks.

Danny scrambled after him, camera held protectively at his side. The shoreline sloped gently. Steve skirted diagonally, tracking around patches of green seaweed, keeping to the rocks, especially where they were driest. The sea breeze tugged at Danny’s hair, wind fingers twisting it back and forth. In the heat of the midday sun the wind was welcome.

“Have you ever been rock pooling?” Steve squatted, feet on either side of a channel in the rocks that led directly to the water. He reached down and set his large hands on a football sized rock.
“Hang on.” Danny picked his way carefully, cognizant that he held his one remaining camera. He lined up the shot so that sun was at his back, pondered, and edged a little over, so that the back drop of the rocky shore worked slantwise with his shot and incidentally the blue of the water matched the teal polo shirt and Steve’s eyes.

“Your eyelashes are ridiculously long,” Danny observed as he crouched and took a couple of shots.

Steve scowled and Danny counted that as a win, and wondered if he could convince Steve to wear a touch of mascara.

“Okay, rock pooling.” Steve continued dogmatically, “you find the best stuff under rocks, but you have to be careful and always put the rocks back in the same orientation you moved them from. I’ll lift it and we’ll see what’s there.”

Steve lifted, corded muscles flexing. Snap. Snap. Snap went the camera.

“Oh, excellent,” Steve said enthusiastically.

Danny’s finger automatically flexed on the shooting button taking a perfect shot of his pleased smile.

“Ha’uke’uke, Danny! Look.”

Obediently, Danny looked at small dark-purple, bobbly dome with a segmented skirt. They were sort of like alien monsters from Star Trek.

“They’re edible,” Steve said as if in some way that would make them more intriguing to Danny. He would have to be pretty hungry.

“Lean down further, like you’re really interested,” Danny directed.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Should have brought some props like a magnifying glass or a notepad.”

“Good idea.” Danny did actually have a small moleskin notepad in the camera bag hanging at his hip.

Steve caught it as he lobbed it over.

“This is one of the weirdest things I’ve ever done. I hope none of my SEAL buddies see them.”

“This is going to viral. Pose, darling, pose.”

Steve and posing didn’t go together very well, but what Danny was getting was honesty. Steve seriously liked fooling around on the rocky shore, pointing out ophi -- selecting amazingly colourful snails with striations of red and purple. At one point, Steve got on his hands and knees, and peered head first under a hanging rock -- letting Danny get shot after shot of his butt, as he forgot why they were actually on the rocky shore, and gleefully identified slimy slugs and pulsating globs of anemones.

“A’ama.” Steve moved blindingly fast, pining a black rock crab down against a boulder and then carefully picking it up, hand spanning the width of its carapace.

It clacked its claws angrily and spat bubbles.

Steve endured holding it up as Danny took some more photographs.

Okay, let’s mix this up a bit.” Danny said reading boredom in his subject. “Let’s swap the teal for
They had moved back along the shore so that it was only a short leap over algae covered rocks to their stash of equipment.

Steve peeled off the polo shirt in one easy motion, revealing the long stark planes of his muscled abdomen. Danny’s mouth went dry. Even obviously twenty pounds underweight, the long-term dedication to health and fitness was apparent in the smooth play of skin over muscles.

Steve turned and bent over to grab the white shirt and the scarred damage on the left side was exposed. He was gloriously attractive.

Steve swirled the shirt around his shoulders. And Danny caught everything in camera-sports mode, as Steve drew the shirt on and then slowly fastened the tiny mother pearl buttons through each hole.

Steve eyed Danny through his long dark lashes. “I get the yay or nay on these photographs, yes?”

Danny swallowed. “Yes,” he blurted.

Holy fuck, he needed to talk to Kono.

~*~

“Kalakaua!” Danny barrelled into her studio and kicked the door shut behind him.

“Danny! Geez! What?”

“You’re an evil, evil woman,” He pointed just so that she would be clear that he was annoyed with her.

Kono leaned back on her bed, pausing in painting her toenails.

“What’s the matter, Brah?” She patted the mattress, inviting him to sit down.

Danny sat with a thump, right on the edge, hands on his knees.

“I’m attracted to Steve,” there he had said it out loud. “I’m objectifying him.”

“And why is that bad?” She rescued her nail varnish and set it aside under her bed, so she could give him her full concentration.

“Well, objectifying is inherently bad. I was perving at him in cheesecloth.”

When they had returned to shore edge, and the beckoning tide pools, Twinkletoes McGarrett had stumbled and prat-falled flat on his back into a pool.

Wet cheesecloth was basically transparent. It had made the intricate tattoos on his shoulders just about visible, edging on the side of mysterious -- Danny had taken a lot of photographs.

“I’m pretty damn sure that Steve is not gay,” Danny added.

“I think that everyone is bi to some degree,” Kono said.

“Okay. I’m now thinking of you with a girl.” He hand waved that comment away before Kono could even begin to respond. “But you’ve known Steve a long, long time. Has he ever brought a boyfriend home? Be honest, Kono. Boyfriend?”
Kono sagged back against her headboard. "No," she said finally. "We could ask Chin, though."

"I am not having this conversation with Chin."

"Dude, don’t you have a gaydar?" Kono demanded.

"No. I don’t have a gaydar. Unless a guy hits on me, I’m pretty much oblivious. And for all the time that Steve and I have spent together he hasn’t hit on me. Okay, you think everyone is bi. But I’m better at figuring out if women are interested. I haven’t hit on you, have I?"

Kono acknowledged that with a shrug. "You’re cute and all, but I’m interested in Ben and Charlie -- you haven’t met him yet."

"Two boyfriends?"

"Take your mind out of the gutter. They’re not really boyfriends." Kono smiled sublimely. "So what are you going to do about Steve?"

Mind awhirl, Danny pushed off the bed and paced around the cluttered mess that was Kono’s studio. Kono retrieved her lacquer and began smoothing a coat on her index nail, letting him think.

Yes, he liked Steve, as a person and as an attractively wrapped package. He was beginning to think of him as good friend -- they had clicked from the outset. He kind of didn’t want to derail that friendship by acting too fast, too impetuously. That approach was against his nature, but Rachel had burned him to the point where his relationship circuits shivered pathetically under three degree burns.

The other side of the equation was Steve. Danny moved over to the windows, and stared blindly across the gardens to the tangled wood around the House. Chin had said that Steve was only just beginning to win after a long, rocky road of recovery and Danny was helping with that recovery. He really kind of wished that Kono hadn’t interfered by opening this can of worms.

"Yes?" Kono asked as he speared her with a glare.

He had only been at Seolh for a few weeks -- even if it felt like six months.

"It’s Steve’s call," Danny said softly. "And I don’t think he’d ready for anything more what we’ve actually got… uhm…. Friends."

"Men." Kono rolled her eyes. "Relationships: so complicated. You should talk to Mamo and Chin. They’ve known Steve forever. But I guess Chin would probably say give Steve some space -- and yes, he needs lots of space. And since you haven’t jumped Steve’s bones, I guess it’s not the time.” She blew on her perfectly painted fingernail. "Would you like me to drop a few hints?"

"No!"

"I can be subtle."

"Somehow I don’t think so, Kalakaua."

~*~

# 39 #

Danny trailed behind Steve as he led the way to the Market Coordinator’s office. It was situated on the top floor of the old warehouse in the attic, judging from the lack of roof height.
Steve had switched off his ears long before venturing into the market. Apparently the super-duper ITEs aids still were on order. Steve had made some noises about needing to make an appointment with his audiologist, Messel, to get them prescription tweaked-programmed when they arrived. It sounded very technical, Danny thought.

Steve came to a stop and Danny barely managed to not smack into him.

“Mrs. Macgregor’s office,” he said with the monotone drop that gave away the fact that his ears were definitely off. “I’ll leave you to it.”

And then he loped away, leaving Danny to wonder what Lion’s Den he was going to beard -- or words to that effect.

~*~

“So Mrs. Macgregor? What made you run away, Babe?” Danny asked conversationally as they pulled away from the market, heading to the next port of call on their long list of things to do -- Chin was a martinet. Picking up dry cleaning was their next chore.

“She used to be the headmistress at my high school.” Steve smoothly changed gears as they picked up speed.

“Scary?” Danny asked. She had been flawlessly professional and had assisted Danny with the paperwork to get him a stand on the third floor in the New Year.

“Nah.” Steve shrugged. “I just don’t like long conversations about when I was in High School.”

Danny let it ride; it certainly rang true. “Hey, can we stop at First National?” He patted his breast pocket. Ben had come by the House with a cheque for a down payment for the modelling photography. It was a welcome addition to his bank balance and meant that he could get some Christmas presents.

~*~

The visit to the dry cleaners led to the bank and then a trip to Wholefoods, and thence onto Toys-R-Us to look for something for Grace. A discussion about a present for Kono took them to a jewellers who specialised in charms for bracelets.

Then Danny realised that his charge was flagging.

“I’m hungry,” Danny announced.

Steve looked, as usual, appallingly uninterested in food, so Danny led the way to the closest restaurant, hand waving and cajoling, knowing that Steve was traipsing along at his heels.

~*~

Food revived Steve, so Danny decided to introduce him to Mrs. Yaayaa to save his poor bruised ass. But Auntie Yaayaa took one look at Steve’s poor, fragile self, and, charmed by his automatic politeness, took Steve into Ben’s kitchen and plied him with hot chocolate with marshmallows.

It was all fairly ridiculous. Courtesy of Danny’s mom’s recipes and a lot of cajoling, Steve didn’t look like the same starving waif he had met a month ago. Yet why, Danny wondered, did everyone want to look after him?
“I have some cufflinks you can borrow,” Steve said, looking at the floating, unfastened cuffs as Danny submitted to Ben checking the fit of the bespoke shirt across the breadth of his shoulders.

“Yeah, thanks, Babe.” Huh, he realised, the only pair of cufflinks that he had owned (and never worn apart from at his wedding) were lost in the fire -- probably burned to a crisp like his laptop. They had been his paternal grandfather’s.

“What?” Steve asked, sitting up straight from his post-hot chocolate slouch.

“I had cufflinks. They were in my apartment.”

“Have you been back?” Steve asked. “Looked at the wreckage? What did your insurance say?”

“Didn’t have any,” Danny said. It hadn’t been his home. He hadn’t been on vacation. He hadn’t thought about insurance. Oversight, maybe, but he hadn’t really had the funds.

“Have you been back?” Steve persisted.

“Picked over the wreckage day after. Had to get in before the vultures descended. Sang Min was thorough. It was all torched.”

“I wonder if…” Steve trailed off, thinking. “Presumably Sang Min also searched through your apartment after the fire. I wonder if Koa Keawe thought of that.”

“Do I need to make another phone call?” Danny asked fishing his Blackberry out of his back pocket.

Muttering, Ben threw his measuring tape over his shoulder and retreated to a clothes rail of hanging garments in the far corner.

“Phone White,” Steve directed, “see if Keawe pulled any records from local CTV. We suspect that Sang Min operated alone when he burnt down the apartment complex, but if is possible that he had an associate with him.”

“Yes, sir,” Danny drawled sarcastically, but made the phone call.

~*~

They were both tired when they finally made it back to Seolh. There was something supremely exhausting about the dull inanity of shopping. Steve carried two suits in dry cleaning bags into the House, one his own and the other Chin’s. The third bag he held contained Danny’s new-ish suit. He hung them off the hook on the back of the door and then grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen sink faucet. Danny brought in the heavy crate of provisions from the market and set them on the table. Damn Steve and his infernal fondness for organic milk by the gallon.

“I got stuff to read,” Steve mumbled, upturning the glass on the draining board. “I’ll be upstairs.”

Danny guessed that a nap was also on the agenda.

“Commander McGarrett?” Head held high, Simons entered the kitchen. He had changed from his habitual black t-shirt and chinos into a light tan naval uniform. Danny didn’t know what type, but guessed that it was standard, casual wear.

“Lieutenant Simons, you have new orders?” Steve stopped dead and faced the man directly.

“Yes, sir. The Hesse brothers have been spotted in the port of IJmuiden in the Netherlands. I have orders to deploy in five hours.”
“I understand,” Steve said abruptly. “Thank you for protecting my family and home.” He snapped off a sharp salute -- fingertips touching the edge of his eyebrow, hand and arm in a straight line to his raised elbow.

Simons returned the salute.

“My pleasure, sir. It’s--” Simons deliberated, evidently gathering his words, “--it’s good to know that places like this exist in the world.”

The sharp staccato mode, in which they both talked, made Danny wince. It was if all the emotion had been beaten out of them a long time ago.

“You’re welcome here any time, Barnabas,” Steve said clearly. “Any time.”

Simons -- Barnabas -- smiled, brightly, and so very pleased at the invitation. It completely transformed his normally chiselled expression into approachable and endearing.

“Thank you, sir.”

“It’s Steve. Come on, I’ll walk you to the door.” Steve let the younger officer precede him.

Danny wondered if they would see Simons ever again. He hoped that they would. He had sort of grown fond of the younger man despite his vampire-like creeping around the House at all hours.

Danny craned his head around the kitchen door, watching as the two naval men stepped out on the porch. Simons pulled his cap from under his arm and set it atop his close cropped black curls. As Steve extended his hand to shake Simons’ hand, Danny decided that eavesdropping was bad and ducked back into the kitchen.

Today had been a good day, Danny decided. He had sorted out the stall at the market, and in the New Year he would have images to display, including Ben’s stills. He had purchased one Christmas present for one of the guys at Seolh and had made a decent start on Grace’s Christmas presents. Okay, he didn’t have a clue what to get Chin or Steve. Mamo was easy; he had a lovely picture of Maru Kahike that he had taken the day before, which he would frame.

Back at home, in New Jersey, when money was tight, the family swapped chores. Danny remembered drawing his Mom a token book when he was seven with vouchers: washing dishes; vacuuming; helping Nana in the garden. He couldn’t do that in Seolh, though, because the place ran on chores, and in reality everyone helped everyone.

Honestly, Chin would probably be happy with a half-way decent bottle of red wine. Danny would have to be guided by most elaborate label in the supermarket, or perhaps one of those bottles with the gold wire wrapped around it. Toast was relatively easy -- Danny had an idea that if he wandered down to Jelly’s in downtown Honolulu and got him a gift token, the student would be able to find something in the Second Hand -Book, -Comic, -LP store that would never pop up on Amazon.com, and it would get him out of the House for some fresh air. Steve, however, was a quandary; what did you get for the guy who had everything?

If Simons was travelling to the Netherlands did that mean that the threat to the House was over? Simons hadn’t said anything about another SEAL taking his place.

“Oh hey, Chin,” Danny said as Chin entered the kitchen, disturbing his ponderings.

“Was that Lieutenant Simons leaving?” Chin asked, half glancing back in the direction of the front door.
“Yeah. The Hesse brothers have been spotted in some place called ‘Imoyden’ -- I’ve never heard of it. Simons is going after them. I hope not on his own,” Danny considered.

“No replacement?” Chin checked perceptively.

“Not that I’m aware of, no.”

“So it’s over?”

Danny shrugged. “Kono and I were chatting and we kinda figured that there was no real reason for them to come back to Seolh. They think that they got what they wanted. Why come back?”

Chin accepted that without comment, but was evidently mulling on Danny’s words and Simons’ departure.

“Steve picked up the nishime kombu and kampyō you asked for from Wholefoods,” Danny said, offering a change in subject.

Chin followed his pointing finger to the crate on the kitchen table. “Excellent.” He plucked out the plastic shrink-wrapped packages.

“What are they?”

“Dried kelp and calabash.”

“I’m glad that’s cleared up then,” Danny said. “What the hell are you cooking tonight?”

“Sushi.” Chin cracked one of the packs and sniffed. “I’ll get these soaking.”

“Any raw fish?” Danny asked suspiciously, because no raw fish was touching his innards.

“I’ll be preparing a selection of sushi. I promise to tell you what everything is. All the fish has been frozen, you will not get food poisoning,” Chin promised severely.

“Sorry.” Danny spread his hands wide. “I generally go for my fish, deep fried. I like deep fried.”

“For breakfast, lunch and dinner I’ve noticed. Try something new. Sushi is low fat and high in protein -- it’s good for you.”

“Does Steve like sushi?” Danny asked suspiciously.

“He’s very fond of it, yes,” Chin said with a hint of a smile.

Danny wondered if Steve knew how much the residents of Seolh loved him.

~*~

The morning of the Governor’s Christmas Ball dawned bright and sunny like most mornings in Hawaii, Danny noted morosely pre-coffee, unless a storm was brewing. After breakfast, Danny locked himself in Toast’s studio and they started working on Ben’s website. Danny providing ideas and concepts, Toast doing arcane things with lines of dots, slashes, brackets, numbers and weird symbols coding across three of his computer screens at once.

“You are going to the Ball tonight, aren’t you?” Danny asked as he finally packed up his notebook and capped his jell ink pen.
“Yeah, dude. Free booze. The monkey suit’s annoying, but my girlfriend’s really looking forward to it. She’s bought a dress and everything. I think that Kono’s going to be wearing that green dress. It was pretty.”

“I think so.” Danny shrugged. Ben had given it to her as an early Christmas gift and as another walking advertisement of his designs and Mrs. Yaayaa’s skill.

Toast glanced at the clock on the bottom right hand corner of his computer screen. “I suppose I better get ready and go get Trish.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“I guess that hair takes a while.”

Danny gave him the finger. “So just out of curiosity,” he began, because it had been bugging him. Toast had loaned him a new laptop after the home invasion, but these were all Toast’s computers up and running and sparkly. “How come your computers survived the electromagnet?”

“Yeah, it was a bit of a pain. Steve had to get me a few new hard drives. But, honestly, to really fuck up computers, it takes more than a pass with an electromagnet if you know what you’re doing. You have to microwave them and then hit them with Mjolnir.”

“What?”

“Thor’s hammer, dude. You remember watching Thor, don’t you?”

Danny had actually completely forgotten about the film. His focus has been on Hesse’s band of invading terrorists. He rolled his eyes.

“So you recovered everything.” Danny was a little surprised; he thought that the evil computer geek had been a professional computer nerd.

“I had to repair them and there were a few holes in the data. But I always back up to external hard drives before a humdinger of a storm. They were in a crate under my bed.”

Looking around the room, Danny wasn’t surprised that the woman hadn’t found the hard drives; he couldn’t even see Toast’s bed.

~*~

“So, hey, who wants to go and get Steve?” Kono asked as they waited in the foyer.

“What?” Danny asked, as all eyes turned on him. “Text him. Oh, yeah, right.”

Chin pointedly looked at his watch. “Mamo will be here with the car any minute.”


“I’ll guard it with my life,” Kono declared.

Danny jogged up the stairs, taking them one at a time, conscious of the perfect creases of his tux (and that a tux in Hawaii was something of the heating torture device). He hoped that there was air conditioning at the damn Ball.

“There you are,” Danny said.
Steve was stalking along the corridor, a long, lean form of dark shadows against the mahogany backdrop of his home.

“Man, babe, looking sharp.” Danny eyed him up and down. “What kept you?”

“Batteries running out on my aids. They’re really annoying when they start beeping. My ITE batteries don’t fit; I had to take an old watch apart.” Steve came to a stop before Danny. “Looks good.”

“The suit?” Danny preened, because he did indeed look good. “Thanks for the loan of the cufflinks.”

“Who tied your bowtie?” Steve asked.

“I did. What’s the matter? It’s perfect?”

“Perfectly askew. Come here.” Steve put a hand to his elbow and drew him along the corridor to the top landing, directly outside Danny’s studio. The evening light through the domed stained glass window illuminated the foyer in a rainbow of muted colour.

“You are not going to--” Danny began.

“Here,” Steve said ignoring him, leaning in and tugging the tails of Danny’s admittedly, sloppy bow, and slowly pulling the fabric. “You could have used a clip on, you know.”

“That would have hardly have been classy,” Danny said lifting his chin.

Steve was deft and professional. He had obviously tied many a bowtie in his time -- no doubt at many a Navy function. It was great pity, Danny thought, that Steve couldn’t wear his dress whites to a Christmas Ball. He wanted to know if a medically retired Navy SEAL was allowed to wear a uniform, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

Steve’s eyes looked blue in the light. Curiously, when Steve was intent on something, generally his changeable eyes were a grey-blue. Not that Danny was studying closely. Danny lifted his chin a little higher, baring his throat, as Steve looped the material up and under. Steve tugged gently, fingers and thumbs on either side of the bow, settling it to his idea of perfection, and then smoothed down the edges of Danny’s lapels.

The flash of a camera startled them both.

“Kono!” Steve chastised.

“One for the wedding album.” She pealed out a laugh.

“Geez, Kalakaua -- see if I let you hold my camera again.” Danny slipped free of Steve’s light grasp.

“You’re planning on taking your camera tonight?” Steve asked as they walked down the stairs together.

“No, I just wanted to get a picture of us all dressed up, when Mamo gets here.”

The name called the man. The beep of a car horn outside heralded Mamo’s arrival.

“Mamo’s here,” Chin called.
“Where do you want us?” Steve asked.

“Here actually,” Danny said, looking around. He liked the light from the old domed window in the high ceiling, and there was a corner table that he could use as an impromptu tripod. The foyer curved around to the staircase providing an open circular space where they could stand directly under the window.

“I’ll get Mamo and Auntie Maru to come in.” Kono handed over Danny’s camera.

“Right, right, everyone stand there.” Danny pointed with one hand as he dragged the table over to the best position. Crouching and peering through the view finder, he realised that it wasn’t high enough.

“I can take the picture,” Maru said softly.

“But you won’t be in the photo,” Danny said.

“I’ll be in the next one.” She smiled softly and held out a hand.

“Okay,” Danny said slowly. “I just have to set it up.”

He directed his motley crew: Mamo in the middle in the dominant, grandfatherly role; Steve on his right, but slightly in front of the elderly man; Chin on the left -- he immediately put an arm around Mamo’s shoulder, and Kono by Chin’s side. Danny wished that the scalloped edge of her dress was a little longer, he would have liked to have drawn it over the floor in a curl. Peering through the view finder, he double checked the exposure.

“Okay, point and shoot, Mrs. Kahike -- Maru. Take a couple -- Steve’s bound to pull a funny face.”

“Hey!”

Danny darted across the foyer, taking his place by Steve’s side. Steve automatically matched Chin, slinging an arm around Danny’s shoulder and pulling him in close.

“Everyone say: aloha!” Maru directed.

“Aloha,” they chimed together.

~*~

# 40 #

“Wow.” Danny took in all the glitz and glitter of the Governor of Hawaii’s Christmas Ball. “All the pretty, stupid people with all the money.”

“Hey,” Steve said, affronted.

“I didn’t mean you, Babe.” Danny patted the small of Steve’s back and sauntered into the mêlée of beautiful people queuing to go into the ‘Iolani Palace.

~*~

The ‘Iolani Palace was amazing, Danny thought. The guests of the governor had the run of the museum, within reason. Discreet museum docents were present to answer questions and direct any drunken partygoers away from displays. The palace rooms had, according to a very intense young lady, been restored to their monarchy era appearance.
“Hawaiian crown jewels,” Steve said, as they stood before a glass case.

“Impressive.”

“Hey, Danny, have you checked out the staircase?” Steve asked.

“Staircase?” Danny responded. The mass of people as they had entered the palace had prevented any meandering in the main entrance.

“Yeah, I noticed, you like staircases. I think that it’s the way that light works with the downwards slat-things that grabs your attention.” Steve led the way, as Danny followed him opened mouthed, because, yeah, he did like staircases but he had never realised it before.

Steve moved through a hall filled with photographs and back to main entrance. He stood midway through the foyer and canted his head to the side, looking upwards. Danny settled beside him matching his pose.

“Ooh.” Danny said inadvertently, liking the smooth curves of the banister above him. “Hey, look at the carvings.”

Steve rocked back on his heels, satisfied.

“It’s similar to the House staircase,” Danny continued.

“Koa wood with kamani and walnut trim.”

“I thought that the House panels and staircase were mahogany?”

“Nah, koa wood. Acacia koa -- Koai'a- Acacia -- if you want to be accurate.”

“Huh. I just assumed that it was mahogany.”

“Come on, you need to see the throne room.” Steve headed off, and Danny rapidly trotted after him.

Visually the whole palace was a treat. Danny’s fingers itched to hold his camera.

~*~

“So is there food?” Danny asked Chin, joining him at the base of set of low steps overlooking the reception hall. Danny kind of thought that there had to be a sit down meal since Kono hadn’t prepared dinner -- but maybe she had been doing her hair, which was very swishy and glossy.

“In an hour or so. You can snack on hors d’oeuvres in the meantime.” Chin lifted his flute of champagne in the direction of a waiter holding a tray of devilled eggs. “The Coronation Lawn is set up outside for the dinner.”

“Outside?”

“You’re in Hawaii, Danny.” Chin nodded towards a giant set of open double doors on the far side of the hall. They were draped with Christmas Red curtains and strings of gold baubles. People were already milling around, moving outside, clearly intent on finding their tables.

“Do we sit together or are we split up?” Danny asked. When they had arrived, Steve, in the lead, had identified them to the concierge as ‘Seolh.’

“Mix and match, generally. I’ll be sitting with Malia.”
“When will she get here?” Danny asked. The waiter with the tray of devilled eggs had slipped through the crowd to their side. It was certainly the most ostentatious display of devilled eggs that Danny had seen -- the egg halves were piled high with egg mayonnaise, layered with smoked salmon and topped with black caviar. Danny took two, because he wasn’t shy and he was hungry.

“When...
“Yeah, I know.” Steve stared off into space, eyes half crossed, and rocked his head to the side, mouth dropping open.

“Steve!” Danny batted his shoulder. “I don’t do that.”

“Heh.” Steve stepped out of reach.

~*~

In deference to the unpredictability of Hawaiian weather during the winter months, the outside dinner set-up was protected by a high, transparent, multi-faceted marquee. Round tables, draped with royal blue table cloths, and white high-backed chairs, filled the entire lawn.

“This place must seat like a thousand people,” Danny observed.

“Something like that,” Steve said. He scanned the tables. “Let’s find our seats. We’ll be near the front.”

