Echoes of a Violin

by Silbrith

Summary

Case: Neal plans to take advantage of a trip to Europe with Peter to retrieve a painting, but the cybercriminal Azathoth has something else in mind. H/C: near drowning, injury, angst. Travel: Paris, London. Fluff: speakeasy party, backstage at the Doctor Who set. May - June 2005. Set within the Caffrey Conversation AU.
Riverside Speakeasy

Notes: Echoes of a Violin takes place after the events in Raphael's Dragon. Although this story is part of the Caffrey Conversation series, it can stand on its own.

In the pre-series Caffrey Conversation AU created by Penna Nomen, Peter recruited Neal in 2003 when he was 24. In exchange for a confession, he was given immunity for past crimes and started working for the FBI as a consultant. In the fall of 2004 he entered Columbia University's graduate program in art as a part-time student. In the spring of 2005 Peter and Neal were appointed to the Interpol art crimes task force. The work on the new task force is part time and places additional emphasis on art crimes for the White Collar team. Readers new to this AU may wish to refer to the notes at the end of this chapter for additional background information.

New York City. Thursday, May 19, 2005

"To Paris!" Mozzie clinked glasses with Neal. "In eleven days we'll be drinking champagne on the Champs-Élysées."

Neal gazed out at the bustling Manhattan street scene just beyond the sidewalk cafe where they were having lunch. Soon it would be replaced by the sights and sounds of Paris. He smiled as he returned the toast. "Our first time to work in the City of Lights together. When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning. I will have finished the job with Gordon Taylor by the time you arrive on the thirtieth. It's quite a coup to have your trip to London financed by Interpol."

"Our new Interpol boss, John Hobhouse, couldn't have picked a better time for the initial meeting of the art crimes task force. Peter and I fly to London next Monday. The cost of traveling to Paris afterward is negligible."

"Peter, of course, believes you're going to Paris for a romantic vacation with your girlfriend Fiona."

"And he's correct," Neal insisted. "Retrieving the Braque painting is simply an extracurricular activity."

"Right." Mozzie viewed him appraisingly. "I assume White Collar continues to believe that Adler's interested in the painting because it contains a clue to a missing hoard of art plundered by the Nazis?"

Neal nodded. He took another bite of his chicken Caesar salad. By now his pangs of conscience at not telling Peter what he knew had been buried so deep, they barely caused a ripple.

Back in February when Neal had been alerted that an extravagant sum of money was being offered for the Violin and Candlestick, the correct course hadn't been so clear. At first he told himself that Peter might have understood the circumstances. Neal and Klaus Mansfeld had stolen it years ago. At the time Neal thought it was a copy and only later discovered it was an original masterpiece.

But that was all water under the bridge.

Peter had as much as told him that any unreported thefts Neal had committed abroad before joining White Collar needed to stay buried, particularly since he was now a member of the Interpol art crimes task force. But how could Neal ignore a painting which was so desired by Adler? That
painting could contain the key to recover many of the most famous missing masterpieces from World War II, perhaps even Raphael's *Portrait of a Young Man*.

No, this was the only option that made sense. If the painting were still where they'd left it, Neal would retrieve it, solve the mystery, and then slip the painting in with the other masterpieces to once again be admired by the world.

Mozzie brushed the ciabatta crumbs off his lap. "Peter knows that you intend to research the paintings on the shipping manifest while you're in Paris, right?"

"Correct. He just doesn't know you'll be helping me. Not that it would necessarily be a problem, but . . ." Neal shrugged.

"Discretion will be our motto," Mozzie supplied, nodding with approval. "How about your cousin Henry? Will he also be in Paris?"

"Possibly. He's going to Germany to look into the background of Adler's father, Wilhelm. He immigrated to the States shortly after World War II, but we don't know what he did during the war. Henry's working with Jones on the project."

"Has Jones persuaded Henry that Adler believes there's a missing U-boat somewhere on the ocean floor filled with Nazi-looted art?"

"That seems the most likely, not just to Henry but to the rest of the team as well. Wilhelm Adler worked in the submarine construction industry in the States. His son is suspected of owning a marine salvage company, so it's a logical theory." Neal glanced at his watch. "It's time for me to head back. Are you coming early tonight?"

He nodded. "I should arrive around five. I promised June I'd help with the transformation. I shall act as co-host for the evening."

"I'm glad classes are over so I can join you. This is one event I wouldn't want to miss."

"It will be a night to remember. Did Diana invite the wetsuit?"

"She did, and don't forget your promise. No more wetsuit comments. After all his work on the Lovecraft blog, surely he's earned it."

He sniffed. "Your point is not without merit, and Diana made a provocative overture on his behalf. A détente could be in order, as long as he doesn't break the truce." Mozzie nodded to the waiter for the check. Neal reached into his wallet for his credit card, but Mozzie dismissed his offer to pay with a wave of his hand. "I'll put this on my tab for Gordon. I'll call it a recruitment effort on his behalf."

Neal snorted. "I've left my old ways behind. You know I'm not in the market for a new job."

"What once was old may once again seem new," Mozzie noted with a shrug. "Gordon asks about you every time I work for him. Keep your options open, mon frère. You never know when the wind will change and you'll need to adjust your sails."

Neal didn't wish to argue with him but he was perfectly content with the direction he was heading.

**WCWCWCWCW**

Neal was still smiling when he returned to the office. No more coursework at Columbia till September. He'd have his evenings free for the next three months. For the moment he refused to
contemplate what his schedule would be like in the fall when he'd no longer be simply pursuing a
dual master's—as if that were simple—but instead would be a PhD candidate. No, he'd much rather
focus on celebrating the end of the school year by returning to Europe. His first time since he'd
started working for the FBI.

"You're in a good mood," Diana commented, looking up from her computer as he tossed his fedora
onto the bust of Socrates. "Is it because of London or Paris?"

"You know the answer to that. What can I bring you back? Perfume, a scarf?"

"Give me a day. I'll start my list." She paused and, scanning the room, beckoned him closer. "Did
you talk with Mozzie?" she asked in a low voice.

"I did and he's on board." Neal said, amused at her stealth maneuver. She must have been looking
for Jones.

"No wetsuit comments, I hope."

"You have no reason to be concerned, especially in view of what you offered in exchange."

She broke into a relieved smile. "Good. I need to redeem myself. Jones is still upset about the donut
scene I wrote in *The Locked Room*. I told him I'd make it up to him."

In the latest Arkham Files story, Jones had attributed seeing monsters to having inadvertently
ingested LSD-laced donuts. His White Collar counterpart had not been amused by what Neal
thought was, objectively speaking, one of the highlights of the story. Jones's girlfriend Helen had not
helped the situation when she gave him a donut maker for his birthday.

Diana turned to check the elevator bank. "Jones has been reminding me that he'll be overseeing the
team while you and Peter are in Europe. There have been vague references to file duty, extended van
shifts . . ."

"You can count on me," Neal assured her.

"Neal, you got a minute?"

He turned around to see Peter standing on the balcony, giving him the double finger-point. Neal
jogged up the stairs. "How may I assist?"

Peter smiled. "What makes you think I need help? Maybe I'm going to assist you."

They went into his office, and Peter waved him to a seat. "How so?" Neal asked curiously.

"Would you like to steal a painting?"

Neal deliberately narrowed his eyes. "Is this a trick question?"

"I heard from John Hobhouse," Peter explained with a chuckle. "He'd like us to make an additional
presentation at the meeting."

"I thought our time would be filled up with discussions on the cybercriminal Azathoth and the
countermeasures we've employed."

"No longer. He also wants us to talk about a hypothetical situation where an art thief cases out a
museum. What weaknesses he looks for, how he selects his target, how he'd formulate his plan.
Hobhouse seems to think we have particular expertise in the area." Peter stroked his chin. "I wonder
which one of us should take the lead on that."

"I could share a pointer or two."

"John recognizes this is last minute. Will you have enough time?"

"To take Interpol into the mind of a thief? It's too intriguing to pass up." Neal paused. This presented the perfect excuse to work out an exchange. "But you're right, I'll have to work on this over the weekend. Long hours. Probably burn the midnight oil. I know you'll want to express your appreciation."

"What do you have in mind?" Peter asked warily.

"That you let me switch our reservations to another hotel."

"Why do we want to do that? We're booked in a perfectly adequate hotel."

Neal frowned disapprovingly. "It's El's first trip to London. Surely you want to give her something more memorable than the traveling salesman's special Hobhouse had mentioned? In any case, he didn't say we had to stay there. He simply mentioned it was close."

"El arrives on Friday. We could wait till then to switch."

"If I can obtain better lodgings at the same price, will you agree to move?"

"It has to be as convenient," he warned.

"Guaranteed. And then when I take off for France and leave you two lovebirds to enjoy London over the Memorial Day Weekend, I won't have to feel guilty about you staying in a fleabag relic."

Peter scratched the side of his neck, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "About France . . ."

"Oh no," Neal said, making the X-sign with his hands. "Don't say 'about France.' I made the request long ago. Fiona and I've already made our plans. You said I could have the week off."

"But you may think this is even better," he interjected hurriedly. "Wouldn't you like to save some of your vacation days? You don't get that many. It will be almost like a vacation and you'll have additional time to spend later."

Neal eyed him suspiciously. "What are you proposing?"

"It's not me. It's John. The French member of the task force, Marcel Jauffret, asked if we'd be available to take our dog and pony show to Paris. He's held preliminary talks to obtain approval for the measures we've enacted, but he's encountered resistance. It's the usual problem of tight budgets. An additional complication is that Azathoth hasn't struck a French museum yet. It's only a matter of time till he does, but the powers that be feel no sense of urgency."

"They'd rather wait till Azathoth strikes the Louvre?" asked Neal incredulously.

"The French aren't alone in this. John hopes the presentations we make will give the other task force members the tools to win approval for implementing our recommendations in their regions. Marcel's asked for us to allocate two days. El and I would stay in London over the Memorial weekend as we'd originally planned. When she flies home on Monday afternoon, I'd fly to Paris. We'd have a few meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday. You'd still have your evenings free. I'd fly back Thursday morning and you'd have the rest of the week to yourselves. You'd mentioned Fiona will be
working during the day . . ." Peter's words trailed off but he pulled out his final trick. He adopted a
soulful look which was a dead ringer for Satchmo's mournful gaze. How could Neal say no to
Satchmo?

"Peter, I'm surprised—no, that's not right—shocked and appalled you'd go along with this."

"That's a little harsh," Peter protested, looking flustered.

Neal fixed him with a stern glare for a few seconds. "Do you actually plan to put El on the plane to
return to New York while you head on to Paris? I hope you haven't informed her yet. I may have just
saved your marriage."

Peter broke into a relieved smile. "You don't mind, then?"

"Of course not. But you can't give me any arguments about the hotel. I only stay in one place in
Paris. It's a tradition going back for years. Trust me, El will love it."

"But aren't you and Fiona . . .?" He reddened, and tried again. "I thought you'd be staying with
Fiona in her apartment."

"And I will, but we decided to treat the first few days as a vacation for both of us. I already have
reservations made."

"You won't mind us being in the same hotel?"

"Not at all. I'll make sure the rooms are far apart, so we won't overhear anything."

"Neal!"

"Peter! It's Paris."

"But will my bank account be able to afford it?"

"Need I remind you this is a business expense? Aren't the French picking up the tab?"

Peter shrugged. "Them or Interpol, but it will only be within established amounts."

"You'll be able to afford it. And when you consider you'll have my expert guide services tossed in
for free, it's the ultimate bargain."

"I'll call El after our talk."

"Good idea. She may need to buy larger suitcases for all the shopping she'll want to do."

"Another benefit of this is that we'll be able to discuss the Adler case with Marcel."

Neal nodded. "Henry's coming by at three to meet with Jones and me about it. Do you want to join
us?"

"What's on your agenda?"

"What else? Nazis and art."

"You know, sometimes I feel like we're in an Indiana Jones movie rather than working at the FBI."

"And that's a complaint?"
He smiled. "No, I don't think it is." As Neal rose to leave, Peter asked, "Six o'clock tonight, right?"

"That's what Diana requested. She wants ample time."

"That shouldn't be a problem. I took the train this morning. El will drive in. Tricia's riding with us. Can we give you a lift?"

"Thanks but I'm taking off early to help June prepare."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Peter smiled as he watched Neal jog down the stairs. The scamp. Making him stew over Paris. Plainly, Neal was already in school's-out-for-summer mode. What would it be like being in London with him? Would he be so buzzed, he'd float off in space? Hobhouse's request for Neal to think like an art thief would only serve to add more helium for his liftoff. Peter made a mental note to verify his presentation wasn't too flighty.

Peter had planned to ask El, but Neal was enjoying teasing him so much, he didn't mention it. When he called her about it, she joined Neal floating in space. The three of them in Paris. Peter was feeling a little of that liftoff as well.

Picking up a notepad, he headed for a meeting with Hughes. Reese looked all business as Peter took a seat opposite him. The levity of the past few minutes vanished at the door.

"I've been on the phone with the assistant director this morning," he said. "Why is it that at a time when I'm older than many of my colleagues, I feel like they're the ones who are the dinosaurs?" He grunted as he glanced down at a sheet of paper in front of him, making Peter uneasy for what was to come. "I was called on the carpet like I was a junior employee Caffrey's age."

"Was it our budget request? Do you want me to rework it?"

"That wasn't the topic this morning, although there have also been issues with it. The review committee has questioned the equipment requests, particularly the ones for authentication equipment Caffrey slipped in." 

"They were all justified," Peter noted. "I'd worked with him to keep the requests to a minimum, and all the equipment can be used for other purposes."

"I'm aware of that. With you and Caffrey serving on the Interpol art crimes task force, I was curious to see how the Bureau would treat the requests. Apparently not that much has changed. Kramer insists on reviewing any expenditures related to art crimes and as you know he has powerful friends in D.C. His argument is that since you'll be working part time on the task force, your team will have even less time to work on art crimes in the States. Kramer's demanding his own department be expanded at our expense."

"So our successes of the past year don't count for much?"

"Apparently not. Kramer notes that most of them were made before your Interpol appointment. It's a clever tactic. He praises your record while claiming, in effect, the world needs you. His unit should assist your valuable work by handling the U.S. end of art crimes."

Peter groaned. His former mentor had increasingly become a problem over the past year. Peter had avoided mentioning Kramer's obstreperousness to Neal, but he was too astute not to know the source of the roadblocks. It was impossible to know how much of Kramer's attitude was because of Neal. Before his recruitment, White Collar had not worked on as high a percentage of art crimes. Many of
the cases last year had been brought to the FBI's attention through Neal's connections. But Kramer made no secret of his concern that Neal would revert to his former life. It was as if he wanted to force Neal to explore other career paths.

"But the budget's not the reason I called you in." Hughes hesitated and scowled.

*What was worse than the budget?* Peter waited uneasily to hear what had his boss so concerned.

"The Finance Division is raising flags about our use of Aidan Phillips for the anti-malware program. They filed a protest, claiming we violated standard procurement procedures."

Peter couldn't believe what he was hearing. "We'd already obtained clearance to bypass the normal workflow. Why are they making it an issue out of it now?"

"Lord knows. When I submitted the request to use Phillips's company, the assistant director had given it his approval. By using the company of Caffrey's friend, a small group of developers, we were able to maintain a low profile and increase the odds of staying off Azathoth's radar. Now some paper-pushers are bent out of shape because of the secrecy with which it was done. They're not privy to the details because of the confidentiality and they're raising a stink about it."

"Do they question the speed with which the review process was conducted?"

"That and our not seeking competitive bids. We knew we weren't following the standard procurement protocol, and it's biting us now."

"It was thanks to Aidan's software we were able to thwart a heist at the Met."

"I know that. The problem is they don't. If we didn't suspect an informant within the organization, this wouldn't have been a problem. But we're faced with the reality that someone within the FBI is in league with the criminal organization Ydrus and probably Azathoth as well. Because of that, we kept the nature of Aidan's project secret. And that's not the only issue we're confronting. The assistant director's received complaints about our use of Winston-Winslow." Hughes crossed his arms on his desk and leaned forward. "And before you blow up on me, let me add I'm as unhappy about this as you are."

"For years the Bureau's attempted to develop better relations with Win-Win, widely acknowledging them to be the best private investigative firm in the States and even admitting their superiority in certain areas." Peter could taste the bitterness in his voice. "Now, thanks to Neal's cousin Henry, we've built a robust partnership. And they're upset?"

Hughes raised a cautionary hand. "Henry's role is at the heart of the issue. They claim it verges on nepotism." He lowered his voice. "They accused you of being biased."

"Because of my family connections?"

He nodded. "When your brother married Henry's mother, it complicated matters. Henry's in line to be the next CEO of Win-Win. The Bureau knows that. The assistant director has heard whispers that your allegiance may be wavering."

"Where are these so-called whispers coming from?"

"He's attempting to track down the source." Hughes's jaw worked for a moment before he continued. "Step back for a moment. Consider how a bureaucrat in D.C. who doesn't know all the details might view it. You're an outstanding team leader with an excellent track record. You match the profile of someone who would be highly sought after by Winston-Winslow. Their former CEO, Graham
Winslow, is famous for his aggressive recruitment tactics. When he was running the company, he managed to steal away some of the Bureau's best employees. You could make far more money with Win-Win than you could with us. You're young, highly motivated. You must be ambitious."

"I also have no intention of leaving the FBI. You know that."

"I know that, but not everyone else does." Hughes sat back in his chair. "Look, I'll deal with the current issues and get them ironed out. Our partnerships are fully justified, but what I've learned reveals that we have enemies within the Bureau. You need to be careful to conduct yourself strictly according to established protocols." He paused and took a breath. "And that is particularly true for your consultant."