“How do you know?” Danny scurried after Steve, who was heading over to the manned seating display.

Steve dispensed with talking to the very obliging young man who tried to help them, and simply scanned the guest list on the poster board finding their names. Danny smiled apologetically at the young man. He shifted up next to Steve, letting him find their names. He was scanning for another couple -- Stan and Rachel Edwards’ names were conspicuous by the absence. Danny rocked back on his heels. Nah nah nah naaa naah nah, he thought, a little vindictively.

“Come on,” Steve said a millisecond later and directed Danny towards a table three sets down from an impressive domed central gazebo dressed in white and pink with what looked like a neat little dovecote on the roof.

“Hey, look at that.” There were eight sets of four coats of arms and plaques displayed in regular insets around the domed roof.

“It’s the Coronation Pavilion.”

“Like for real? People got… uhm… coronated there?”

Steve laughed. “Yeah, for real. King Kalākaua and Queen Kapi’olani were crowned in 1883. But the pavilion was originally on the King Street steps back then.”

“There’s a lot of history in Hawaii,” Danny observed. “I don’t think that we’ve got royalty anywhere else in the US?”

“I don’t think so.” Steve shrugged, apparently unconcerned, but Danny guessed that he would be googling it later. “This is our table.”

“Our table, Babe?” Danny grinned.

~*~

Thankfully, Danny ended up sitting besides Steve and not set up so that they were arranged man-woman-man-woman around the table. They were one table over from Chin and Malia. Kono, Toast and Trish (Danny assumed) were off to the far left. Danny kinda figured that the younger participants were sidelined; they certainly were enjoying themselves.
Danny smiled at the Ancient Dowager Duchess of Inane Conversation as he topped up her sweating crystal wine glass with a refreshingly dry Pinot Grigio.

There was a high table set up in the Coronation Pavilion, and the Governor of Hawaii was wining and dining with the movers and shakers of Hawaii and some Mainland intelligentsia. There had been a speech during the starters, which actually had been interesting. Governor Patricia Jameson came across as sincere and interested in her role and in the people of Hawaii.

He leaned over and spoke, softly, but clearly into Steve’s shell-like ear, hoping the mike would pick up his words. “Do you know the other people on the high table?”

“I know that the guy three down on her right is Commanding Officer Captain George Murray of the USS Grace Hopper. The aircraft carrier came into port for a scheduled visit.”

“Are you going to say hi?” Danny asked. The stocky, dark guy appeared intimidating to Danny’s photographer’s eye.

“I don’t generally go up to captains of aircraft carriers and say ‘hi,’ Danny.” Steve regarded him with a Spock-eyebrow.

Danny didn’t see why not, but hey what did he know about the Navy?

“The couple beside Captain Murray are Mrs. Batch’s son and daughter-in-law. I think Shirley Batch is a democrat, she’s possibly running for governor in the future.” Steve rubbed at his bottom lip, and leaned in very closely. “The old Asian guy who looks like he’s smelling something bad is Hiro Noshimuri, he’s the head of the Yakuza on the Islands. I don’t know his wife’s name. Don’t talk to Noshimuri. His son, Adam, is at the same table as Kono and Toast. Hmmm.”

Danny froze, glass of Pinot Grigio against his lips.

“The old lady with the blue hair and probably formaldehyde in her veins instead of blood is Sophia Cole-Baldwin, multi-millionaire. She contributes to many charities on the islands. Very prone to expressing her own opinions and doesn’t care what others think. She got on with my grandmother, even though they agreed to disagree about everything. You know the guy sitting beside Mrs. Cole-Baldwin, that’s Kahuna Keōua.”

Oh, the dude that had scared him with the chanting in the kitchen.

“At least he’s not wearing a toga,” Danny said.

Steve elbowed him severely.

“Hey, if I have to wear a monkey suit, everyone has to wear a monkey suit,” Danny protested.

“You look very nice in it, son,” the Dowager Duchess said, proving that she had ears like a bat.

“Pass the wine over, kiddo.”

Danny topped up her glass again, because he figured that she would be hilarious when as drunk as a skunk.

~*~

As discreet waiters and waitresses slipped among the tables, doling out coffee and tea with chocolate mints -- Danny pocketed his for Grace and accepted Steve’s with a smile -- the governor led another round of speeches.
The theme was ‘service to the community’ with awards being given out. Danny approved, but preferred to see Joe Public receive the awards, not managers and co-ordinators. But he clapped in the right places and cheered when the Dowager Duchess teetered to her feet to receive an award in recognition of her work supporting hostels that provided sanctuary for abused partners and families. Her husband was a tiny, arthritic, elderly gentleman, and before Danny could blink Steve was on his feet offering his arm to help her make her way to the pavilion.

There were a few discreet awwws as Steve conducted the lady through the dangerous terrain of tables and chairs. Head bent, his concentration was one hundred percent on ensuring that they arrived safely.

There was an endearing high flush on his cheekbones as he waited, in parade rest, for Mrs. Cherry Spencer-Hale to receive a framed award and a vibrant braided lei of carnations, orchids, and maile leaves from the governor.

Deftly relieving her of the award and once again offering his arm, Steve led her slowly back to their table.

Danny took the opportunity to switch her wine glass for water.

“Son,” Mr. Spencer-Hale said, “she could drink you under the table. Don’t bother.”

~*~

“So what happens next?” Danny asked as he settled back in a postprandial slump and wondered if it was de rigueur to loosen the bottom button of his jacket.

A string quartet was plinking the background. Throughout the Coronation Lawn most seemed happy to loll and digest. Some guests mingled, moving to other tables to talk to friends and acquaintances. A few groups were abandoning their tables en masse.

Steve pointed at the white lily and dark blue fuchsia central decoration on their table, but in reality he was illustrating the whole area.

“There will be a few ‘shows.’” He actually used his fingers to add speech marks around the word ‘show.’ “Generally quiet around here. I think that there’s a choir later. The quartet will do more stuff. On the Banyan Terrace there’s a dance party. By the ‘Iolani Palace Barracks, there will be hula dancers and other displays. If it rains, the performers will move into the Barracks…”

Steve delved into his inner suit pocket and pulled out a folded piece of cream paper. It appeared to be a schedule. Danny hadn’t received one with his invite. “Lots of events. Huh, at ten there’s a display of fire breathers from the Cirque Au Nationale -- that’s new. Fireworks at midnight.”

“Wow, they go all out.”

Steve shrugged and passed over the itinerary for Danny to read.

“Figure out what you want to do,” Steve said.

“So we just mingle?”

“It’s a party.” Steve looked really disinclined to move an inch.

“Do you dance?”
“What do you think?” Steve flared his nostrils.

Danny accepted that with a nod. He liked dancing, maybe Kono would dance? Although she appeared pretty comfortable talking to a young Asian guy. Leaning forwards, elbow on the table, her fingers dabbled at her bottom lip as they chatted.

“Is that Kono cosying up to the Yakuza dude?” Danny shifted around to face Steve directly to ask the question.

Steve stood up in one smooth motion, his chair almost toppling backwards. Danny caught it before it could fall over.

“Hey, let me.” Danny reached up and squeezed his elbow, emphasising that this was for the best.

“Danny,” Steve grated.

“Steve, trust me.” This was best left to innocent photographers instead of intimidating Navy SEALs. “Nothing is going to happen. We’re at a goddamn banquet. Sit down, Steve,” he finished quietly.

Steve sat with a thud.

Luckily Kono and Adam Noshimuri were focused on their little tête-à-tête and oblivious to Danny’s approach.

“Hey, Kono, according to the itinerary--” Danny waved it in front of her face, “--we can dance. You promised me a dance.”

“Danny?” Kono started back from the sheaf of paper.

“Do you mind?” Noshimuri began.

“Sorry, I… just, Kono promised.” Danny smiled, playing stupid. As he expected, Kono read the totally out-of-character befuddled grin on his face, and decided to go along with whatever shenanigans he was planning.

“Adam.” She smiled warmly. “I did promise.”

“Okay,” Noshimuri said slowly, the edge of a dark glower marring his expression.

“I’ll catch up with you later.” Kono curled a finger around a strand of her hair as she looked straight at him.

“I’ll find you,” Adam promised, and stood politely as Kono rose gracefully.

She brushed past Noshimuri with a swish of her long skirts and a waft of a delicate, citrusy scent and latched onto Danny’s arm.

“What was that about?” Kono asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

Danny could see Steve tracking them out of the corner of his eye.

“Do you know who he is?” Danny asked.

“His name is Adam. Adam Noshimuri. He’s a lawyer.”

“According to Steve, his father is the Head of the Yakuza on the Islands,” Danny said quietly.
“No way!” Kono breathed.

Danny slid in close, arm around her waist, to prevent her from spinning around and staring at the man.

“But that’s just his father, isn’t it?” Kono said pragmatically.

“There’s a reason why we have a saying: apples don’t fall far from the tree. I don’t know the Yakuza, but I know how the Mafia works -- best give him a wide berth, Kono.”

“Danny.” Kono stopped on a pin.

“Hey.” Danny released her. “We’re just looking out for you.” And he added icing on the cake. “Because we care.”

Kono accepted that with a roll of her eyes, but she accepted it.

“So you wanted to dance?” Kono said. “For real?”

“Yeah, Babe. I never pass up an opportunity to dance.” Danny gave a sinuous shake of his hips.

~*~

Hands in his pockets, knowing that he was breaking the lines of his tux, Danny sauntered through the crowd. He loved parties. He loved the energy. He loved the dynamism. He had talked to what felt like a hundred thousand people; from slight smiles and introductions, to a long chat with a guy who produced films and television programmes for a company based in Honolulu.

He had enjoyed dancing, but it had really been far too warm and humid to really get down and give into the music despite being outside. There was a reason why light cotton t-shirts and shorts were the standard wear in the Islands of Hawaii.

Chin slid up beside him. “Having fun?”

“Yeah.” Danny smiled toothily.

“It’s almost midnight,” Chin said, somewhat cryptically.

“And?” Danny couldn’t believe how quickly the time had passed.

Chin regarded Danny, evidently trying to use his nascent telepathic abilities, Danny guessed, wishing that he would get to the point. Clearly, he was missing something really obvious.

“Chin, please. What? Just tell me.”

“Fireworks, Danny. Fireworks.”

“And?” Danny asked, cocking his head to the side, thinking hard. Fireworks? And then he remembered, Chin thinking that a small BBQ at Seolh was a good idea, as long as they didn’t have any fireworks. “I think that I’ll go find Steve.”

“I last saw him on the Coronation Lawn.”

“The Lawn?” Danny confirmed, wondering if Steve was still sitting at their table being an antisocial git.
He was still sitting by the Coronation Pavilion, but four tables over, under the shadow of a small copse of spindly trees. Intent on his new Blackberry, thumbs flicking back and forth, he lazied on his chair -- lean, long legs stretched out before him.

“Hey, Steve.” Danny slid directly into view. “Playing Angry Birds?”

“What?” Steve glanced up from the screen.

“Fireworks are starting in fifteen minutes. What do you want to do? Go into the museum, head over to the Barracks and watch, or do you want to grab a cab and get out of here?”

“Why would …? Oh, Chin said.”

Danny shrugged. “What do you want to do?”

“Probably best to watch them.”

And Steve rose to his feet like a man about to trudge to the guillotine.

~*~

In all honesty, Danny didn’t know if this was a good idea. But Steve was an adult, he could have easily grabbed a ride home an hour ago. Danny kind of figured that he was making himself do this, to prove a point to his own torturous, or perhaps, tortured mind.

Danny liked fireworks. He assumed that anyone who hadn’t been in a combat situation -- be they man, woman or child -- liked fireworks.

Despite the late hour, it was still warm out. And, unusually for December, the sky was still clear and cloudless with no threatening rain.

They skirted the edge of what seemed to be every single guest at the Governor’s Ball. The lawn before the walled fortifications of the fort-like Barracks had been protected with boards, to protect the grass and to allow the guests to stand in comfort.

Steve picked a position to the back of the anticipating crowd, tucked into a corner of grey wall and tower. He flicked behind his right ear and then his left, switching his aids off.

Danny moved up beside him, leaning against the stonework, and crossed his arms, waiting for the display to begin.

It did -- with a loud countdown and a glorious cascade of primary colours shooting skyward from light fountains.

Rockets followed, vying for the starlit night and filling it with starbursts of green, blue, and yellow.

Danny had never enjoyed a firework’s display less in his entire like.

Steve tracked each and every line of fire with an intensity that made Danny’s spine thrum in sympathetic pain. He was standing, hands by his side, but in the flashing darkness and brilliant white light, Danny could see that he was driving the nail of his forefinger into his thumb nail bed.

Danny didn’t have a clue what to do; if he startled him, Steve would probably come up fighting.

The final waterfall of light streaming heavenward was a relief.
Danny sighed into the darkness, blinking as the light ebbed. A rainbow of colour burned against his retinas. They stood together as the visual bleed ebbed.

Finally reading relaxation, Danny bumped his shoulder into Steve’s bicep. “Are you okay, Babe?”

Steve glanced at him sideways and dredged up a smile from abyssal depths.

“Fine. Nice display,” he said casually, and he fiddled with the little switch on the back of his right hand aid.

“Yep.” Danny said. “Lots of taxpayers’ money going up in smoke.”

“Gentlemen?” a cultured female voice interrupted them. “Steven, how are you?”

They turned as one, to face the Governor of Hawaii.

“Governor Jameson.” Steve froze.

And it was only then that Danny made out her companion in the muted light.

Fuck — it was the unknown guy in the photograph.

~*~

# 41 #

“Governor Jameson. Auntie Pat,” Steve corrected himself woodenly. “It’s nice to see you again. Lovely party.”

Danny would have winced at the rote phrasing, but Holy shit there was the guy -- the guy that Sang Min and Victor Hesse had struggled to prevent anyone finding simply anything about -- just standing before them, all sophisticated and urbane.

“Having as much fun as always, Steve? You’ve never liked parties,” the governor said knowingly. “Are you going to introduce me to your companion?”

“Oh, sorry. Danny Williams, this is Governor Patricia Jameson. Auntie Pat, this is Danny Williams, and --” Steve looked directly at the unknown.

“Wo Fat,” the guy said, and allowed the governor to shake Danny’s hand first.

“Nice to meet you, Ma’am.” Danny returned her grip, striving not to squeeze too hard. “And nice to meet you, Mr. Fat.” He just couldn’t bring himself to shake the man’s hand.

“Just Wo Fat.”

“Pleased to meet you.” Steve leaned past Danny, shielding him, and shook Wo Fat’s hand. “I don’t believe we’ve met; is this your first time at the Governor’s Ball? I’ve missed the last few years.”

“No, I’ve been a guest at all of Governor Jameson’s Balls.”

“Oh, so you’ve been in Hawaii awhile?” Steve continued conversationally. “What is it that you do?”

“This and that. Mainly exports and imports,” Wo Fat said easily.

“So you’ve known the governor long?” Steve asked smoothly.
“Oh, we’ve been friends a long time.” The governor chimed out a laugh and linked her arm with the man. Wo Fat patted her hand as it curled over his forearm.

“Really?” Steve said levelly. “That’s interesting.”

“I understand that you used to be a Navy SEAL?” Wo Fat asked.

“I’m currently medically retired.”

“Medically retired? Despite the--” Wo Fat waved a lazy hand indicating the hearing aids.

“I will still serve my country,” Steve returned. “I simply need to find the best role.”

“That’s very admirable.”

Danny winced, the words didn’t sound condescending, but he could only describe them as slimily suave.

“I try,” Steve said granite-like. “I can of course contribute. I’m probably going to become an instructor -- use my experience. It was Danny’s idea.”

Oh, he has been listening, Danny thought -- inadvertently distracted from the Impending Threat of actually being in the vicinity of a known terrorist leader, which was making him gibber and spin in circles in the internal recesses of his mind.

“What type of imports and exports?” Steve persisted.

“So what do you do, Mr. Williams?” the governor slid into the conversation.

“Uhm, photography. I take photographs,” Danny managed, tight lipped.

Steve’s cell phone chimed in his breast pocket. He didn’t answer it. “That’s probably Mamo. We did agree to go home after the fireworks,” he explained the interruption.

“You should pop around to the office, sometime, Steve,” the governor continued, ignoring Steve’s offered graceful exit. “We can get a coffee and reminisce about old times. Or, I’d love to come over to Seolh. It’s been too long.”

“Oh, of course, that would be fine.” Steve rolled his shoulders fractionally under his jacket, and found feigned relaxation to Danny’s experienced, photographer’s eye. “We recently opened up the conservatory; the light is lovely in there.”

“Oh, I do remember. I spent many a happy hour in the conservatory.”

“Check your calendar, and tell me when you can come over. I’ll bake some scones.”

“Ah, just like Audrey -- with whipped cream and strawberry jelly?”

“Scones?” Danny couldn’t help asking, even as Wo Fat listened to their conversation with a smirk of a smile staining his face.

“Yes, Daniel, scones. Don’t knock them until you’ve tried them.” Steve nodded determinedly. “It is time for us to leave. Mamo’s with us and he did ask if we could head on home straight after the fireworks. I’d best corral my team. Nice to see you again, governor.” Steve coughed. “Auntie Pat. And you, Mr. Fat.”
“Wo Fat,” he corrected.

“Wo Fat,” Steve echoed. “I won’t forget.”

Danny did not object when Steve slung an arm around his shoulders, spun him around and away from Wo Fat, and basically frogmarched him away.

Steve kept Danny under his arm, like a baby bird under a momma bird’s wing. Danny felt sheltered and protected -- it was an entirely untried sort of feeling.

“I--” Danny began.

“In a moment.” Steve hugged him tightly against his side.

He sauntered them along, relaxed for all intents and purposes, but Danny imagined that he could feel Steve’s beating heart thumping against his own ribs as Steve held him so close.

Right-handedly, Steve was thumbing his own Blackberry, pulling up Toast’s GPS that provided a satellite overlay of the ‘Iolani Palace grounds and a series of coloured stars and other symbols.

“I wish I could convince Mamo to switch on his phone more often.” Steve cut through the post firework celebrants, unerringly tracking what Danny assumed were Chin and Kono’s signals.

“Danny, I need you to call White.”

“It’s after midnight,” Danny protested automatically.

“He’ll answer,” Steve said dryly. “Tell him that we’ve identified P-One as Wo Fat. And that he’s here in the company of Governor Patricia Jameson at the ‘Iolani Palace.”

Danny rapidly pulled out his phone as Steve towed him along.

“Chin!” Steve called and picked up the pace, shuffling them past a couple and off the main drag.

“Steve, what is it?” Muttering apologies, Chin towed Malia out of the main wave of revellers.

The phone barely rang three times before White picked up.

Steve’s attention was mainly on his Blackberry screen. “Kono?” he called loudly causing heads to turn.

“Commander? It’s Danny Williams.” He repeated Steve’s message verbatim.

“Steve?” Kono called up from slightly ahead -- turning and forcing her way back against the guests.

“Stay on the line, Williams,” White said tensely.

“Here.” Steve sort of released Danny into Chin’s orbit. “Have you seen Mamo and Auntie Maru?”

“They said they’d meet us at the car. They went ahead before the fireworks started; they wanted to avoid the throng.”

Steve’s Blackberry chimed and Danny realised that he had been texting along with tracking signals. Multi-tasking for the win.

“Toast is at Trish’s,” Steve said tightly. “Something about her black cocktail dress?”
“What’s the matter, Steve?” Malia asked.

“Chin, I need you to get Malia and Danny out of here. Get straight to Mamo’s SUV and go directly to Seolh,” Steve ordered uncompromisingly.

“What?” Danny screeched. “What the Hell are you playing at?”

Steve glanced down at him, brow furrowing. “I need to keep eyes on P-One until the team gets here.”

“No way!” Danny waved his phone under Steve’s nose. “This isn’t your job.”

“Yes. It is Danny. Chin, you have your orders.”

“Steve,” Chin began, worry creasing his features. “I don’t think…”

“I need you guys to be safe!” Steve grated. “Get to Mamo’s car. And. Leave.”

“What?” Danny rapidly spoke into his phone. “Tell Steve that he can’t chase after this Wo Fat guy alone. It’s dangerous.”

“Steve intends to do what?” White rapped out.

“Tell him not to go!” Danny thrust the phone into Steve’s face.

Steve smiled ghoulishly at it. “I can’t hear anything, Danny. Chin: orders.”

And with that parting shot, he disappeared into the crowd.

“Holy Jesus Fucking Christ,” Danny hollered. “You completely stupid, overprotective, retarded numskull!”

The crowd parted before his viperous anger, one lady actually blanching whiter.

“Danny?” Chin set a quiet hand on his shoulder. “We should leave.”

“No fucking way,” Danny said resolutely, shrugging him off. “You go to the car. I’m going after Steve.”

“Danny?” Malia said, her quiet, even voice was somehow perfectly modulated to break through his incandescent anger.

“What?” Danny snapped. “Sorry, I--”

“Find him,” Malia said, “and keep him safe.”

“Yes.” Danny lent his shoulder to bulldoze his way through the crowd heading back towards the Barracks looming ahead. He scanned left and right as he moved. There were so many people. There was something like a thousand people at the party. How could he find one man?

A miasma of dispelling, sulphurous firework smoke, hung, acrid, over the air; was Steve even tracking the real world? He had called them his team. Was that just the way that he thought? Or had he sidled sideways into a PSTD flashback?

Danny kept heading, shoulders firm, against the tide, earning more than a few black looks and muttered imprecations.
“Oh!” Then right before him appeared-- “Captain. Captain of the aircraft carrier. Murray?”

The captain stopped startled. “Can I help you?”

Two burly, thick necked men at the officer’s back -- thankfully in Navy uniforms -- eyed him suspiciously.

“Yes. To the side. To the side.” Danny made pushing hands to direct him out of the lines of people leaving. “Please.”

The captain did not move a millimetre. He raised his hand in the face of Danny’s intensity to stop his companions probably forcibly moving Danny out of his path. People parted around them like the churning sea around a lighthouse.

Danny gritted his teeth and dove straight in. “I’m here with Lieutenant Commander Steve McGarrett. He’s a Navy SEAL.” Belatedly, Danny remembered his mobile phone. He held it before the captain, as he whispered furiously, “Steve spotted a terrorist -- P-One. And he’s gone after him. But he doesn’t have anyone with him.”

The captain’s dark eyes speared him, and -- oh, Danny figured that that must be trained into them at Navy School, because Steve had that exact same focussed expression.

“Commander White at Pearl Harbour-Hickam is on the phone.” Danny pushed it into the captain’s hands. “He can confirm what I said.”

As the captain spoke quietly and urgently to White, Danny scanned the crowd. Where in the world would Steve be? Somehow just knowing, Danny’s gaze tracked upwards. There was a person on the roof of the Barracks main tower silhouetted against the night sky.

Damn Steve and his fondness for heights. Insane eyrie dweller, he thought viciously.

“Steve’s on the roof,” Danny said, and without a second thought, arrowed towards the building through the finally thinning crowd.

~*~

It was dark inside the Barracks. Danny could see a few displays and glass cases dotted here and there, but not much detail. There was a sign possibly directing guests towards a theatre. Shadows loomed throughout the darkness, hardly held back by the meagre light through the tall window at the top of the stairs far ahead.

He fumbled in his pocket for his phone and swore because he’d left it with the captain. He couldn’t even use the LCD screen as an impromptu flashlight. Inadvertently keeping to the white diamond tiles instead of the black he crept forwards.

He figured that he had to head upwards.

His eyes slowly got used to the light as he fumbled along, hands outstretched.

Footsteps sounded above him, light and racing, echoing through the old wooden framework.

“Steve?” he called -- would he ever stop expecting Steve to respond to him yelling? “Idiot!”

A figure turned the top corner of the staircase. Long limbed and lean, the man was only a dark form against a backdrop of bare illumination from the night sky and city lights beyond. The harsh light of
“maglite speared Danny’s eyes.

“Danny!” Steve snapped, exasperated. “I told you to leave.”

“Well, excuse me.” Danny bristled. “I’m not letting you run off on your own.”

“I need you to be safe.”

Danny digested that statement for a millisecond.

“That’s commendable. But I need you to be safe too -- and that means that I have to watch your back.” He stretched a fraction taller. “So I guess we have an impasse. So you know where this Wo Fat guy is? Did you see him?”

The light remained unerringly fixed on Danny’s face.

Danny half turned on his heel, and swung both hands in the direction of the main door, swishingly. “I’m guessing from the running that you saw Wo Fat? Do we really have time to argue?”

The WWII interrogating spotlight focussed on his face finally dropped.

“You’re not going to let me do this on my own, are you?” Steve said, picking up speed as he stalked down the stairs.

“No way, Babe,” Danny said simply.

“Come on then.” Steve caught Danny’s elbow, spinning him to the left, and propelled him off to the side. “I saw Wo Fat leaving with the governor through the old park entrance.”

~*~

They burst through the back exit of the Barracks, slamming opened handed through a barred fire escape as one. In the distance, an alarm went off. Steve paid it no heed.

They trotted down a steep set of grey granite steps, old and unused judging from the windblown leaves and detritus pushed up against the steps and along the short path below.

“This leads to the back of the parking lot,” Steve explained moving ahead on long legs. “At the very least I want to get the registration plate of Wo Fat’s vehicle.”

“Okay.” Danny jogged along at his side, thinking two sets of eyes were better than one.

Steve held up his phone. “And possibly get some photos.”

He picked up his pace, moving to a running jog, and Danny saw a chain-linked fence ahead

“Steve?” Danny huffed.

Steve didn’t pause, didn’t hesitate. Effortlessly, he leaped forwards, toe tip deftly slipping into a diamond-shaped space, and then he launched upwards. Practiced and smooth, he rolled over the top of the seven foot chain-link fence and dropped down lightly on the other side.

Fucking James Bond, Danny thought.

Not to be left behind, Danny scrabbled after him. He might be shorter, but he too had been a kid at one point and had scaled more than a few fences running around New Jersey. He needed two toe
holds, and graceful it was not, but he dropped beside his more athletic companion only a little out of breath.