"I recognize that some at the Bureau have been opposed to Neal from the beginning, and even with all the successes we've had over the past year and a half, there's still opposition."

"We've discussed this before, and I repeat the need to be cognizant. It's because of my high regard for both you and Caffrey that I'm being so frank."

Hughes was giving him a lot to chew on. But as to how Peter was going to rein in his exuberant consultant who was already giddy at the thought of being in London and Paris for the next two weeks, he didn't have any helpful suggestions. Peter decided to table that difficult discussion till the next day. He didn't want to cast a shadow on the party.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

If we're in the middle of an Indiana Jones movie, it's obvious who should play Indy. After all, who wears a fedora to the office?

But as Neal glanced around the conference room table at Peter, Jones and Henry, he knew he wouldn't go unchallenged. Peter would growl over relinquishing the leadership role. And Jones? Base case, he had an unfair name advantage. He was probably already shopping for a bullwhip.

Jones was the one who first devised the U-boat theory. Ever since he found out that Adler's father had worked on U-boats during World War II and Adler was suspected of owning a marine salvage company through a shell corporation, he'd pushed the idea of a sunken sub filled with Nazi plunder. Since Jones was a gaming enthusiast, Neal had accused him on more than one occasion of letting his video game fantasies leak into his work. His claim was bolstered last month when Jones became addicted to Silent Hunter III, a U-boat strategy game.

But Jones now had rock-solid evidence to strengthen his case. Two months ago, Neal had discovered tantalizing documents in the safe of Karl Huber, a suspected member of Ydrus. He'd photographed the journal of Huber's father who was with the SS during World War II as well as a fragment of a shipping manifest. On the list were the names of some of the most valuable unrecovered paintings which had been plundered by the Nazis.

Vying with Peter, Jones, and Neal for the role of Indy would be Henry. Neal could outcon Jones, but Henry was sneaky. His cousin would stake a claim to star billing even if it meant a name change to do it.

Henry was working with them on the case since he was in charge of Win-Win's investigation into Vincent Adler. Henry's company had secured financial backing for a full-scale investigation from wealthy investors who had been bilked by Adler's Ponzi scheme.

"What we still don't know is if there's any connection between Adler and Huber," Jones said.
"We've combed through the journal and the data files on Huber's computer. There's no mention of Adler, either the father or the son. The only link we're sure of is that both Vincent Adler's father and Huber's father were German soldiers during World War II."

"What's the status of Huber?" Henry asked. "Has anything surfaced on him?"

Jones shook his head. "Not since he slipped off the grid in Greece. Interpol's still searching for him. His family's missing as well. We assume Ydrus provided them with new identities. His shipping company's currently managed by a new CEO who was appointed last month. There's been no more evidence of weapons smuggling since Huber's disappearance. The company itself appears to be clean. All the instances of smuggling were done by local operators who had been contracted by the company."

"We're continuing to monitor the Buenos Aires airport for any matches with Adler, Fowler, and Huber, but nothing's popped up," Henry added.

"How many airports have signed up for the beta of your facial recognition software?" Peter asked.

"Outside of Buenos Aires we're also in the international airports in Santiago, Quito, Mexico City, and Paris. We hope to soon add London to the list."

"I expect once Peter and I've made our presentations in London and Paris, you'll also have more of the museums signing up for your package," Neal said. "Have you decided if you'll stop by Paris?"

"It depends on how quickly I can wrap things up in Germany. I'd like to. There are vast archives of World War II records that exist only on paper. I'll be working at the Deutsche Dienststelle in Berlin for the bulk of the time." He stopped. "I saw that grin, Neal. I want you to know I've been making myself say that ten times a day in preparation. The Deutsche Dienststelle is the depository for war records on both German and non-German war personnel. Win-Win has a partnership with a German investigative firm who will work with me on it."

"Couldn't you have handled the request electronically?" Peter asked.

"I already tried. The files weren't found so we need to dig deeper. While there I'm also scheduled to speak with the German authorities about using our software in their airports."

"Travis and I've been researching that sheet of equations which was found in the journal," Jones said. "We've been in contact with the U-boat Archive in Cuxhaven." Travis Miller was White Collar's tech expert. He'd considered those equations to be a personal challenge. After he'd identified them to be fractal formulas, speculation had centered around the formulas being somehow connected to a fractal antenna. "So far we've uncovered nothing about the use of fractal antennas on U-boats," Jones added glumly.

"Is that the thud of a cherished theory I hear?" Neal asked.

"Maybe the warning sirens," Jones admitted. "Any use would have been experimental in nature." He droned on about fractal antennas and their applications, but it was above Neal's paygrade to understand and Henry's too, judging by his glassy-eyed expression.

At the end of the meeting, Jones grabbed Neal on his way out. "Mozzie didn't pull a switch at the last minute, did he?"

"Of course not. Don't you trust him at all? On second thought, forget I asked. In any case why are you worried? El, Tricia, and Peter haven't prepared either."
"Are you sure?" Jones glanced over at Peter who was sorting through his papers and narrowed his eyes. "They could be lulling me into a false sense of security."

"What are you two conspiring about?" Henry asked.

"Dark things are afoot tonight in Gotham," Jones warned in sepulchral tones.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCW

Peter pulled up in front of June's mansion. Had Neal kept cars away? That there was a parking space right in front was suspiciously convenient. They were probably the last ones to arrive. Tricia had been held up by a late phone call. White Collar kept her so busy with Azathoth and Adler, Peter sometimes had to remind himself she didn't work exclusively on their cases. Her skills as a profiler were in demand by all the crime units.

The Arkham Round Table, composed of Diana, June, Tricia, El, and Mozzie, had been formed to strategize plots for Diana's Lovecraft fan fiction with the goal of influencing Azathoth's behavior. The cybercriminal excelled in psychological warfare and they were responding in kind.

After the death of a Czech detective last winter, no one underestimated the seriousness of the threat. Over the past month Azathoth's taunts against Neal and Peter had become more frequent. Everyone was uneasy that he was preparing to launch a new attack. Peter hoped the party would allow everyone to take a breather.

Both Tricia and El had dressed in styles reminiscent of the 1970s—wide bellbottoms and tight sweaters. El wore large hoop earrings. Peter had retained his same suit, but Neal would tell him it hadn't changed much from the 1970s either. He'd dug in his closet for a wide paisley tie to wear. It had been a gift from El's mom shortly after their wedding. Peter had taken one look at the garish monstrosity and decided Tina was using it to test the depth of his love for her daughter. He'd proved it by wearing it out to dinner that same night. That was the only time it had been worn... until tonight.

"This was a wonderful idea," El said as they walked up the stairs. "June didn't mention a word about it in our meetings. I only learned about the party when we received the invitation."

"Neal told me that she and Mozzie concocted it over a game of Candy Land," Peter said. "The hardest part was finding an evening everyone was free. Mozzie for some reason wasn't available on any of the weekend nights. Neal was vague as to why and I don't think I want to know."

He rang the doorbell. After a moment it opened a crack. "Password?" a low gravelly voice muttered. Was that Neal? No one had mentioned anything about a password to Peter.

El pushed him aside and whispered, "Zoog."

Neal opened the door wide and let them in. "Welcome to the Arkham Speakeasy."

Neal had brushed his hair forward. It had the effect of making him look as young as the twenty-two year old Neal Carter of the Arkham Files. He wasn't wearing bellbottoms but had a dark button-down shirt on.

"Have the others already arrived?" Tricia asked.

He nodded. "Diana, Travis, and Jones came together. Now that you're here, the festivities can begin." As they walked into the living room, Peter heard the strains of Crosby, Stills and Nash coming over the speaker system.
The living room had been transformed. From somewhere—no doubt one of Mozzie’s hidden storage containers—June had found a treasure trove of lava lamps. The blobs of wax looked eerily appropriate for the creepy events in Arkham Files. The documentation paintings Neal had made of the night Azathoth kidnapped them in October were displayed on easels throughout the room.

Peter and Neal headed for the bar to get drinks. It had been decorated with wooden crates stenciled with "Arkham Ale," "Innesmouth Cabernet," and "Sharkey's Spirits." Jones, Travis, and Mozzie were sitting at a card table in the living room working on their laptops. Peter nodded in their direction. "I see détente has been achieved."

"They're playing Silent Hunter III. That's the U-boat game Jones is so obsessed with and now Mozzie as well. Diana and Travis acted as peacemakers in the negotiations and brokered a multiplayer game on a trial basis. As a peace offering, Jones provided Mozzie with the cheat codes to unlock the game's Easter eggs. Mozzie reciprocated by agreeing to no longer call Jones a wetsuit."

"Does Jones have a new nickname?"

"Mozzie wanted to call him Doughboy," Neal said in an undertone, "but I talked him out of it."

Peter reduced his laughter to a snort. "Is June still planning to serve donuts?"

Neal shook his head with a grin. "She was ready to, but Diana pleaded for a substitution. She's in enough hot water with Jones as it is."

While they were talking, Peter heard Diana ordering Mozzie to put away his laptop. It was astonishing to see how readily Mozzie listened to her. Of all the successes of the Arkham Round Table, a truce between those two had to be among the most remarkable. Would Jones also succeed in acquiring that easy familiarity? Although Peter was a firm believer in second chances, he'd categorized Mozzie as one of those incorrigible con men who could never give up the life. Perhaps there was hope, after all.

"Gather around, everyone," June said. "Make sure you have a glass of champagne." Neal acted as bartender and took drinks around.

June raised her glass. "We're here to celebrate the completion of Diana's second story, The Locked Room. She posted the final chapter this morning."

"At an ungodly hour while the rest of you were still asleep," Diana added. "I couldn't have managed without all your help on the Arkham Round Table, so here's to you." As everyone responded with cheers and toasts of their own, she retrieved a gift box from the bookcase behind her. "For those of you who don't attend the Round Table sessions, last week we cast a secret ballot to choose the most creative suggestion for The Locked Room. And the winner is . . ."

During the dramatic pause, June passed her a sealed envelope. Diana ripped it open and read from the card inside: "Tricia Wiese for having Sara confuse starlings with stardust in the lyrics of the Crosby, Stills, and Nash song 'Woodstock'!" She put down the card to join in the thunderous applause. "Step up to get your prize, Tricia!"

Tricia was much more of a ham than Peter had dreamed possible. Was this a secret side to Tricia? She hugged the package as she gushed, "I'd like to thank the Academy, my colleagues, and of course, my long-suffering family—"

"—Just open the box!" Mozzie shouted.

She tore open the giftwrap to reveal a framed photo of a starling.
"She's being very noble to act so thrilled," El murmured. "She told me starlings are considered a nuisance bird."

"She'll treasure it for the symbolism," Peter muttered back. "And those white dots on the bird do rather look like stars, or stardust." So far not too many members of the team had called Neal or him Starman, but it was only a matter of time.

"The misquoted lyrics were so popular with the fans, we decided to include them in more stories," Diana announced. "Tomorrow I'll add a whiteboard to the breakroom for suggestions for more muddled music. All suggestions are welcome. Just think, next time one of you may win the coveted prize."

While she was talking, Mozzie had strolled to the wet bar. Retrieving another package—this one much larger—he presented it with a flourish to Diana, adding that it was from all of them. El had told Peter about the gift, and this was one item Peter wished someone would give him.

The large box had been wrapped in sea life paper with an origami starfish on top. That must have been Neal's contribution. Diana, grinning with delight, started to open it then paused. Casting a suspicious look at Mozzie, she said, "There better not be a zoog inside."

"The Round Table members voted on it jointly," June advised. "I don't know if you find that reassuring."

"Not necessarily," she admitted. When Diana squealed with pleasure at the brass armillary sphere inside, Peter knew they'd chosen well. "Next time I'm stuck, I'll gaze into the center of the sphere to have my plot revealed," she said. "This should belong to all of us. I couldn't have written the stories without your help."

"And we have another announcement," Mozzie said. "Tonight we welcome into our fellowship a new member, Clinton Jones. I've taken him on as my apprentice since he's agreed to acknowledge my preeminence in all matters."

Peter was stunned as Jones not only appeared to accept his new status but was happy about it. Peter nudged Neal. "What gives?"

"Mozzie has agreed to tutor him in strategic planning via board games. He told me Jones displays promising potential. Remember how Jones used Battleship to plan our Lynx Mountain op in January? Mozzie gave him advance credit for that."

"What is Mozzie getting out of it?"

"Jones is rapidly becoming an expert on U-boats. Mozzie plans to draw on his knowledge. He figures his Navy background could also be useful."

"In honor of Diana having completed two stories and to welcome our newest member into the Round Table," June said, "Chef Emil has prepared an Arkham Files feast with some of the characters' favorite foods: meatloaf, lasagna, and halibut. For dessert we have Bourbon pecan pie, brownies, and a special dessert in honor of our two heroes: chocolate nightgaunt cake."

"Henry should be here," El said, sighing at the mention of the desserts. Neal's cousin was famous for his addiction to chocolate.

"Already taken care of," Neal assured her. "Emil is setting a box aside. I'll deliver it on the way to work."
"You've been very mysterious about the game we're playing," Tricia said. "Isn't it time to tell us?

June gestured to Mozzie. "Would you like to have the honor?"

"It will be my pleasure," he said with a nod of the head. "As most of you know, June and I are aficionados of board games. This year a new game came out. It must have been psychically inspired, or perhaps it was Azathoth working his machinations behind the scenes. The name of the game is **Arkham Horror**."

"It's set in the speakeasies of the Roaring Twenties," June continued. "A dark shadow looms over the city of Arkham. Peter, you'll be pleased to hear that the play is co-op. No lone wolves are allowed."

Mozzie clapped his hands. "And now let the festivities begin!"

"Had you heard anything about the game?" Peter asked Neal.

He shook his head. "Mozzie and June were acting very mysterious about it. All I knew was that it would be team-based and that June and Mozzie would lead the two teams. Peter, I see that look. What are you thinking?"

"That I'd like to know more about the publisher. I don't think Mozzie was serious when he mentioned Azathoth's machinations, but these days I don't take anything for granted. We'll talk about it tomorrow."

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The Riverside Speakeasy party had been a roaring success. When it broke up at midnight, Peter informed the team that he wouldn't be watching the clock the next morning to see when people arrived. Nevertheless, Peter arrived at his standard time and he wasn't surprised to see everyone else did too. His people were a dedicated lot.

The game turned out to be an excellent team-building exercise. Mozzie captained a team composed of his apprentice Jones, Tricia, Travis, and El. June had Peter, Neal, and Diana on her side. Mozzie's team won, although Peter was suspicious Mozzie had cheated. El claimed not, but since she didn't know the rules how would she know?

Now Peter's only concern was that Azathoth had cheated. He recognized that he'd become somewhat paranoid. Every time he heard of a new Lovecraft game, movie or TV plot, he wondered if Azathoth was involved. At the end of the evening, he'd asked Jones to see him when he arrived at work, and it wasn't long before Jones was sitting opposite him in his office.

"What's this about?" Jones asked.

"You're still blogging about Lovecraft. Had you heard anything about this game?"

He nodded. "Looked into Lovecraft games, both board and video, when we started our research. **Arkham Horror** was released in the early '90s as I recall. Won an award at the time. This is a revamped version of the original game. I could check with my gaming contacts to see if there was anything out of the ordinary with the production."

"Go ahead. And check out the game's backers. See if anything raises a red flag. It's probably nothing."

"It's difficult to see why Azathoth would have gotten involved with it, unless he simply wanted to
help promote Lovecraft."

Jones's words sparked an idea. "What if that were the case? We assume Azathoth has been interested in Lovecraft for a long time. He may have invested in the game before he became a cybercriminal. If that's true, it's conceivable he didn't conceal his identity."

Jones nodded. "I see where you're going. This could be the missing link which would enable us to identify him."

"Earlier this year we were able to identify the Dutchman. Isn't it time for us to do the same with Azathoth?"

Notes: Thanks for reading! For months, Azathoth has been preparing his traps for Neal and Peter's trip to Europe. He issues the opening salvo in next week's chapter: Young Man Among Roses. This story has nine chapters which I'll post weekly on Wednesday.

In this chapter there are several nods to The Locked Room, the story Diana just completed. If you're curious about them, I listed all the references with notes on our blog. Thanks to my awesome beta and co-conspirator Penna Nomen for discovering the game Arkham Horror. A new edition came out in 2005, the time of this story. In our latest works Penna and I have been exploring what happens when characters become authors. Penna wrote about the worlds created by authors in a fascinating post for the blog, called "Authors and Characters."

The Arkham Round Table is very much a reflection of the exchanges Penna and I have conducted over our stories. So many ideas in this chapter are a result of that partnership, it's impossible to list them all. To point out just a few, the accusations of nepotism and favoritism have their roots in Caffrey Disclosure, and the groundwork for the Adler mystery was laid in Caffrey Flashback. The trouble that Hughes encounters because normal procurement procedures weren't followed was based on Penna's knowledge of how the bidding process works. Lately our minds wandered off onto the topic of mangled music lyrics. Penna coined the phrase muddled lyrics to describe it. A warning: muddling music can be highly addictive. Anytime you'd like to add your own contributions, send them my way and I'll forward them to Diana for the White Collar white board. Diana writes under the user name Lomaria. She's posted a comment to this chapter concerning the hard bargain she had to strike with Mozzie.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
This week's pins include the armillary sphere, illustrations for the party, cast photos, music, and the Braque painting.

Background on the Caffrey Conversation AU for new readers: This series was created by Penna Nomen and begins with her story Caffrey Conversation. Our blog has a list and short summaries for all the stories in chronological order. The primary difference from canon in that Neal was never sent to prison and the characters are several years younger. The personalities of canon characters (Elizabeth, Mozzie, Diana, Jones, Hughes, June, and Sara) are the same. In canon, Neal's only relatives to be mentioned are his father and mother. In ours, his mother Meredith has a twin sister named Noelle who is a psychologist. Noelle married Peter's older brother Joe during the 2004 Christmas holidays. Henry Winslow is Noelle's son and nearly three years older than Neal. He works at a private investigation and security company named Winston-Winslow (usually referred to...
as Win-Win). Neal has one other cousin, Angela, who is the daughter of Noelle and Meredith’s deceased brother. Working with the White Collar team are two non-canon characters: Travis Miller, a technical expert, and Tricia Wiese, a profiler. Neal’s friends at Columbia include fellow grad students Richard and Aidan. Pins for the entire cast and locations are on our Caffrey Conversation Pinterest site.

Disclaimers: White Collar and its characters are not mine. Any depictions of real institutions are not necessarily true or accurate.
Young Man Among Roses


When Neal arrived at work on Friday morning, he only had one item on his agenda—prepare a plan to break into a museum and steal a painting. And this was at Peter's request. Sometimes he had to pinch himself to believe that working at the FBI could be so sweet.

He could have based the heist on one of his previous jobs, but he decided instead to pattern it after one of Klaus's classic heists. Normally Neal brainstormed an upcoming job with Mozzie, but his departure for Paris made that impossible. In any case, Mozzie had never worked with Klaus. Neal, on the other hand, had been given a two-year immersion course in the art of being the Leopard.

London had a vast array of museums to choose from, but Neal was particularly fond of the Tate. Klaus and he had cased it thoroughly as they discussed hypothetical thefts. It was where Neal had first grown to appreciate the Pre-Raphaelites. But Klaus especially admired Whistler. Let's steal a Whistler.

Neal set up his base of operations in his niche in the lab, a haven for fine art amidst the electronic gadgetry of the tech geeks. Travis sat next to him. Neal liked the juxtaposition—art wizard and tech wizard working side by side. Travis was used to Neal's unusual projects. Planning a heist wouldn't even raise an eyebrow.

He prepared a blown-up blueprint of the Tate and spread it out on his worktable. Thanks to his connections on the art crimes task force, obtaining a detailed floorplan was a cinch. Neal smiled. No master thief should be without the cachet he was acquiring.

Which work should he select? The Tate had so many tempting possibilities. He lingered over the Symphony in White No 2. Klaus had spoken at length about that. But Neal preferred the Nocturnes—enchanting moonlit scenes of the Thames. Yes, the Nocturne in Blue and Silver Chelsea. That would be his target. Neal set to work . . .

"What are you humming?"

"Hmm?" Neal turned around to look at Travis. "Sorry. I didn't even realize I was."

Travis chuckled. "Whatever it was you were really getting into it. You were making flourishes as if you were conducting while you schemed. I should have recorded you."

"Now you know why I prefer to plan heists alone at night."

Oops. He was still doing it. He couldn't get La Folia out of his mind. Understandable. It was one of Klaus's favorite pieces. Neal could hear Rachmaninov's variations in his head. Klaus liked to have it playing in the background during heist-planning. He believed that musical variations on a theme were analogous to all the variables which needed to be factored into a job. La Folia and the Huttenbrenner Variations of Schubert were his favorites. Mozzie also liked to strategize to classical music. What would Klaus and Mozzie have been like if they'd worked together? Dueling symphonies?

Peter entered the lab and approached Neal's workstation. "I thought I'd find you here. Planning your presentation for London?"

Neal nodded. "My target's a Whistler from the Tate. That should impress them."
"Here's a suggestion. How about the Victoria and Albert Museum instead?"

That was a surprise. Neal had expected the usual sarcasm about planning a heist, and instead Peter was playing along, even expanding on the idea. "As a team player, I'm happy to adjust. There's a lovely Turner at the V&A that I've been—"

"I already have the object selected—a Hilliard. You're familiar with him, I assume?"

"The Elizabethan miniaturist? Of course." An interesting selection and an unexpected one. He assumed Peter would have wanted something showier.

"Yesterday a Hilliard was stolen from the V&A. I gather it's one of their most valuable—Young Man Among Roses. Have you heard of it?"

*Out of all the pieces in the museum, they chose that? "Was anything else stolen?" he asked.*

Peter shook his head. "Clearly you're familiar with it."

"It's probably the most famous of all Hilliard's miniatures. Possibly of the Earl of Essex, a courtier at Elizabeth's court. It's a beautiful work but miniatures are rather obscure. Compared with all the treasures in the V&A . . ." Neal paused, shaken by the possible implication. How could he have known?

Peter didn't allow him to mull over possibilities, but requested Neal join him in his office. Once the door was closed, he wasted no time. "Take a seat and tell me why you looked so startled when you heard about it."

Simple request, but there wasn't a simple answer. Neal considered for a moment. "When you hear, I think you'll agree it verged on the spooky. There I was channeling Klaus to pull a heist—a hypothetical heist—at the Tate, and you waltz in talking about an object that Klaus had teased me about stealing. It hit eerily close to home. Was his ghost sending me a sign from beyond the grave?"

His attempt at levity was rebuffed by Peter's somber expression. "You're telling me this may be another message by Azathoth? A few weeks ago we discovered a treasure he'd hidden which appeared to contain a message about your past with Klaus."

Neal nodded. "The jeweled lion on the leash."

"You'd mentioned Klaus nicknamed you Lion Cub. Did he also connect you with this?"

"Yeah. When Klaus and I were in London we made many trips to the V&A—and no, I didn't steal anything—but we did discuss possible heists. One of them was for that miniature. Klaus said it was calling out to him. The man in the portrait reminded him of me. To my knowledge he never stole it, but it became a standard tease."

"Because you resembled the man in the miniature?"

He shrugged acknowledgment. "Klaus harped that I was too much a romantic, wearing my heart on a sleeve like the roses on the courtier's cape. Do you have an image of the miniature?"

Peter pulled it up on his monitor.

Neal pointed out the details. "The man is quite young. His mustache is just beginning to come in. The Earl of Essex was rumored to be Queen Elizabeth's lover. You see how he has his hand on his heart? He's wearing her colors, and the rose is a symbol of the Queen. The miniature is described as
representing the ideal Elizabethan romantic hero."

"That was before you'd met Kate," Peter commented.

"But not before hormones had kicked in."

He winced. "Ah yes."

"Does it look like Azathoth's malware was used for the break-in?"

"It's a distinct possibility. The alarms weren't set off. The display case was opened without the security sensors being tripped. You know that Hobhouse has been trying to persuade the London museums to sign up for Aidan's anti-malware."

"I'm surprised they haven't already done so. After we used it to successfully block an attack at the Met, you'd think they would have jumped on board."

"Tight budgets make everything an issue. Securing approval even for the best of purposes can be a lengthy procedure." Peter's words trailed off and he cleared his throat.

Neal eyed him curiously. "Something else on your mind?"

"Have you already switched our hotel reservations in London?"

"Not yet, but I contacted a friend who's a travel agent. She was able to secure us a great rate at the St. Ermins. We won't have to pay any more than at the place Hobhouse had mentioned. El will love it. Luxury hotel, and it's close to John's office, just as you requested. You enter through a tree-lined courtyard into a palace. You're close to the other palace—Buckingham Palace—and Westminster Abbey. The Tate's a short walk away. A fantastic breakfast you'll love. You can have eggs, bacon, and sausages."

Peter held up a hand to brake him just as Neal was getting warmed up. "It sounds wonderful, honestly, but we'll have to pass."

He hadn't even let Neal describe the nearby pubs. Peter knew how to knock the wind out of a guy's sails. "Why? I met all your criteria."

"I understand you got a great deal, but consider how it would look. If we stay in a place more luxurious than what the other members are using, questions may be raised. Are we calling in a favor?"

"You didn't say anything about this yesterday. Did something come up?"

He nodded. "Hughes talked with me. He's been taking heat over the contracts with Win-Win and Aidan's company that we fast-tracked. And before you say anything, I understand the reasoning was completely warranted. But Hughes warned me we're under extra scrutiny, and need to be mindful to follow procedures. That includes our work with Win-Win. I named Jones to coordinate our dealings with them last summer. Any negotiations with Henry's company should be conducted by him. Stick by the rules and we'll be fine."

Neal swallowed down the disappointment. Was this a replay of last summer when Hughes warned both Peter and him to avoid the appearance of favoritism? Neal would keep his venting to himself. But it was frustrating. He was playing by the rules, keeping it legit. Peter's words made him more than ever convinced he'd made the right decision not to inform him about the Braque painting. It would have placed Peter in an untenable position. "We're only counting Tuesday through Thursday
as work days. How about switching to St. Ermins on Friday? You'll be on vacation. No one can complain about that."

Peter hesitated. "El would be thrilled. Sure go ahead. That means you will have already left. I'm sorry you won't be able to stay there too."

"It's okay, but I warn you up front, I'm not switching my hotel in Paris. That was to be my vacation, paid with the prize money I won at the sci-fi convention."

"No, that's fine," Peter said quickly.

"Do you want to stay there too or choose somewhere else? It's your call." Neal sat back and folded his arms.

"I've already told El . . . Will you handle the reimbursement forms with Jauffret?"

"I'd already planned on it. Jauffret and I've exchanged emails. Would you like me to get something in writing on the reimbursement procedure?"

"That would be helpful."

"How about the plane reservations? Henry had given me some of his frequent flyer miles to upgrade to business class. He has more than he'll ever use in a lifetime. I was going to try for first class, but that's off the table. Should I leave us in the cattle car?"

Peter nodded. "Accepting frequent flyer miles is the equivalent of receiving a gift and opens us up to charges of making a sweetheart arrangement with Win-Win. It could damage prospects for future opportunities."

Flying economy class to Europe. Traveling salesman hotel. At least, the Bureau wasn't sabotaging his time in France, but still . . .

Peter eyed him unhappily. "You know that I don't like this either. The Interpol task force is a new program. Once the initial kinks are worked out, it will be easier on everyone."

"Right." Neal stood up. "Is there anything else?"

"No, that's it. Don't forget, Tricia's coming to meet with us this afternoon. We can fill her in on the miniature then."

Neal left Peter's office. He paused at the balcony to gaze down at the bullpen. Being a member of a team came at a cost. Mozzie had warned him about the bureaucratic restrictions he'd be subjected to. Working at the FBI suddenly didn't seem quite as sweet as it had at the beginning of the day.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Neal, let's assume you're right. Azathoth knows that Klaus teased you about the miniature. Why does he want to remind you?"

Tricia had come up to their floor in the afternoon for an informal meeting in Peter's office. It had originally been scheduled to review their current profile of the cybercriminal. Now they had an additional data point to factor in.

"To flaunt the miniature in my face?" Neal admitted reluctantly. "Demonstrate he's in the driver's seat? We believe Azathoth targeted Peter and me because of our roles in the op which resulted in
Klaus's death. He could be showing off his ability as a thief in an attempt to make me envious."

"And are you?" Peter asked.

"Envious, no. Frustrated, yes. Last month we prevented an attack at the Met, so he turns around and targets the V&A. I'd say the challenge is not aimed just at me but at all of us. He undoubtedly knows about the task force. To steal something on the eve of our first conference would be exactly the sort of grandstand move Azathoth would pull."

"We've speculated that Azathoth may be tightly connected with Ydrus," Peter said, "and possibly the driving force behind the organization."

"Has there been any progress made in uncovering the suspected FBI mole?" Tricia asked.

"Unfortunately not," Peter said. "Hughes has stiffened access restrictions, but we can't isolate our data fully from the Bureau's."

"Nor can you conceal your movements," she pointed out. "Ydrus quite possibly has other task force members under surveillance as well. From the little we know of their operations, they have many similarities to a spy ring. Have you been able to keep Aidan's anti-malware off grid?"

"So far, but Hughes is getting pressured for the tactics." Peter paused. "Neal and I intend to bring up Jacek and Marta Kolar as the lead candidates to be Azathoth. As Klaus's last protégés they would most likely be the ones to seek revenge, and Neal had already indicated the knowledge they have of his association with Klaus."

"If you bring up the Kolars, it won't be easy to keep Neal's name out of the discussion," she warned. "Do you plan to mention the personal nature of the threats?"

"Not the significance of insider knowledge. We're not sure how meaningful those are."

"Your kidnapping, the stalking, those events are not that different from what happened to the Czech detective who was murdered. The taunts Azathoth has made—the card showing Neal's corpse, the origami on the tree at the Museum of Natural History, the implication he was buying one of Neal's paintings, the use of the Leopard's business card—are acts of bravado."

"And as to the coded message he sent to Diana and the jeweled pendant he'd hidden, the fact that it was a leashed lion is too hypothetical to mention to the others," Neal added.

Tricia nodded. "I can see where Jacek might be taunting Neal that he's a tamed lion now. It's harder for me to believe there's a connection to the Hilliard. There are so many hypothetical possibilities, it would only muddy the waters at this point to bring them up."

"We need to restrict ourselves to what's known," Peter said. "That's plenty. Fact: Marta and Jacek Kolar worked for Klaus Mansfeld, a master art thief, and used the malware at the Met. Fact: Jacek has the technical expertise to write the malware. Fact: the glowing branch malware employed by Azathoth has only targeted museums. The link between Mansfeld and the Kolars we can and should discuss. We can also repeat the warnings to be alert to bizarre signals. The Czech detective received a playing card similar to the one I received. We may have received more threats simply because we've been better at thwarting heists, but that shouldn't imply others won't also be targeted." Peter turned to look at Neal pointedly. "You shouldn't fixate that this is a personal vendetta. There may be others who are being targeted. That's something we should discuss at the conference."

"Has there been any progress in tracking the Kolars?" Tricia asked.
"Not yet," Peter admitted. "In the museums and airports where Win-Win's facial recognition software is being used, their photos have been added to the database of targets, but of course, that's only a tiny sampling."

"And if they've changed their appearance, facial recognition software won't help much," she warned. "I keep thinking about that plastic surgeon, the one who owned the house where Azathoth held you prisoner. What if he works for Ydrus as well? He may have operated on the Kolars to disguise their appearance."

"The surgeon now lives in Salzburg and Hobhouse has been unable to obtain a search warrant from the Austrian authorities," Peter said. "Unless we can find additional evidence linking the surgeon to criminal activities, we can't access his records."

Legally, Neal had suggested breaking into the surgeon's office but that had been shot down. Now, with the additional scrutiny Peter was facing, he knew he dared not mention it again.

"Has Aidan been able to trace the signal Azathoth sent to activate the malware at the Met?" Tricia asked.

"He's been able to follow it through Budapest and into London," Peter said.

"Is that where the signal originated?" she asked.

"He doesn't know yet," Peter said. "He hopes to further refine the location. Now that more museums have installed the anti-malware, whenever Azathoth sends a signal the coordinates will become more precise."

"The voice we heard when we were kidnapped was British," Neal added. "We assumed it was to mislead us, but perhaps that was Azathoth speaking to us. It fits with the bravado he's displayed on other occasions."

"You've informed Hobhouse, I presume?"

Peter nodded. "But there's nothing he can act on. The museums in London are already in a heightened state of alert because of the theft."

Tricia rose to leave. "You'll have plenty to talk about with the task force. If you discover the theft of the miniature was committed with Azathoth's malware, I'd say the odds are good it was designed to be a warning shot. Azathoth may take advantage of your conference to commit an even more daring act."

After the meeting, Neal returned to his desk to clear the accumulated odds and ends of paperwork. This would be his last day at the White Collar office for two weeks. He put aside thoughts of Azathoth to savor the sound of that. No more coursework at Columbia till September. A week in London, followed by a week in Paris. He'd see Fiona again and retrieve the Braque painting. What would a microscopic analysis of the painting reveal? A secret map? Code to a location?

Diana approached, carrying the box he'd placed on her desk. "You wouldn't know anything about this origami which mysteriously appeared while I was in the file room?"

"Do you like it?"

Her smile was all the answer he needed. "You're joking, right? An origami squid? It's awesome."

"Thanks. It's to commemorate the story you finished."
"This baby's going home. I've been thinking about that milestones box you keep of your accomplishments. I don't plan to keep a box like yours, but a milestones shelf for completed stories might be in order. I could place it next to my desk to inspire me. I'll call that starfish you'd made for the gift box my milestone for the first story. Any chance I could get you to make origami for future stories?"

"It'll be my pleasure, but I'd like something in exchange, though."

"Like what?" she asked warily.

"Nothing major. A few suggestions from time to time, especially for Peter's character."

She grinned. "Your singing idea worked out well. What do you have in mind for the next one?"

"Given the time of year, I expect costumes would be appropriate."

She pondered a moment. "Yes, there's definite potential. And El will be happy to join the conspiracy. Any particular costume?"

"I have a couple of possibilities in mind. I'll let you know when I get back. Did you decide what you'd like me to bring you from Paris?"

She nodded. "Azathoth in handcuffs."

"Good choice. I'll do my best."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCWCW

On Saturday morning Neal headed for the art gallery at Columbia University. The exhibition for first year students was over and today had been allotted for the works to be removed. Neal was glad he decided to retain use of his studio. He planned to take advantage of his free time over the summer to get a head start for the following year.

When he arrived at the art gallery, Aidan and Richard were already there. They'd agreed to help each other with the chore of wrapping up their works. The actual transport to their studios would be handled by the maintenance team.