Steve nodded approvingly.

“Come on.” Steve raced ahead, cutting through sparse rhododendrons. Dry mulch crackled beneath their feet as they cut over the gardens.

The switch to tarmac and floodlit space made Danny blink.

Steve stopped dead on the verge, head coming up like a hunting dog.

“The VIP area is over there.” A colourful marquee had been set up to protect the guests in case of thunderstorms or to simply wait in comfort as an army of valets retrieved their cars. “Back up, Danny.”

Steve pulled them both back into the shadows of an old Banyan tree, tucking Danny securely between the twisted, root-strangled trunk and his body. He had picked the perfect point to oversee the VIP parking lot.

“How come you know this area so well?” Danny asked.

“Grandmother donated money to the museum during the restoration phase. There were lots of meetings. Me and Mary played in the grounds,” Steve answered, as he continued to scan.

Danny peered around his side. A smooth ballet of valets and guests exchanging keys and Mercedes, BMWs and other sleek black cars was performed before them.

“Kaye,” Steve said.

“What? Who?” Danny peered in the same direction as Steve.

“Jenna Kaye. The computer geek.” Steve nodded at a young woman at the front of the line of revellers. Wearing a purple diaphanous gown and a drape around her shoulders, she looked very different from the squirrelly invader of their home. Impeccably made up, with her short hair sleek and smooth, she appeared confident and in control.

“You know her?”

“Fingerprint on your camera. She’s ex-CIA or something else. The CIA is remarkably cagey on the subject,” Steve said waspishly. His tongue poked between his teeth as he held up his phone, two handed, little fingers extended, and took two photos of Kaye and the black BMW that rolled up to pick her up.

“Where’s Wo Fat?”

Steve moved his area of observation above and beyond the marquee.

“Damn, I think… I think… someone’s watching us or for us,” he said implacably. “Wo Fat’s not at the marquee. He’s gone another way.” He caught Danny’s sleeve and towed him deeper into the cover of the undergrowth.

“How do you know?”

“Because if this man is the brains behind the Hesse brothers, he’s intelligent and canny. He wouldn’t have even chanced blowing his cover. The governor must have completely blindsided him
when she spotted me at the fireworks. He covered so well, but he must have been furious. He knew who I was before the governor introduced us. Knew I was a Navy SEAL. He might have hoped that we hadn’t ID’d him. But I’m pretty sure that our response gave us away. Come on.”

Half ducking, Steve headed off, paralleling the parking lot, keeping to the dubious cover of the palms and carefully tended rhododendrons.

Danny tripped after him in his shiny black leather loafers. He bet that James Bond had never bemoaned his choice of footwear.

“Where are we going? Danny asked.

“Governor’s palace.”

“What?”

“Whether Wo Fat is in collusion with the governor or she’s an innocent patsy, she’s said she’s known him for years. I’m guessing her life expectancy can be measured in minutes.”

“Why didn’t you say something to her at the Barracks?”

“Right, because, of course, she would have believed me,” Steve tossed over his shoulder. “Wo Fat had a gun in a left shoulder holster. And I was more focussed on getting you clear. For all the good that did me.”

There wasn’t much that Danny could say in response to that, so he picked up the pace and tried not think about the burning sensation of being watched smouldering between his shoulder blades

~*~

Two blocks down from the ‘Iolani Palace, skirting the modern Hawaii State Capitol Building, brought them opposite the governor’s palace. The building had a sort of Greek air with pillars and angular stonework. Surrounded by short neat hedges protected by railings, it bore wrought iron gates that were wide open. And that was curious in itself for a governor’s mansion, Danny guessed.

“Are we going straight in?” Danny huffed, happy to slow down to a fast walk, as they came out from under the shadow of the State Capitol Building.

Abruptly, Steve stepped onto the street and crossed the road away from the governor’s residence heading towards a white church hemmed by a white pebble-stone wall. A few cars were dotted around the parking lot, perhaps making use of free overnight parking. A giant black SUV, rivalling Mamo’s was parked closest to the governor’s hedge, on the same line of sight as the open gates. Cover, Danny guessed, as Steve jumped over the short wall and fetched up on the far side of the vehicle, tucked up beside the right hand wing mirror.

“Has White given you an ETA on the team?” Steve glared, incendiary-like, at the open, inviting gates. Danny set one hand on the wall and vaulted over it.

“Uhm, I gave my phone to Captain Murray.” Danny shuffled around Steve to look through the car windows at the governor’s palace.

“What?” Steve scowled over his shoulder.

“The guy who owns the entire boat?” Danny explained. “I figured we needed back up. There are thousands of people on that kind of boat. What better form of back up? Hopefully, he’s bringing the
entire Army.”

Steve stared at him, eyes wide. “Sometimes your mouth moves and I see and hear the words and they make absolutely no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense! It was a great idea.”


“Are we going in?” Danny asked as he dialled the number.

“No. I’m with a civilian. And funnily enough, I did not bring a gun to the Governor’s Ball.” Steve pointed at the discreet camera on the top of one of the gate pillars. It was angled straight down at the immediate entry zone before the driveway and the intercom key pad where a car would stop. “Something’s up. No light on the camera. Gate opened. No security.”

“Busy.” Danny held up the phone. “He must be talking to the captain.”

“Send him a text. Tell him we need back up at the Governor’s Palace, Washington Place.”

“You can text faster than I can.” Danny thrust the phone under Steve’s long nose.

Steve snatched it out of his hand, bottom lip downturned. “Tell me why I brought you?”

“Voice of reason,” Danny retorted.

Steve fired off a text, stabbing at the key pad as if he was an angry woodpecker.

“Look there’s something up,” Danny observed, miming open gates with the blades of his hands. “It’s suspicious. Let’s just call the police. Hey, we can call Koa Keawe.”

“Damn, we need to know what’s happening in there.” Steve scanned the governor’s palace beyond the hedges. “Look, Danny, get to the end of the road and flag a cab and get out of here.”

“What so you can scale the side of a building, creep in through a window, and do the Jason Bourne thing alone? No frigging way, my friend.” He backed up his words by stabbing a sharp fingernail right into Steve’s left hand side.

Steve yelped half in pain and half in shock, folding away from the hit. “Danny!”

“Medically retired, Steven. Medically retired.”

Danny could have withered under the napalm intensity levelled at him, but he met it head on.

“Shit, I don’t know what’s happening.” Steve almost wailed, but he tamped it down and turned it into a growl. “Where’s the god-damn team?”

“Babe, I know it feels like two weeks, but it’s only been fifteen minutes, twenty tops. They’ll be on their way.”

Steve gusted out a teeth-gritted exhale. “Call Koa Keawe.” He passed his phone back over to Danny. “Tell him that we think that the governor might be in danger.”

“Do you have his number?” Danny asked, trying to find the menu.

“Yeah, it’s under K for Koa and Keawe.”
Steve flicked out his jet black blade from nowhere. Mulishly, he turned on his heel, scanning the parked cars in the lot.

“What the Hell are you doing?” Danny demanded, as Steve stalked through the mosaic of parked cars. “You don’t have Keawe’s number programmed on your new phone. Should I call 911?”

“Shush.” Steve clicked a finger in Danny’s direction as he selected an older model Chrysler. He ducked down by the radiator grill and, as if by magic, popped the hood.

“How the Hell did you do that?”

Steve didn’t answer, holding the hood up one handed he scanned the guts of the car, selected two wires and cut through them with his razor sharp knife.

“Are we stealing a car?” Danny asked astounded.

“Do you want to tone it down? Even I can hear you.”

Danny jerked back. “Excuse me, isn’t this a crime?”

“Extenuating circumstances.” Steve drew out the dipstick. “Do you have a tissue?”

“You’re checking the oil before you steal it?”

“Tissue, Danny?”

“Of course, I have a tissue.” Danny always had a tissue, he had a seven year old daughter; he didn’t feel dressed without a pack of tissues. He handed one over and watched as Steve wiped off the oil, tossed the tissue, and then stepped on the end of the stick, bending it back and around to form a loop. “What are you doing?”

“Haven’t you ever boosted a car?”

“No, I have not boosted a car? What are you, some kind of juvenile delinquent?” Danny spat. “Why are we stealing a car?”

“If they leave we need to be able to follow them.”

“I give up. I’m calling 911.”

“No! We need to control the situation. Calling 911 will just bring a patrol car or two and lots of sirens. If the governor is in there with Wo Fat, we can’t predict what will happen if he gets spooked. Koa will be able to bring SWAT and control the response.”

Steve stripped the rubber seal off the driver’s window, and using his maglite, head against the glass, peered into the door workings. Flabbergasted, Danny watched as he smoothly insert the dip stick, wiggled it around, and then yanked it upwards. The door clicked and opened.

“Wow,” Danny said, impressed.

“Here.” Steve handed over the dipstick. “Straighten this out and put it back in the oil well.”

Danny automatically grabbed it as Steve slipped into the car and reached under the steering wheel. The dude was going to hot wire the car.
“Danny, dipstick.”

“Koa Keawe, Brainiac,” Danny retorted.

Steve glanced heavenwards, thinking hard. “Koa’s number is: 315 – 450 8133.”

As Danny carefully picked out Keawe’s number one handed, he set the thick wire down against the short wall, put his foot against it, and pulled, drawing the wire straight as possible. The phone rang and rang and rang. “Answer the phone, Keawe! Finally you can actually help and you’re asleep or something.”

The call finally switched to voice mail as, with a little wiggling and pushing, Danny reinserted the dipstick. The engine beneath him roared into life -- Steve had sparked the ignition.

“Excuse me?” the woman’s voice was unexpected.

Danny dropped the hood down with a sharp clunk.

“Kaye?” Steve said, frozen half in, half out of the Chrysler.

“You know me, Commander?” she said, flinching back a step.

Despite the immaculate grooming, and flawless makeup, she now exuded rawness and wide eyed inexperience.

“I’m sorry, you have to help me,” she continued.

“What?” Danny demanded. Why was she apologising?

“I’m sorry,” she repeated.

The gun that she held was enormous, and why was she pointing it at him?

~*~

# 42 #

“If you try anything, Commander, I will shoot Mr. Williams,” Kaye said nervously as Steve rose, leonine, to his feet.

Danny raised his hands over his head. A gun, someone was actually pointing a gun at him. It was Hesse all over again -- he was collateral to ensure Steve’s good behaviour.

Steve moved almost faster than the eye could follow. It was like watching a series of photographs: click, Steve was standing by the Chrysler; click, Steve was between Danny and the gun; click, Steve sinuously twisted around the woman, wrenching her arm upwards; click, Steve eelied sideways; click, Kaye was curled beside the car cradling her wrist and, finally, click, Steve was aiming the long muzzle directly between her eyes.

“Talk,” he said uncompromisingly. “Who are you actually working for?”

“You have to help me.” She glanced furtively over her shoulder. “Wo Fat has my fiancé. I have to help, otherwise he’ll kill Josh. I need you to come with me.”

“And do what?” Danny said incredulously. “Come with you to visit a terrorist? No way! Even if you had an engraved invitation, lady -- which, by the way, I don’t see -- we’re not going anywhere with you.”
“He’ll kill my fiancé. Please, you have to help me,” she said, tearfully, over Danny’s words.

Steve slid a glance at Danny as if considering it.

“Steve,” Danny railroaded on, “no way. I will grab you by the scruff of the neck and tow you away from this harridan.”

Steve shot him a frankly astounded glance, but a smile curved his mouth for a fraction of a second.

“What about the CIA?” Steve asked giving his attention back to the woman.

“No one will help me.” She stood gingerly, watching Steve doe-eyed, holding her wrist like a limp bird. “No one.”

“Give me my phone, Danny.”

“What?”

“My phone, Danny,” Steve ordered, clicking his fingers.

Danny took a hesitant step forward and then another so that he could drop the phone on Steve’s outstretched left palm. Steve flicked through his phone, scrolling over the screen barely looking at it. A click, and a stroke and apps disappeared off the black screen. The gun in his other hand didn’t waver. All his listed contacts blinked out. Multitasking, he tapped in a long, longer than normal, number with his thumb and saved it with no other details. He tossed it over to the woman. She caught it fumble handed.

“That’s an x-model set up with Overlay,” Steve said un informatively (for Danny). “Short range enabled if required. Assuming you have intel, you can share it with the naval intelligence operative on the listed number.”

“I guess it’s prid pro quo, then?” she said bitterly.

“Hah,” Steve said without humour, “You’re CIA; you know how it works.”

She stuffed the phone in her purple purse and raised her trembling chin. “I do. I’ll be going.”

“Bye bye.” Danny waggled his fingers and she turned on her heel and scurried away, all forlorn. But Danny could only remember the gun pointed steadily at him and thought, duplicitous.

“Get in the car, Danno,” Steve ordered, sliding efficiently into the driver’s seat.

“What?”

“Car!”

Danny dashed around to the passenger side. His heart was beating like a trip hammer. He was too young to have a heart attack.

“We’re still stealing the car?”

Steve set the gun on the dashboard and didn’t respond.

“Are we following her?” Danny asked.

“No. I’ve just chipped her. She now has a phone with a GPS tracking device. We know where she’s
going. All the research we’ve carried out has her identified as a skilled researcher but not an operative.”

“So why are we stealing a car? Are we going to help the governor?” Danny looked pointedly at the gun on the dashboard.

“Not at this moment, no,” Steve said, cupping a hand around the back of Danny’s head and pushing his head down between his knees. Danny was so astonished that he allowed it to happen.

“Steve?”

The warm length of Steve’s torso rested over Danny’s back, startling him into unprecedented silence, even as Steve murmured, “Shush.”

What, Danny wondered, was happening? The dark, rough fabric in front of his nose smelled of air freshener. The space that he was pushed into was warm verging on hot.

“We’re going to follow them,” Steve said above him, voice rough. “There are two cars coming out of the governor’s residence.”

Scrunched up, Danny’s guts and heart met and danced the fandango of terror.

“What?” Danny gasped out. There was no response, as Steve was as still as stone above him.

The warmth lifted away as Steve shifted, turning and settling back properly in the drivers’ seat. He manipulated the old car’s stick shift, balanced clutch and gas, and reversed out of the parking space. Danny uncurled a fraction and peeked over the dash.

Ahead of them two cars with blacked out windows, a long limousine and an Audi, moved down Beretania Street heading north west. Steve smoothly directed their stolen car onto the main street and started to tail them.

“What are you going to do if they go different ways?” Danny asked, as the first car indicated to go left at the junction ahead.

“Follow the limo with the governor’s plates.”

Both cars turned left, amber lights blinking, and Steve picked up speed.

This was officially turning out to be the most intense date of Danny’s entire life.

~*~

“I’ll say one thing, Babe,” Danny observed as they drove through the one am traffic around the city blocks of Honolulu, camouflaged by other cars going lots of places. “It certainly hasn’t been boring since I started living at Seolh.”

Steve flashed him a wicked, crinkly smile.

“If we’re going to be accurate, Danny, this all kicked off when you came to Seolh.”

Danny huffed but he couldn’t deny it. “You’re actually enjoying this, aren’t you?”

Danny’s heart rate had dropped back to bells-and-whistles concerned instead of utterly terrified out of his gourd. There was something about being encased in a good half-ton of good American steel that calmed him.
Steve indicated and turned right, heading for the Lunalilo Freeway. He kept three to five cars between him and his prey.

“What happens if we get on a freeway?” Danny asked.

“We just follow. I wish we had a phone.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have given it away,” Danny said primly, not mentioning the captain of the US Aircraft Carrier who now had his phone.

“Pot-Kettle,” Steve said, clearly not forgetting. “Have you got a pen on you?”

Danny patted the lines of his black tux, even though he knew the answer. “No.”

“Check the car,” Steve directed.

Danny checked the nooks and crannies around in him in the intermittent illumination from streetlights, road signs and buildings as they passed by.

“Glove compartment?” Steve suggested tersely.

Danny flipped it open, and the lamp revealed a small first aid kit, manual, other oddities and a pen.

“Pen.” Danny held it up.

One handed, Steve pulled the Governor’s Ball schedule of events from his inner breast pocket and tossed it over.

“Write on the back, as big and as clearly as possible: Cmdr Wht; 375 A E T P-One; DV2 399.”

“Okay,” Danny said hesitantly. “Abbreviation for Commander White and A for apple or H for hat?

“Alpha Echo Tango Papa hyphen One,” Steve rapped out. “And then the license plate.”

“Why am I doing this?” Danny rested the page on the dash and began blocking out the three lines of words and letters. “It’s not like we’re on a desert island. There’s no glass bottles. If we chuck it out of the window, it will just end up in the trash. Shall I add: help?”

Steve was peering left, right and centre as he tailed the two cars. “Hold it up against the windscreen. It will be picked up, especially at junctions and definitely if we turn onto the Nimitz Highway.”

“For real?” Danny checked.

“For real,” Steve confirmed.

“Okay.” Danny scribbled quickly, darkening the text to make it bolder. Man, he had read about Big Brother Always Watching You, but he didn’t realise that they lived in a Police State.

~*~

The wide interstate was dark in the dead and quiet of night. Steve drew far back, following the red tail lights of the governor’s car and the other vehicle heading through the Keaiwa State Park. Every now and again the passage of headlights on the opposite lane of the freeway strobed through the old Chrysler like bright lightning. Danny zoned on the intermittent arcs of light brightening though the car and ebbing to nothingness. Only the beat of adrenaline kept him awake.
“Where do you think they’re going?” Danny asked, a fraction louder and tone deeper than normal, in consideration of the darkness encasing them.

“The H3 interstate takes us into Kaneohe,” Steve said. “I only know the Marine Corps base is at Mokapu and their air station is at Kaneohe Bay. I thought that they’d head down to docks west of Honolulu.”

“Flight out at the air station?” Danny postulated.

“You don’t take commercial flights from a Marine Corps air station,” Steve said with an air of incredulity at the suggestion. “I’m not aware of any publically accessible airstrips in the vicinity.”

Their preys’ tail lights were far ahead, dipping occasionally out of sight as the road curved up and down.

“Hold the wheel a second,” Steve directed as he wound down the driver’s window, switching off the internal lights and headlights.

“What the Hell are you doing?” Danny asked, as he took the wheel. Thankfully the road was straight.

Steve was half leaning out of the window peering up at the heavens -- scanning.

“What are you doing?” Danny asked again, without any expletives.

Steve dropped back in the driver’s seat and fired up the lights again.

“Hmmm, clear night,” Steve said, typically opting for a non sequitur rather than answers. He slid a glance sideways, and then elaborated without being probed. “I’m looking for a surveillance helicopter overhead.”

“What?” Danny leaned forwards craning his head to peer futilely through the windscreen. “How can you tell?”

“I know what to look for. Or, more accurately, what not to look for. I know the Hawaiian night sky and it’s a cloudless night. You have to observe patch changes against the night sky. It’s easier with a scope, I’ll admit.”

“You are a super SEAL,” Danny marvelled with a little bit of mocking. If the Navy let him go because he was deaf they were idiots. “Did you see one?”

“It’s kind of difficult in a moving vehicle—” The car jerked beneath Steve’s hands, swerving widely off course. Danny slapped his hands against the dash as the world skewed sideways. The back of the car fish-tailed around.

“Holy S—!”

The windscreen exploded.

“Duck!” Steve yelled.

The world went topsy turvy.

~*~

This was an altogether new experience, Danny thought as he opened his eyes. He was sort of
mushed up on his side against Steve, waist seatbelt tight against his hips. He had slid out from under the chest belt.

“Steve?” he tried and coughed. Safety glass from the blown out windscreen sheeted off his torso as he wriggled. Danny rotated his neck and shoulders; nothing felt massively wrong.

Eyes closed, Steve lolled against his seat belt, chin resting on his chest as he hung forwards. In the instant of registering a picture, Danny noted that his right hearing aid hung loose.

“How’s it going?” Gingerly, he reached out and set a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “You with me?”

“What?” Startled, Steve sat up, wincing. There was gash high on his forehead, in the hairline. Blood was freely flowing down the right side of his face following the line of his dark hair behind his ear. The fold of his white shirt collar was already marked red.

“Don’t move; you might have a neck injury.”

“I don’t,” Steve said authoritatively and, perhaps, working on convincing himself. He hooked his hearing aid back in position, messing up the perfect line of blood.

“You’re bleeding!”

Steve fingered the wound and flicked away a piece of glass. “Minor scalp laceration. They always bleed. It’s nothing to worry about.” He mashed his hair down against the cut with a wince.

“Nothing to worry about?”

“We don’t have time for this, Danny. Are you hit? I’m assuming from the volume -- not.”

“Hit?”

“You can get out on your side?” Steve asked as he took stock. His door was firmly wedged shut. Steve rooted around his legs -- probably for the gun, Danny guessed.

They were off kilter, left-hand side of the car nose deep in a steep ditch, tilted over.

Gravity was against Danny, and the angle wasn’t great, but he levered the door open, putting his back into it. The internal light above their heads flicked on and Steve quickly switched it off.

“Move, Danny,” Steve said urgently.

On releasing his seatbelt, Danny found out that getting out was an exercise in wriggling and figuring out places to put his feet that wasn’t on Steve. And keeping the heavy door from swinging back on him.

“Hurry up,” Steve said, putting hands on Danny’s butt and pushing hard. “Get out and go for cover.”

Danny yelped as he was benched pressed out of the car.

“It looks like there’s a storm drain ahead,” Steve directed, coming up behind Danny like a jack-in-the-box. “Head there.”

They had come off the interstate but luckily on a banked ground-level section rather than one of the many raised platforms.
Their mad skewing ride had been mitigated by an old dirt track beneath the interstate before they had ended up in the ditch. It probably accounted for the fact that they were not mangled to death. Danny sort of half-perched half-leaned on the edge of the passenger seat and the edge of the car, and pushed off onto the side of the grubby ditch. The door swung down clipping him on the shoulder, bruisingly. He slipped on the damp vegetation, going down between the car and the mud, and catching his ankle hard against the undercarriage.

“Motherfucker,” he said succinctly.

“Are you okay?” Steve asked above him, braced between door and frame. “Are you stuck?”

“Just more bruises.” Giving up the vague notion that he might save the tuxedo, Danny scrambled up the side of the bank on hands and knees, getting above Steve.

“Move to the storm drain, Danny,” Steve persisted.

“Come on then,” Danny directed, taking some of the weight of the door. He should have just wound down the window. Lesson learnt for next time, Danny thought mirthlessly.

Steve didn’t argue, and his longer limbs made it easier for him to bridge the gap between car and ditch. He didn’t say a word, simply catching Danny’s elbow and propelling him up the bank onto the track.

“You are very annoying, Commander,” Wo Fat said above them, stopping them dead. He set one foot on the interstate guard rail and rested his elbow on his knee as he looked down.

One moment Danny was in front of Steve being forced up the bank, the next he was tucked behind him. A large hand twisted in his sleeve kept Danny firmly in place.

Wo Fat continued, “McGarretts; very annoying.”

What, Danny wondered, does that mean? He craned his head around Steve’s shoulder as three thugs, two broad tanks and another thin and wiry like Wo Fat, stepped up beside the terrorist, brandishing long rifle-like guns.

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# 43 #

“Where’s the governor?” Steve demanded, back ramrod straight.

“You’re not in a position to ask questions, Commander McGarrett.”

Steve brought his acquired gun up and pointed it directly at Wo Fat. The man didn’t even bat an eyelid. Not that Danny could see much in the meagre light of the overhead interstate lamps. If anything Wo Fat only appeared amused.

“The governor,” Steve commanded again. “You have kidnapped an elected State official. This is an act of terrorism.”

“Tha--”

Bright lights straight out of Close Encounters of the Third Kind flooded the area. Danny didn’t even have time to ask what the fuck is happening? before Steve kicked backwards, pushing his bad knee out from under him and Danny slid unceremoniously back down the bank. There was a sharp pop-
pop and a rain of bullets strafed the area right above Danny’s head. The space where Steve had been standing. The space where Steve was no longer standing. Caught in the mud, Danny slid further down beside the Chrysler, as he tried to see where Steve was.

Up above on the interstate one of the heavy-set thugs swung around to bring his rifle up to point at the helicopter hovering overhead, and then he dropped, a floppy mess of no-longer living flesh. Steve scrambled up onto the interstate, firing repeatedly and with absolute precision. The second large thug jerked backward, a spray of blood arching behind him, and his head flicking back like it was partially disconnected from his body. And then Steve was on the road, pursuing the retreating Wo Fat and his companion. He dodged and weaved as Wo Fat returned fire.

Grabbing a shrunken twisty bush, Danny found his feet and got himself out of the ditch and raced after Steve. He wasn’t entirely sure what he could do to help, but he wasn’t cowering in a muddy ditch. The rise up to the interstate wasn’t as steep as the ditch, but he resorted to hand over knee to get up to the road.

The skinny thug and Steve were dancing a violent ballet of kicks and punches. Half blinded by the debris-strewn wind that the helicopter’s downwards rotors were whipping up, Danny had to shield his eyes as he stumbled forwards. Steve had a wicked backhand. But the thug span with the punch, leg coming out and catching Steve smack against his vulnerable left side.

“Steve!” Danny yelled, as Steve crumpled backwards, coming down on one knee, hard on the road.

Wo Fat was ahead, sprinting for the two cars that had simply stopped in the middle of the interstate. He slowed, turning back to watch as Steve sort of did something improbably gymnastic, hands on the road, hips twisting, and kicked his attacker directly in the centre of his chest. The crack of breaking bone was viscerally horrible, even over the sound of the landing helicopter.

Wo Fat was up by the stopped cars. He paused by the larger limousine, hauling open the back door.

“No!” Danny shrieked, somehow knowing, somehow realising what was going to happen as Wo Fat pulled out a small gun from the back of his pants and fired twice into the back seat.

“Governor!” Steve yelled, vaulting over the person he had probably just kicked to death, and racing towards the cars.

Wo Fat had too much of a head start. He leapt smoothly into the passenger seat of the black Audi, the engine gunned, and headed off into the darkness. Steve knelt on one knee, aimed and fired. He got one shot off -- it spanged ineffectually off the bumper as the car swerved -- and swore loudly, evidently out of bullets.