They started with Richard's sculptures. Neal and Aidan were delegated to work on Richard's galactic zoo—the menagerie of space creatures Richard had made as part of his exhibition. Richard concentrated on the bronze bust of the jazz musician Lionel Ferbos. June had bought it last week for the National Jazz Museum in Harlem. She'd been appointed to the Board of Directors at the beginning of the year and was serving on the committee to refurbish the museum.

"Your first sale," Aidan commented as he reached for the roll of bubble wrap. "How does it feel?"

"I'm still in shock," Richard admitted.

"You'll soon get over it," Neal predicted. "June told me she'd also commissioned you to scupt a bust of Charlie Parker. Your two pieces will be added to the art gallery at the museum. Not bad at all for a promising new sculptor."

Aidan tore off a piece of masking tape. "You sold your bronze. You got your internship at Scima Gameworks. I even heard Professor Stockman praise your galactic zoo to your mom at the reception. Your rocket's on the rise. Good thing cyberhacking is so prevalent. I wouldn't want to have to depend on my videos to earn a living."
"Just wait till Comic-Con," Richard predicted. "When Hollywood gets a glimpse of Yellowface, the Masked Avenger, they'll be swarming over you like—"

"—yellow-faced bees to honey?" Aidan finished with a grin. "To that I say bring 'em on!"

"Where's Travis?" Neal asked. "I thought he was meeting us."

"He had a SETI meeting to attend," Richard said. "He offered to supply us with pizza for lunch and to stay afterward to help us uncrate the art."

Aidan paused in wrapping one of the creatures. It had a long bulbous snout which reminded Neal of a pig elephant hybrid. "Have you been able to sneak any of these designs into your work at Scima?"

"Not yet. They have me working on concept designs for a new sci-fi game. Ian, my boss, encouraged me to sign up for online training on the projects they're working on at their headquarters in London. Yesterday I got to spend the morning learning about the special effects work they did for the Harry Potter and James Bond movies."

"A Lisandor Chapman?" Neal nodded. "He did, and I'm taking him up on it. I wrote his office and have arranged for a tour of the facility next Thursday. The studio is about an hour west of London. Fiona told me that some of the scenes for the next Harry Potter movie were reportedly filmed in the park adjacent to the campus."

"A month ago I wouldn't have even known what you're talking about," Neal admitted. "I never watched Dr. Who till I heard Scima Workshop was involved with it. Travis had to fill me in."

"David Tennant may be on set," Aidan added. "Did you hear he's the new Doctor?"

Clearly Richard and Aidan knew a lot more about Dr. Who than Neal did. They spent the next several minutes repairing the woeful deficit in his understanding of the series while they wrapped Richard's sculptures. They were still talking about the Doctor when they disassembled Aidan's video equipment.

"Yes, I promise to get autographs if I see Billie Piper or Tennant," Neal said, laughing at their enthusiasm. "And I'll make a point of studying their photos so I'll recognize them, but I doubt they'll be around. Travis told me filming hasn't begun."

"We can dream," Aidan retorted.

"Neal's probably dreaming more about Fiona," Richard observed from his position on the floor. He was sitting cross-legged, coiling up cables. "It seems like only yesterday Neal denied he and Fiona were anything more than friends, and now look at him—getting all mushy at the thought of their reunion."

"I am not," Neal protested, dumping another heap of cable wire onto his lap. "Okay, maybe a little."
Aidan grinned. "In another week, you'll be strolling along the Seine together."

"Not at first. We're meeting in the Loire Valley. She's been assigned to work on a chateau in Amboise. The family's holding an auction of its contents before selling it."

"This gets even better," Richard said, chuckling. "You'll meet your beloved in a castle. Watch out for dragons circling the battlements."

Aidan framed an imaginary scene with his hands. "I can see it now. Neal hurls himself onto the dragon to rescue the fair Fiona. He clings to its neck, riding it high into the air over the castle."

Neal eyed Aidan suspiciously. "Don't tell me . . ."

"Richard clued me in to some fascinating stories," he said, unable to contain his grin, "and I gotta say you really should teach some of your moves to Neal Carter. I thought my dating technique was pathetic, but your character's descended to a new low."

"So true," Richard added sadly. "You could say he's sunk into the abyss of cluelessness."

Neal groaned. "Travis told you, didn't he?"

Richard nodded. "He wanted me to help Diana with her monsters, and naturally I needed to read the stories."

"What impressed me was how perfectly Diana captured you," Aidan said. "Your essential nerdiness. Your gullibility. Your terror of Diana. It's no wonder Peter's your hero."

"Just wait till Professor Stockman hears your new nickname of Starman," Richard couldn't resist adding. "She'll be so impressed."

Neal exhaled noisily. He'd been much too unsympathetic to Jones's plight. They'd now become brothers in suffering.

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

"Anyone want another slice of Area 51?" Travis asked. He'd bought two different pizzas from the Flying Saucer Pizza restaurant to share.

Neal held up a warning hand. "That last slice of Mars Attacks finished me." The group had headed over to Richard's studio for lunch after all their works were crated. When Travis arrived with the pizza, Neal brought over his two stools from his studio next door and they converted Richard's worktable into a picnic table. The moving crew was due to deliver their art later in the afternoon.

"Richard told us a little about the sci-fi game he's working on without mentioning any names, of course," Aidan said.

Travis chuckled. "We're all dancing around confidentiality concerns. Scima is using cutting edge technology and employs draconian techniques to prevent industry piracy. They could probably teach the FBI a couple of tricks about security."

Richard popped the can of his soda. "There's even talk about implementing virtual reality on the game I'm working on."

"Is that like a 3D game?" Neal asked.

"Virtual reality is much more advanced than that," Travis said. The player is immersed in an artificial
world with a special headset."

"I'm working on sculptures which will then be digitized and animated," Richard explained. "I can't begin to understand the technology. Much of that work is being done in California. Scima has an experimental lab in their studio in L.A. I'm being sent there in mid-June for a six-week training course."

"Do you work much with the programmers?" Aidan asked.

"A few. There's one guy—a Dutch developer—who's been helping me with the sculpture technique they're looking for. Scima's headquarters for gaming is in Amsterdam."

"Any women developers?" Neal asked.

"Several, but none that look like Marta."

"You're talking about Jacek's wife, right?" Aidan asked, pointing at Neal with his pizza slice.

Neal nodded. "She's worked in gaming as a developer and an artist."

"It would be quite a coincidence if I ran into her," Richard commented. "After the hack attack at Scima, I wouldn't think she'd be anywhere around there."

Last winter the email systems of Scima Workshop and Paramount Pictures had been hacked to promote interest in making a movie based on a Lovecraft short story. The hack had been discovered when Chapman, an artistic director for Scima Workshop, had mentioned the movie to Neal during the sci-fi convention.

"We wondered at the time if Chapman could be Azathoth, but he checked out," Travis said. "He has no training in programming, and whoever hacked the email system of Paramount Pictures was an expert."

"Such as Jacek Kolar," Aidan added. "He's still your lead candidate, isn't he?"

Travis nodded. "Nothing ties Jacek directly to Scima, but Marta may. I've supplied Richard with what little information we have about her."

"He gave me a photo but it won't be very helpful," Richard said. "She could have easily disguised her appearance. If she had plastic surgery, no one would recognize her. Even simple makeup techniques could do the trick, like when I made up Neal to look like Owen Wilson."

"We were talking about that at work yesterday," Neal said. He explained to the others the connection between the plastic surgeon and Azathoth. Aidan and Richard were already familiar with Azathoth, particularly Aidan since he'd designed the software to combat Azathoth's malware, but it was the first time they'd heard of the plastic surgeon.

"So why haven't you investigated him?" Aidan asked impatiently.

Neal winced. "It's a sensitive subject. It's not from lack of trying. The surgeon now lives in Salzburg, Austria. Interpol approached Austrian authorities to obtain a search warrant but their request was rejected. The surgeon's files are protected by confidentiality agreements with the company he contracted with."

Aidan shrugged as he reached for another slice of pizza. "There are other options, as I'm sure you're aware."
"Like breaking into his office?" Neal said. "I've already volunteered. Peter shot that one down."

"You wouldn't have to go to Austria," Aidan pointed out. "A virtual break-in would be far less risky. Not that I'm for an instant suggesting it, but as a covert operation, it has interesting potential."

"Speaking purely hypothetically," Neal asked, "Would someone with your skill be able to perform such a maneuver?"

He nodded. "I believe such a person would be able to do so."

Their conversation was beginning to have an uncanny resemblance to the one he'd held with Aidan about hacking his tracking anklet last fall. Travis was watching both of them impassively, but Neal knew the wheels were turning in his head too. Neal filed the information away in the part of his brain reserved for useful contingencies.

**Burke residence. Brooklyn. Saturday afternoon.**

Peter placed his toolbox on the kitchen counter and bent over the sink. He'd promised El he'd fix the faucet before leaving. That it started to drip the previous day was expected. Whenever they tried to leave on a trip, some household emergency always popped up at the last minute. Perhaps that was the reason he disliked traveling. Peter hoped to finish the repair while El was out shopping. That would leave him free on Sunday to take care of the clogged drain, shorted fuse, or whatever else would crop up.

This would be the longest he'd been away from the office since he'd started working for the FBI. El and he normally took vacations as long weekends. Now he'd be gone for two weeks. Jones, as his second-in command, would be in charge while Peter was gone. He'd met with Jones at length on Friday to go over every detail. Jones was ready to tackle the job and Peter hoped to restrain himself from contacting him every day for updates. He knew when he'd accepted the position on the art crimes task force that this moment would come, but handing the reins of White Collar over even to someone as capable as Jones wasn't easy.

He wished he could cross off that Lovecraft board game from his list of concerns.

Jones had called him in the morning with a report and what he'd learned had not been reassuring. The company that developed the original game in 1991 had sold the rights twelve years later to a small game developer, Galactic Magic. Galactic Magic proceeded to revamp it but ran out of money in the final stages of production. They announced in March 2004 that they were stopping work on the project. Six months later they once again made news when they issued a news release that the project was back on track thanks to an injection of funds. Where had the additional backing come from?

Jones said he'd look into it and reminded Peter that phone calls between London and New York were routine. He seemed amused by Peter being a helicopter dad. El was even clucking at him to get him to relax.

He opened the toolbox and got to work. When the landline rang just after he'd succeeded in completely taking the faucet apart, he grumbled. Peter the Plumber wrestled with Peter the Helicopter, and the Helicopter won. He expected it to be Jones. When he discovered it was Tricia instead and she wanted to speak with him about the trip, he invited her over. The faucet would have to wait.

Tricia also lived in the Fort Greene neighborhood of Brooklyn, only a couple of miles from Peter and El. She and her husband Mitch had moved into the neighborhood a year after he and El bought their
townhouse. Although they lived close, their lives in Brooklyn seldom intersected.

"I hope I'm not intruding at a bad time," Tricia said when Peter greeted her at the door.

"Not at all," he lied. "El's working this afternoon and I could use a break from kitchen faucet repair."

"I promise to be brief. I don't want El to be left without a working faucet when you're in London."

He led her into the living room. "You're the one who shouldn't be working on a Saturday."

"Mitch is at a Little League practice with the boys. They don't even know I'm here," she said, taking a seat on the couch.

"Good for him. I'll have to come watch one of their games. There's a pot of coffee made. Would you like a cup?"

"Please."

Peter went into the kitchen to pour them two mugs. When he returned, he found her looking at a photo of him and Neal at a Yankees game last summer. "This is an excellent photo of you two. When was it taken?"

"El took it last Father's Day." He handed her the coffee. "I gather you'd like to talk about my kid."

She chuckled. "You caught me. That Hilliard miniature continues to bother me. Neal believes Klaus may have mentioned the tease to Jacek and Marta, but there's one other person we didn't discuss."

"You're thinking of Chantal, aren't you?"

"That's right. I didn't want to bring it up yesterday. Neal is adamant in believing she can't be involved with Ydrus. I wish I could be as confident."

Peter took a sip of coffee before answering, weighing his own feelings about Chantal. "We checked into her background earlier, and she was clean. Neal insists she's no longer involved with any criminal activity."

"I'm aware of that, but as the signals become increasingly personal, I'm reanalyzing everyone connected to this case. Chantal's record since she opened her bistro in Paris is spotless. What troubles me is that she also had a spotless record when she was married to Klaus Mansfeld, even though we now know she was an expert safecracker and worked with Klaus and Neal on several jobs. What if Chantal has gone back into the business but she's hidden it from Neal?"

Peter set his mug down on the cocktail table as he considered. "Chantal doesn't have the skill to be Azathoth, and from everything Neal has told me, it's impossible for me to believe she would betray him to Azathoth."

"I hope you're right, but here's another consideration. What if she's being blackmailed to provide the information? Or perhaps she doesn't believe she's divulged anything that damaging? She may have made a casual remark to someone and didn't realize she was being pumped for info." She paused for a moment. "And this woke me up in the middle of the night. If she's being threatened, would she ask Neal to help her? Could she drag him into a trap without him being aware of it?"

Peter gave a dry chuckle, not that there was anything to laugh at.

Tricia looked at him, startled. "You think my fears are groundless?"
"On the contrary. Is it any comfort that I've been worrying about the same things?"

"Yes, it is. I was beginning to think my maternal instinct was being kicked into overdrive. Can I blame it on Diana's stories? That's a younger version of Neal and I seem to forget that our Neal's not that twenty-two year old innocent."

"You have nothing to feel guilty about. In Diana's stories Neal's not as innocent as he appears and he's growing up fast. Ours, on the other hand . . ."

"Seems more vulnerable than ever? It's not that I don't trust him, but we know the lengths he'd go to help a friend. If Chantal made it sound like she was in trouble, our knight errant would charge in to rescue her."

"You're right. Neal has his own sense of justice. He's made large strides since joining the FBI, but I wouldn't want to test his loyalty if for instance Mozzie were in trouble. He'd try to figure out a way to skirt the laws and keep us in the dark while spinning some tale to soothe his conscience that he was acting to shield us from any repercussions."

She nodded. "We've discussed how Azathoth is playing into Neal's feelings of guilt over the death of Klaus. He's not allowing Neal to move on."

"I'd hoped that by now we'd no longer be talking about Klaus. After all, he died almost eight months ago. Instead, he's become a constant topic of conversation. The latest example? Hobhouse asked Neal to make a presentation on a hypothetical heist, and Neal chose to emulate Klaus's strategy."

Tricia groaned. "Between Azathoth's mind games and Interpol, Neal doesn't stand a chance of putting Klaus behind him. He must be the prey of warring emotions—guilt over his death, admiration for Klaus's skills as a thief, and anger over Azathoth's actions."

"I share your concern. Neal's quick to claim that he acted correctly when he worked undercover to bring Klaus down. A little too quick. It makes me think he's not trying to prove it to me but to himself."

"In a week he'll meet with Chantal. She divorced Klaus but she may also have warring emotions. Could you manage to be present at their meeting? I'd like your objective assessment of her. I hope she's exactly the way Neal described, but I don't think he's the best judge."

"That shouldn't an issue," he said. "Neal's already mentioned that he intends to ask her about Klaus's older brother, Rolf. I'd like to hear what she has to say. I'd also like to question her about Klaus. He's at the heart of the mystery. There's such a strong connection between Klaus and Azathoth, the more we learn about Klaus, the closer we'll be to exposing Azathoth."

"Good. I'm also curious to hear what she says about Rolf. As I mentioned, I'm reassessing everyone. Rolf's knowledge of mathematics and computer science continues to intrigue me. I've tried to find a link between him and Jacek or someone else who could be connected to Azathoth. But since Rolf died before Neal met Klaus, it's a real stretch to see how he could have any bearing on the case." She paused to take a sip of coffee. "To be clear, my concern is not that Neal has any desire to return to his former criminal ways, but about how much he's being influenced by Azathoth's mind games. If Neal is remorseful about Klaus, he may try to overcompensate now."

"Henry's also warned me to be alert. He believes Neal is fooling himself. Mozzie remains unaware of what happened. Henry thinks if Neal weren't feeling so guilty about Klaus's death, he would have told him long ago."
She nodded. "If he believes he acted incorrectly, he may worry he'll hurt others again and shut them out. Neal could embark on some knight's mission to seek atonement by reckless deeds or try to redeem himself by falling on his sword."

"That's where Fiona comes in. She helps keep those reckless tendencies restrained. I consider her my secret weapon."

Tricia smiled. "Neal doesn't have just Fiona. You, El, his Caffrey relatives—you all act as a brake."

"And Diana's stories are helping also. We've long suspected Azathoth's ultimate goal is recruitment. The Round Table has done a good job in demonstrating that I'll go to any lengths to help Neal. You even had me singing with him in the last story. What's next? Costumes?"

Tricia got a disturbing glint in her eyes. "Sorry, but that knowledge is classified. Let's hope both Neal and Azathoth get the message. Any offer Azathoth makes will have to be a package deal." She stood up. "I shouldn't keep you any longer. What time will you leave tomorrow?"

"The plane leaves at ten in the evening. We'll arrive in London midmorning their time."

"Your first trip to Europe! I envy you. I'm convinced that since we've examined everything that could possibly go wrong, you'll have only smooth sailing now."

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**Notes:** Klaus isn't the only one who accused Neal of wearing his heart on his sleeve. Mozzie did as well in a canon episode in Season 5. They both warned him that it was a weakness others could exploit. I wrote about Neal's vulnerability in this week's blog post: "Neal the Romantic."

Although Arkham Horror is a real game, I invented its development history. I based the campus of Scima Workshop on Pinewood Studios in Iver Heath. Black Park which is adjacent to the studio has been used as a location for many movies, including Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire, which was released in November 2005.

Penna and I both enjoy including references to movies and TV shows in our stories. Recently she wrote about Harry Potter and Caffrey Conversation for our blog. For this story Penna has had to work overtime, acting as beta not only for Caffrey Conversation but also for Doctor Who. Thank you, Penna! She's much more an expert on the Doctor than I am. I hope you enjoy his inclusion. He was teased in this chapter and will make a return visit in Chapters 4 and 5.

Thanks for reading and your comments! I love hearing from you. KeJae and I had traded messages about what Neal's friends would think of his adventures in Arkham Files and with the Winchester brothers. That exchange sparked ideas for this chapter. Thanks, KeJae!

**Blog:** Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)

**Chapter Visuals and Music:** The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

New pins this week include the art works and music mentioned in the chapter as well as Neal's origami squid, Rolf, Marta, Jacek, the St. Ermins hotel, and the photo of Neal and Peter that Tricia admired.
"It's good, isn't it?" Neal waited expectantly for Peter to swallow his first mouthful of bitter and the resulting smile to spread over his face. "I told you, you'd feel better once you had a pint in your hand."

Now that Peter was once again happy with the world, Neal could relax. The grouch who'd arrived at Heathrow Airport had been vanquished by British hops. Traveling economy had been misery enough but to have it compounded by a companion who wanted to spend the flight discussing Neal's presentation was a special kind of hell. Honestly, who works on PowerPoint in the middle of the night? As soon as Neal heard the rumble of the jet engines, he was ready for some shuteye. Since they were in the cattle car, there was no reason to stay awake. Peter made a feeble stab at sleep but spent the rest of the night complaining he couldn't. And whose fault was that? If he'd only let Neal upgrade their tickets, he would have luxuriated in a comfortable seat and slept through the flight.

Luckily today was a travel day with no meetings scheduled. Neal had soothed Peter during the taxi ride into London with descriptions of all the pubs he’d lined up for them to visit. Once they arrived at their hotel, they retired to their rooms—Peter to sleep, and Neal to write up his notes for the presentation, which somehow he hadn't gotten around to earlier. The Bureau knew how to take all the fun out of planning a heist.

The FBI travel department had made the hotel reservation. The hotel couldn't compare with the luxurious accommodations Neal had managed to procure. Nor was it as convenient to the headquarters of the National Crime Squad where they'd be meeting, a point Neal took great pleasure in reminding Peter of on numerous occasions. Neal could guarantee that their present rooms cost at least as much as the rate he'd obtained. Who stayed at an American chain when they were in London? FBI bureaucrats, that's who. But Neal had to admit the complimentary high-speed internet throughout the hotel was a bonus, and the Tate was only a short walk away.

Neal suggested that Peter review his presentation in a pub. The Buckingham Arms was close by. It was early enough in the day that there would be few customers, and Neal suspected Peter would be much more tolerant after a pint or two. The pub had booths in the back where they’d have privacy and plenty of room to spread out. Neal even offered to forgo elegant dining in favor of simple pub fare on their first night in London. He was amply repaid for that magnanimous gesture by Peter's look of surprised delight.

In the past, Peter had harped on Neal for what he considered a lack of sufficient detail in his presentations. After the Keller sting last March, he signed Neal up for a couple of seminars on project planning. This time Neal was determined to be prepared. No eye rolling allowed at his first presentation on the international stage with agents from across the globe in attendance.

Peter set down his glass and smacked his lips with satisfaction. "I think I'm starting to get the hang of traveling. On the walk over, you mentioned you'd tell me about the email you received from Scima."

"When I logged in this afternoon I found a message from Alistair Chapman's office. You remember when we talked with Chapman at the sci-fi convention, he mentioned that my painting of the squid-faced assailant seemed familiar? He now wants to discuss it with me." Neal took a sip of his claret and waited for Peter's reaction.

"I'm not likely to forget that meeting. When Chapman referenced the Lovecraft story and commented
on your similarity to the artist in 'The Haunter of the Dark,' I wondered if he could have ties to Azathoth."

"And when we discovered he could pronounce Cthulhu Mythos correctly and knew who Azathoth was, you were ready to arrest him."

Peter nodded. "We were close to being duped by yet another of Azathoth's tricks. This hoax, though, has continued to puzzle me. Why would he go to all the trouble of faking email correspondence to Scima to make them believe Paramount Pictures was interested in making the movie? Yes, the subject of the story implied a threat to you, but if he intended to threaten you, there are many far easier ways of achieving the same objective."

"My theory is that Azathoth really wanted to see it made. We know he's fascinated by Lovecraft."

"Just another fan doing his part to see a movie, TV show, or game made?" Peter considered it for a moment as he sipped his beer. Neal congratulated himself for holding off discussing Chapman's email till now. Peter would have had at least two beers before Neal began his presentation. "I suppose it's possible. It's hard to think of any other reason. But that Chapman should contact you about the painting on the very week we're in town? That seems like too much of a coincidence for my taste."

"Are you back thinking he's Azathoth? When I found out about our schedule for London, I decided to take him up on his offer and ask for a tour. It's hard to believe Chapman himself read my email. He must have an assistant who screens his correspondence. I suspect he invited many of the other contestants at the painting competition to take a tour. The confirmation I received came not from his office but from someone in Public Relations."

"So you think he didn't know you would be in London?" Peter twisted his mouth in that odd grimace he got when he was chewing on something. "I suppose that's possible. Refresh my memory of what he said about your painting at the time."

"The painting was of the scene in the dining room when I was attacked. All you see of me is my back. The spotlight's on the face of the assailant in his squid-faced glory. Chapman said that it resembled a painting he'd seen. He wasn't sure if it was Squidface or the surroundings. The email I received today was from Chapman's assistant, Amanda Jones. She explained that Chapman wanted to discuss the painting with me. I replied that I was in town and could meet with him in person."

"I'm going with you," Peter declared in a tone that brooked no quibbling.

"I thought you'd want to, but the appointment's scheduled for Thursday morning. You're booked for meetings at the National Crime Squad that day—international mortgage fraud or something else equally exciting."

"I'll rearrange my schedule. Scima Workshop is how far away?"

"It's about an hour west of London in Iver Heath. The campus is immense. They film live action sequences as well as prepare special effects and digital animations. If you go, you'll want to take the time to look around."

Peter considered for a moment. "Your meeting's at eight. I should be able to accompany you and still have time for the other items on the agenda." As he drained the last of his pint, his cell phone rang. He glanced at the display. "It's John calling."

Had there been a break on the Hilliard case? Neal waited impatiently for Peter to fill him in. It turned
out he'd have to wait for any news. John wanted to know their plans for the evening and asked if he
could join them at the pub.

When the call ended, Peter stood up. "I'll get us refills. We still have plenty of time before John
arrives for you to walk me through your presentation. You want another glass of wine?"

"Please. Order a claret. They'll know what you mean."

"That's red wine, right?"

Neal nodded. "That's a generic term for Bordeaux in the U.K. The house Bordeaux here is decent,
and you'll feel much more authentic if you use the term."

Neal powered on his laptop. By the time Peter returned with the drinks, he was ready to begin. Neal
suspected Peter was far more critical than the task force members would be. He not only asked a
slew of questions during the presentation but then grilled Neal on how he'd conduct the heist
workshop afterward. Maybe the beer had been a bad idea. Peter was so revved up, Neal was
beginning to think he'd taken lessons from Stockman, a professor so demanding she was nicknamed
the Impaler. Was Peter trying to challenge her for the title?

At the conclusion, Neal sat back and drained the last of his claret. "What's the verdict? Do I pass?"

Peter nodded his approval. "Not only pass, you may have earned extra credit. Now that I know what
you're capable of, I'll expect this every time."

Neal frowned. "Let's not kill the moment. Which aspect impressed you the most? The creativity of
the plan? The dazzling ingenuity with which I circumvented the museum's security measures? Or
perhaps the speed with which I accomplished it?"

He made a show of stroking his chin. "Actually it was your PowerPoint slides. Never have I seen
such artistic ones. Seriously, how much time did you spend on this?"

"The slides I prepared on the weekend. I conceptualized the plan on Friday, and put it all together
today."

"You realize there's a problem. You did such a good job you'll be deluged with requests for encore
performances."

"Good point. I'll do my best to mess up my delivery."

"Attaboy." He paused. "Don't take this the wrong way, but did you channel any of your old heists
for this? You'd mentioned you were modeling it on the Leopard. Did you pull this one with him?"

"No, although we talked about it. Discussing potential heists was routine dinner conversation. Since
Klaus is dead, he won't mind that I'm divulging his technique."

"I liked the way you took us into the mind of the thief, but how will you explain that to the task
force?"

"We interviewed the Dutchman. I'll say it's based on the insights we obtained from him and some of
the other thieves we've dealt with."

"You mentioned that if a thief isn't working under a contract, he often goes after a painting that is
personally relevant to him."
Neal nodded. "That's true. Klaus was an admirer of Whistler paintings. I don't know if he ever stole anything from the Tate, but if he had, my money would have been on Whistler."

"Like you'd steal a Raphael?"

"Correct. Of course, I wouldn't limit myself to Raphael. There's Degas, Vermeer, Turner, Caravaggio—"

"Stop there," he said with a laugh, "before the police are called in."

Neal had been keeping an eye on the front door and stood up to wave. "And here's the person who could bail me out." John had arrived. The pub was quickly filling up with the after-work crowd. He elbowed his way up to the bar and a short while later joined them in the booth with a glass of Scotch.

"I see you've made yourselves at home," he said, exchanging greetings.

Peter raised his glass. "Neal's teaching me how to enjoy traveling overseas."

"He brought you to a great place to start."

"I didn't think Peter would be ready for gourmet dining on his first night," Neal admitted. "Bangers and mash seemed more appropriate."

John smacked his lips. "Or bubble and squeak."

"A little toad in the hole?"

"All right, you two, have your fun," Peter said with a laugh. "As long as you keep me supplied with bitter, I can down anything."

Steak and ale pie wasn't high on Neal's list of preferred foods, but Peter liked it and Neal wanted his first evening to be along Burke lines. He'd have plenty of time for his kind of cuisine in France.

Over supper, they brought John up to speed on the latest news from Alistair Chapman.

John listened to their report without comment. Afterward he said, "I'm uneasy about this too. I'd wanted to discuss the Hilliard miniature with you but we should add this to the agenda. And for that we'll need a private location. My townhouse isn't far away."

John had driven to the pub in his Jaguar and had it parked outside. As Neal sank into the leather upholstery, the Taurus's well-worn fabric seats flashed before his eyes. Wasn't it time for Peter to shop for a new car?

John's townhouse in Stanhope Mews was in South Kensington, about a twenty minute drive west from the pub. He took a scenic detour for Peter's benefit and pointed out Hyde Park, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Natural History Museum on the way. Not shabby at all, Neal thought to himself, when they arrived at the quiet cobblestone cul-de-sac. The small townhouses were painted bright colors with flowers and neat shrubbery in front of them.

Soon they were settled in John's living room, austerely furnished in shades of taupe and black, with glasses of tawny port beside them. Peter took a sip and nodded appreciatively. Had Peter been hiding secrets from Neal? He never would have suspected Peter was a connoisseur of port. That cried out to be investigated.

"John, would you like to attend the meeting with Chapman?" Peter asked.
He considered for a moment then shook his head. "I'd like to, but my presence could be problematic. There are delicacies with approaching Scima Workshop which you should be cognizant of. The film industry's importance in the U.K. cannot be underestimated, not only for its revenue but also as a source of national pride. The royal family is involved with movie premieres and tie-ins. To have the whiff of a suspicion that Azathoth may be manipulating the major players in the film industry makes this rise almost to the level of a MI5 crisis."

Peter nodded. "The initial email hack attack of Paramount Pictures and Scima is unprecedented in our country as well. Film studios are constantly on the lookout for a new theme to build a franchise on. They all aspire to launch the next Harry Potter, James Bond, or Star Wars series. I can readily understand where both parties were excited for an equal potential with Lovecraft."

"Did you encounter difficulties when we asked you to investigate Chapman?" Neal asked.

"Barriers were raised at every attempt I made," John acknowledged. "Scima has powerful friends within our government and they were outraged at the thought that a Scima employee in such a high position could be considered a suspect. I was warned to obtain clearance from the Home Office before any future investigations of Scima."

Peter rotated his glass slowly in his hands before speaking. "You're aware that we're convinced an Ydrus informant is working within the FBI. Do you have any concerns about the National Police Squad?"

"So far we've had no indication," John said, "but I must admit I was surprised at the amount of resistance I encountered over Chapman. I looked into the matter and discovered that he lives not far from the Home Secretary. They see each other socially. This is not to suggest there's anything improper in the friendship, but simply to illustrate that we must approach this cautiously. Under the circumstances, I feel it's best for me to stay out of it."

"Does Chapman know about Azathoth?" Neal asked.

"When we approached him after the convention, we simply said the FBI was investigating a case where a short story by Lovecraft was connected to one of the criminals. We explained that when Peter heard Chapman mention the movie, he requested it be checked out. Scima cooperated fully at the time. The questions popped up later once the Home Office heard about it."

"I plan to maintain my afternoon agenda on Thursday after the morning meeting with Chapman," Peter said. "I can fill you in then."

"You mentioned you have news about the Hilliard," Neal prompted.

John nodded. "On Saturday we discovered that Azathoth's malware had indeed been used in the theft at the V&A. Since then my phone's been ringing off the hook with calls from the Museums Association. They'd been reluctant to sign up for the anti-malware program you chaps have been using. And implementing the facial recognition software was dead in the water. I'm happy to report that's no longer the case. Now the only question is how quickly can the new measures be implemented."

"That's welcome news," Peter said. "I'll put your people in touch with Agent Travis Miller. He's in charge of the project."

"I'll email you the contact information. You should be prepared to receive numerous similar requests during the meetings. I know the Italians would like to sign up, but their budget won't allow it." John paused for a moment. "Over the phone you mentioned there was a personal connection between
Neal and the Hilliard piece that led you to believe Azathoth could be involved. Could you elaborate?"

Peter glanced at Neal who nodded agreement. They'd discussed on the plane that this might come up. John was already aware of Neal's undercover work with Klaus and knew about his years in Europe.

"As you know, Neal is not like the other members of the task force," Peter said. "He's not an employee of an investigatory organization, but a consultant. Much of his work involves undercover operations. That's why the details of how the Leopard, Klaus Mansfeld, was taken down have not been released to the law enforcement community. You're one of only a few people outside the immediate White Collar team who knows that the Leopard recruited Neal to paint a forgery and that we were able to make use of that to trap him."

John nodded. "You can be assured I won't discuss this with the members of the task force or anyone else for that matter unless you've agreed to it first."

"Over the past couple of months Azathoth's taunts have become more personal and difficult to understand," Peter continued. "That gold and pearl baroque lion for instance. Why would he give that to us?"

"I'd wondered the same thing myself," John admitted. "In my experience thieves don't normally bestow gifts upon their pursuers."

"What you don't know is that the ornament also can be construed to have ties to the Leopard. Mansfeld was a connoisseur of gargoyles, and the ornament was hidden within a gargoyle. The fact that it was a lion also may, and I stress the word may, be significant."

"Klaus Mansfeld gave me the nickname of Lion Cub," Neal supplied.

John raised his eyebrows. "He was the Leopard and you were the Lion Cub? How extensively did you work for him?"

"I was a member of his crew for two years," Neal acknowledged.

"That's not in his file, John," Peter added, "nor should it go in yours."

"Agreed. And there's no need for that to come out in the open now. The Leopard was one of many who have taken advantage of Azathoth's malware. We've now had instances of it in Asia, South America and Australia in addition to the previously recorded cases in Europe and North America. Thanks to the detection procedures developed at the FBI we're able to uncover uses of the malware which previously would have been undetected. The Hilliard is a case in point." John turned to Neal. "I gather the miniature also has a meaning for you and Mansfeld."

"Klaus told he how it reminded him of me and that he should steal it for me."

"Azathoth hasn't sent it to you yet I assume?" he said with a smile. "You haven't received any unmarked packages with priceless British treasures?"

"Not yet," Neal said, appreciating his effort to lighten the mood.

"Azathoth's behavior is so bizarre, it defies explanation," John added. "Why would he leave clues to his connection with the Leopard or that he was engaged in revenge? We wouldn't have suspected the Kolars otherwise."
"Tricia has been working on his profile since January," Peter said. "She believes he's an egomaniac convinced of his superiority and ability to elude capture. He wants us to know the ease with which he can manipulate and taunt us. That ornament he left for us to find was of relatively low value when you compare it with the value of the art works thieves have been able to steal by using his malware."

John nodded. "And the thefts we're aware of are most likely only a small fraction of the total number of crimes he's facilitated."

"Tricia believes he enjoys toying with us." Neal added.

"Like a leopard would with a mouse?" John finished, raising an eyebrow. "You're sure Klaus Mansfeld is dead?"

"Positive," Peter said. "Neal and I were both there. There's no doubt. The theft of the Hilliard could be an indicator of more things to come for Britain. You've been relatively unscathed up to now but that may not last."

"You need to be personally alert, as well," Neal commented. "As head of the task force, Azathoth may put you in his crosshairs."

"It's an issue we need to discuss with all our members," John acknowledged. "Ydrus has shown no hesitation in killing its own when they sense a weakness. I'm convinced that Azathoth is working hand in hand with Ydrus if he's not their leader. The negotiations are almost concluded for the Civil Aviation Authority to purchase Winston-Winslow's facial recognition software."