“Oh my god.” Danny stopped beside Steve. He didn’t want to look into the limousine.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Steve scrambled to his feet and continued towards the governor’s car. He didn’t pause, climbing in the back. “Danny, help.”

Danny couldn’t ignore that. He scurried up beside Steve as he manhandled the tall woman out of the back of the car.

“You’re not supposed to move… people,” Danny said, as he loaned his strength to get her lying on the cold tarmac. He shrugged out of his jacket and balled it under her head.

“There’s no time for that.”

Horribly, she was awake, gasping, shallowly and wretchedly. Her cream dress was no longer
“Sorry, governor,” Steve said as he slit the bodice of her gown with his magically appearing jet black knife. He manipulated her left arm, ignoring her whimpers, and got a look at the wound high on her chest tucked down by her armpit. “Danny, look in her purse, see if you can find a sanitary pad or tampon.”

“What?” There was so much blood, flowing fast and pulsing. A puddle was forming beneath her.

“Danny!” Steve said through gritted teeth.

“Okay.” It was better than looking at that gory, gushing, blackened hole. Danny got the purse out the back of the car and upturned the contents beside Steve. Danny rapidly pawed through them. “Makeup, tissues, comb. Hmm…? Will this do? Fat sanitary napkin…ah! Incontinence pad?”

Steve glanced up. “Take the wrapper off.” He shuffled over on his knees. “There’s a second wound on her abdomen. Use the pad, lots of pressure.”

“What?”

“Danny! Get on my other side.” He flipped back the folds of her dress, revealing her from hips to throat. “Danny. You have to do this. I only have two hands.”

It was bloody and Danny didn’t want to touch, but-- “What are you doing?”

Steve had his fingers in the higher wound, knuckle deep. His eyes were closed as he concentrated. A new trickle of blood was working down the bridge of his nose from his forehead.

“I’m pinching the artery,” he said voice distant. “Otherwise she’s going to bleed out. Danny, you have your orders.”

Danny slapped the pad over the wound above her hip and leaned in hard. The governor keened and he wanted to release, but he couldn’t. This was beyond horrible. How long they were going to have to do this, he couldn’t even begin to estimate. Eyes still closed, Steve felt along the governor’s left arm, until his large hand encircled her wrist. Monitoring her pulse, Danny guessed.

“Commander McGarrett?” a young female voice demanded loudly. She wore a large round helmet, with a black visor tucked up high. The helicopter pilot, Danny guessed.

Steve’s eyes flicked open. “Captain,” he said instantly, “we need to MEDEVAC the governor out of here.”

“We’re in the middle of a refit. We’re not currently equipped for MEDEVAC, commander.”

“Make it happen. Find something to keep her flat while we transport her. I can’t release my hold. Now, captain.”

The pilot nodded firmly, and ran to organise her crew. Danny didn’t know one rank from another or what the colours on their breast pockets meant, but a slight red-head with spiky hair cocked his head to the side when the captain told them to find a board or something. He ran immediately to the limousine and popped the trunk, hauling out the false bottom that covered the spare tyre and tools.

“Perfect, Cole. You’re my favourite engineer,” the pilot said.

“I’m your only engineer, Captain Terrance.”
“Excellent,” Steve noted. “Slide it under the governor; try not to jostle her too much.”

The engineer studied the problem for a mere blink of his eye. “Can I ask you move over to the other side, please,” he said, looking at Danny.

Danny didn’t ask why. Straddling the governor’s legs, he shimmed over next to Steve -- all the while trying to keep his bloody fingers pressing down over the rapidly darkening pad.

“We’re going to do this length-wise towards the heart--” Cole knelt and positioned the board along the right-hand side of the governor’s torso, “-- minimising disturbance.”

She was breathing harshly, panting, her gaze fixed on Steve. Despite everything happening around her and to her, she was keeping very still -- Danny thought that she was very brave.


Fortuitously, the remains of the governor’s silk dress made it slightly easier for Cole and the captain to slide it under her.

Steve watched hawkeyed as the board was manoeuvred into place. A small red car pulled to a stop on the other side of the helicopter blocking the interstate. Its headlights helped illuminated the situation. The board was long, matching the width of the limousine and only her feet hung off the edge. It was a perfect choice of makeshift gurney.

“Good work,” Steve breathed as the board was situated. “Okay, we’re going to snatch and grab. I can’t let go of the artery. Danny, you can step back temporarily. Cole, Captain, stay on that side.”

Steve raised his chin, catching the attention of a second man that Danny was only just aware of. His name badge over his chest pocket said Baptise. “I want you on my side with Danny. Lift on my say so, carefully and as slowly as possible. We are going to walk over to the Pave Hawk and slide the governor in the back. Does everyone understand? We cannot jostle her. Sound off.”

“Terrance: yes.”

“Cole: Yes.”

“Baptise: Yes.”

“Yeah, I do. Danno!” Danny said.

Steve waited until they were positioned around him.


Danny really put his back into it. He did not want to jiggle her one iota. A fraction shorter than the tall Navy-Army (he really didn’t care) helicopter crew he had to lift a little higher -- he had never been more thankful for the hours spent in the gym.

‘Snatch and grab’ it really wasn’t, Danny thought, as they shuffled towards the helicopter.

There was another pilot in the high cockpit, watching them behind a shadowy transparent visor. His mouth was working -- almost chewing on a mike attached to his helmet -- as he evidently spoke at length to someone on the other end of a radio.

A few bystanders had exited their cars and were snapping off photos. The flash of light was
annoying and omni-present. In the far off distance of the dark night, Danny could see the blue lights of police vehicles.

They had reached the open housing of the helicopter. Working in tandem with Cole, Danny positioned the end of the board on the flat bed of the helicopter. The governor had lost one shoe somewhere, Danny noticed absently. Cole scrambled into the helicopter, and squatted low. Danny stepped back holding his hands up. Terrance and Baptise slid the impromptu gurney into the helicopter, pausing when Steve came up tight against the metal side.

“You’re doing fine, solider… governor,” Steve said. “I’m just going to get up into the Pave Hawk.”

Steve suited action to words. His impassive expression slipped a fraction as he evidently lost his grip on whatever he was holding. A quick nod and Terrance and Baptise quickly pushed the governor right into the helicopter. Steve settled into a half-lotus at her side, eyes drifting shut as he concentrated on repositioning his hold. A drop of blood burgeoned and then dripped from his nose into his lap. Steve was oblivious; it would have driven Danny nuts.

“We’ve got clearance for Tripler,” the pilot in the cockpit called. “Are we fixed?”

Cole slammed the sliding side door shut with an echoing thud. “Good to go, Copper Boy.”

Danny had no frame of reference but he thought that the lift-off was smooth.

“Danny,” Steve said over the hellish roar of the rotors. “Pressure. Abdomen.”

“Shit.” Danny got up on his knees beside Steve and slapped his palms over the pad.

Terrance had moved up to join the other pilot, settling in the co-pilot seat.

Baptise knelt opposite them with a humongous bulky backpack festooned with pockets. Reaching into the lower, middle pocket, he pulled out a khaki green package.

“Are there’s any exit wounds?” Baptise asked.

“Steve?” Danny quickly reached over and tapped Steve’s knee and then set his hand back on top of the pad.

Steve opened his eyes.

“Exits?” Baptise said succinctly.

“Small calibre,” Steve answered.

Baptise nodded. “Can I ask you to lift your hand a second?” he asked Danny, unfurling the package, revealing a thick white pad and trailing ties. “Don’t remove the pad.”

“Okay.” Danny lifted his bloody fingers and Baptise slapped the thicker bandage on top of the first pad. He nodded encouragingly at Danny, who put his hands back on the pad and pressed.

The governor was silent, eyes closed, face lax. Danny hoped that she wasn’t dead.

“Pulse?” Steve directed, even as he held her wrist.

Baptise went for her carotid pulse with two extended fingers and pressed. ‘Rapid,’ he mouthed.

“Saline?” Steve asked, jerking his chin at the backpack.
“I’m not a medic, sir,” Baptise said.

Steve scrunched his face up furiously, and Danny guessed that he knew how to give the governor saline, but now he was trying to keep blood in her body with his freaking fingers.

“Tripler ETA in two,” Cole said, glancing up to the cock-pit and then back at them.

“Pack around my fingers. Sponge, whatever,” Steve directed.

One pocket was the source of little sponges, another pocket held tape. Baptise packed and Cole cut strips of tape and cocooned Steve’s fingers. Baptise finally held up a square pad before Steve’s nose and pointed to his forehead. Steve leaned forwards, letting him press the pad against the cut and fix it in position with a messy strip of tape. There was a little bump of a jostle of air currents, and Steve scowled, but Cole jumped up to the door, peering through the thick window.

“We’re coming down, sir. Medical staff are waiting for us.” Even as the helicopter touched down, Cole slid the door back. He held his hand palm out, directing the waiting staff to hold until the rotors slowed to a stop. Outside, Danny could see the doctors and nurses poised to descend.

The waiting was tense. Cole was a statue, and then the pilot announced ‘clear’ and Cole dropped his hand. And the doctors and nurses seemingly teleported across the space.

There was hodgepodge of unfamiliar terms and acronyms swapped back and forth, Steve supplying some of them. Danny was going to have to Google ‘hypovolemic’ when they got home. A grey haired, bespectacled, white, older guy set his stethoscope against the governor’s chest and listened carefully after Steve’s download of information.

“I need you to stay where you are,” the doctor said looking directly at Steve. “We are going to work around you. You,” he glanced at Danny, “let me check.”

Danny happily fell back, once again holding his bloody hands high. The doctor glanced under the layer cake of pads. Another medic took Danny’s space forcing him up against the fuselage wall and began to try to insert an IV in the governor’s arm. It took several attempts.

“Right,” the boss guy said, and there was another flurry of words and both Steve and the governor were snatched away. Steve riding atop the governor’s gurney, straddled across her body, poised in position as if he were carved in stone.

“Wow,” Danny said, as they were whisked out of sight. “Wow.” He was stuck in a record groove. All the adrenalin in his body flushed away as if a plug had been pulled, leaving him puddled on his butt in an army-navy-air force helicopter. “Worst date, ever.”

“Sir?” There was a bright-eyed and bushy tailed, actually very attractive lady smiling down at him. She crinkled her freckly nose at him. “Are you injured?”

“I don’t think so? I mean why would I be?” Danny asked.

She shrugged, but continued to smile. “Why don’t you let me check you out?”

“Yeah, okay,” Danny said agreeably. Seriously, worst date, ever.

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# 44 #
Danny got a hot shower to wash off the blood staining his hands, shins, and knees, followed by a cup of warm coffee that was the best cup of coffee that he had ever had in his entire life. And, also, a blanket that had been pulled from a microwave so it was warm and cozy. It was the simple things that made life worthwhile.

He had a spectacular grazed gash just above his ankle where he had caught it on the underside of the Chrysler when he had slipped. He hadn’t even noticed the damage. Bruises were blossoming on his shoulder and across his chest from a combination of their impromptu descent into the ditch and the Chrysler door. Cleaning the gouge had not been a pleasant experience and there wasn’t much that he could do about the bruises apart from the prescribed switch between icing and heating that he was being subjected to. His new tuxedo had been consigned to the garbage and he had on a set of fetching turquoise scrubs which did nothing for his currently flushed complexion.

The little red pills that the frizzy-haired doctor who had looked after him had kindly requested that he take -- otherwise he would be feeling the burn, she had pointed out cheerfully -- made him feel pretty good about the fact that it was quarter to three in the morning. All the action had gone down in less than an hour. Three hours ago he had been preparing to watch a fireworks display and that had been the most stressful thing to happen all day.

And on that thought, he swung his legs off the gurney and gingerly tested his ankle against the floor. His leg wasn’t happy, but it was merely uncomfortable. He was kind of curious to know how far he was going to get before being intercepted, but he was going to find a certain Lieutenant Commander McGarrett.

“Mr. Williams?” A short, stocky nurse, her smock bursting at the seams, bustled over as he pulled back the curtain and peered out into the open area. “Can I help you?”

Wow, less than two seconds. The military nurses were on the ball, in an aggravating kind of way. She was also kind of scary in that I’ve seen everything, boy, and I’m wise to all your tricks manner. That felt a little unfair, since he hadn’t even began to misbehave. He opted for honesty.

“I’m looking for my friend, Lieutenant Commander McGarrett? And how’s the governor? Any news?” A couple of the bays were curtained off. Danny guessed that the governor had been whisked immediately to surgery, but where was Steve?

“I’m afraid that I don’t know how Governor Jameson is.”

“Steve? Lieutenant Commander McGarrett? He was also in the car. I think that he was -- I know that he was stunned after the crash. And the guy karate-kicked him in his ribs.” Danny gestured at his left side. “His sore ribs, he had surgery five-six months ago.”

“I tell you what.” The nurse lowered her chin, and looked at him straight in the eye. “I’ll go see what I can find out, if you sit quietly.”

There was really no arguing with the woman. Bulldog, he supplied inwardly, aware that it was not the most charitable appellation.

“Look, tell me where Daniel Williams is. He came in with me and the governor,” Steve’s voice came from the corridor beyond.

“Steve?!” Danny started across the assessment suite, forgetting the nurse and her orders. “Steve?”

Steve came around the corner, a beanpole of a white-coated man shepherding him.

“Danny!” Steve said relieved. “Are you okay?”
"Yeah." Danny couldn’t say the same thing for Steve. The harsh white fluorescent lighting made Steve look positively gaunt. The leaps and bounds in health that Steve had made since Danny had come to Seolh were readily apparent in contrast. This was the man that had greeted him that first day. He was the colour of curdled milk and his cheekbones verged on the edge of cutting skin. Like Danny, the staff had allowed Steve to grab a shower, and had given him a set of turquoise scrubs. The cut high up in his hairline still had a messy bloody pad affixed with surgical tape. Another tiny glass cut marred the skin by his left sideburn.

“How’s the governor?” Danny asked.

“Still in surgery. She’s got the best looking after her.” Steve flicked a glance at his clean fingers -- his expression was one that Danny imagined might shadow Lady Macbeth’s face.

“We got her here, Babe,” Danny pointed out. “She’s got a chance.”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, Commander,” the skeletal-like doctor with Steve spoke. He gestured to the first open bay. “Let’s stitch up that cut on your forehead.”

“Have you checked his ribs?” Danny interjected, getting into the man’s orbit. He refused to be intimidated by almost seven feet of height. The dude only needed a scythe to evoke an image of Death in Danny’s active imagination. “He was kicked.”

“Danny,” Steve said fondly, resting a hand on his shoulder. “I’ve just come from x-ray; bruised but no breaks. Maybe a hairline, doc?”

“Hairline?” Danny darted a glance between creepy doctor and patient.

“Difficult to judge.” The doctor gestured smoothly towards the empty gurney, and ordered, “Commander.”

Steve shuffled over in his little matching blue booties. Danny sort of hovered, and guided him, unnecessarily, every step.

“Mr. Williams,” his nurse spoke. “Let the doctor work; come back to your bed.”

“It’s okay, he can stay.” Steve gingerly hefted himself onto the padded gurney.

“They gave me some nice little red pills. They’re awesome,” Danny said. “You should ask for some.”

The doctor nodded to the nurse, who bustled off, soft-soled shoes going snick-snick against the linoleum. Carefully, Steve stretched out on the bed. Head cushioned, he lay still as the doctor angled a poise lamp, so he could best see the laceration on Steve’s scalp.

“I’m just going to numb the area,” the doctor said, drawing on nitrile gloves before flipping back the green cover protecting a sterile suture kit on a tray by the head of the bed. “It will only take four or five stitches. But we will have to shave the hair around the wound.”

Danny set his hand on Steve’s ankle, and squeezed. Surprised, Steve lifted his head and cocked an eyebrow at him. Belatedly, Danny remembered that this was a Navy SEAL, not a kid. Cod--dle, Kono’s voice mocked in his mind.

“You’re reminding me of Grace. She had to get stitches once. She cried.”
“I’m not going to cry, Danno,” Steve said dryly.

“Hey, you could ask the doctor to take the stitches out of your foot.”

Steve huffed. “I took them out on Saturday afternoon after our day on the beach.”

“Please, can you lay down, Commander?” The doctor brandished a stubby syringe.

“Is that allowed? I mean, can you just take them out?” Danny demanded, looking at the doctor.

“It’s hardly complicated, Danno. All you need is a pair of tweezers and a sharp pair of scissors.” Steve dropped his head back on the pillow and closed his eyes.

Danny left his hand where it was; he didn’t care that the doctor was studiously ignoring the pair of them.

~*~

“Commander?”

Danny whipped around, scowling at White’s presumptuous tone. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the doctor stitching Steve’s head glare at the interruption.

“Keep still, Commander.” The doctor backed up the order resting the palm of his hand over the protective sheeting draped over Steve’s forehead and shading his eyes.

“What’s happening?” Steve asked.

“It’s okay,” Danny said, patting Steve’s ankle. “I’ll deal with it.”

“What?” Steve demanded, again proving that a blinded Steve was very deaf indeed.

“I’m assuming,” Danny said, “you want to talk to both of us. Steve’s occupied. I’ll go first.”

“You will, will you?” White said dryly.

“Yes,” Danny said simply. This guy was supposedly Steve’s friend and superior officer, a friend and superior office wouldn’t prevent his subordinate from receiving medical treatment. “Heard anything about the governor?”

“Still in surgery. Will be for hours. Doctors are silent on the possible outcome. You were right about the sedative, son,” White said loudly for Steve’s benefit.

Steve flipped up the cloth, annoying the doctor further judging by the glower. The red light of Hades glimmering in the doctor’s eyes had to be only in Danny’s imagination. The little red pills were kind of weird.

“Blood work showed that the governor had been drugged,” White said.

“Thought so.” Steve thudded his head back down. “She was too quiet for someone who had been shot. Her pulse was too slow at the outset.”

“It may have saved her life. Along with your quick actions,” White said soberly.

“We’ll see,” Steve said flatly.
“I’m going to have a quick chat with Mr. Williams. I’ll talk to you when the doc’s finished,” White stated and turned sharply on his heel, demeanor expecting Danny to obediently trail after him.

Danny thought about being pissy and argumentative, but in the long term it would be easier to answer the man’s no doubt psychotically detailed questions. Danny doubted that he would get to bed this night.

~*~

“Look it was -- indescribable. Everything happened. It was like riding a rollercoaster.” If Danny drank any more coffee he was going to mutate into a cardboard coffee cup. He set his cup down beside White’s digital recorder on the low table between them. “We saw Wo Fat, and that man exudes confidence. The governor thought that they were best friends. Wo Fat not so much. Steve went after Wo Fat. I followed Steve.”

“Why?” White asked.

“What do you mean why? Someone had to help him.” Danny glanced furtively around the empty waiting room, checking each and every ragtag sofa and armchair. He lowered his voice. “He can’t hear people behind him…. Steve thought that the governor might be in danger. I had to go with him.”

“Go on.” White nodded.

“We went to the Governor’s Palace. There was a church next door. And there were cars in the parking lot. We stole -- I don’t believe it -- we stole a car and followed when two cars left the governor’s place. Oh, Kaye. I forgot about Kaye. You have to do something about Kaye.”

“Jenna Kaye? She was there?”

“She came to the parking lot. She wanted us to help save her boyfriend--fiancé -- John, I think? Wo Fat has him. She tried to force us to go with her, but Steve--” Danny karate chopped mid-air, “--got her gun off of her and then he gave her his new phone. He said that it was overlaid?”

“Overlay,” White said. He looked as if he had been carved from stone -- weathered, sun-beaten stone. “Steve let her go?”

Danny nodded.

“Okay,” White said levelly.

“Okay? Don’t you need to call someone?” Danny asked slowly. “Track her? Toast put some sort of tracking device in our phones.”

“I will. Just continue.”

“Just continue? Continue,” Danny echoed. He shuffled forwards on the couch, perching on the edge. “So we followed the governor’s limo and the black Audi. Why do bad drivers and creeps drive Audis or BMWs? Any rate, we were on the interstate and we got shot at! The windscreen exploded. We crashed in a ditch.” Danny bounced his left fist off the palm of his right hand, and twisted his left hand over, flat on the coffee table.

White blinked.

“By the time we got out of the car -- that was a pain in the ass -- Wo Fat had come over all mocking.
He doesn’t like McGarrett’s, by the way. Then the helicopter arrived and there was more shooting! Steve was like a machine. Wo Fat just shot the governor. Just like that.” Danny jabbed his finger twice, hard. “Bang. Bang! I think... I think... that he was clinical about it. His face was a mask. If he wanted to kill her, he would have shot her in the head, wouldn’t he?”

Danny stared at the digital recorder.

“Double tap,” White confirmed, breaking the silence where Danny’s memories echoed.

“Steve thought that she was in danger because she’s known Wo Fat for years,” Danny said. “And would know useful stuff about him. But he didn’t kill her.”

“Calculated risk,” White observed. “He wanted to delay you. Injuring the governor forced Steve and the crew to stay behind to render aid -- which you did. There is still a better than average chance that she will die. Anything else?”

“What?” Danny started. White was just so horribly clinical about the whole affair.

“What did Wo Fat do after shooting the governor?”

“He jumped in the Audi and drove away. No, someone else drove. He got in the passenger side.”

White stood smoothly, picking up the recorder. “If you’ll excuse me.”

“What?” Danny asked his retreating back.

“I have to talk to some people.” Halfway out of the waiting room his voice was barely audible.

“What?” Danny asked the boring print of a flying dart-like airplane on the far wall. “What did I say?”

He was so tired. Danny sagged into the old sofa. It would be so easy to flop over onto his side and rest his eyes for just a second. A quick catnap would make getting through this night a little easier, and then he would find Steve. But that really was not going to happen. Tiredly, he hauled himself up to his feet, he had to find Steve. And then they could go home.

~*~

All the lights were on at Seolh, illuminating it against the backdrop of the woods and the burgeoning dawn sky. Danny stared at the scene blearily as the Navy car carefully wended its way up the long drive. The day wasn’t really over, because White had said that he would likely need to talk to them again. Danny really didn’t like repeating himself, especially multiple times. Danny’s most recent interrogation had certainly lacked the bulldog level intensity of the previous interview he had endured when he had had to tell White about Hesse’s invasion at Seolh.

However, it was entirely possible that Steve had told White everything that he needed to know. Steve’s memory did seem to border on the eidetic. Danny was pretty sure that he had dozed at several points during Steve’s recitation.

The governor was still in surgery, and was likely to be for several more hours. There had been no reason for them to remain at Tripler, especially when her daughter and son had arrived. So they had carefully taken their weary leave.

The car pulled up to a halt. Feeling the burn of abused muscles, Danny shuffled out of the car, aware that Steve was stumbling out on the other side. They were going to have to run the gauntlet --
Mamo’s SUV was still on the gravel parking area by Kono’s ratty jeep.

“Stevie!” Mamo hauled open the front door.

“Hey, Mamo.” Steve picked his way up the steps, holding their paper bag of meds against his chest.

“Are you okay? Why didn’t you call? What happened? Chin said that you were following a terrorist? Are you okay? Your head? What happened?”

“Sorry, Mamo,” Steve said monosyllabically.

“Hey.” Danny limped up beside Steve. “Please, can we come in? We’re tired.”

Mamo stared at them, torn between anger and relief. “Why didn’t you call?”

“Sorry,” Danny said again. “Believe it or not, we lost our phones. Both of them. I gave mine to a captain of an aircraft carrier. Steve gave his to an ex-CIA agent who is in bed with a terrorist who tried to kill the governor.”

Mamo’s mouth dropped open.

“Mamo,” Steve said levelly. “Can we talk about this later? I’m sorry for worrying you, but we’re both about to crash. If you don’t let us in, I’m just going to go round the back and use the kitchen door.”

“Sorry, Kiwi.” Mamo stepped aside.

The rest of the family were inside, waiting: Auntie Maru; Chin and Malia; Kono, and Toast had returned with his girlfriend, Trish. They all stood in the foyer.


“Terrorist kidnapped the governor, car chase, sort of rescued the governor.” Danny shrugged. That was delightfully succinct; he kind of wished that he had recounted that version to White, if only to see the sort of face he would have pulled.

“What?” Chin asked. “Is she okay?”

“They’re looking after her at Tripler. It doesn’t look good -- but there’s a chance,” Steve said. He checked his Rolex Submariner watch. “It’s oh-six-hundred hours. It’s time for bed. We can discuss this later in the morning. Auntie Maru, Mamo, you are welcome to use one of the bedrooms in my garret.”

“We put clean bedding in the blue studio,” Auntie Maru said.

“Excellent.” Danny clapped his hands together once. “I am calling an end to perhaps one of the most exciting nights of my life, and sending you all to bed. If this bald guy called Commander Joe White comes around. Tell him that we don’t live here, and check next door.”

“Danny, you can’t say that,” Steve said sourly.

“I will make pancakes and French Toast with bacon and maple syrup for everyone who does not give us up to White when he descends.”

Kono laughed. “When you’re awake, though, you have to tell us what happened,” she bargained.
“Deal.” Danny set a heavy hand on the banister and began to haul himself up the stairs, thankful that his studio was right at the top. Steve paced him.

“Here,” Steve said when they reached the top of the stairs.

“What?”

“Painkillers.” Steve rifled in the paper bag, and presented Danny with three small boxes. “Muscle relaxants.”

Danny stared at them. “Tomorrow is not going to be fun, is it?”

Steve shrugged, pondered, and said, “No. Take the pills in the box with blue writing when you wake up. Yellow box is for the weekend. The muscle relaxants are in the white box with black piping. Hot shower as they kick in, and then coffee. Caffeine works synergistically with the analgesic.”

“It’s too early for a chemistry lesson, Babe.” Danny set his hand on his doorknob. “You going to be all right?”

“What?”

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, Danny knew that directly asking the question was a mistake. But he was a direct sort of guy, and thought that Steve appreciated directness. He decided; in for a penny in for a pound.