"That will help but we are concerned that the Kolars may have disguised their appearance." Peter said. He explained Tricia's concerns about the connection to the plastic surgeon.

Neal could predict in advance what John's answer would be but he felt he needed to give it one more shot. "Is there any chance the Austrian authorities will change their mind about allowing us access to his records?"

He shook his head. "Unfortunately not. He's protected by confidentiality laws until we're able to establish a connection to criminal activity. Any action would have to be conducted covertly. It's possible that time may come, but we don't have enough evidence yet to justify it."

**London. May 24, 2005. Tuesday.**

With the first day of meetings under his belt, Peter was able to look back with satisfaction at how well they'd done. Late in the day he made use of a huddle room provided to members of the task force to call Jones. He'd received a text earlier in the day that Jones had news about the board game.

"It's not as clear-cut as I would have liked," Jones admitted. "I spoke with the project manager of Arkham Horror at Galactic Magic. He said they'd had a savior ride in to rescue them at the last moment. The game had been more expensive to produce than they'd anticipated and they were on the point of canceling the project."

"And their knight in shining armor was?"

"You'll like this—Albert Wilmarth."

Peter sat back in his chair, stunned. "That's the name of the man who placed the deposit for Neal's painting at his exhibition, the man who left the Leopard's business card behind."

"You got it," Jones confirmed. "All the company knows is that he gave an address in Geneva. The
funds came from a Swiss bank account. It was a one-time direct infusion of cash.

"The producer must have realized the name was an alias."

"He did, but you have to remember this is a small company, privately held. The disclosure laws are not as strict for them as they are for a publicly held company. Galactic Magic assumed a rich fan wanted to provide the financing, and they weren't about to look a gift horse in the mouth."

After Peter got off the phone, he rounded up Neal and John to discuss the situation.

"I can ask the Interpol agents in Geneva to look into the transaction," John offered.

"I was hoping you'd say that. Jones is sending over the details."

"But the motive eludes me."

"The first instance we've found of Azathoth's malware being used was in February 2004 in Prague," Neal said, "but we have no idea when Azathoth first became fascinated by Lovecraft. The company could have it right. He could be simply a rich, obsessed fan. We already know he has to be wealthy."

"And we know that he's interested in games, as witnessed by that house he held us captive in," Peter added. "If we can uncover the identity of the man who provided the backing, we may finally be able to identify Azathoth."

John jotted down some notes on a notepad. "I believe I'll be able to make a sufficiently compelling case that the Swiss will agree." He turned to Neal. "Peter tells me we'll help you steal a Whistler painting at the Tate tomorrow. I'm looking forward to it."

**May 25, 2005. Wednesday.**

"The next morning the guards will arrive at the Tate and see a blank wall where The Nocturne in Blue and Silver used to be. And the painting itself? Already out of the country." Neal scanned the task force members who were listening to every word with bated breath. "Any questions?"

At the onslaught of praise and demands for more information, he grinned cheerfully. Peter chuckled. His presentation had been a Caffrey masterpiece. Peter would have to demand a repeat performance for the White Collar team. Neal had started it off by passing out copies of the floorplan of the Tate to the participants. He described the target painting and assigned them into groups of three to develop their own strategy to steal the painting. Peter had worked with Hobhouse and Marcel Jauffret, the French representative. Personally, Peter thought their plan was the closest to being achievable even though Neal pointed out in his critique that they'd committed a fatal error which would have allowed the police to nab them in the first fifteen minutes.

Afterward when Neal presented the method he would have used, task force members had a much greater appreciation of its brilliance. It had been an eye-opening experience for everyone, but particularly for Peter. Neal said the strategy was based on one Klaus Mansfeld had developed. He now understood why Neal valued his skill so highly. If Neal hadn't exposed him, the odds were high the Leopard would still be prowling the jungle, stealing from museums with impunity.

Marcel leaned over to murmur, "He needs to make the same presentation in Paris next week, only use the Louvre instead. Does he have adequate time to make the needed adjustments?"

"Plan a heist at the Louvre? I don't think we'll have any difficulty in persuading him." Peter liked Marcel. They'd discovered at the group luncheon that they had much in common. Marcel had initially planned to be a professional soccer player, but his career had been short-circuited by an
injury, similar to Peter's experience with baseball. He'd risen through the ranks of the National Police at a blistering pace. He reminded Peter of Jones and not just because of his African heritage. He was young, smart, and highly-motivated.

At the conclusion of the workshop, Peter walked up to the front to help Neal put away his materials. "Congratulations. It was a fine performance. I predict we'll be taking this roadshow around to many other venues in the future. It's hard to believe this is the same guy who used to breeze in with his plan scribbled on a sticky note."

"He's still around," Neal said, grinning, "but I wanted to do my bit to hold up the team standards. Jones has been emailing me daily with tips."

"I'll make sure he hears how pleased I am."

"Thanks." He looked genuinely appreciative and a little surprised. Could Neal have been nervous? Peter wouldn't have thought so. But an ex-thief making a presentation before so many law enforcement officials? Yeah, that could be nerve-racking.

"Marcel can't wait for you to work your magic in Paris," John said, walking up. "I just did a quick check of members. You two are the only ones staying in London tonight. Care to join me for dinner? You had pub fare Monday night. I should be able to come up with something a little more refined."

"It'd be my pleasure," Peter said, "but it will be just me. Neal already has plans."

"Do you remember Sara Ellis?" Neal asked.

"From the Raphael investigation last month? Of course."

"She owes me dinner and shopping."

John smiled. "And hands down, she beats us on looks. Enjoy your evening."

**Patara Thai Restaurant. Wednesday evening.**

Neal raised his wine glass to Sara. "You and I, sitting on a banquette in a Thai restaurant—this seems like old times. Although I don't ever remember having carried so many packages before. Very astute of you to pick a place with large alcoves to store all our loot."

"That was clever of me, wasn't it?" Sara agreed happily. "I chose Bond Street for our shopping spree in honor of our alter egos, Tiffany Case and James Bond. I like to think they would have approved."

A little wet weather hadn't dampened their enthusiasm. Sara had brought along two enormous umbrellas for them to carry. Neal had to laugh at her outfit—a smoke-blue silk suit with paisley rain boots. When he teased her about it, she countered that after having been forced to work late one evening to avoid ruining a new pair of heels, she always kept an emergency pair of rain boots in her desk. They only had a couple of hours to shop before the stores closed. Neal easily could have filled his suitcase but with Paris coming up, he was forced to make judicious decisions.

"What do you have planned for Fiona?" she asked. "Which gourmet Parisian restaurants have you lined up?"

"That will have to be another trip. Fiona assumed her work in Amboise would be completed on Friday. We were planning to return to Paris on Sunday, but she found out yesterday that she'll need to stay an additional two weeks. It may be for the best since I also have to work. Once Peter and El return to New York, I'll go back to Amboise."
Sara sat back, a mischievous grin on her face. "How fitting! You'll leave your lady in her chateau, gallop off to Paris to do battle then return on your white horse like a knight coming back from the Crusades."

This was getting tiring. Sara sounded just like Richard and Aidan. "Where did everyone get the notion I'm a medieval knight?"

"I wouldn't complain about it. Fiona's lucky. I wish I had a knight in shining armor. Besides, it's a natural assumption. You fence, you sing."

"Knights don't sing."

"Oh yes they do. Many knights were troubadours, Richard the Lionheart for one. I'm told he wrote beautiful songs."

"When did you become such an expert?"

She shrugged. "Fiona and I may have discussed your endearing chivalrous tendencies on more than one occasion. Then there's your propensity to fight dragons. You rescued two Raphaels from fire-breathing monsters this spring. That has to count. And I can call Diana as a witness if you need additional proof."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you realize I've read her latest story. Your epic battle with that dragon?" She raised an eyebrow. "I rest my case."

Not Sara too. Was everyone reading Diana's stories? "That wasn't a dragon. It was a—"

She pressed her hand against his mouth. "Don't quibble. It's close enough."

While the thought of Fiona and Sara discussing him invited interesting speculation, the image of a knight charging around the countryside didn't sit well. Was it only a matter of time till he'd be accused of being a Don Quixote attacking windmills? "Plainly I need to update my image. I much prefer James Bond. I'll take driving a sports car over riding a horse any day."

"I wonder if James and Tiffany will ever team up for another caper. I enjoyed our fake date in New York last spring. It appears our characters in Arkham Files are as well. I wouldn't mind going to that coffeehouse we visited in The Locked Room. You could sing for me. I could embarrass you...confuse starlings with stardust."

He eyed her suspiciously. "Do I have to worry you're sending Diana suggestions, too?"

She grinned slyly. "I'm sworn to secrecy, but you have nothing to fear. I'm only a stand in. Simply one of your many Bond girls. Let's see, in addition to me, there's Raquel, Kate..." She paused for a moment. "Refresh my memory. Who were the other girls?"

"Hmm. My mind's a blank."

"Oh, James, don't torment me so!" she mocked.

He grinned. "Sorry, Tiffany, it's better this way. You'll thank me in the long run."

"I wish you were staying longer in London. We could take one of the James Bond tours and visit some of the film locations. There are even helicopter tours. Last Christmas, Fiona and I visited
Halton House which was used as the casino location for *The World Is Not Enough*. We wished for you."

"Did you visit Black Park? It was the setting for a scene in *Goldfinger*."

"As a matter of fact we did. It has fantastic atmospherics. How did you know?"

"I've been reading up on it. The park is next door to Scima Workshop where many of the special effects for the Bond movies were created." Neal explained his plans to visit Scima. Sara, as one of Sterling-Bosch's lead investigators, was already quite familiar with Azathoth, but she hadn't heard about the connection between Scima and the cybercriminal.

"You have all the luck. Only you can visit Scima Workshop and call it work-related. I remember the paintings you exhibited at the sci-fi convention. That battle scene was intense, and when I learned the victim was you, well, I had no idea. It's hard to believe that Azathoth could manipulate the film industry, but the way he's been able to hack museum security systems shows he probably has the technical expertise."

When the waiter arrived with the check, Neal reached for it, but Sara snatched it away first. "You paid last time. This is my treat."

"I appreciate the gesture, but my fake date was reimbursed by the Bureau."

"That's beside the point. I owe you and I always like to pay my debts." Sara dug into her bag, an enormous Hermes pouch large enough to hide a Holbein inside. "This will only take a minute. I have a system."

Neal watched in amusement as she rummaged. "I can tell Fiona didn't teach you the fine art of organization."

She looked up. "No, we were too busy discussing you."

Neal took advantage of her distraction to seize a paperback in her bag. "What's this?" He waved it high in the air well above her reach. "Just what does Sara Ellis read? The world demands to know."

"You're so going to regret this, Caffrey."

"I think not." Neal's grin broadened as he looked at the cover. *Forbidden Rose*, huh? This sounds good." He flipped it over to read the comments on the back cover.

"It was just something I picked up when I was waiting for the Tube."

"Lusciously sensual love story. French aristocrat seduced by an English swashbuckling spy." Neal stopped reading to gaze at her with goopy eyes. "If only I'd known you were still pining for me . . ."

"Watch it. I'm going to tell Fiona on you. Besides, historical romances can be very enlightening."

"Oh, I'm sure they can."

"You have a dirty mind. I don't read them for the steamy bits." She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and flashed a coquettish smile. "Or not merely for the steamy bits."

"And swashbuckling spies?"

"And costumes!" She laughed and raised a hand. "You see before you a self-proclaimed member of CAA—Costume Addicts Anonymous. Not that I don't love current fashion, but the gowns of other
eras?" She gazed dreamily in the air. "Sometimes I think cosplay was invented for me."

"And when did you first detect this woeful addiction?"

She pulled out her wallet. "Hmmm. It's been so long ago in my past I can't remember."

"Did a pirate capture you and carry you away?"

"My mind's a blank," she countered, eyeing him pointedly. "And if I act like my character in Arkham Files, I should be the one asking you the questions, not the other way around."

"Oh, you don't want to imitate her. Neal Carter's already annoyed. Is your singing as bad as Sara's in Arkham Files?"

"Another secret I have no intention of revealing."

"I'll pry your secrets out of you, Sara Ellis."

"Hah. You don't stand a chance."

"Would you like to place a small wager?"

"Why something small? I'll win. I'll think of something suitably extravagant."

"Raising the stakes on me? A bold move. I like it." Sara and historical romances . . . He never would have pictured her as the type. The secret side of Sara. He planned to have fun with this. It could be almost as good a tease as Peter and costumes. He might have to make a few additional suggestions to Diana.

"Do you have time for another round of shopping?" she asked.

"Not this trip. I'll take the Eurostar tomorrow afternoon and arrive in Amboise later in the evening."

Now she was the one making goopy eyes. "I'll think of you two, writing your own romance."

"I hope Fiona still thinks so. It's been almost three months. All those Frenchmen around . . ."

"You're not worried are you?"

Was he? Sometimes he wondered if Fiona were just a fantasy that would disappear in a poof.

"You are, aren't you?" Sara's expression turned serious. "I'm sure you have no reason to stress out. I spoke with Fiona a couple of weeks ago. She was looking forward to your visit."

"I'm not sure if she'll want to come back to New York. I can't blame her. She's got Paris. She likes her new colleagues. There's even a fellow she knew from university days that she's working with."

"The architect?"

"That's right, Gerald. Has she mentioned him much to you?"

"Simply to say how she enjoyed reminiscing with him catching up on acquaintances. You're just suffering pre-reunion jitters. It's really quite sweet."

"I admit I've been imagining a Don Juan in every doorway."

"Will Diana include Fiona in the stories?"
"I've asked her not to. The hoax Azathoth played on Peter and me last January shook her up badly. I don't want her to have anything to do with Azathoth."

She frowned in disapproval. "If you want to shed your knight errant image, you'll have to stop being so protective. Will I be destined to be your fake girlfriend forever?"

"I doubt you'll waste your time with Arkham Neal for long. You'll find some jock and give Neal the kiss-off."

"Which raises the question of how Diana got the idea to make me so enamored with jocks? And I'm looking straight at you."

He shrugged innocently. "I wouldn't know, but it sounds reasonable. You're into self-defense. You like to play the tough girl. But now that I know you're yearning for a pirate to sweep you off your feet—"

"Stop right there!" she interrupted. "You have to promise not to tell Diana about my reading habits."

"Keep it a secret? That'll cost you."

"Cost me what? What are you planning?"

He shrugged. "You like secrets. I like them, too."

"So, we each have our secrets, do we?" Her eyes sparkled. "I can live with that."

On the way back to the hotel, Neal mulled over Sara's accusation. Was he protecting Fiona too much? She might like being included in the stories. He'd been guilty yet again of making assumptions without checking with her first. Neal vowed to add the stories to his growing list of topics.

Notes: Next week in Chapter 4: Stage Tricks, Neal explores a new job opportunity and Azathoth makes his move.

Neal and Sara's fake date occurred in The Mirror. For those of you interested in trivia, Echoes of a Violin is the third story that features Neal and Peter traveling by plane. In Choirboy Caffrey Neal and Peter flew back to New York from Saint Louis, a flight that landed Neal into hot water. In Caffrey Aloha, Neal's grandparents picked up the tab and everyone flew first class. Alas, this trip Neal was ensnared by bureaucratic regulations. No upgrades :( I wrote about Sara's secret side for our blog. Penna and I had a great time imagining which historical romances she would be interested in. We also developed several additional secrets for her. The blog post doesn't contain spoilers for what they might be, but there are a couple of clues in this chapter. One of them is about where she developed a love of costumes.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins this week include ones for Neal, Peter, and Sara. Kil_Rain has created art of Neal as a knight and in various costumes. I included a few of them for Sara to go goopy-eyed over.
Stage Tricks

Iver Heath. Thursday, May 26, 2005

Early on Thursday morning, Neal and Peter boarded the train at Paddington Station for their trip to Scima Workshop in Iver Heath.

During the journey, Peter reviewed the plans he'd made for El. Based on the number of items on the list, Neal suspected Peter was trying to keep his wife from having time to shop. But if that were his plan, he'd be foiled. Neal was preparing his own list for El's eyes only which had key shopping destinations marked next to the attractions Peter had outlined. Did El really want to go on a pub crawl when she'd only be in London a few days? Her skills as an actress made her the ideal choice for what Neal had in mind. He smiled as he pictured her making an off-hand remark about a pub on the King's Road which just happened to be one of London's best shopping streets.

Both he and Peter were in a good mood. The task force meetings had been a success. No threats from Azathoth to cast a pall on the proceedings. Neal would board the Eurostar at four thirty that afternoon and arrive two hours later in Paris. There he'd switch at the Austerlitz train station for the final leg of the trip. He'd considered renting a car—he had his eye on a sweet Audi convertible for the Loire countryside—but the train was much faster. Fiona said she had a car available for their use once he arrived in Amboise.

Peter glanced over at him and smiled. "You're thinking about Fiona, aren't you?"

"Have I become that obvious?"

"Sometimes. You'd offered to meet us in Paris on Monday, but we can manage without you if you want extra time. We're due to meet Marcel at ten o'clock on Tuesday. You could take the last train back from Amboise on Monday night and sleep in. You probably won't get much sleep before then."

Neal thought it better not to reply to that loaded comment. "In a way it will be a busman's honeymoon. She needs to work on the auction on Saturday and I offered to help."

Peter put down his notepad to stroke his chin. "Interesting word choice—honeymoon."

"Now, don't start."

"But you're thinking about it, aren't you?"

"Maybe . . . eventually, but that's a long way off. We haven't made any commitments. We both agreed to date others if we wanted to."

Peter raised a brow. "Have you?"

"No," Neal admitted.