“Excitement aside, that was your first ‘night out’ since you were retired. Are you going to be okay?”

Steve regarded him, and then on the edge of inscrutability, a bare hint of a smile graced his face. “I’ll be fine, Danny.”

“Promise?” Danny blurted.

The smile morphed into a true grin. “I promise.”

Can you promise? Danny wondered. Was it fair to even ask? He hadn’t thought it through, just blurted the question. Steve had been a machine tonight, organised and in control. He had killed two men, and maybe the third that he had kicked in the chest. The depth of the training that Steve had endured and the skills that he had gained beggared imagination.

“Pills, Danny.” Steve tossed them over, one after another, making Danny juggle them hand to hand. “Everything will be better after you’ve slept.”

“Will it?” Danny asked, suddenly aware that Chin was halfway up the staircase, trying very hard not to listen.

Steve leaned past Danny, pushed open his door, and shepherded him into his room.

“Sit,” Steve directed sitting Danny on the edge of his bed. His big hands cupped Danny’s shoulders.

“How do you do it?” Danny asked hollowly.

“It’s what I’m trained for. Wo Fat was going to kill the governor. The yakuza were trying to kill the helicopter crew. I could stop them. I know what to do. What you’re experiencing, Danny, is shock. You’ve been on the edge of it for the last few hours. You’ve been fighting it, tooth and nail, but you’re safe now and that’s when it sets in. But remember, you’re home now.”
“I feel like someone took a spoon and scooped out my insides.”


“Yes,” Danny marvelled, feeling a little like he was drunk.

“Honestly, sleep’s the best thing for you now, Danny. Lay back,” he directed, inexorably pushing Danny over until his head touched the pillow.

“You can’t do this,” Danny complained.

“Okay,” Steve said agreeably as he slipped the blanket and sheet out from under Danny’s feet and then, belatedly, tugged at his borrowed crocs.

Danny hissed as his sore leg was juggled.

“Sorry, Danny.”

“It’s okay.” Danny rubbed his cheek against the soft pillow. “I forgive you.”

“Good to know.”

Sleep was inevitable and very, very welcome.

~*~

# 45 #

Waking up was seriously unpleasant. Danny actually couldn’t move. He was seized up solid like a rusted engine. He would have whimpered but that would have meant moving. Normally waking up took him a little while, but he had shifted and, agonisingly, he was abruptly and horribly awake. Taking the painkillers was perhaps the most important thing in the universe. He could only hope and pray that Steve had put them on his bedside table.

Getting the pills meant rolling over. Rolling was feasible. Otherwise, he would have to lie still until someone came to help him. Yeah right, that sounded pathetic in his own mind, and ten generations of Williams men spun in their graves like old-fashioned vinyl records at 33rpm.

Okay, rolling, he thought it through: bend right uninjured leg and use it to push onto my left-hand side. It seemed like a plan. Danny gritted his teeth and put thought into action. It was better to just do it. Car accidents sucked.

Huh.

As he got onto his side, he was greeted by the improbable sight of one Steven J. McGarrett sprawled, arms and legs splayed, on the inflatable mattress beside Danny’s bed fast-fast asleep. Lying diagonally, he took up the entire bed. A single sheet was wrapped around his waist.

Why? Danny wondered. But he knew; Steve had been worried about him. Danny couldn’t remember the last time that someone had been worried about him. He was the worrier; the husband (no, ex-husband), the father, the oldest brother, the son of aging parents.

A glass of water and both sets of pills were on the table beside his bed. Luckily, he was close enough to the edge of the bed so that it was merely a wincing, agonising reach to get the pills. Who knew that being banged around in a car would hurt so much? He took the pills dry, because he would have to sit up to drink a glass of water. And sitting up really wasn’t on the agenda.
Perhaps Steve also wanted the company? As a Navy person, Danny guessed that he was used to barracks and sleeping with his team. Okay, that didn’t sound right even in the echoing depths of his own mind. SEALs had to sleep and on a mission he guessed that they stayed together.

SEAL puppy pile? Danny huffed out a laugh.

The SEAL in question was snuffling. It was adorable. The big scary killing machine wasn’t that scary when sleeping and defenceless. Danny had expected fallout, PTSD flashbacks and nightmares, followed by Steve hiding in his eyrie. Danny had harboured vague thoughts of making sure that Steve made it to his lighthouse bedroom safely, but it had turned ass about face with Steve looking after him. Push and pull? No. Give and take? No. Friends looking out for each other.

Friends indeed.

Steve slept on, undisturbed by Danny’s ruminations. The marring blur of dark red, with deep purple beginning to bloom, stained his left side. Vibrant, the bruise threatened to camouflage the angry red scarring spider-webbing over his left-hand side. It was going to be one hell of a bruise.

They were both hurting.

He was possibly the most attractive man that Danny had ever seen -- and, as a photographer, he studied people. The eyelashes could form a photographic series. Profile shots? Play with light and shadow to accentuate the smoky darkness of his eyelashes against pale white cheeks. A shot with a rivulet of water playing over his -- that made him think of the scarlet red blood that had ran like fractured glass over Steve’s forehead, down the left hand side of his nose...

Think about something different, Danny thought furiously.

Shirt. Lack of. Steve wasn’t wearing the fetching hospital scrubs; he did in fact appear to be naked.

Huh, Danny shook his head. As much as he wanted to lie still and marinate in warmth and comfort, and indulge in drinking in the sight of a relaxed Steve, he needed a piss very badly. He blamed the volume of coffee that he had drank in the middle of the night. If the glass of water had been empty, he might have been tempted to use it. Teeth gritted, he opted for a slow roll and use of elbow leverage to get into a bent sitting position.

Ouch. The muscles in his abdomen protested strongly.

Slowly, he stood and hunched liked Quasimodo and then with an added limp of Renfield, he dragged himself to the bathroom.

~*~

“Oh, Brah,” Kono said commiseratingly from the bottom of the stairs. “Can I help?”

Danny braced himself against the banister and laboriously made his way down each and every mountainous stair.

“Shoot me. Shoot me now.”

“I think that Steve wouldn’t be happy if I did that.” Kono watched his every painful step. “Where is he?”

“As if you don’t know, Kalakaua. But get your mind out of the gutter; he is sleeping like a baby on the air mattress in my room. The air mattress that you probably helped him tote into my bedroom
when I was fast asleep.”

“Did you know that you snore?” Kono said, proving his point.

“I do not.”

Kono smiled sunnily. “I figure if you make your way to the television room, you can prop yourself in an armchair and I’ll bring brunch to you. What do you want?”

“Coffee. I will love you forever if you bring me coffee.”

“Bacon, eggs, hash browns? Eggs Benedict?”

“Eggs Benedict. You are the light of my life, a veritable glorious comet in the night sky.”

“Dude,” Kono mocked right back at him.

“What time is it?” Danny asked as he crept along.

“Just after twelve.”

“Oh.” Six hours sleep; he wasn’t going to complain, but he wished that it had been more like twenty six.

Getting to the armchair seemed like an insurmountable task. Kono waited, arms crossed over her narrow chest, until he reached the bottom step and only then did she saunter off, dressing gown swishing around her ankles, to the kitchen to make breakfast.

Finally, Danny carefully let himself down onto the armchair like Granny Purdey, arthritic and twisted.

“Here, Danny.” Kono trotted back with a mug of coffee. “You taken anything for this?”

“Thank you, my child,” Danny said, fixated on the mug.

“I’ve a friend who’s a masseuse. You want me to call her?”

Danny made grabby hands because she still hadn’t passed the coffee over. “I’ve never understood that. I am in pain -- touch me and I will kill you.”

Kono gave him the coffee. “I’ll call her.”

“I didn’t say yes!” Danny hollered after her.

The various remotes for the entertainment system were on the coffee table in the centre of the room. He couldn’t bring himself to reach for them.

“Come on, painkillers, kick in, please.”

~*~

The muscle relaxants, those little red pills, were definitely kind of awesome, Danny decided after one episode of Disney’s Avengers and halfway through some animation that reminded him of his one and only, accidental, LSD trip.

“You good, Brah?” Kono swooped in and snatched up the tray, before he could mop up the last bit
of egg yolk with an edge of toast.

“Yeah.” Danny bobbed his head.

Kono snorted and left his line of sight. There was something else now on the television. Who changed the channel? A sponge under the sea living in a pineapple. How did that work? Wouldn’t it get really wet and soggy? How would it move?

“Danny?”

“Steve!” Danny said joyously. He turned his head, actually using his entire body. “You woke up. Are you okay, Brah?”

Steve’s eyebrow almost climbed up to the band aid in his hair line. ‘Brah?’ he mouthed.

“Braaaaaaaah,” Danny said enjoying the echoing sound.

“You okay?” Steve kind of teleported across the room, and set a warm hand on Danny’s throat, rubbing deliciously against the bristles. Danny shivered delicately.

“I’m awesome.” Danny smiled. “Have you had a shower? You’re flushed. You slept naked.”

Danny still wore his scrubs even if they did make him feel like a dork.

“You don’t look hollow anymore,” Danny continued. “Good. I don’t like it when you look cadaverous. I like you fleshy and healthy. You’ve got your compression top on. Are you ribs hurting?”

“How many tablets have you taken?” Steve straightened arthritically, so his warm hand no longer soothed Danny. “Danny?”

Danny tapped his fingernail twice against the wooden block on the arm of the chair where you balanced a coffee cup. There was a cup ring marking the polished top. A fragment of mud or tree or booger was caught on the edge of his fingernail.

“Danny?” Steve persisted.

“Two.” Danny held up a grubby finger and a clean finger. “Two thingy and two thingy, like it said on the boxes.”

“Kono!” Steve hollered loudly, demanding an immediate response.

“Don’t yell, we’re not deaf. Whoops, sorry.” Danny pulled a face and, immediately, plastered a hand over his eyes.

“What?” Kono skidded into the television room with a squeak on the hardwood floor.

“Is Malia still here?”

Danny peeked between his splayed fingers.

“Yeah.” Kono nodded.

“Get her. And get Danny’s pills off his bedside table.”

“Is he okay?” Kono asked.
Steve clicked his fingers imperiously and pointed towards the staircase.


“Danny.” Wincing, Steve planted his hand on the armchair and lowered himself down to kneel on the floor directly opposite him.

“Are you hurting?” Danny asked solicitously.

“Unsurprisingly, yes.” Steve curled his fingers around Danny’s wrist and pulled his hand away from his face.

“You should take some of the meds, they’re awesome.”

“I can tell,” Steve said pithily.

“Steve, what’s the matter?” Malia flew into the sitting room, all pretty and wrapped in a silk blue nightshirt. Danny sighed; lucky Chin.

“Can you check Danny over? He’s....” Steve shuffled back making room for Malia. “He’s altered.”

“Really?” Danny asked. He lifted up his free hand and tested thumb against index finger, forefinger, thingy finger, smaller-little finger -- possibly missing thingy finger.

“I’ve got the meds.” Kono came running back, not even breathing hard. “He’s only taken two of each.”

Malia reached for the boxes.

“We’ve been prescribed Percocet for today and tomorrow, then high-dose ibuprofen,” Steve said intensely as she turned the boxes over to read the prescription information. “Carisoprodol, muscle relaxant.”

With a gentle smile, Malia passed the pills over to Steve to look after. She settled at Danny’s side.

“Can I examine you, Danny?” Malia asked kindly.

“Yes, you’re the Presentiment’s wife. Presentiment? President’s wife. No, no, no fiancée.”

“President? What am I then?” Steve asked.

“Emperor. Though you like to think that you’re the Benevolent Dictator. But you’re really the emperor.”

Kono laughed at Steve’s affronted expression. “What am I, Brah?”


“Guys,” Malia interrupted. “Can you give us a moment?”

“It’s okay, they can stay.” Danny smiled.

Malia glanced towards the door, not even needing to say a word. Steve and Kono retreated obediently. Chin was indeed a lucky man.
The pervasive urgency and worry emanating from Steve was eroding the drunken fog that was making his world a blissful, pain-free place. Blinking, he focussed on Malia, who was feeling under his hospital smock top checking his ribs and tummy. The pads of her fingers were cool. Danny didn’t know if he liked it or not.

She smiled at him. “Danny, look at me.” She set her hands on either side of his neck splaying her fingers over his jaw line. “Have you taken Percocet or muscle relaxants before?”

Danny shook his head minutely against her hold. “No.”

“You didn’t bang your head yesterday?” Even as she asked the question, she moved her grip up to slide her fingers over his skull, mussing up his hair. Danny couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Nope,” Danny said, enjoying the rubbing just a little bit.

“I guessed so. They wouldn’t have given you Percocet.”

Danny cogitated on that observation. “Steve’s got a cut on his forehead. He’s got Percocet. Is that bad?”

“I’ll talk to him,” Malia said reassuringly, settling back on her heels. “Do you have a known sensitivity to opioids?”

“Eh?”

“Are there any drugs you don’t take because you’re allergic?”

Danny shook his head. He hadn’t liked the LSD trip and repeating the experience simply hadn’t appealed in the slightest. But maybe Malia meant hospital medication? Another cup of coffee might make him a little more present.

“I think you’re fine, Danny,” Malia said, bringing his concentration back to ground zero. “Can I call Steve and Kono back? I know they’re worried.”

Danny waved his hand magnanimously. “They’re just outside -- trying not to listen. Come in, guys.”

Kono and then Steve poked their heads around the doorframe.

“Can we come in?” Kono asked brightly.

“Yes,” Malia said, with huff of amusement as they made the two steps back into the room.

“So what’s the verdict?” Steve asked, hazel eyes intent.

“Danny is, I believe, experiencing mild euphoria as a result of the interaction of Percocet and Carisoprodol. I’m guessing that it is the Carisoprodol that is the main cause of the side effect. I’m going to prescribe Metaxalone instead of Carisoprodol. Will you be able to fill the prescription, Kono?”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll run into town.” Kono bobbed on her toes, already half poised to run off, even still in her nightclothes.

“Are you sure he’s okay?” Steve asked.

“Yes,” Malia said authoritatively. “In fact, Danny, you’re not feeling any pain. But I’m sorry; I’m not comfortable with you staying on a combination of Percocet and Carisoprodol.”
The combination of armchair loafing and being pampered was sort of unprecedented. He remembered his mom looking after him when he was a kid, but as an adult this was weird. Dopily, he lay spooned in the armchair watching an array of movies. Steve lazed flat out on his old sofa, pillows propped under his knees. Every once in a while, Steve rolled off the sofa and took his sorry ass off to the kitchen or the conservatory, citing that moving actually helped in the long term, before returning back to his sofa nest.

“Hey, Emp?” Toast poked his head around the door. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” Steve said, eyes half mast.

“Sorry, I can’t stay around tonight even though it is the Twentieth.” Toast drummed his fingernails on the doorframe. “Trish rang. Her computer is dying and she’s got a paper due.”

“Dying?” Steve said dubiously.

“She downloads. Virus, probably. I have to book. See you later, dudes.” Toast disappeared.

In the hallway, Danny heard Malia asking Toast if he wanted a lift and the student enthusiastically agreeing.

“Hello, Danny,” Malia said warmly, entering their cosy nest. “How are you doing?”

“Fine,” Danny lied, because the red pills had been weird but he had not felt a thing under their influence.

“Scale of one to ten?” Malia asked.

“Four thousand, five hundred and eighty two,” Danny said promptly.

Steve snorted. “He needs to move around.” His eyelashes were sweeping tiredly and he appeared completely relaxed, almost asleep.

“Steve’s right,” Malia said. “You don’t want to stiffen up.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Danny said with a regal wave.

Malia stared at him, assessing. “I’m going on shift. I will no doubt see you both in the near future.”

“Bye, Malia,” Steve said, and his tone made Danny wonder if he was feeling slightly loopy, or perhaps teetering on the cusp of sleep.

Danny waggled the fingers on the hand that he was still holding up regally. “Bye, Dr. Malia.”

Malia huffed out a laugh. “Bye, guys. Look after each other.”

Danny blinked and turned his bleary gaze back to the television after she left. There appeared to be a lot of army types crawling through tunnels yelling. Last time he had checked, the army guys had been working out in a gym.

“What are we watching?” Danny asked.

There was no response from the sofa.
“Steven!”

“What?” Steve cracked open an eye.

“What are we watching?”

Steve studied the screen for a moment, and identified the movie as, “Aliens. Michael Biehn.”

“Oh, I like this one,” Danny proclaimed.

“We’re kind of like, half way through it.”

“These drugs are weird.”

Steve nodded. “You get used to them. The trick is not to get used to them, though. High strength ibuprofen in a couple of days. Seriously, you need to move more, or you’ll regret it.”

“Oh, right, like you know—” Danny stuttered to a halt.

“Yes, I do know.” Steve opened his eyes wide. “You should try moving around a little. Maybe take a bath before you go to bed.”

“I don’t want to move.”

“Seriously—” Steve rolled his sorry, bruised ass off the sofa, wincing. It was like watching a rusty, creaky robot. It wasn’t enticing Danny to move in the slightest.

Steve was rocking his head slowly from side to side, stretching his neck, ignoring Danny’s dramatics.

“I don’t want to move,” Danny repeated, even as he shuffled unceremoniously to the edge of his seat. Moving his legs pulled the bruised muscles of his chest and abdomen. Percocet was his new favourite friend.

“Come on, I know something we can do.”

“What is your cunning plan?” Danny asked, bracing himself to stand. “Walk around the gardens?”

“It’s the Twentieth.”

“And?” Danny finally stood, hunched. He tested that whole theory that panting would help with the agonising, white core of pain. The tide of pain rose and fell, leaving him feeling a little sweaty, but better with movement. For once he was looking forward for a bath instead of a shower.

“Let’s find Chin.”

Danny limped after him. Steve was probably correct and moving was best thing in the long term, but fuck it, he wanted a beer and to continue slobbing on that armchair.

“Hey, Chin. It’s the Twentieth,” he heard Steve say as he propped himself up against the kitchen door.

“I know,” Chin’s voice came through clearly from inside the kitchen.

“Yay!” Kono said brightly. “Are you up for it?”
Steve slid an assessing sideways glance back at Danny. “Yeah.”

Kono shimmied past Steve. “Hey, Danny.” She executed a pirouette ricking up a hall rug. “Mele kalikimaka!”

“Up for what?” Danny asked.

“You up for this, Danny?” She wriggled, delighted at whatever Steve was proposing. They -- Chin, Kono and Steve -- had such a history; they had known each other for years. They lived seamlessly with Seolh, when he still trying to figure out how this place worked.

Steve cocked a wry smile. “Come on, Danno.”

“Up for what? What are we doing?” The air of expectation was difficult to resist.

Surprisingly, they trooped into the pantry. Kono darted ahead and opened the cold room door, executing a bow, conducting the crew further in.

“You’ll love it,” Steve said.

“Come on, tell,” Danny demanded, narrowing his eyes.

Chin shook his head at Steve and Kono as they ignored the question. Kono giggled, delighted.

“Chin?” Danny asked, as the older man walked ahead into the room. Despite the parental resignation at Steve and Kono’s behaviour, Chin wasn’t forthcoming with answers.

In another universe, Danny would have expected all manner of clandestine, cultish activities. Sue him, he had an active imagination. Danny angled past Kono, entering the claustrophobic room.

Kono closed the door behind them. But if they were planning an orgiastic initiation rite, it was blatantly obvious from the morning that a combination of analgesics, muscle relaxants, and pain meant that he wasn’t participating in any activities any time soon.

Chin squatted, gripped a recessed ring in the floor, and lifted a long hatch.

“Whoa, where does that lead?” Danny asked. The hole was a black rectangle sucking all the light out of the cool room.

“Zombie apocalypse thermonuclear war siege bunker,” Steve said, and paused a beat, “more commonly known as the basement.”

“Hilarious. Seriously, you’re hilarious,” Danny said flatly.

“It’s the place where we store the Christmas decorations,” Chin put Danny out of his misery. He carefully rested the hatch door against the far wall.

“Decorating? We’re decorating the Christmas tree?” Danny asked. “Tonight?”

“Yeah, it’s the Twentieth. It needs to be up and in place for the Twenty First,” Steve said authoritatively.

“And why is that?” Danny drawled.

“Because the Twenty First is the shortest day of the year and the longest night.” He shrugged, forgetting, and winced.
“And we need a Christmas tree to scare off what --? Scary Twenty First of December demons or other Hawaiian hobgoblins?” Danny grinned toothily.

Steve pouted. “It was grandmother’s rule.”

“Was she a neo-pagan?” Danny flashed a smile.

“How do you even know what a neo-pagan is?” Steve asked. “You’re an atheist.”

“I know what a vegetarian is but I eat meat.”

“You’re worse than my mom and dad -- bicker, bicker.” Kono yanked down on a light pull hanging from the cold pantry ceiling a little too enthusiastically -- as she let go, the string bounced violently in midair. Light from a low watt bulb flared in the dark hole, making it significantly less malevolent.

“Isn’t it dank and dark down there?” Keeping his feet firmly fixed, Danny peered over the edge.

“No, it’s dry and there is a light bulb.” Chin set off down creaky wooden steps.

“Why aren’t they in the attic? Christmas decorations live in the attic. Or one of the reception rooms?”

“Are you scared of the basement?” Steve asked, pursing his lips and making little kissy sounds.

“No, I’m not scared.” Bristling, Danny trooped after Chin, muscles protesting every step of the way.

It was cool and dry, and Danny made a mental note to sleep down here in the height of summer, because the House had a lot of things going for it, but it didn’t have air conditioning, only a preponderance of ceiling fans.

“Wow.” Danny wasn’t actually sure what he was looking at -- foundations or cave?

There was mortar and stonework, but one wall was rough-hewn rock. The meagre light of the bare bulb set shadows scurrying against the walls. A flat brick wall was obscured by plain metal work shelving loaded with old fishing boxes, bins, and plastic-wrapped weird shapes.

Chin unerringly headed to the middle array and grabbed a hefty chest banded with bronze strips. He nodded at a plastic bucket with what looked like an old dried newspaper positioned over the top.

“That’s light; it’s got tinsel in it.”

“How far does this go?” Danny asked checking left and right. “Are there more rooms?”

Steve shifted and Danny could spot cagey at five hundred paces.

“Yeah.” Steve rubbed the back of his neck.

“There’s a wine cellar.” Kono pointed at a dark recess edged with bricks. “Where the really good stuff is stored.”

Chin rolled his eyes.

“Right, you can’t tell Grace about this place,” Danny ordered.

“Why?” Kono asked.
“She’s been brought up on Rachel’s Enid Blyton books. Famous Five Cave Adventure. Secret Seven Mystery of the Dank and Dingy, Deadly Hole. She finds out about this and we’ll lose her for days.”

Steve stuck his hands in his pockets. “It’s not something that crops up in conversations,” he said, obliquely stating that if Grace asked him about secret passages, hidden entries and caves under Seolh, he might possibly, probably mention an interesting basement.

~*~

Chin and Kono did the heavy lifting. Danny could barely lift his right arm above shoulder height, and he was a righty; he wasn’t adept with his left hand. It didn’t stop him from helping, because this was a Christmas tree.

It made him miss Grace like a hole in his gut. This was something that he should have shared with his daughter.

“You okay?” Kono asked.

“Yeah, just tired.” Danny hedged, fighting with the thick pin needles on a twig. The tree was an ornamental pine that spent most of the year in a big pot in the garden and Christmas in the playroom festooned with baubles.

“Sit down for a moment,” Kono said.

“Nah.” He wasn’t going to admit to Steve that moving actually helped. Slowly, he bent to grab the next bauble from the top of the bronze chest. It was a pipe cleaner, doily-wrapped doll with a strip of blue shiny fabric wrapped around its waist. “Who made this? What is it?”

Steve looked up from where he was sitting on the floor patiently untangling a knot of Christmas tree lights. A flush of pink touched his cheeks. “Hey, I was in kindergarten.”

“It’s a Christmas angel!” Danny realised. The white doily might, once upon a time, been wings. He teased them out and, yes, wings.

“I thought you had imagination. Of course, it’s an angel,” Steve said, indignant.

“We have to so put this on the tree,” Danny said handing it off to Kono to place.

She stretched up on her tiptoes, a balanced line of motion, and set the blue angel on the top of the tree.

~*~

“Da Da Dad ah Da!” Kono, with Chin on her heels, boogied into the sitting room, balancing a packed tray on one hand like a trained waitress. Chin was significantly more sedate with his own piled high tray. “Dinner, courtesy of my Mom.”

Kono smoothly hunkered by the coffee table and set the tray down. The contents of the colourful array of bowls and painted side plates smelled delicious.

“I’ve brought Malgeunguk, Tojangguk, Sundubu jiggae. Momma gave me Geotjeori, Chonggak kimchi, Gaji namul, Sigeumchi namul in consideration of your poor inexperienced palate, Danny. Pajeon and Gamjajeon.”

“Er, thanks,” Danny hedged. It certainly looked photogenic, but he didn’t recognise a single dish.
There were a bowls of thick stews, mounds of rice, and thin pancakes and other unrecognisable dishes.

“Mom made you Tojangguk specially, Steve.” Kono elegantly turned on her knee and held the bowl before the supine Steve.

Steve eyed it and then Kono, eyebrows knotting as he maintained a reclining position. After an hour or so decorating, they had both returned to their nests and let the cousins transform the tree into a coloureful, sparkly hodgepodge of old and new Christmas memories. Danny kind of thought that he had grabbed a nap at some point, because he didn’t remember them finishing the tree.

“I’ll tell mom if you don’t eat any,” Kono said. “It doesn’t have any gochujang, just for you. Anchovies, clams, and shrimps.”

“And I’ll tell her about Ben Bass and Charlie Fong,” Steve returned.

“I’m a big girl. I have needs. You have needs.” She dug a spoon in the soup bowl stirring the contents. “Are you genuinely telling me that you’re not even going to try my mom’s soup?”

“It gets a little tedious, you know.” Wincing, Steve pushed up with his elbows.

“What, you being a picky, picky eater?” Kono asked.

Steve swung his feet around, setting them on the floor, before tucking a pillow behind his back.

“Thank you,” Steve said wryly as he accepted the bowl.

Mission accomplished, Kono turned on Danny. “And what would you like to eat, Danny, my man?”

“I have no clue. Is there any chicken?”

Chin chortled.

“Ohkay,” Danny said slowly. “Little bit of everything then.” Man, he had eaten more new things and weird things during the past weeks in Seolh than in his entire life.

“Trust me; my mom’s an awesome cook,” Kono promised.

She carefully set a smaller bowl on a plate and ladled some soup into it. The spinach looking dish followed, with Kono spooning a mound on the side of the plate. Danny remembered the roast beets that he had inflicted on Kono and knew that this was a little revenge. Just as he was about to remind her that spinach sucked, his borrowed -- courtesy of Toast -- cell phone rang. A photo of his most favourite person in the entire universe smiled up at him.

“Hey, Monkey.”

~*~

# 46 #

Danny took himself -- after muscle relaxants, painkillers, bath, redressing the nasty scrape on his ankle, breakfast and copious amounts of coffee -- out to Mamo’s workshop. The air was thick with wood esters, cutting the back of his throat like fragments of sawdust.

“Hey, keiki,” Mamo acknowledged his entrance, without looking up from the smooth planing of a seven-foot long stretch of rich golden wood with a two handed lathe.
“Hey, Mamo?” Danny cocked his head to the side. “That’s not a surfboardy thing, is it?”

Mamo huffed out a laugh. “Surfboardy thing? No... Are you feeling better?”

“I’ll live.” Danny set his hip on a stool. He didn’t actually know if he was feeling better, or getting used to the agony. The morning had been grim, more so because of the lack of the distraction of a Steve sleeping less than a yard away. High strength ibuprofen had been prescribed for tomorrow, which meant that he would have less pain -- he hoped.

Mamo slanted a glance his way. “Can I do something for you, Danny?”

Danny shifted. “Steve’s at his audiologist,” he said, by way of nothing.

“Good,” Mamo said, drawing his lathe along the wood grain, fine wood shavings curling over the blade.

“He’s getting his new aids. Better than his loaners.”

“Perhaps that furrow between his eyebrows will go away.” Mamo blew the thin curls of wood off the plank with a puff of breath.

Danny sagged onto his seat, ignoring the bite of his ribs. Mamo continued to gradually smooth the grain of the wood between gentle huffs. The grandfather of Seolh seemed content to let Danny sit and watch, and gather his thoughts.

“Christmas,” Danny finally blurted.

“Yes.” Mamo slowed the careful play of the lathe.

“Any idea what I can get Steve? I’ve got Chin’s present, and Toast’s and Kono’s,” at the last second Danny didn’t add ‘and yours’. “But I don’t know what to get Steve.”

Mamo finished the line of planing and lifted the lathe away. He stared directly at Danny.

“What?” Danny asked, raising his hands. “I don’t know what to get him. I could buy him a Kindle and a selection of books. I could get him a bunch of bad sci-fi Asylum movie DVDs, and he’ll fall asleep two minutes past the opening scene. A gift card for the Old Navy store so he could buy some new cargo pants. I could, I dunno, I buy him a new sketch pad, but it isn’t what he needs.”

“I,” Mamo began.

“Steve’s kinda--,” Danny pondered, “--not material. He doesn’t seem to need stuff. I want to get him something he needs. Or, to be honest, something he wants, and needs.”

“Steve’s--”

“For the love of god, what are you getting him?” Danny demanded.

“York Peppermint Patties.”

“Candy?” Danny asked.

“It’s his favourite; he only treats himself at Christmas.”

“Original or sugar free?” Danny asked nonsensically.
“It’s Christmas; full fat.” Mamo smiled.

“You buy him a year’s supply, don’t you?” Danny stated.

“They’re in the silver freezer, top left hand drawer. I replace them when they run out. We used to send him care packages when he was in the Navy.”

“So what do I get him?”

Mamo rested against his work bench. He tugged at his bottom lip. “His yoga gear was destroyed in the fire. We could go into the city. I’m sure that there will be someone at the market on the weekend who will know where we could buy yoga supplies. Organic yoga supplies.”

“I don’t think that they’re supposed to be edible,” Danny said dubiously.

~*~

“Wow, hemp. I guess he could smoke it.” Danny hefted the rolled up, woven hemp, organic yoga mat. It had some weight to it, and it felt firm under his fingers.

After conferring with a messy-haired hippy at the market, Mamo had taken him to some sort of warehouse masquerading as a yoga centre. Rough and ready was the word that sprung to Danny’s mind. Out the back was a store room with piles of equipment.

The young instructor-come-salesman rolled his eyes. “It’s not that kind of hemp, brah.”

“Oh.” It seemed like good quality mat, but what the Hell did Danny know about yoga mats.

Mamo shrugged; he seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Okay. So you do yoga, right?” Danny asked the skinny guy in his blindly white t-shirt and short shorts that left nothing to the imagination. “Is this the mat that you would buy?”

“I have more than one mat. I like to use a hemp mat when I’m practising outside.” His tan and bleached blond highlights indicated that he spent a lot of time practicing outside.

“Will Steve have more mats?” Danny asked Mamo. “We never thought of that.”

Mamo answered by pulling out his ancient Nokia and carefully picking out a number with his index finger.

“I’m calling Chin,” Mamo said, before Danny could ask him.

“What else do people who do yoga use?” Danny asked, as Mamo stepped away to converse with Chin, leaving Danny with the frankly sceptical instructor guy.

“Depends on the type of yoga. Do you know what form your… this Steve practises?”

“There’s forms?” Danny asked.

“Yeah, uhm.” Instructor guy crossed his arms over his chest, biceps bulging under his t-shirt. “Does the guy use props? Wooden blocks or foam pads?”

“Err?”

The instructor bit his bottom lip. Turning to the IKEA shelving, he picked up a wooden block about
the size of a masonry brick and offered it to Danny.

“Does he use these?”

“He hasn’t been doing a lot of yoga since he hurt himself,” Danny hefted the brick; it was sturdy. Handing it back, he recalled, “Steve had a crate of stuff.”

“Hurt himself?” The instructor guy suddenly looked concerned. He reached for the mat that Danny held.

Danny backed out of reach clutching the present to his chest. “What?” he asked suspiciously.

“Perhaps Steve should come in and have a few lessons so we can assess him? Figure out what type of yoga works best for him.”

Danny glanced at Mamo for help, because he didn’t know if Steve would be on board with that idea. The dusty, unused gym at the House loomed into his consciousness. Steve ran. He had also said that his balance was shot; maybe this wasn’t such a good idea? Mamo felt his gaze and looked up. He ended the call with Chin with a soft goodbye.

“Chin doesn’t think that Steve has spare mats,” Mamo reported.

“Uhm--” Danny jerked his thumb at the guy, “--thinks maybe Steve should have a few lessons? Post, you know, the….” Danny tapped his left-hand side ribs.

Mamo absorbed those words, and digested, and then thought about them a little more. Danny rose up onto the balls of his feet waiting for Mamo to add his own two cents. Yoga instructor guy waited patiently -- appropriately Zen-like, Danny noted.

“That’s a good idea, Makaio,” Mamo finally said.

“Can I ask how Steve hurt himself?” Makaio asked softly.

“Steve will have to answer that one,” Mamo said. “But I can tell you that he was serving overseas and he broke his ribs and had to have surgery. He had bad pneumonia -- real bad.”

“How about,” Makaio said. He scanned the shelving and grabbed a post-it and pen, and scribbled down a cell phone number. “You get Steve to give me a call, we’ll set up a session, and we can talk about what works for him, one-on-one. No charge. ‘Kay?”

Danny delicately pinched the yellow note out of Makaio’s fingers. “Thanks.”

“I’ve got spare equipment, you don’t need to buy the mat,” Makaio said. “You could get him one later.”

“He needs a new mat, and, I guess, if I buy the mat he’ll really think about having a few lessons.”

“That sounds like our Stevie,” Mamo said.

“If you’re sure,” Makaio said.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Danny said. “I’ll take the hemp thing, as long as you’re sure that it’s not illegal or anything.”

~*~
“So pneumonia,” Danny opened with conversationally, once he had got his breath back after climbing into Mamo’s high altitude SUV. His ankle was throbbing.

Mamo nodded. “ICU for three weeks after the accident... attack. In Germany, so we couldn’t visit. Then he was transferred to Tripler, so we could visit. Then we brought him home.”

There were lots unsaid. A whole story unfurled behind Mamo’s eyes.

“He’s doing better now. You’re good for him, Kaniela.”

“You keep calling me that. What does it mean?”

“Kaniela?”

“Yeah?”

“Daniel. It’s your name. Kaniela.”

“Oh, okay.”

“You are good for him,” Mamo repeated.

“Thanks,” Danny said, for the lack of anything better to say. He had questions that he wanted answered, but he wasn’t asking Steve’s adopted grandfather. His borrowed cell phone vibrated, announcing a text. He didn’t recognise the number, but opened it, guessing that it was Steve checking in. And lo and behold, it was.

“Steve?” Mamo asked. Danny glanced up from the screen. “I saw you smiling.”

“He’s on his way home. And he’s got my cell phone from the Admiral guy, so thankfully I don’t have to get a new one. And I can give Toast this one back.”

“Tell him we’ll pick up lunch, and see him in twenty minutes.”

“Okay...” Tongue caught between his teeth, Danny picked out a message. As he laboriously constructed his text, Mamo turned into a restaurant parking lot and pulled to a stop.

“Zippy’s?” Danny asked.

“You stay, chat with Steve.” Mamo popped open his door. “I’ll get a selection of Zip pacs.” Surprisingly agile for such an aging and large man, Mamo dropped down to the sidewalk.

“I,” Danny began, moving -- because he wasn’t letting a sixty year old run around for him -- but he was blindsided by the cramp of abused muscles after sitting for ten minutes. He sat a moment, and then it was too late -- Mamo was in the restaurant.

‘did you, ‘ Danny texted, ‘get nu ears? what are zip pacs?’

He sent the message into the ether and waited for the inevitable fallout, because Mamo’s taste in food was -- Danny pondered a moment -- terrible.

‘No! Tell him get me an Oriental Chicken Salad!’

Carefully, Danny tapped out, “2 late babe.”

~*~
“You can’t do this, Rachel.” A good day had just gone down the toilet. “Visitation’s agreed by the courts.”

“Well, you’ll be hearing from our lawyer in the New Year.”

“No!” Danny howled down the dead line. In another universe he would have hurled the cell phone at the wall in pure frustration. But he was fucked. Buying a yoga mat had almost broken the bank, how was he going to employ a lawyer? There was the medical bill after Hesse’s attack that somehow still hadn’t arrived. He could only hope that the recent visit to Tripler was covered by the military.

The car -- she knew because he had sold his car that he was penniless. She knew that Seolh helped charity cases. He dropped into a defeated slump on his bed.

“Why do you hate me?” Danny asked the heavens. “I’m not taking this lying down. You hear me, Rachel? You will not win.”

Danny sagged back on his bed, set the heels of his hands over his eyes and pushed.

“Okay.” He dragged together the shattered remnants of his dignity, and splayed out his arms over his mattress, and stared up at the astounding ugly plaster coving. He knew what to do.

Steve -- Steve had volunteered to help. And Danny was going to take him up on the offer.

~*~

# 47 #

Danny knocked and slipped into Steve’s eyrie. He hadn’t found Steve in his usual haunts, which were basically the kitchen or Mamo’s workshop. So he checked his apartment.

Danny didn’t call out. He tapped his way through the first floor, drumming fingernails over the small dining table, and slapping the banister of the spiral staircase before carefully picking his way up the steps.

Steve was in the studio, at his giant draftsman table. The central portion of the table was raised and tilted so that he didn’t have to bend over to draw. Steve detected Danny the millisecond that he peeked over the top-turning stair.

“Hey.” Steve cocked his head to the side. His expression morphed quickly into concern. “You okay?”

“No,” Danny said. “I need your help.”

Steve set his mechanical pencil down and turned the searchlight of his considerable focus on Danny.

“Okay, what do you need?” Steve said simply.

“You said that you had a lawyer. A good lawyer.”

Steve nodded. “What’s happened?” He moved around the table, catlike, gaze fixed on Danny as he came closer.

“Rachel wants to change our custody agreement. And I don’t get Grace for Christmas.” Danny slumped.
Steve hunched down a fraction so he could look Danny in the eye. “What… prompted this?” he asked finally.

“I don’t know! I had Grace for most of Christmas Day. Rachel and Stan got all of Thanksgiving, because Stan wanted to go to some event in Los Angeles and his parents were visiting Los Angeles at the time. Rachel’s been freaking since the fire, and attack. I dunno, maybe she saw something on the news about the Governor. I just rang Rachel to tell her that I’d pick Grace up at eleven o’clock on Christmas morning and ended up talking to a brick wall.”

Steve plucked his new Blackberry from his back pocket and glanced at the clock app. Danny knew that it was late; it was after eight. Soon the dinner bell (Toast was preparing food and he invariably took an age) would be ringing and the room lights flashing. It was Sunday tomorrow; nothing lawyer-ey would happen until Monday, which was the day before Christmas Eve.

“Do lawyers work on Christmas Eve?” Danny asked -- Rachel had timed this perfectly. “We only have one day to sort this out.”

Steve squinted, and then said, supremely unconcerned. “My lawyers do. Don’t worry, Danny, we’ll figure this out.”

“Don’t worry? Don’t worry? My baby is probably thinking that I don’t want her for Christmas. She’s probably locked in her room crying her eyes out. Rachel’s not thinking about that.”

“Danny. Danny.” Steve carefully laid his large hand over Danny’s shoulder, thumb settling in the well of his collarbone, and squeezed. “You call Grace before she goes to bed most nights? Right? You go call and reassure her that this will be fixed, and that her Danno and Uncle Steve will see her over Christmas.”

“I can’t say that.”

“Yes, you can.” With his other hand, Steve crossed his heart. “It’s a promise.”

“I--”

“Now, I’m going to talk to Chin.”

“Chin?”

“The President of Seolh helps the Emperor in all things,” Steve pointed out. “When you mentioned Rachel knowing about the governor did she say that, or was it supposition on your part.”

“Supposition?” Danny echoed.

“The circumstances of the governor’s injury have not been circulated, Danny,” Steve said. “If Rachel knows about it, how does she know about it?”

“No,” Danny said after a second’s pondering. “She said, the insanity of my new life, questionable lifestyle -- living in a commune -- meant that our arrangement had to be reviewed.”

“Well, that’s interesting.”

“Interesting?” Danny howled.

“Danny.” And Steve was so calm and collected that he was suddenly unassailable. Danny dipped down and out from under the hand cupping his shoulder. “She’s using Seolh as an excuse to take
Grace away from you. She is not going to win.”

“Really?” It was hard not to believe that absolute surety.

“Danny, go and check on Grace. That’s your first priority. I’ll go find Chin.”

“Thank you.” Danny bolted, before he kissed the big goof.

~*~

Half way through reassuring Grace that he and mom would talk and definitely sort things out, the lights flicked off and on. Despite his stomach grumbling, he stayed -- of course -- on the line, reading the next five pages of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.

Leaving a happier Grace, he made his way down to the kitchen, knowing that a plate would be in the oven for him.

“Hey,” Toast acknowledged his entry. Everyone else turned, as Toast jumped up from the bench table and made for the oven. Based on everyone’s mostly filled plates, they had waited a while for him, before finally starting.

“Grace okay?” Kono asked.

“You told them?” Danny asked Steve.

Steve chewed on his lip. “I needed to speak to Chin. Yeah, it wasn’t a secret, Danny. Ohana, buddy.”

“Don’t worry, Danny, we won’t let this happen,” Kono chirped.

“Stan’s a multi-millionaire. He owns resorts.” Danny slashed the flat of his hand through the air. “We went to the Batch & Son offices; those lawyers do not come cheap. And Stan hired them on a whim.”

“Danny, I appreciate that you’re concerned,” Chin said, and continued before Danny could jump all over his careful words. “I genuinely understand. But Seolh has good lawyers as well.”

“Sit, dude.” Toast set a plate of fries, ham and fried egg -- sans pineapple -- on the table in Danny’s customary place, next to Steve. “I’ll pull up dirt on the dude if it comes to it. And we’ll blackmail the ass.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Steve said -- incredibly, making a joke.

Their hearts were in the right place, but it wasn’t like they had weeks to sort this out. Christmas was right around the corner.


Breathing out calmly and carefully, Danny sat. He picked up his knife and fork and stared at his full plate.

In a plain attempt to change the subject, Kono asked, “Have we heard anything about the governor?”

Steve stabbed his mashed up egg yolk with a fry. “Still holding her own. In ICU.”
“Are there guards and shit?” Toast asked.

Steve took a bite of his dripping fry before answering. “Yes, there are guards.”

“Police or military?” Kono asked.

Steve munched, and swallowed. “Yes.”

“So they want to talk to her about the terrorist. And how good she knows him?” Toast continued. “Has anyone been looking at her computers?”

“Yes,” Steve said.

“And have they found anything?” Danny asked, interested. “It sounded like she had known Wo Fat for years. And she knew Audrey and the McGarretts.”

“What?” Steve jerked around so fast that Danny jumped back in his seat.

Danny hunched down, chin tucked against his chest.

“Repeat that!” Steve ordered. “What do you mean? What does Grandmother have to do with this?”

“No, not your Grandmother. I think…. Wo Fat said -- I’m paraphrasing -- ‘McGarretts are annoying’. You were there. It was when he was on the interstate, mocking us.”

Steve’s mouth dropped open as he processed, and Danny had a startling good view of his epiglottis. Luckily, he had swallowed first.

“Oh,” Danny said realising. “You didn’t hear that, did you? The ssss – plural. Shit, I’m sorry, Steve.”

“Why would Wo Fat know my family?” Steve turned and asked the table at large.

No answers were forthcoming.

“Steve.” Danny tapped the kitchen tabletop, to get his attention. “I told White, when he interrogated me.” He was fairly sure that he had mentioned that.

Chin set his knife and fork down. “You may be overanalysing. McGarretts are annoying. Kellys are annoying. Kalakauas are annoying.”

“Hey,” Kono protested.

“I mean that it can be a phrase,” Chin continued, ignoring his cousin.

“Yeah, but generally, it’s if you know more than one,” Kono mused.

“And how would Wo Fat know the McGarrett family?” Chin said, watching Steve closely. “Mr. and Mrs. McGarrett died twenty years ago.”

“Family on the Mainland?” Toast asked.

“I think we’re stretching,” Danny joined in. “I mean, do you have a family of SEALs?”

Steve scowled. “Yeah, my aunt in Seattle and the cousins in Florida are part of the Navy’s special operations forces.”
Danny shrugged. “So we’re thinking phrase, yeah? Maybe I heard it wrong.”

“I’ll ask Joe,” Steve said, bottom lip downturned.

~*~

Two o’clock segued into three o’clock as Danny watched clouds fritter past the bright moon. Three to four o’clock wasn’t much more interesting. He was sure he had seen a mass of bats, even though he didn’t think that bats lived in Hawaii. He made a resolution to Google it in the morning. Thinking about Dracula on top of imminent battles with Rachel, upsetting Grace, visions of blood, and the gripping niggle of pulled and abused muscles didn’t help with the pursuit of sleep.

The last time he had not been able to sleep, the house had been firebombed.

Realising that sleep was never going to happen, he kicked off his sheet and single blanket. A mug of milk and a check of the downstairs might be a recipe for sleep.

~*~

Places were always a little creepy in the dead of night. It was cliché, but it had a depth of truth.

Shadows, darkness, gloom -- preyed on the mind. The corridor of reception rooms was particularly spooky because there wasn’t much natural light. The gym suite frankly looked like an apocalyptic graveyard of Terminators by the reflected light of the moon.

The conservatory had a luminescent quality that Danny liked and he decided to photograph it with an appropriate lens and tripod on the next full moon, or during his next trip down the rough and torturously unpleasant insomnia road. Danny paused, palms pressing against the old, cool glass looking out across Chin’s carefully tended gardens, robed in silver and shades of grey.

That, of course, meant that he stayed at Seolh.

“Ah fuck,” he breathed. He really needed to make a decision. Maybe four o’clock in the morning wasn’t the ideal time -- but to coin a phrase -- there was no time like the present.

He took himself to the kitchen where there was milk and a handy magnetic notepad and pen stuck to the fridge.

Settling at the kitchen table, he divided the first page in the notebook into two columns and wrote ‘Pros’ and ‘Cons’ at the top.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good people, good friends, Steve’s Ohana.</td>
<td>Bit smothery? (pot kettle; black -- Babe!)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happy to have Grace visit any time</td>
<td>Lawyers might decide Grace can’t come to a commune.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace loves it</td>
<td>More hospital visits in the last month than in the last five years. HARDLY ANYONE’S FAULT but the bad guys.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

He remembered the material concerns and, in the pro column, added: Cheapest rent in the world
He pondered, tapping his pen against the pad. And then he wrote **Steve** in the pro column.

Objectively, the pro list was significantly longer then the con list, and two of the con points weren’t really negatives. Really, the only thing, and it weighted the entire con column like a three thousand ton weight, was Grace.

Danny thumped his forehead against the table, and then slumped, head tilting to the side. And then he just lay there, miserable.

“IT’s all right, son.” A soft hand stroked his hair. “Steve will sort it out.”

Danny jerked upright, hissing, wincing, and frantically scanning left and right all at once.

“FUCK, that was a weird dream.” A young woman had stood over him. She had possibly been Caucasian but dressed in -- to be frank, Danny didn’t actually know -- he kind of thought that she might have been naked from the waist up. Tired, he rubbed his temples. His subconscious was a weird thing, especially if a dream of a half-naked, brunette, hazel-eyed beauty only freaked him out.

Abandoning the table, Danny staggered off to bed, determined to sleep.

~*~

The sun was at its zenith when he next opened his eyes. He swore, knowing that he had lost hours. It was practically lunch time. He splayed out on the double bed, reluctant to get up, but really knowing that it was inevitable.

“Sunday the Twenty Second,” he informed the ceiling. Today was going to be a long day of uncomfortable grim anticipation, waiting only for Monday and when they could see Steve’s lawyers.

Impossibly, the lunch bell rang. It provided the impetus to drag his sorry ass out of bed. He dry chomped on the ibuprofen as made his way downstairs. Coffee first and then he would deal with the horror that his hair had no doubt turned into -- Seolh had destroyed any sense of decorum.

“Holy shit.” It hadn’t been the lunch bell ringing, it was the ‘all hands on deck’ bell ringing (they all sounded the same to Danny). There were three local guys in the kitchen with Chin and Mamo overseeing what appeared to be the delivery of a heavy body bag.

“Hey, Kaniela. Sleep well?” Mamo asked.

“What is that?” Danny asked, pointing at the dead body lying on the kitchen tiles just in case any of the five men were incapable of seeing it.

“Whole pig for the Christmas lu’au,” Chin answered.

“The what?”

“Christmas feast, we’ll be roasting it in an imu.”

“Emu?” Danny checked.

“Imu, underground oven,” Mamo said, this time. “Slow-roasted pig, best in the world.”

“We’ve got more deliveries to make, Brah,” one of the delivery guys said. “Where do you want this?”

“Cold pantry.” Mamo led the way.
Danny stepped aside, letting the delivery guys shuffle past with the pig slung between them. He then slipped into the kitchen.

“This is the pig in the hole thing, isn’t it?” he asked Chin.

“Yes, very traditional. We’ll clean out the fire pit today, cut down a banana tree, harvest some ti leaves from the woods. Build the fire tomorrow and set everything out. We’ll start the fire first thing in the morning on Christmas Eve, and build the oven during the day.”

“Sounds labour intensive,” Danny observed as he helped himself to well-brewed coffee from the pot.

“It needs the community -- it is the community,” Chin said sagely.

“So who is coming on Christmas Day? It sounds like you’re preparing for a party.” Without Grace, Danny wasn’t too sure that he would be in the mood to party.

“Seolh. Mamo’s family. Mrs. Keawe’s family. The Kalakaua Clan will likely drop by later in the evening. Malia will bring her mom and dad around.”

Chin blushed, which delighted Danny no end. But he noted that the Kelly Clan were conspicuous by their absence. It would be very difficult without Grace, but Danny would try to make the effort.

“Steve up for this?”

“He went to the Christmas Ball. We’d debated whether we would be very low key this year, but decided to go the whole hog,” Chin finished, unintentionally punny.

“We?” Danny added some speech marks with his fingers.

“Mamo and I.” Chin stilled.

“Good call,” Danny said into that silence. “Where is Steve by the way?”

“He went out really early, crack of dawn.”

“To see White, I guess.” Danny opened the fridge, and began to pull out the ad hoc lunch makings. He was hungry, and he guessed that everyone else would be.

The notepad and pen were back on the fridge, next to the clip that held the takeout menus from the House residents’ favourite restaurants. The top sheet was blank. Danny patted his shorts pocket.

What had he done with the list?

~*~

# 48 #

“Whoa, babe.” Danny did not drool. He did not carefully check his chin. Steve in uniform was a special treat to the eyes. “What are you wearing?”

“Navy Service Dress Blues.” Steve tipped off his white and midnight blue cap as he stepped over the threshold and into the House, tucking it under his arm.

“Was there a special occasion?” Danny asked, since Steve had actually shaved closely, judging by the bare hint of stubble in the early evening.
Steve smiled a smirk of a smile. “You could say so.”

“Did you get a medal or something?” Danny wondered, although Sunday afternoon seemed a weird time for a ceremony and why hadn’t he invited his Ohana? “You saw White, didn’t you? What did he have to say about the McGarretts?”

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked.

“Of course.” Danny rolled his eyes, and led Steve into the kitchen. Steve’s drinking tastes were diverse; if he wanted coffee he was tired. “Sit,” he directed. “Have you had lunch?”

Steve placed his cap on the table and sat after carefully tugging at the material above his knees to maintain the creases.

“Is there coffee?” Steve asked.

“Yes, I grabbed something at the base,” Steve said as the ancient espresso machine huffed and spat.