"And I can't believe she'd find anyone that she'd rather be with than you. Does she know yet when she'll return to New York?"

"Her three months will be up in mid-June, but Weatherby's may extend it."

"If she comes back to New York, what then?"
"You wouldn't be trying to play matchmaker, would you? I thought that was El's job."

Peter shrugged. "A woman of Fiona's caliber doesn't come along that often. The longer you hold off, the more you risk someone else capturing her heart."

"Gee, thanks. Give me something more to stress about. How long did you wait before proposing to El?"

"Three months of excruciating agony, worrying that I was moving too fast but panicking I wasn't acting quickly enough."

"I can relate." Neal turned his head to gaze out the window at the countryside. The train was whisking through parkland and would be at the station soon. Were he and Fiona ready for the next step? What was the next step? Couldn't they just stay *amis-amants*? But would she give up on him if he didn't say something? Maybe she hoped to discuss it over the weekend. He'd rather have retrieved the Braque first, but it should be a straightforward job.

His future in New York was looking secure. For the next several years he'd be working on his doctorate. But what if Fiona weren't returning to New York? Seeking some kind of commitment wouldn't be fair for either one of them. It made sense not to bring up the subject till she knew something definite about her work assignment. All those Frenchmen with their seductive accents . . . She was a Brit. Were they as susceptible to the French as American women were?

The train began to slow down. Neal could see the station ahead and reached for his schedule. A shuttlebus from Scima would arrive in ten minutes. All was proceeding by clockwork. That was the strategy he needed for his love life. It was truly unfortunate no one had supplied him with the appropriate timetable to consult.

When they disembarked, Neal put aside thoughts of Fiona to focus on Scima. The bus ride was an adventure in itself. As they rode through the sprawling facility, Neal caught glimpses of actors in makeup and costumes. Props were being carried about and scenery loaded onto trucks. Everywhere people were scurrying like so many ants, each determinedly pursuing their mission. He'd never been on a studio lot before and was fascinated by what he saw. In addition to special effects, many live sequences were filmed on Scima's soundstages. It was a shame Peter didn't plan to stick around for the tour afterward. How could a presentation on international mortgage fraud compare with a behind the scenes look at the special effects for *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*? Or a sneak peek at what they were preparing for *Doctor Who*?

But even more important than Harry Potter and the Doctor was H.P. Lovecraft. Did Alistair Chapman have anything significant to report? Chapman had mentioned at the convention how often squid-faced aliens were used in science fiction. For him to have seen artwork that resembled Neal's painting could simply indicate that someone else liked tentacles, or it could be yet another gauntlet tossed down by Azathoth. Whatever it was, they'd soon find out.

The shuttle took them directly to Chapman's office in an anonymous brick shoebox of a building. The magic Scima created for film obviously didn't extend to their offices.

When they entered the utilitarian building, the secretary immediately showed them in. Chapman looked just like Neal remembered. His black turtleneck and Italian-cut trousers must be his signature look. He greeted them warmly. "A pleasure to see you both. If I'd realized you were with the FBI, I would have been more circumspect in my remarks at the convention." He gestured for them to take their seats in the two chairs facing his desk.

Chapman's office looked high tech and sleek. The furniture was tubular with leather upholstery. One
wall was filled with a row of large monitors. Clay models of creatures shared space on the bookcases with books, scripts, and computer printouts. Several Oscar and BAFTA statuettes were prominently displayed.

"We're in your debt for having discovered the attempted fraud on our studio so swiftly," Chapman said. "Did you discover who was responsible for the false emails?"

"Not yet," Peter replied. "Since the case is still being investigated, I'm afraid I can't discuss any details."

Chapman waved aside his explanation. "Our professions force both of us to be discreet. Let me get to the point. When I saw Mr. Caffrey's painting at the convention, I mentioned it seemed familiar. Over the weekend I realized why. Before I go any further, I must ask you to treat everything I disclose as confidential. Given your occupations, I know that won't be an issue."

They nodded their agreement.

"You may be aware that we're currently working on special effects for the next season of Doctor Who."

"I thought that was the TARDIS I saw from the bus," Neal said.

Chapman smiled. "That one's on permanent display so visitors can photograph our famous blue police box. The working models are all on soundstages. A new alien species has been created for this season, the Ood. An Ood is vaguely humanoid but its face resembles a squid with a mass of tentacles for a mouth." He paused, appearing to enjoy their reaction. "One of the concept drawings bears a striking resemblance to your painting, Mr. Caffrey."

"Please call me Neal. May we see it?"

"Of course. When I was at the convention, I'd picked up from a colleague a copy of the catalog which was used by the judges for the painting competition. I was able to compare your painting with the concept work." He went over to a drafting table in a corner of the room and removed a watercolor from a protective sleeve. "Please judge for yourselves." He paused to fight back a sneeze. "Sorry. It's been a miserable allergy season." Sniffling, he returned to his desk for a tissue.

Neal had painted an expressionist rendering of the dining room where a man wearing a squid-faced mask had attacked him but he added fragments of realistic details. Scraps of the crimson wallpaper, the dusty chandelier, the heavy Victorian furnishings, even the old German porcelain dinnerware were all present even though Neal realized he'd probably lose points for mixing realism with expressionism. That painting had been a personal challenge to Azathoth. Although the odds that the cybercriminal would ever see the painting were remote, Neal believed it was worth taking a chance. Azathoth had monitored Neal and Peter's activities in the past. Would he take the bait and make some response to the painting? Apparently he had.

In the watercolor, an attack was also taking place in a dining room, and the assailant bore a strong resemblance to Neal's. But even more striking were the similarities in the wallpaper and furnishings of the room. Even the dinnerware was identical.

"Who painted this?" Peter demanded, "and when?"

"A freelance concept artist who worked primarily in our gaming division. We circulated an invitation among our employees for submissions back in January and she sent this in on February 15."

"And the name?" Neal asked, knowing it already. When Chapman referred to a woman, it was
obvious.

"Marta Kolar."

After Chapman's revelation, Peter requested an office where they could work in privacy. They were shown into a small meeting room down the hallway. Peter's first call was to Hobhouse. It would be several hours before anyone would be awake in New York, but he went ahead and texted Jones and Tricia, while Neal sent messages to Travis and Diana.

Chapman had supplied them with the file on Marta Kolar. She'd worked through February at Scima's studio in Prague. Her present location was unknown. That in itself was a puzzle. How was it they'd never heard she worked for Scima?

"Jacek may have hacked the records to falsify her work information," Peter speculated. "The Czechs weren't aware of our interest in Scima Workshop."

"The police reported her missing in early March, about the same time Jacek also disappeared from the grid."

"This has a bad smell to it," Peter said, shaking his head. "Why would Marta do it? It's as if she wanted to be caught."

"We know how Azathoth likes to boast. He could be taunting us with her identity?" Neal suggested. "We can't locate her. She's probably changed her name and her appearance."

"Or it could be someone else posing as Marta." Peter paused. "You mentioned Richard was working with European developers at Scima Gameworks. Make sure he's aware of this latest development." He opened his briefcase and pulled out the bus schedule. "There's a shuttle leaving in thirty minutes. I'll take it and will continue working on the case in London with John."

Under the circumstances Neal didn't feel right about heading off for a tour of the facility. "Do you want me to go back with you?" he offered.

"Thanks, but that's not necessary. You earned this trip to the film studio. I'll keep you filled in on developments. There's no reason for you not to take the train to Amboise this afternoon. You'll have the next four days off. Consider your vacation to have already started."

That didn't set well with Neal. "Will you be able to let others investigate this when El's in town?"

"By the time she arrives, I'll have had plenty of time to set the investigation in motion. Don't worry. I won't let this ruin her first trip to Europe." Peter glanced at his watch. "You're supposed to join your tour at nine thirty. You better be on your way. I have one more call to make then I'll head back for London."

Neal stood up. "In that case, see you in Paris!"

Peter smiled. "That sounds good to me too. It wasn't so very long ago I wondered if I'd serve you with an Interpol arrest warrant in Paris. Now we'll both be their guests."

"You're not missing the good old days I hope?"

"Not for one minute."
Neal was still smiling as he walked out of the office onto the backlot. They had a major lead for Marta Kolar. London had gone without a hitch. He could afford to relax for a few days.

Chapman's secretary had given him a map and indicated the location of Building 30-C which was the starting point for tours. Before he left, he'd studied it so he wouldn't have to consult a map as he walked around. No need to shout that he was a visitor. For a few minutes he could pretend he was an actor on a set. That was a con he'd never pulled. Henry had been able to visit their grandmother Irene on film sets when he was a child. He'd never told Neal what mischief he'd gotten into, but knowing Henry it must have been good. This was Neal's chance to make up for lost opportunities.

Aiding in the deception were the name badges he and Peter had been given. From a distance they didn't look very different from the ones employees wore. Memorizing a map was a skill Neal had learned long ago. It'd held him in good stead for the roof maze of the Louvre and the back alleys in Rome. The labyrinth of buildings at Scima Workshop would pose no problem.

When Neal arrived at his destination, he was several minutes early. No sign of the guide. The door to the building was stenciled with the words Doctor Who. Would he be able to visit one of the Doctor's soundstages? Neal was glad he'd read up on the show.

Some props had been set up in a large parking lot. Five-foot tall mock-ups of building rooftops apparently were meant for a London scene. The row consisted of three buildings, each about ten feet apart. The scene made him wonder if they were training cat burglars.

"There you are!" Neal turned to see who'd called out and saw a pretty blonde wearing denim coveralls and a striped crop top running toward him. "I've been looking for you everywhere."

He smiled an apology. "I was—"

"Never mind, we'll work you in." She stood back and eyed him up and down. That was a little disconcerting but nice.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Do I meet with your approval?"

She circled him. Was she undressing him with her eyes? Should he pose? "The suit's okay although it's really too dapper for the Doctor and where are your trainers?" She shook her head with disapproval. "Wardrobe can do better than that. With your looks, you're one of the best ones I've seen. They shouldn't have handicapped you with the wrong clothes. Follow me."

Clearly, she'd confused him with someone else, but it wouldn't be any fun to tell her that. Peter had said he should consider himself on vacation. And he'd just landed in the middle of an adventure.

The blonde introduced herself as Bridget, a costume coordinator for Doctor Who. Apparently Neal was about to try out to be a stunt double. He'd never done any stunt double work, but how hard could it be for an expert cat burglar? Weren't they about the same thing?

The wardrobe department alone was worth the con. Neal could have spent hours among the costumes, but was hustled into a cubicle where he was handed a brown pinstripe suit and white tennis shoes.

"Much better," Bridget said approvingly when he came out. "You don't need makeup. You're close enough without it. We can always add it later if necessary. Come along. Move sharp."

Neal followed her eagerly as he dredged up his recollection of Doctor Who episodes. CBS had
carried the first season in April and he'd watched a couple of them, mainly because Travis was such a fan. The Doctor that season had been Christopher Eccleston. Neal had seen a few promotional photos of Tennant as the Doctor. He had a wide-eyed, sardonic look that Neal could nail easily. Goofy grin, yeah he could do that. Neal's professorial face had some similarities to Tennant's serious stare. He began flexing his facial muscles as they dashed to the set.

Bridget looked at him and grinned. "Oh, you're good. You'll knock their knickers off, I warrant."

A middle-aged scruffy dude wearing a Doctor Who t-shirt and carrying a clipboard walked up. "You better be worth the wait. You ready?"

Neal flashed a megawatt smile. "Prepare to be dazzled." Scruff-face introduced himself as Colin and grabbed a cameraman to shoot footage. He had Neal perform running jumps on their mock buildings. Colin requested flying starts, rolling stops, crazy can't-get-a-grip stops. Whatever they threw at him, Neal landed. He was glad he wasn't wearing his own suit. That brown pinstripe was taking a beating, but Neal could have kept performing all day.

"How'd I do?" he asked at the end, faking a British accent. All those months of listening to Fiona's accent were paying off big time. Bridget gave him an encouraging wink.

"Not bad," Colin admitted.

"Oh, come on. Tell me anyone did better."

He shrugged and gave a half-smile. "Maybe not, and you've got the right attitude. What are your specialties?"

"Wall-scaling, high wire, base-jumping, you name it—I'm your man. Crack pistol shot, expert fencer."

"Fencing, huh? Can you fence with an umbrella?"

Neal shrugged. "Why not?"

Colin tossed him an umbrella and kept one for himself. They staged an impromptu battle on the pavement. Colin wasn't bad, but he was no d'Artagnan. Neal threw in a few acrobatic leaps for good measure. Several stagehands had gathered to watch and were cheering them on.

"Take that, Sneed!" Neal said triumphantly, holding the vanquished scruff-face down on the ground with the tip of his umbrella to the sounds of wild clapping and cheers. He laughed and helped Colin up. "So, do I get the job?"

"Not yet," Colin said with a grin, "but you get to advance to the next level." He escorted him to a small building which was equipped with a bare stage and large screen.

A heavyset bald man who was also wearing a Dr. Who t-shirt introduced himself as Edwin, the lead stunt coordinator. He had Neal stand on stage while he shot him from various angles. "You have the look. A little makeup and you could be a twin for David. Let's see how good you are at imitating him. I'll flash videos on the screen. You imitate his looks and mannerisms. The first run-through, try to capture his movements. You'll get five chances for each minute-long clip."

The poses ranged from serious to goofy, dramatic to comedic. Neal swiped some hair onto his forehead and followed David's every move. It was like looking in a mirror and he loved it. He was hammering his comic Doctor impression when he heard a commotion coming from behind the cameras. After he finished the take, he peered out to see what was happening. David Tennant and
Billie Piper had arrived on set and they'd just watched him play the Doctor!

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

After chatting with David and Billie, Neal was ready to sign up for his new life as a stunt double. But he knew it was only a matter of time till his TARDIS would plummet to earth.

David and Billie had just walked off when a young guy in a brown pinstripe suit and tennis shoes ran up to the soundstage. He was panting and needed a moment before he could catch his breath. "Sorry I'm late," he wheezed. "My car died on me. Is this where the stunt double tryouts are being held?"

Upon questioning, this was the fellow whom Bridget had been searching for when she latched onto Neal. When Neal explained who he was, Colin didn't seem to mind. Quite the contrary. He gave Neal his card and suggested he fill out an application form. Bridget couldn't stop laughing about it and even gave him a sales pitch about how the life of a stunt double was much more glamorous than working for the FBI. Neal had no intention of filling out the form but he didn't need to leave for his train yet. He could enjoy the fantasy for a few more minutes.

Bridget had a delightful accent which Neal had to restrain himself from copying. "The snack trolley's just around the corner," she said. "The next appointment's not for a few minutes. Fancy a soda?"

They sat on a bench to drink while Neal explained how he'd won a tour of the facility.

She popped the top of a lemon soda and clinked cans with him. "So you know Alistair Chapman? He's a regular charmer, that one. You might think he'd be unapproachable—he's such a bigwig—but he's sweet as licorice to all the personnel. Some of the directors stay in their offices and rarely mingle with us lowborns, but not him. He takes a personal interest in every facet of the production. He's even involved with music production."

"I didn't realize Scima handled the music as well."

She nodded vigorously. "That's not always the case, but for Doctor Who Scima's in charge of both the special effects and the music."

"What kind of music does Chapman select?"

"For the Doctor, he generally goes for the latest pop hits. Weird, huh? He doesn't look the type at all. I would have picked him for high-brow stuff. A few weeks ago I found out I was right. I picked up his iPod by mistake and didn't recognize any of it. Classical piano music. Not at all like the Doctor."

Chapman and classical piano music? It suited him. He had a sophisticated look about him. Neal could picture him at the piano . . . Now why did he think of that? Perhaps it was his fingers. They looked like the fingers of a pianist.

Bridget continued to rattle on. "Last week I overhead Alistair lecturing a set designer about medieval astronomy devices."

"Really?" Neal laughed. "That's hard to believe. What medieval devices are there? Old telescopes?"

"No, these were funny contraptions. They looked a little like globes but were circled with brass rings. I can't remember the name, but it sounds a little like armlets. Apparently Alistair is an expert on those too."

What she'd described sounded like armillary spheres such as the one Diana had been given at the
speakeasy party. Azathoth had used them in his house of horror last fall where Peter had to manipulate the rings to solve the puzzle. Could Chapman be Azathoth after all? His head spinning with the implications, Neal pumped Bridget for every bit of information he could extract from her.

"I have a couple of forms for you to fill out. They're back at the costume warehouse. Colin was most insistent, which is really quite surprising. Usually we're doing the opposite. It seems like every day someone is trying to sneak on set to get a job or sell their script."

As they walked back to the warehouse, Bridget continued to reel off the stories. Between the latest James Bond movie, *Casino Royale*, which was currently in production, the Harry Potter movies, and *Doctor Who*, their campus was the constant target of people aspiring to be in the movies.

She pointed to a tall stack of papers on her desk. "These are all applications for stunt doubles. Production's demanded we interview them all by the end of the day tomorrow. We'll have to work till at least eight o'clock and I bet it will be later." She had a knack of grinning that made Neal feel like he was part of a conspiracy. "It should be a circus. Doubles for the doctor and Rose Tyler everywhere. I should suggest that to the scriptwriters."

"A *Doctor Who* episode featuring stunt doubles? If that happens, ring me up. I want to be there."

"I'll make a note," she countered. Neal expected she was merely joking, but she pulled out a notebook and scribbled something inside. Was this how movie careers were made? What would Peter say if he got a call? "Last month a pair of writers tried to sneak in to sell their script to the *Doctor Who* production team," she confided, snapping the notebook shut. "I gave them high marks for creativity. They'd even dressed in costume. One of them wore a leopard outfit."