So he had been to Pearl-Harbour Hickam, Danny noted, as he frothed milk to make an indulgent latte.

“I don’t know if it has come up in conversation before?” Steve said. “As well as being my commanding officer, Joe White is an old friend of my dad’s. He’s been a mentor throughout my whole career. He knew both my mom and dad. I used to call him Uncle Joe.”

“Okay.” That kind of possibly explained the reason why the guy seemed to drop out of the woodwork left, right and centre every time there was a problem. But Danny didn’t know anything about how the Navy or the Army or any type of military organisation worked. Maybe being over protective was the name of the game.

“So I asked him if Dad knew Wo Fat.”

“And?”

“He said no. Dad was a detective in Honolulu PD. And Wo Fat would have been something like twenty back when my parents died.”

“So I guess that I didn’t hear properly, or read too much into the creep’s words?” Danny set the coffee down.

“Natural endorphins… in chocolate.” Danny turned to make his own coffee. “Helps with muscle pain, or so I’ve been told.”

“Have you changed the dressing?” Steve persisted.

“Why are you being so picky about this?” Danny asked, laughingly, turning slightly to look over his shoulder.

“You kept after me when I cut my foot. I’m just returning the favour.” Steve leaned back in his chair, a long line of perfectly tailored humanity.

“I’m just returning the favour.” Steve leaned back in his chair, a long line of perfectly tailored humanity.
Snorting, Danny focussed on his own espresso, opting for a tiny, perfect hit of caffeine, rather than a milky, sugary vat. He left it in the shot glass, rather than fooling around with another cup. He leaned up against the counter.

Steve glanced, pointedly, at Danny’s leg, where the white dressing and tape was a little grubby after the afternoon’s shenanigans.

“Slightly different. This is a graze,” Danny observed between sips of coffee. “You had something like a hundred stitches--”

“Slight exaggeration.”

“And it being right on the bottom of your foot, and hence inaccessible even if you can twist like a pretzel, you needed my help,” Danny said staunchly.

Steve snorted. “If you say so.”

“I say so,” Danny said. He raised his glass, sort of pointing to the band aid tucked high in Steve’s hairline. “And how is that healing, hmmm?”

“So where is everyone? Shouldn’t--” Steve leaned over to the side and glanced at the white board on the back of the kitchen door, “-- Chin be preparing dinner?”

“You missed out on the start of what I think might be the most laborious food preparation ritual in the world,” Danny said. “And, no, I’m not talking about that shark meat thing that you urinate on and stick in a pit for month. Although... I hope that there’s no urine in the pork thing.”

“What are you talking about?” Steve asked, aghast.

“Mamo had this enormous chainsaw.” Danny held his arms outstretched. “And Al’u cut down a banana tree. He and Chin started cutting it into small chunks. And Kono, saying that it was good exercise, dragged me into the woods where we collected ti leaves.”

“Are we having a Christmas lu’au?” Steve asked, brightening. His smile lit up, incandescent.

“Really? I didn’t think -- are we using the pit?”

“They’re out there clearing out some pit by the workshops. I came in -- honestly, I had to sit down, and get some more sunscreen. And then you came.”

“I haven’t been to a Christmas lu’au for years. Oh, you’ll love kalua pig. You’re in for a treat.” Quickly, Steve tossed down a mouthful of coffee. “I need to go get changed and go see what’s happening.”

Chortling happily, Steve snatched up his cap and dashed off upstairs. It was if he had suddenly metamorphosed into a kid.

“Huh.” Danny folded his hands on the table. Perhaps there was something to this Christmas lu’au thing.

~*~

“Chin Ho Kelly!” Steve sang out as he strode diagonally across the lawn to the workshops. “Mamo Kahiike, what are you planning?”

Mamo laughed a belly laugh. Kono and Chin joined in.
They stood around the dirt area directly opposite the pottery kiln where an old deep pit had been dug. During the afternoon, Danny knew that Chin and Mamo had cleaned out the collected windblown rubbish and old leaves, and checked the stones lining the pit. Mamo’s giant nephew Al’u had dropped by earlier to help move the heavy, round, dark-grey rocks that were scattered all around the workshops into a handy pile next to the pit, before wielding the chainsaw to decimate a poor little banana tree.

Since Danny had taken a little break, Kono had a piled their large banana leaves and long, green fronds of ti leaves into a heap on a tarpaulin. Forearm-long chunks of pale yellow banana wood were stacked on another tarpaulin.

“So what’s the plan?” Steve asked, rubbing his palms together, taking in their preparations.

Kono wiped a grubby hand across her forehead. “Build the fire tomorrow, so we can light it first thing on Tuesday.”

“It should be hot enough by mid-late afternoon,” Mamo estimated.

“You’ve got a hog? A big hog?” Steve asked, looking back towards the House.

“Should take about twelve hours to steam,” Mamo said.

Steve grinned happily at Danny, and Danny couldn’t help but respond wholeheartedly. This appeared to be the best Christmas present that Mamo and Chin could have given him. Danny bet that they were relieved to see that happy grin, because earlier Danny had had the distinct impression that they had been shitting bricks.

“So,” Chin began, looking heavenwards at couple of clouds building on the horizon, “let’s cover everything with tarpaulins in case it rains.”

Mamo raised his chin and sniffed. “We should be okay, but better safe than sorry.”

“Okay.” Steve glanced at his overly pretentious and shiny diving watch. “Danny, do you want to go back in the House and order pizza while we get all this stuff locked down? It’s late to start preparing dinner, and you guys look like you all need showers.”

“Gee, thanks, Steve.” Kono huffed.

“Subtle, babe.” Danny laughed and took himself off to the House, to get out of the line of fire, and ensure that decent pizzas were ordered.

~*~

“So, Steve, what’s happening tomorrow?” Danny asked, as they set out plates and napkins for the pizzas on the kitchen table.

Mamo had headed on home, with promises to return tomorrow with his wife and a plethora of family to help with the imu. Kono and Chin were catching much needed showers.

Steve read the question correctly, somehow knowing that Danny was not asking about the Christmas lu’au, but rather Grace.

“Get ready for midday.”

“Yes.” Steve nodded definitely and seriously. “They’re on retainer.”

“Do they think we’ve… I’ve got a good case?”

Steve set down a handful of cutlery with a clunk on the table. Stilling, he set his most serious gaze on Danny, adroitly requesting all of Danny’s attention.


“Danny. Trust me when I say that you will see Grace this Christmas. I can’t tell you not to worry, because you’re a worrier.”

“I am not!”

“You will see Grace. I promise.”

“You can’t promise, Steven,” Danny said weakly.

“I can.”

There was a tap on the kitchen window, and the young student who usually delivered their pizzas waved enthusiastically.

“Door’s open,” Danny hollered. It usually was.

“Hey, Elaine,” Steve greeted, as he rooted in the rent tin on the top of the fridge, and pulled out some bills.

“Hi, guys.” Elaine set a padded messenger bag, which probably weighed the same as she did, on the kitchen table and began unpacking. “Mele Kalikimaka!”

“Mele Kalikimaka,” Steve returned, handing over payment and what looked like an impressive Christmas tip.

Elaine clutched the wad of cash, then flicked a fleeting look up at Steve and blushed.

“Thank you. I hope you have a good Christmas.” Still blushing furiously, she snatched up her bag and darted away.

“Hey, Babe, I think you have a fan.” Danny chuckled.

“She’s like twelve,” Steve protested.

“I’m guessing nineteen-twenty,” Danny said, as he closed the door that the student had left open in her rush.

“Still a baby.” Steve lifted the lid of the top box. “Hey, we got free garlic bread.”

~*~

Danny paced. Danny tidied. Danny wrapped Christmas presents with grim resignation. The clock on his bedside table ticked its way interminably to eleven o’clock when he would put on his best dress trousers, shirt, and the single tie that he had recently purchased and then go to the lawyers.

Danny smoothed a strip of scotch tape over a fold of gold wrapping paper until there wasn’t a single bobble of air.
“Why, Rachel, why?” he asked a curly bow. Fear ruled Rachel’s life -- fear of instability: no money; no pension; no security; people judging her actions. They were real fears, and they were destructive. She never looked for hope, just reacted and moved on, searching for stability. Danny’s itinerant photographic contracts and projects and resultant ebb and flow of money had driven her up the proverbial wall.

Danny drew his fingers across the edge of his scissors, testing the sharpness.

There was a rap-rappity-rap on the door that was Steve’s distinctive knock. Instead of waiting for the room’s occupant to open the door for him, as was his usual habit, Steve opened the door and just poked his head in.

“Hey, Danny.” He was edgy, but a pleased smile bubbled under his skin. “I’ve got an early Christmas present for you.”

The door flung open, and…

“Monkey!”

His daughter stood in the doorway, pink suitcase resting at her feet. “Daddy!”

They met halfway across the room in the biggest hug since the volcanic islands of Hawaii were created. Kneeling, Danny held her tight, cradling her in the arch of his body. Her head tucked against his neck as her legs wrapped around his waist. She kept switching between Daddy and Danno, voice rough with tears. Danny rocked back and forth.

Danny looked up, catching Steve’s gaze. Steve lifted his chin in acknowledgement, and then simply retreated, closing the door with a soft snick.

~*~

“I don’t know whether to punch you or punch you,” Danny opened with.

Danny caught up with Steve who was covering a butt-load of casserole dishes with aluminium foil on the kitchen table. Grace was outside in the workshops visiting Mamo, harvesting in the vegetable gardens with Chin, and doing something arcane at the imu with Kono. She would probably run back and forth between them in a large circle for half an hour or so and then collapse in a puddle of glee. She was beyond excited.

“Aren’t you supposed to say: punch you or kiss you?” Steve slid around to the opposite side of the table, displaying that even SEALs knew that sometimes discretion was the better part of valour.


Steve was watching him, hawkeyed. Without breaking his gaze, he pulled his ITE aid remote out of his side pocket and set it on the kitchen table.

“My turn?” he asked.

It was hard arguing with someone who was deaf. “Yes,” Danny grated out.

“Right.” Steve held up one finger. “I was eighty nine percent sure that it was going to work. But if it hadn’t, I didn’t want to get your hopes up. She could have changed her mind. We still have an
appointment at midday with Seolh’s lawyers.”

“What did you do? How did you do it?” Danny asked. Rachel had been insistent that Grace was not spending any time with him and that they were going back to court. She hadn’t returned any of his phone calls. “Did you… Did you… visit my ex wearing your uniform and charm her?”

Steve straightened, affronted. “I merely ensured professional deportment, to underscore the seriousness of our discussion, and to emphasise that Seolh is not a community of dilettantes.”


“She went up against the community, Danny,” Steve said, voice level. “She was using Seolh as an excuse to take Grace from you. She wasn’t going to win.”

Danny took that sentence and turned it on its head. “Okay, I accept that. But…”

“No. She operated from a false sense of security that money buys, or, I don’t know, psychosis.”

“She was protecting her baby,” Danny said, suddenly defending his ex-wife.


“Don’t ‘Danny’ me. What did you do?”

“I merely explained to Rachel and Stan that you were part of Seolh and that Seolh would support you in any custody discussions. I also explained to them how Seolh fits into the Island structure: historically to the present day; community development and charitable works; the police force, and the government. I also mentioned its links with the building and service industry.”

“Links with the building industry?” Danny parroted.

“You’ve met Kavika. A lot of his people work in the building industry. Build resorts and work at hotels and such like.”

“You blackmailed them?”

“Blackmail is such a strong word.” Steve stood a little straighter, shoulders rolling back. “And inaccurate. There was no blackmail involved. I merely stated my -- Seolh’s position.”

Emperor of Seolh, indeed. He had ran it like a strategic operation, planned and thought out down to the last iota, even to meeting with Rachel and Stan in his military uniform.

“We still have an appointment scheduled with your lawyer?” Danny asked, wondering whether he needed it or not.

“Yes, if you wish to discuss alternate custody arrangements. Rachel has, however, defaulted to the original arrangement,” Steve reported.

“Hardly, since I wasn’t scheduled to have Grace until Christmas morning,” Danny said. Grace had her large pink wheelie suitcase, which meant a visit longer than an overnighter. He hadn’t liked to ask her, to upset her, to state he didn’t know how long that his daughter would be visiting.

“Well, I pointed out to Rachel and Stan that they took Gracie off the Island and had her for all of Thanksgiving.”

“So what did you arrange for my daughter and I, Steven?” Danny asked priggishly.
Steve finally had the grace to look a little embarrassed at his presumption, but it warred with smooth satisfaction.

“Twenty hundred hours -- eight o’clock in the evening on Christmas Day. I figured that Grace would want to see her mom.”

“You figured? Hmmm.” Danny set his hands on his hips.

Steve glanced to the right, suddenly interested in the garbage can by the back door.

“If my mom was around,” he said. “I’d want to, you know, spend time… with her.”

Danny pondered on that statement until Steve shifted, uncomfortably. Danny kind of wanted the man to stew, dwell on his presumptuousness, until he figured out that he had overstepped his bounds. If Danny had had a roll of newspaper he would have batted Steve on the nose. But Steve’s heart was in the right place.

“Next time. Next time, you involve me in any of your plans. Especially if they involve my daughter. Now come here.” Danny crooked his finger.

Sensibly, Steve stepped back, even though he was still on the other side of the table.

“Steve.” Danny pointed at his feet.

Hesitantly, Steve slipped around the table as if heading to the guillotine. He came in close, head hanging dejectedly, which would have worked if he wasn’t ten foot tall.

“Thank you, Steve.” Danny hooked his arms around Steve’s narrow shoulders and hauled him in tightly, tucking Steve’s head against his neck.

“Oh.” Steve sagged, relieved. So he had realised that he had been high handed, Danny noted.

Carefully, Steve’s hands came up and circled Danny’s waist.

It was wonderful and exhilarating, and Steve smelled of the sea and a hint of Old Spice. He was warm and comfortable, despite being made of angles and long lines.

“Thank you,” Danny repeated, squeezing a little tighter.

Steve squeaked -- loudly, and surprisingly -- he squeaked.

“Shit! Your ribs!” Danny released him at the speed of light, wrenching right out of his orbit. “Shit, are you okay?”

“Yes,” Steve said, too high to be believable.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Sit. Sit.” Danny grabbed his elbow.

“It’s okay, Danny. Let me just get my breath.” Steve didn’t shift, preferring to bend over, hand splayed over his left side. “You could hug for the Olympics, dude.”

“What a pair of decrepit old fools we are. Sit, man.” Danny ducked down to look in his eyes. “Have you taken any ibuprofen today?”

“Yeah, early,” Steve said. Probably just before he had driven over to Stan and Rachel’s estate and liberated Grace from their clutches, Danny added inwardly.
“So you’re due.” Danny pulled the military issue blister pack out of the back pocket of his khaki slacks. They could share meds.

Steve accepted the two white pills with a grimace, and swallowed them down dry.

“No!” Danny protested. “You’ll destroy your stomach lining!”

Danny darted, as much as an arthritically beaten up guy could, over to the fridge and grabbed a carton of organic milk.

Steve set his hand on the table and levered himself down into a chair. “It’s okay, you just took me by surprise.”

“Daddy.” Grace raced into the kitchen. “We’re going to have a bonfire and roast a pig. This is so cool.” She launched herself at Steve. “Thank you, Uncle Steve.”

Steve caught her against his right side, bracing himself against the table.

“Careful!” Danny admonished.

“It’s okay,” Steve said, as Grace rose up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

Steve froze, mouth dropped open in surprise and eyes wide. The heat of his flush would probably be visible from outer space -- aliens would be able to use it as a homing beacon.

Danny cackled, delighted. “I think that you surprised Uncle Steve, Monkey.”

Grace laughed and was out the back door in a flash, unaware that she had shocked a Navy SEAL comatose.

Danny poured the milk in a glass and pushed it across the table into Steve’s orbit. Steve didn’t move a muscle.

“Drink your milk, tough guy.”

“I.” Steve grabbed the milk like it was a lifeline and downed it in one go.

“You okay, Babe?” Danny asked, as Steve thumped the glass back on the table.

Steve blinked at him. “It’s like riding a rollercoaster,” he muttered.

“Williamses?” Danny guessed, and shrugged. Steve was the one that had come up with a description of ‘dynamic’ for him. Grace was her father’s daughter.

Steve nodded mutely. A line of milk edged his top lip.

“Is that a bad thing?” Danny scratched at his chin.

Steve stared up at him, eyes too wide and vulnerable for a trained, professional soldier. Suddenly, he smiled, fine lines crinkling around his eyes.

“No,” he said. “I like rollercoasters.”

“Danno!” Grace came screaming back into the kitchen, reversed and raced out, hollering, “We’re building the fire. You gotta help.”
“Well, you’re about to experience a Christmas rollercoaster with a seven and a half year old, who I think was given a bag of sugar before she left her mom’s house.” As revenge went it was a subtle and evil machination on Rachel’s part.

“Oh.” Steve suddenly looked guilty.

“Did you give my daughter sugar, Steve?” Danny asked perceptively. He had probably given it to her on the way over, as an ice breaker or something. No doubt his Navy Intelligence Officer mission spec had included ‘methods of interacting with a small person while transporting said person to base.’

“I might have,” Steve said cagily, standing, and edging towards the door.

“You’re batting a thousand, Babe,” Danny observed. “Kids really aren’t in your skill set are they?”

Steve shrugged ruefully. “I can learn. I thought that they liked sugar?”

“Oh, they do. What was it? Chocolate?”

Steve had almost made it to the door. He held up one finger. “A bar.”

“A whole bar?” Danny asked faux conversationally.

“I don’t know. It was a Hershey’s Symphony bar, they’re kind of big. She might not have eaten it all.” And then he was out the door, and, ostensibly, safe.

Danny rinsed the milk glass, upturned it on the sink counter, and then set off to educate one Navy SEAL on the dietary habits of children, especially when left unsupervised.

~*~

# 49 #

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy,” the voice was persistent and one that he could never ignore.

Danny cracked open an eye -- the other was mushed against his pillow. Grace was leaning in close, nose twitching.

“You’re awake!” she said joyously.

The room was dark, meaning it was freakin’ early. Grace was dressed haphazardly in what looked like a pink hooded top over her satin blue nightdress.

“It’s Christmas Eve, Monkey, go back to bed. You get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow morning to open your presents.”

“We gotta light the fire, Danno. We have to do it early so it will get hot enough by midday so then we can cook the pig,” Grace said rapidly.

Danny reached out and grabbed his watch off the nightstand. It was five am. Jesus.

“Come on, Danno.” Grace tugged at his extended wrist. “We’re making a proper imu. It’s traditional.”

“Coming. Coming.” Blearily, Danny tossed back his blankets and let her pull him upright. He rubbed his face with his free hand. “Go put some leggings on, Grace.”
Grace released him with too high a pitched squeal for the middle of the night and went to put some more clothes on.

~*~

There was a cold bite in the morning air that he hadn’t experienced since leaving New Jersey. No doubt as soon as the sun rose it would warm up, but at this precise moment all Danny wanted was his bed.

“Uncle Chin.” Grace raced across the wet grass, slipping and sliding in her Crocs.

“Morning, Grace. Danny.”

The security lights were on outside the pottery, illuminating the imu and the surrounding preparations in a puddle of light. The day before, they had carefully constructed a mess of kindling, twists of newspaper and larger chunks of wood, with a hollow pipe sticking up right in the middle, reaching into the depths of the pit. One after another, they had piled dark grey, round rocks over the unlit fire -- creating a modern day funeral pyre, with the pipe standing proud like a flag pole. They had called it a night at that point. Danny had missed the agreement that they had a five o’clock start.

“Hey.” Danny lifted a hand in soporific greeting.

“Perfect timing, Grace.” Chin smiled at Grace who, fearlessly, crowded in close beside him at the wooden picnic table that they had set out the night before.

“We’re going to light it now, aren’t we?” Grace asked.

“Yes.” Chin plucked a firelighter from a tin box on the table. “We’ll light this and drop it down the pipe into the middle of the fire.”

“Ah, that’s what the pipe’s for.” Danny sniffed loudly.

“Can I light it?” Grace asked Chin.

Chin flicked a checking glance at Danny. Danny nodded, trusting Chin to not burn his baby. There was a pair of pincers beside the tin that were probably part of the firelighting exercise.

Danny oversaw the lighting ceremony as he tried to wake up. He should have grabbed a cup of coffee, but part of him was still fast asleep tucked up in bed. Chin was explaining everything; apparently the fire was going to heat up to four thousand degrees, and they weren’t roasting the pig per se, they were steaming it. Four thousand degrees seemed like a lot of degrees to steam a pig.

Half asleep and mussed, Steve shuffled over the grass to join them. It looked like he had thrown on old stone-washed jeans that were a little loose and --

“Is that an Arran sweater?” Danny asked.

“Huh?” Steve fetched up beside Danny, swallowing a yawn.

“Arran sweater?” Danny caught the knitted hem in his fingers and rubbed over the intricate knotwork. The dark blue sweater was old and washed enough to be soft to the touch. The t-shirt underneath was body warm. Danny shivered.

“Grandmother liked to knit. I’ve got more sweaters than cargo pants.” Steve scrunched down, huddling into its warmth, hands stuffed in his jeans pockets. “Unseasonably cold.”
“Yes,” Danny managed to say, in the face of such adorableness. “No clouds during the night, so no insulation.”

The impromptu climatology lecture woke Steve up a fraction. “Huh?”

Danny opted for shaking his head and turning to watch the preparations, pushing his shoulder into Steve’s bicep. Steve let him.

~*~

The fire finally took hold, burning fiercely, a plume of fire reaching so high it looked like they had made a volcano. The next part of the preparations seemed to revolve around ensuring that the pile of porous round stones dropped down into the pit evenly to form a base for the next stage.

“Hang on,” Danny interrupted, before they could destroy the volcano. “I need to go get my camera.”

Steve laughed.

“I need to get a picture of this!” Danny pointed at the sun beginning to peek over the horizon -- adding amber and golden highlights to the scene.

“Well, go on then.” Steve pointed to the house. “Better run, because it will collapse in on itself, sooner rather than later.”

“I’ll go, Daddy!” Grace raced off.

“It’s always good to have a willing minion,” Danny observed.

~*~

Breakfast segued into brunch and then into lunch, or more accurately, coffee, croissants, bagels, juice, and sandwiches seemed to be constantly ferried back and forth from the kitchen. Danny took a shower at one point. He wrestled Grace into clothes rather than a hodgepodge that made her look like a character from Harry Potter.

The picnic table was groaning with casserole dishes, some of the ones that Steve had been preparing the day before, others which arrived with various members of the Keawe and Kahike families. People came and went -- Danny was having problems keeping everyone’s name straight.

Grace, with two of Mamo’s grandkids, twin boys, had had the dubious joy of helping Mamo and Mrs. Keawe’s granddaughter, Laka, smash up the chunks of banana trunk with hand-sized mallets. Danny had watched like a hawk but Grace had had a whale of a time killing pieces of banana tree.

The air of celebration and festival was invigorating. And the photographs were going to be outstanding.

“Coming through.” Al’u, with two of his cousins, carried the star of the imu across the grass.

Danny snapped off a couple of shots as they placed the pig on an interleafed layer of banana leaves lying on an unfurled roll of chicken wire.

Mamo shuffled over from the fire with one of the hot stones held in a set of thick pincers. All the children had been temporarily banished to the edge of the plot to watch. He put the stone in the body cavity of pig. Chin had another stone on a shovel, which he set next to Mamo’s.
“It’s a big hog,” Mamo explained to Danny. “Helps it cook.”

The chicken wire made it easy to wrap the pig up in the banana leaves.

“I guess you guys have done this before; you’ve got it all thought out,” Danny observed.

Mamo laughed. “We’ll lay the pig on the fire and put the casserole dishes around it. But first halili -- we’ll put some of the mashed up banana trunks on top of the stones. The moisture from the banana wood provides some of the steam.”

The family wasn’t waiting for instructions, they were ferrying the yellow chunks of wood to the fire by the armload and hot, sweet smelling steam was beginning to rise up from the pit. They had knocked the rocks into the imu as the fire had burned hot and fallen in on itself, making a flat surface for the pig and the other dishes. All hands were on deck, setting the pig in the centre and then the foil wrapped dishes around it.

Danny took photos documenting the preparations. The rising steam gave the scene a surreal cast. Crouching, Danny got in low, photographing along the length of the hog as Mamo and Chin broke through pillars of steam to dump armfuls of banana and ti leaves on top of the wrapped pig.

“Dude,” Al‘u stepped over him and laid his own pile of leaves over the food. “You’re worse than the kids at getting underfoot.”

“Good photos, though.” Danny fiddled with the aperture and timing, and setting the camera down on the dirt, experimented with catching the swirls of steam over time.

“It’s going to get wet soon, keiki,” Mamo warned. “You better pick up your camera. We’re going to cover the imu with wet burlap, to keep it moist.”

Danny held up a finger. “Thirty seconds.”

“Artists,” a voice said cynically. And Danny knew that acid tone -- Koa Keawe.

“Hello, detective,” Danny said sunnily, because that would piss off the man.

Danny supposed that you couldn’t have a Christmas dinner without one member of the family being a pain in the ass. The detective was dressed snappily, badge gleaming at his waist, so it appeared that he had only dropped by. Danny kind of guessed that Christmas was something of a movable feast for police. A Christmas lu‘au might allow them to drop in and out as the demands of work ebbed and flowed.

“Danny, you best move,” Chin said, as he paced a cousin pushing a wheelbarrow sloshing with water and piled with burlap.

“Moving.” Danny shuffled back, holding his camera away from any water as barely wrung out gunny sacks were placed over the heap of banana chunks, food and leaves.

~ * ~

The mound of the imu puttered away doing what underground steam ovens were designed to do. The wet burlap had been covered by cloth tarp and then plastic sheeting, before they had buried it in loose, damp sand, insulating and sealing the imu to create a scaldingly hot, damp oven.

As Danny studied the mound, Grace pushed her hand into his. “Hey, Monkey, you okay?”
“People have been using imus for hundred and thousands of years. I have to write an essay for school about my Christmas Vacation, I’m going to write about my imu.”

“Your imu?” Danny raised an eyebrow at the hint of possession.

“Seolh’s imu,” Grace revised. “Can I put some of your photos in my report?”

“Sure.” Danny squeezed her hand. Homework during Christmas, it seemed cruel and unusual.

“There’s a little baby, and his name is Daniel, like yours Daddy. Uncle Steve is calling him Little Dee. He’s tiny.”

“Uncle Steve -- tiny?” Danny joked

“Uncle Steve isn’t tiny, Danno. He’s gianormous. No, Al’u is gianormous. He picked up me and Kevin and Kara and Brandon, and swung us around and it was great.”

“Great, eh?”

“Yeah.” Grace turned their handhold into a tug. “Come on, see the baby.”

Danny obediently followed his daughter.

“It’s a lot like home, isn’t it, Daddy,” Grace observed, pulling him this way and that, around little tricycles and scooters -- some abandoned and some riders intent on banging into his shins. There was a forest of lawn chair inhabitants and loafing loungers. They skirted the edge of an impromptu game of volleyball come baseball. Mayhem really, but people were having fun.

“Yeah,” Danny agreed, slowly. The annual summer picnic back in New Jersey had been for the entire family and extended family, with members of dad’s Fire Station and his crew descending.

An iPod dock with large speakers had been set by the kitchen doorstep with a power cable curling through the doorway. A Christmas carol was currently playing, but the previous selection had been Queen’s ‘It’s a kind of magic’.

It was all a little surreal with the blue skies overhead, hints of blossom on the air, and a caressing warm wind.

“Do you think Nana and Grandpop might come and see us?”

Danny swung her hand back and forth and Grace moved with him. “They’d love to. They’re saving up.”

“Hello, Big Dee,” Nani greeted, as she sat at the kitchen table giving Daniel his bottle.

“Big Dee?” Grace chortled, pinging her gaze between the baby and her dad. “And Little Dee!” She laughed, impossibly amused.

“Hi Nani, how’s Little Dee? Doing good?” Danny asked, as he tickled Grace into a puddle around his ankles.

“Yeah.” Nani dipped her head and nuzzled the baby’s temple. “He’s a good boy.”

Danny hefted Grace up onto his hip, ignoring the stab of his pulled muscles. Grace latched on like a monkey.
“He’s okay?” Danny persisted just a fraction, wanting to know if the doctors had given the little scrap a clean bill of health.

“Docs are happy for the time being.”

Before Grace could register that, Danny asked, “Have you seen Steve?”

“He was looking a little shell-shocked,” Nani said with her typical candidness. “I think that he went upstairs to his apartment for a little me-time.”

“What does that mean, Daddy?” Grace asked, head canting to the side.

“It means,” Danny said, releasing Grace to let her slither down his legs, “that we’re going to leave Steve alone for half an hour or so, and then I will go up and chase him out of his den.”

“Okay,” Grace said easily. She clambered up next to Nani and started peppering her with questions about babies.

Abandoned, Danny looked around, and then headed back outside to join the volleyball game, until it was time to find Steve.

~ * ~

Danny tapped on the door to Steve’s eyrie and let himself in. Across on the sofa, Steve immediately jerked up, rubbing at his face. The paperback on his chest fell to the floor.

“Danno?” he asked, squinting.

“Sorry, Steve. You okay?” Danny cast an assessing eye over him. He seemed fine, albeit disturbed from a nascent doze, Danny judged.

“I was reading. Catching up.” He leaned over and picked up the book, closing it without making a note of the page, and dropped it back on the floor.

“Actually, it looked like you were having a nap.”

“I was reading,” Steve said waspishly.

“And then it turned into a nap.”

“Maybe.” Steve swung his feet around, settling them on the floor with great deliberation, and placed his hands on his lap.

“There’s nothing wrong with napping. Napping is awesome.” Danny flopped into the armchair opposite Steve’s futuristic, sparkly television set up. “One of my favourite activities.”

“Daddy?” Grace called from the bottom of the staircase to Steve’s eyrie.

“We’re going to have a visitor,” Danny said for Steve’s benefit.

“Huh?” Steve looked to the door as Grace peeked around the bottom of the frame. Evidently, she had come up the stairs hand over knee.

“Hey, Monkey,” Danny greeted her like they hadn’t parted company mere minutes ago.

Grace scampered across the room, clambered over the arm of the chair and settled into Danny’s
“This is me-time?” she asked, taking in the laptop, the abandoned Play Station controller and the book on the rug before the television.

“Well, there’s no snacks….” Danny observed.

“Me-time?” Steve echoed, uncertainly. He shook his head, dismissing the sideline. Pulling a face, he blew out a huff of breath, clearly shrugging off post-doze sleepiness.

Grace watched entranced, and Danny tugged one of her pigtails. She let it happen, content to simply be there with her Danno, and watch Steve.

“Hey, Grace, check out my computer,” Steve said, as he returned their joint gaze. “I came up to look up something on Google one of my uh guys on my Team told me about last year.”

“Okay.” Grace slithered off Danny’s lap, and onto the floor like an eel.

Danny aborted a half-hearted grab after the back of her t-shirt, concerned about what an unknown Navy SEAL thought was appropriate for a seven year old. The notion was instantly swamped by the fact that Steve wouldn’t do anything to harm Grace.

Grace stroked the touchpad and the computer awoke. Proficient with computer information, she took in the contents of the screen instantly.

“NORAD Tracks Santa?” She was all over the computer, effortlessly navigating the pages. A YouTube link opened up a video, and a tiny CGI Santa flew over the sea as a disembodied voice said that Santa was approaching St. John’s in Halifax Nova Scotia. “Santa? What’s NORAD? This is awesome. Santa’s coming! Daddy.” She lifted up the laptop, bringing it over to Danny.

As he settled her on his lap, and looked at the screen, Danny kind of vaguely remembered hearing about NORAD Tracks Santa. He had never looked it up, since computers and his goofy thumbs did not go together.

“NORAD is the North American Aerospace Defence Command,” Steve explained. “The United States and Canada use satellites and RADAR to keep a track on our airspace, so they help Santa every year. It’s based in Peterson Air Force Base near Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs.”

“Where the Stargate is?” Grace asked, breathlessly.

Steve looked pained, but went along with the deception. “It’s next door.”

Danny smiled over the top of Grace’s head. Steve shifted in his seat.

“Look, Danno, we can see where Santa’s been.” Grace had moved onto the moments, earlier in the day, when Santa had been spotted. “He was in Egypt. He flew over the pyramids.”

“I can see, Monkey.” Danny smiled again.

Steve rose smoothly from his loll on the sofa and made one long legged step in their direction. Smiling, he offered Grace his hand.

“How about,” he said, “we show Kara, and Brandon, and Samuel and everyone else where Santa is?”

“Yes!” Grace latched onto Steve’s hand, rolling off Danny, trustingly abandoning the laptop into side.
Danny’s hands. “Come on, Danno, everyone should see this!”

She towed Steve to the door, yammering in Christmas excitement, determined to share NORAD Tracks Santa with absolutely everyone. Steve glanced back at Danny, an impish smile on his face. Danny couldn’t help grinning back goofily at Steve’s obvious enchantment and satisfaction at his Santa tracking prowess on behalf of all the children at Seolh. Steve jerked his head, demanding that Danny follow.

Obediently, Danny traipsed after them. What could he do? They were like binary suns to his orbiting Earth.

~*~

# 50 #

Amazingly, Danny woke before Grace on Christmas morning. A day of running around, back and forth, chasing and playing with new friends, and keeping track of Danny had tired Grace out. He had had to pour her into bed after a warm bubble bath. Fighting sleepiness hard, it had been quite late before she crashed. The argument that Santa was flying over Los Angeles and all children had to be in bed before Santa reached Hawaii had, surprisingly, finally worked. Once the smallest person in the house was safely asleep, the adults had set bundles of gaily wrapped presents around the Christmas tree. And then they had lazed in the playroom, cracking a bottle of single malt and, watching, improbably, How to Train your Dragon.

Grace slept, loose-limbed and snoring, in the cradling well of her Princess bed, so deeply asleep that Danny washed, shaved and dressed snappily without disturbing her. Entranced, as ever, by the raw innocence of his sleeping daughter, he debated waking her, but Danny finally decided that the day was going to be long and exciting and he should let her sleep as long as possible.

Creeping downstairs, he took himself into the kitchen.

“Christmas morning.” He rubbed his hands together -- there were certain Williams traditions that had to be upheld. If Seolh was introducing him and his daughter to their Christmas customs, it was only fair that he share his family’s.

He rooted around the cupboards pulling out the various fruit preserves, and putting the ones that he didn’t think would go with Gingerbread Waffles back on the shelf. There were more preserves than he knew what to do with, and he guessed that there were probably more in the pantry. Settling for white grape jelly, a thicker fruitier brandy cherry jam, and a jar of runny honey, he set them on the table.

He set to work: plugging in the waffle iron to heat; turning the oven on low to keep batches warm, and starting on the batter spiced with ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves.

The first cooking waffle filled the air with a rich, festive scent. The spices entwined perfectly with the aroma of perking coffee. Danny cracked open the back door, enjoying the fresh air trickling in.

It was so enticing that he knew that his morning peace would be broken any moment. He was kind of looking forward to it.

The first person ensnared by the siren-like call of his Christmas Breakfast was Steve. It appeared as if he had crawled straight out of bed, decked only in an old blue terry-cloth bathrobe, which had definitely seen better days. The ratty robe stopped above his knobly knees, and Danny hoped that he had thrown on some shorts, because his daughter was in the house.
Steve sniffed appreciatively. “What are you cooking?”

“Gingerbread Waffles.”

“What?”

“Gingerbread Waffles,” Danny repeated.

“Oh, are we waiting for everyone, or digging in?” Steve eyed the first stack on the plate beside the waffle iron, and kind of leaned with intent.

“Finish setting the table.” Danny slid the plate out of his reach. “I’ll put this batch in the oven to keep warm. I’ll start a fresh batch. You may have a couple of them.”

“Yes, set the table and then you can eat.”

“You’re bossy,” Steve observed, but he obeyed, opening the fridge and juggling milk, juice, and butter to the table. He examined the preserves that Danny had set out. “What about maple syrup?”

“I didn’t see any.” Danny closed the waffle iron with a hiss.

“No maple syrup?” Steve scratched side of head, looking around kitchen as if a bottle of maple syrup was going to limbo out from under the bookcase laden with cookbooks.

“Really,” Danny said loudly. He rocked over to the side, checking Steve’s right ear -- and lo–and–behold, Steve didn’t have his aids in. “No syrup.”

“Chin probably used it in his red wine barbeque sauce.” Steve pouted and then shrugged. “Pity.”

Danny clicked his fingers and then pointed in the direction of the pantries through the kitchen wall. “Look in the siege pantry.”

“Huh,” Steve acknowledged and ambled off.

Danny shook his head; Sleepy Steve was a special creature. He checked his waffle --perfect, decanted it, and started the next one. Steve had let his guard down twice now: napping yesterday with his door unlocked, and now -- this was the first time that Danny had seen him voluntarily without his aids.

He took it as a good sign. Pouring a mug of coffee, Danny wondered on it -- he knew that the aids sometimes pained Steve. Was there an alternative? There were the cyborg thingies that you could have on the side of your head. They were called ear implants or something, co-ear implants? Danny made a mental note to ask Chin. Maybe you couldn’t swim with them; they looked mechanical?

“Maple syrup,” Steve said triumphantly, returning with a squat glass bottle.

“Hey, Babe,” Danny said, waving his spatula.

“Yeah?”

“Merry Christmas, Steve,” he said clearly.

Steve’s smile lit up his face. “Merry Christmas, Danno.”
“What do I smell?” Chin sailed into the kitchen.

Malia came in right behind Chin, fingers entwined with her fiancé’s. “They smell amazing.”

“What Williams’ Christmas Special: Gingerbread Waffles.” Danny used his spatula to point at the oven. “First batch is in the oven.”

“Oooh.” Malia danced around Chin, and went for the waffles, snagging an oven glove en route.

“Daddy. Daddy! Santa’s been! Have you seen the presents under the tree? There’s millions.” Grace came right into the kitchen, fearlessly dodging around Chin and Steve. Danny had a bare millisecond to put his spatula and coffee mug down before she was climbing him like a tree. She peppered his face with kisses, and Danny got to blow a kiss against her neck, making her squeal.

“Merry Christmas, Monkey.”

“Happy Christmas, Danno!” Grace leaned back in his embrace and chimed out a laugh. “Can we open the presents?”

“Ah, you know the rules.” Normally, he would have put a Christmas Stocking on the end of her bed to keep her occupied, but he hadn’t managed it this year.

“Breakfast first.” She sagged for a second, but they were special waffles, and she rallied. “Christmas Gingerbread Waffles!”

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After Danny had had to chastise Grace several times to slow down her pace of eating, Kono proposed that there was nothing stopping them from moving breakfast to the television room, especially on Christmas morning.

So, en mass, they carried plates of waffles, jams and syrups, napkins with knives and forks, cups and pot of coffee to the room. Toast staggered downstairs and slouched into the playroom without a word and dropped into the armchair in the corner. Out of the entire Ohana, Danny was the only one who was dressed for the day.

“Presents?” Grace bobbed from foot to foot.

“You can be Santa’s elf,” Danny said indulgently.

Kono joined Grace on the floor by the mound of presents tucked in and around the tree. Grace grabbed the nearest one -- a small, round box with a bow on top.

“It’s for Mamo,” Grace said turning over the gift tag.

“Put it aside,” Chin directed. “We’ll open Mamo’s presents when he comes by around eleven.”

The next glossy silver wrapped present was handed to Malia, followed by one going to Toast. Grace was promptly distracted by a Barbie-sized box with her name on it, leaving Kono to quickly root through the spilling pile and hand off presents to Steve, Chin, and Danny.

Chin had gifted Danny with a book on the history of the People of the Islands of Hawaii. Skimming through it, Danny kind of wondered why, and then was captured by a chapter on clothes throughout history.

“Daddy.” Grace hauled out a yard-long box from under the tree and dragged it bodily over to him.
“This one’s for you.”

“Wow.” Danny set the book aside, and accepted the present, flicking over the label to read. “To Danno, Merry Christmas, from Steve. Babe?”

Steve shrugged. “You need one.”

Intrigued, Danny ripped off the paper -- in complete contrast to Steve’s observed careful picking of tape off paper.

“Tripod?” And Steve was totally right, he needed a tripod. It was a generous present. Part of him had thought that Steve might have given him a new camera and he didn’t know how he could have accepted that. But a tripod was perfect, not too expensive, but a well-thought through present. “Thank you.”

“Mamo helped,” Steve offered, unasked. “I think he wants his portable workbench back.”

Danny laughed, because great minds definitely thought alike.

“This is from Daddy, Uncle Steve.” Grace shuffled on her knees across to Steve balancing the gift wrapped yoga mat in her arms. “My name’s on the gift tag too. I don’t know what it is, though.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Once again Steve slowly unravelled the present, so that giftwrap could be added to the folded sheet on the cushion beside him for re-use.

“Come on,” Grace piped. “I want to see.”

“Grace,” Danny said lightly.

Steve had put his ITE aids in, so he flashed a grin, and started even more slowly teasing off the scotch tape.

“Doofus,” Danny said fondly.

“I love it,” Kono yelled from the rug in front of the television. She had added the charms from both Danny and Steve to her bracelet on her wrist, and was jangling it back and forth.

“Oh, excellent,” Steve said, as he finally figured out what he was holding. “I definitely need one of these. Hemp?”

“There’s a card as well,” Danny mentioned.

“Oh.” Steve flicked open the envelope, running his bent little finger under the seal. He pulled out the folded piece of paper. “Camera lessons. Ten lessons with professional photographer par extraordinaire Daniel Williams. Heh.”

Danny grinned back at that pleased expression.

“You like?” he asked.

“I like,” Steve replied. “So does this mean that you’re thinking of staying on at Seolh?”

Silence fell in the wake of the Emperor’s question. Grace gasped and pressed her hands over her mouth.
“I…” Danny looked at the crew around him. “I do. I do want to. You know that all ready. But weren’t we waiting until the New Year?”

Chin pushed off the sofa, standing tall. “I hereby call an Extraordinary General Meeting of the residents of the Seolh Co-operative.”

“Hang on a sec.” Toast pulled out his iPhone and started tapping. “Laka? Merry Christmas to you, Sweetie. Can you put your Grandfather on?”

“Hello?” Mamo’s voice came from Toast’s phone tentatively. “Hello?”

“Hi, Mamo.” Toast angled his phone so that everyone could see the screen. Mamo’s face filled the screen, nose suddenly bulbous.

“Oh, that’s clever,” Mamo said. “I thought this was a computer, not a camera. Hey, they’re moving. Stevie? Hello? Mele kalikimaka!”

“Mele kalikimaka,” everyone at Seolh chimed back at him.

“Laka, come see.” Mamo and the screen image swooped around the Kahike home. “I can see everyone at the House. It’s like a video camera.”

“I know, Granda,” Laka said.

“Toast helped me buy a tablet computer for Laka; it’s to help her with schoolwork,” Mamo said off screen.

“Mamo,” Chin said clearly. “We’re calling an Extraordinary General Meeting.”

“What?” Mamo said.

“Granda, sit down.” There were sounds of shuffling as Laka got her grandfather sitting. She evidently held her new tablet before him, since he was sitting well back on a plush armchair rather than letting everyone see right up his nose. “Think of it like television or like Star Trek.”

“Hi, Mamo.” Chin waved. Mamo waved back. “We’re calling an Extraordinary General Meeting. Danny’s told us he would like to become a new resident of Seolh. It’s time to vote.”


Chin actually had to bite his bottom lip, if only for a second. He scanned the members of Seolh dotted around the playroom. Grace now had her fingers stuffed in her mouth and was quivering.

“All those in favour of Danny Williams becoming a new resident of Seolh, please raise your hands.”

Immediately, the show of hands were all in favour. Overcome, Grace’s hand shot in the air and she waved it frantically.

“Well, I think that is a landslide vote in your favour,” Steve laconically, as he held his hand up, index finger extended heavenwards. If he had been a Cheshire cat his tail would have been swishing ever so satisfactorily.

“This is the best Christmas present, ever,” Grace declaimed.

“How are we supposed to beat this?” Toast asked, still holding his phone high. “The plush seal that I got Steve is going to pale in comparison.”
“A seal?” Steve asked.

“I know--” Toast nodded sagely, “--we should have champagne.”

“It’s not even ten o’clock in the morning,” Kono protested.

“I think that it’s a good idea.” Chin sailed out of the room.

“Well, I will see you all in a couple of hours. Congratulations, Danny,” Mamo said. “Over and out?”

“Oh, Granda,” Laka said fondly, as the screen winked off.

“More presents,” Kono said, rooting under the tree. She handed over an envelope to Grace. “That’s for Steve.”

Grace scrambled over, practically throwing the envelope at Steve before returning to grab the next present.

“Grace, calm,” Danny chided.

Grace came back over to Steve with a parcel that was so obviously a wrapped seal that everyone started laughing.

~*~

“So let’s look at your loot.” Danny pawed through Steve’s pile on the sofa cushion. “Gotta love Toast’s present.”

Presents had been distributed, opened and ogled. Cool waffles had been eaten. The extended family of Seolh was about to descend on the House for the Christmas lu’au, so there had been a general move in the direction of bathrooms to get ready.

Steve, however, seemed content to sit on the sofa in his short robe and absently pat the plush grey seal on his lap. “Yeah, I’m not entirely sure what he was thinking. Toast said he’s called Bob.”

“He looks like a Bob.”

Steve eyed him. “Bob the Seal?”

“You could call him Reginald.”

“I’ll stick with Bob.”

“So what else did you get?” He picked up a certificate from Castle’s Tattoo Parlour. “A tattoo? Who is this from?”

“Kono’s idea, but she and Chin contributed.”

“Where?” Danny blurted, before he remembered that that was a personal question. So he asked again, “Where?”

Steve tapped his left side, right over the surgical incision.

“Can you do that? I mean, isn’t the skin--” Danny pondered and opted for the diplomatic, “--not flat?”
“It will be easily another six months if not a year before I can use this,” Steve said nonchalantly. “And yes, scarred tissue tattoos differently than regular skin. But Castle’s the best on the Island.”

“Why do you want to tattoo it? Won’t it hurt?”

Steve plucked the certificate from Danny’s loose hold. “It’s about owning my own skin, Danny. I’ve got time to think about the design.”

Danny really wanted to ask about the meanings behind the tattoos on his shoulders.

“What did Grace get you?” Steve asked. “I was distracted by Malia squealing and jumping on Chin’s lap and kissing him senseless.”

“Yeah. I think that she liked the pearl necklace.” Danny laughed. “Grace got me a new tie. A gold and bronze swirly tie to add to my collection.”

Steve automatically turned to look at Danny’s haphazard pile on the floor by his armchair. The tie had pride of place on the top of the pile.

“Tie collection?”

“I’ll have you know, I usually dress like a professional. It’s important when working with clients. My tie collection was in my apartment.”

“If only I’d known,” Steve said with mock gravitas. “I’d have gotten you one.”

“Goof. I like the tripod. Hey, I can use it today. Yes.” Danny abandoned the sofa. He should get his and Grace’s presents upstairs before the House was invaded, and he needed to put his new tripod together. It was going to take two or three trips to move the loot.

As he carried the first armload out of the sitting room, he stopped, taking in the still-loafing Steve.

“Come on, Babe.” He stopped, canting his head to the side. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” Steve nodded his head decisively. “Just thinking.” He corralled his own armload and followed Danny out the room.

~*~

There were more presents to be had. Mamo surprised Grace with a tiny board suitable for her, balanced with strict instructions that she could only use it if Kono or Steve was with her.

Danny had known Mamo’s plans, and he was very pleased that Mamo had requested both a pinky swear and a sincere cross-of-the-heart before releasing the board into Grace’s hands. The board was also staying at Seolh -- since he was now a new resident! -- and thus under his lock and key.

“That’s a very satisfied smile,” Chin observed.

“It’s Christmas,” Danny said, filled with bonhomie.

“That it is.” Chin settled back on his heels, viewing the party. “You weren’t bothered by the Extraordinary General Meeting were you?”

Danny turned and contemplated the man. Chin didn’t appear unsure, but the question surprised Danny.
“No.” Danny scratched his chin. “I mean, yeah, I’ve had reservations, mainly about Grace. The totally insane month that I’ve had here; is it safe for Grace? Rachel and her machinations stopping me seeing Grace. But Steve’s solved that. We, Steve and me, re-organised the appointment with his lawyers for the New Year, we’re going to see if I can contest the current arrangement.”

“Good,” Chin said simply.

Danny kept scrutinising him; because when Chin actually had something on his mind he had a weight about him. Currently, it was a little like viewing the Titan, Atlas. Chin, however, was watching something else.

“Oh,” Chin brightened. “Time to break open the imu.”

Al’u and his cousin Theo, with Koa Keawe, were approaching the imu with spades, ready to unearth the pig from the underground oven.

“Hmm?” Danny mused, thinking on digging up a roasted-steamed-burnt pig carcass from a pit. A headless, eviscerated pig, cut opened showing ribs and….

Had Steve been around when the pig had been carried out of the House? He definitely hadn’t been present when the body bag had been delivered. “Excuse me, Chin.”

Danny scanned the family members. Steve was talking with Mrs. Keawe, bent over so that she could check out the cut in his hairline, as she clucked disapprovingly.

“Hey?” Danny barrelled over. He didn’t have a clue what he was going to say when he got there.

“Hey?” Steve returned, forehead crinkling.

“Hi, Mrs. K. Melly thingymabob.”

She laughed and said, “Mele kalikimaka.”

“Yeah, the big goof cut his head.” Danny turned to Steve. “Has anyone checked that recently?”

“What?”


“I?” Steve managed as he was dragged along by the force of Danny’s will. Halfway across the grass he began to baulk.

“Humour me, Steve,” Danny cajoled. “Humour me.”

“Okay,” Steve drawled through all the vowels.

Danny got him into the kitchen and seated at the kitchen table.

“I’ll just go and get the first aid kit,” Danny said, and ran to get the kit from the downstairs bathroom.

Steve was still sitting, fingers drumming on his knees when Danny trotted back into the room.

“Do you want to peel off the band aid?” Danny asked.

Watching him a little warily, Steve teased off the dressing. The bare, shaved skin around the wound
made it more of an insult. Danny leaned in close. It was red and little beads of congealed blood dotted along the slice. The doctor had put in tiny deft, black stitches. Hopefully, it wouldn’t scar.

A cheer erupted from outside, no doubt as the hog was finally unearthed from the pit in all its glory. Danny darted a glance at the door.

“Ah.” Steve smiled a sweet smile of realisation. “You wanted to get me away from the imu.”

Danny started to back off a fraction, but Steve’s large hand came up and settled on his hip -- stopping him dead.

“I…” Danny began. “It kinda looked really creepy when it arrived, and I didn’t want you to be reminded, blindsided by…” Words failed him, and he could only set his own hand over Steve’s vulnerable ribs.

Sitting, Steve stared up at him. “Thank you,” he said sincerely.

“You’re welcome,” Danny blurted. “I didn’t want to remind you, though. So I sort of failed there.”


Danny stopped burbling.

“You’re never going to do this because you think I’m fragile,” Steve observed. “I might be damaged, but I’m not fragile. So I’m pretty sure you’re never going to do this, unless I do it first.”

“What?”

Steve’s other hand came up, sliding around Danny’s jaw to cup the back of his head and draw him down. Their noses bumped, and Steve smiled against Danny’s mouth as he tilted his head to the side. Danny leaned in and matched lips to lips in a perfect kiss.

~*~

The end

End Notes

Steve was injured during an undisclosed mission in Afghanistan. Whilst this incident is not *graphically* discussed or illustrated in the majority of text, it is often alluded to and may be upsetting. Steve is still recovering from the attack and is permanently deaf.

There are incidences, however, of gory, graphic imagery pertaining to vicious attacks in section 18 and, especially, 43.

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