At her mention of a leopard, Neal paid even closer attention. A leopard was forever associated in his mind with the Leopard—Klaus Mansfeld.

"They'd written a takeoff on *The Pink Panther*. I think it was called *The Veiled Leopard*. I chatted with them about it and thought it was quite clever."

"Were they able to submit their script?"

She nodded. "They did but it was quickly shot down. My girlfriend told me about it. She said Alistair was blowing smoke out of his ears when he heard about the stunt. Afterward he enacted even tighter security restrictions, but they haven't cut back on the number of attempts."

Bridget was called away shortly afterward, leaving Neal alone at her desk to fill out the form. But forms weren't on his mind. Chapman was.

The knowledge of Lovecraft, armillary spheres, classical music, sensitivity to the Leopard—they all tied Chapman not only to Azathoth but to Klaus. Chapman couldn't possibly be Jacek. His body type and age were far too different. Who was left? Neal could think of only one possibility who had all the attributes—Rolf.

Shocked, Neal sat back to consider the distinct possibility that Rolf was still alive. Tricia said authorities had investigated the circumstances of Rolf’s death. His parents had viewed the corpse. But what if the corpse had been in such bad shape that identification was difficult? Rolf had supposedly died a year before Neal met Klaus. What if instead he’d gone into hiding? That would have been around the time Ydrus was forming. Rolf could be the brains behind Ydrus. Had he secretly worked hand in hand with Klaus, keeping his existence a secret from Neal? Not informing Chantal? Letting his parents grieve? Neal was convinced Chantal believed Rolf was dead. But if he’d faked his death instead, everything would fall into place. It was all so neat, so simple. Everything fit. Even the plastic
Neal called Peter, but was connected to his voice mail. After leaving a message, Neal also texted him, saying it was urgent.

He glanced at his watch. If he didn’t leave now, he’d miss his train, but Fiona would understand. He’d call her and let her know he’d take a later train. This was too important.

The wardrobers were all busy helping would-be stunt doubles with outfits. Neal noticed a supply of temporary ID badges for doubles on Bridget's desk. A seed of an idea sprouted. He pocketed two of the badges.

When he exited the warehouse, it was midday. Most of the workers were standing around food trucks. Peter still hadn't responded to his messages. While Neal was texting Peter a second time, John Hobhouse called him.

"I'm trying to track Peter down," John said. "He was supposed to be back for the eleven o'clock presentation, but hasn't shown up."

"He told me he was catching the 9:30 shuttle." A warning bell dinged in Neal's head. "I tried his cell a few minutes ago and didn't get an answer."

John reported the same. Neal promised to call him back as soon as he had news and sprinted toward the front gate. The sign-in sheets should show whether or not Peter had left. As he ran, he sorted through options. The train could have had equipment problems, but in that case Peter would have answered his phone. Transmission coverage was excellent in this part of the country, but he could have lost the phone or he might have a dead battery. But what were the odds of both the train having issues and his phone not being available? Not good. And in that case, Peter would have borrowed someone else's phone to call John.

That alarm in Neal's head turned into a siren.

The news at the front gate did nothing to quiet it. Peter had never signed out, which had to mean he was somewhere within the Scima campus. Neal identified himself to the front guard and requested security begin a search. He hitched a lift back to Chapman's office on a security cart. Should he instead call it Azathoth's office or Rolf's office? For now he'd stick with Chapman, but Neal was convinced they were one and the same man.

He updated John during the ride back but didn't mention his suspicions about Chapman over the phone since the driver would have heard. Instead he texted that he had evidence linking Azathoth and Chapman. His theory about Rolf would have to wait.

Neal decided to play the part of the unknowing dupe with Chapman, reasoning that his best chance to find Peter would be to lull him into a false sense of security. He found his quarry at work in his office. It was the lunch hour. Had he been waiting for Neal?

When Neal reported Peter's disappearance, Chapman canvassed the personnel in his office. No one acknowledged having seen Peter since he left to catch the bus.

"What can I do to help?" Chapman put on a good act. His face oozed sympathy and concern. Neal found himself wanting to throttle him.

Instead, he acted too dazed to respond, using the time to plan his next move. Peter's life could depend on it. John was on his way. The police would arrive any minute. But what help would they be? Azathoth had tossed down the gauntlet personally to Neal just like he did in the house of horror.
Solve the puzzle and Peter lives. Lose and Peter dies.

Azathoth liked theatrics. He would have taken advantage of the Scima soundstages to pull off something sadistically Machiavellian. But what? Not that much time had elapsed. The odds were high Peter was still on the Scima campus. Always in the past Azathoth had left clues. He wanted to gloat. What did Neal have to work with?

Was Marta's painting a sign? The attacker wore a squid-faced mask. Squids and the sea were the theme of a holographic display at the house of horror where he and Peter had been held captive. Neal's second painting at the convention had shown Azathoth emerging from an ocean. In Prague, a detective was found in a swimming pool with a squid glued to his face. The painting by Marta Kolar was a watercolor. Water and squids—those were the common threads. Were there any bodies of water at Scima?

Chapman was perched at the edge of the desk. He pulled out his cell phone to make a call. He was growing impatient, tapping with his left little finger against his knee as he talked.

When he ended the call, Neal asked, "Do you have any lakes or lagoons on your campus?"

"No, but there's a large lake in Black Park, about a twenty-minute drive away."

"How about swimming pools?"

"We have a couple of small ones. Then there's the Underwater Stage. It just opened on the eighteenth of this month."

"What's it like?"

"It's a state-of-the-art facility—a tank twenty feet deep and seventy feet long designed for underwater shoots. It's the only underwater stage in Europe and one of the finest in the world," he added proudly. He opened a drawer in his desk to pull out a brochure. "We'd prepared this as a press release. Take a look."

Neal studied the photos which showed the stage equipped with props for a scene. Azathoth loved theatrics. Why use a lake where Peter might not be found when Azathoth had this in his backyard? Looking up, he asked, "Can you take me there?"

"Of course. My car's parked outside." The stage was situated several minutes away from the main campus. Neal texted John where he was going and with whom. John texted back that the police would head straight there and should be at Scima within a few minutes.

Neal was allowing himself to be driven to the stage by the man he was convinced was Azathoth. It was a huge gamble. Would Azathoth take the opportunity to seize him too? Neal was taking the chance that Rolf didn't want to burn his Chapman alias. He'd soon find out if he was right.

On the way to the Underwater Stage, Chapman explained that they were preparing a special effects scene where the TARDIS would materialize in the middle of the ocean. They'd moved some of the props in place over the past few days.

Oods. Water. Neal felt more certain than ever he'd guessed right. "Can you drive faster?"

Chapman nodded and accelerated the Audi, taking the turns like a race car driver. Neal noticed his hand resting on the gear shift, his little finger tapping... As soon as they arrived at the sheet metal building, Neal raced up the steps to go inside, followed closely by Chapman. When they arrived at the door, Chapman reached in his pocket for a key, explaining they kept it locked when no one was
present.

The large sheet metal structure was nearly filled with what appeared to be an immense swimming pool. As Chapman had noted, there were a few props around. Plants to simulate an ocean floor, fake boulders.

"Now why is that there?" Chapman pointed to the center of the pool. Resting on the bottom was the TARDIS. "It wasn't supposed to be moved into position yet."

Neal took one look and raced to the edge of the pool, stripping off his jacket as he ran.

"What are you doing?" Chapman demanded.

"Call the police and update them," Neal yelled, toeing off his shoes and socks. He dove into the water.

Peter was in the TARDIS. Neal knew it with unwavering certainty. It was exactly the kind of bravura taunt Azathoth would make. He swam till he was directly over the phone booth then took a deep breath and dove straight down. The pool was twenty feet deep and the water was crystal clear, but when he got to the TARDIS, the door wouldn't open. He wasted precious seconds trying to force the door open. He couldn't see inside. No way of knowing if Peter were there. Finally he had to return to the surface for more air. Dimly he could hear Chapman call out something, but he blocked him out.

He felt along his shirt collar for a lock pick, filled his lungs with air and dove back down. The lock was a simple one. He unlocked it in seconds.

Peter was inside.

Neal involuntarily gasped at the sight, losing precious oxygen. Peter appeared unconscious, his body limp. His head was covered by a latex Ood mask. Neal didn't let himself consider the other possibility.

The phone booth hadn't filled completely with water when Neal opened the door, but it was now. He dragged Peter out of the booth and wrapped both arms around him. Propelling himself with a quick kick against the TARDIS, Neal swam up to the surface. Peter was a dead weight in his arms.

The noise level at the surface was a shock after the silence of being underwater. Two cops had jumped in the water and swam over to assist. Taking over, they hoisted Peter into the waiting arms of other cops at the side of pool who immediately set to work removing the mask. Willing arms helped Neal out of the pool.

The mask slipped off easily. Peter's eyes were closed, but he was breathing. Neal closed his eyes for a moment in relief. He was holding out hope he'd been in time.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "We'll make sure he gets through this." Neal looked up to see a policeman crouched beside him. "The medics are here now. You need to step back."

John had entered the building and was sprinting up the stairs to the pool. Chapman was standing to one side, talking with a security guard.

It had all been a trap. Chapman at the sci-fi convention, the invitation for the tour, the watercolor by Marta. All an elaborate hoax designed by Azathoth to kidnap Peter, and they'd fallen for it.

Was this the end game Azathoth had wanted? Had he really meant for Peter to die?
Notes: What do you think? Was this simply another cruel hoax? Did Azathoth intend something deadlier, or was his goal something else? Whatever it was, Neal's not done playing the Doctor. Next week in Chapter 5: Neal and the Doctor, he returns to Scima and brings a friend along.

It was a gift that the timing of this story worked out so well with actual events concerning Doctor Who. In the summer of 2005, the first season starring David Tennant (Series 2) was in pre-production. The Ood made their debut appearance in "The Impossible Planet" during that upcoming season. The Underwater Stage is part of the campus at Pinewood Studios in Iver Heath. It was opened in May 2005, and was used to film sequences in that episode. The Veiled Leopard was released in March 2006 as a CD audio adventure. I invented the producers' attempt to sell it as a screenplay.

Neal got to experience what it was like on a film set. If he'd bumped into characters rehearsing White Collar, this would have turned into a meta chapter. In Arkham Files and A Caffrey Christmas Carol, Penna and I have played in the meta sandbox, where characters are aware of their fictional counterparts. She wrote about the concept this week for our blog in "Trying new things: Meta." I wrote about Klaus and Rolf's connection to classical piano music. The post is called "Klaus Always Loved the Classics."

I hope everyone had a great Valentine's Day. It will be a while in the Caffrey Conversation timeline before another Valentine's Day rolls around, but Penna has been participating in the AO3 version: the Chocolate Box gift exchange challenge. The stories have just been posted. You'll need to wait till February 21 to read the authors' names. I'll have news about her stories next week. Many thanks to Penna for her outstanding beta help while she was busy writing three stories for the challenge.

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
New pins this week include scenes from Scima, the Underwater Stage, and Doctor Who.
"I promise you, El, Peter will be fine." As Neal spoke the words of reassurance, he realized they were as much for his benefit as hers. "I met with the doctor just a few minutes ago. She said the drug used was a powerful sedative which will keep him knocked out probably till the morning, but once he sleeps it off, he can be released. We should both be at the airport to welcome you."

This was the fourth call Neal had made to Elizabeth. She was taking a late flight from New York at the conclusion of a wedding reception she'd coordinated. She'd tried to switch her reservation but the earlier flights were booked.

Neal had ridden with Peter in the ambulance to University College Hospital in London. Medical personnel supplied Neal with scrubs to wear instead of his drenched suit. While John Hobhouse stayed behind to oversee operations at Scima, Neal spent the afternoon checking on Peter, placing calls to New York, and switching his travel plans.

Only a few weeks ago Peter had called Fiona with news about Neal's poisoning. Now Neal needed to tell her an attempt had been made on Peter's life. She handled it better than he would have expected. The only thing that was certain was that he wouldn't take the train to Amboise tonight. The entire weekend was in doubt and Paris as well. The plans to recover the Braque painting might have to be shelved.

Neal got up and refilled his cup from the coffee maker at the courtesy beverage counter. The police had secured one of the family rooms for his use. It came equipped with a couch and arm chairs. A round table was serving as his desk. Neal didn't have his laptop with him, but he'd gotten paper from the nurses' station and was relying on his cell phone. Constables had been stationed in the hallway. No one was taking any chances on a repetition.

At the sound of the door opening, Neal swung around to see John enter. "I spoke with Peter's physician on the way in. You must be reassured."

"I was concerned that he hadn't regained consciousness," Neal admitted, "but she said that was a normal reaction from the drug he was given."

John nodded. "He'd been injected with quite a nasty cocktail. If you hadn't arrived when you did . . ."

There was no need to remind Neal. The water level was up to Peter's neck when he opened the door.

John filled a cup with hot water and placed a tea bag in it. He brought the cup over and sat down at the table. "We have several teams now on location. They're in the midst of interviewing all the studio personnel. The surveillance feeds will be brought to London for processing. I'm not dismissing your suspicions about Chapman being Azathoth, but I must say he's been instrumental in expediting coordination between Scima and our units."

"About that . . . There's something else you should know." Neal drew a breath and explained why he believed that Chapman was Rolf. John had already heard about Marta Kolar being the artist of the watercolor, but this was Neal's first chance to report what he'd learned from Bridget.

To say John was skeptical was an understatement. "I too had my doubts about Chapman after his
actions at the science fiction convention, but this evidence seems too flimsy to be considered. Simply
because Chapman reacted strongly to someone in a leopard suit, you leap to the assumption that he
feared he'd be linked to Klaus Mansfeld?" John had a sympathetic look on his face, a clear tell he
assumed Neal was still in shock and not thinking straight.

"It's not just the leopard incident," he insisted. "How many creative directors know about armillary
spheres?"

That at least got John's attention. "I'll grant you that's an obscure object, and it strengthens the case
that Chapman may be Azathoth. But I don't remember anyone claiming Rolf was particularly
knowledgeable about antique astronomy devices. We examined Chapman's history thoroughly. He's
been at Scima for decades. How could Rolf have stepped into his shoes?"

"There's always a way," Neal said, trying not to sound argumentative. "Rolf was reportedly killed in
a car crash. If the corpse had been burned beyond recognition, dental records could have been
substituted and evidence planted to make it appear that it was Rolf in the car. The second step—
assuming another identity—is more difficult, but with the proper preparation, achievable. That plastic
surgeon in Salzburg? We've considered he might have performed surgery on Jacek or Marta Kolar
but what if he operated on Rolf as well? Alistair Chapman's wife died seven years ago. He has no
children, no close relatives. Rolf was highly knowledgeable about computers and fine art. He could
have stepped into the role of a creative director with relative ease."

"It's a tantalizing theory, but there's simply not enough actionable evidence to support it."

"I have a few more bits. You probably won't jump up and down over them either, but when the
pieces are added up, I think a shape is emerging and it's Rolf's. Klaus was an excellent pianist and
told me Rolf was as well. They used to play duets. They were trained as classical musicians. They
favored nineteenth and early twentieth century composers—Schubert, Rachmaninoff, Liszt." Neal
told him what Bridget had said about Chapman's playlist on his iPod.

He'd have to give John high marks. Although he was obviously still skeptical, he didn't interrupt and
even took a few notes.

"And then there's this. When I was in Chapman's car, I noticed his hand—" Neal stopped and stood
up to pace. "You'll think I'm grasping at straws," he warned.

He shrugged. "You have an excuse. Go ahead. What did you see?"

"He was tapping with his little finger," and Neal demonstrated on the desk. "It wasn't just a tap but
he was pressing into the leather knob of the gear shift with his little finger. I've seen that tell before.
Klaus had it. I asked Chantal about it once. She said it went back to when he had piano lessons as a
boy. He had a teacher who harped on him to strengthen his little fingers and had him perform the
exercise constantly, Rolf may have developed the same habit."

John didn't say anything. He had his elbows propped on the table and rested his chin on his hands as
he mulled over Neal's report. Neal picked up his coffee cup and refilled it for the tenth time. He
returned to the window, gazing down at the street below as he formulated the con . . .

"Let's assume for the moment you're right." Neal spun around. "To clarify, I didn't say I'm a believer,
but it's worth taking a hard look." Neal pulled up a chair and sat opposite John. "According to your
scenario, Rolf, masquerading as Chapman, lured the two of you to Scima Workshop."

"That's right. He could have easily discovered I was exhibiting at the sci-fi convention. Rolf was the
one who hacked the film studio's email and then played the part of the victim."
"I assume you believe Rolf also ordered Marta to paint the watercolor you saw in his office. Why?"

"To make sure Peter came with me to Scima," Neal said promptly. "Azathoth has been monitoring our movements. We know that from the flash drive we found. He wanted both of us on campus, and suspected that Peter would insist on accompanying me once he heard about the painting. And he was right. Rolf holds both of us to blame for his brother's death. We know Rolf had an interest in art. I can't prove that he engaged in any criminal activities, but the brothers were so close, it seems likely. Rolf may have been working for Ydrus those years I was in Geneva, but Klaus never told me."

John raised a brow. "And he didn't tell his wife either?"

Neal hesitated. "I can't believe Chantal knew he was alive. Klaus must have kept it a secret from her, too."

John didn't debate the point, for which Neal was grateful. He knew he could trust Chantal, but it would be difficult to explain why he was so positive. "If we continue with your scenario, the implication is that Rolf recruited the Kolars after Klaus died."

"It's more likely they'd been working for him all along," Neal corrected, "but like me, they didn't know it. Once Klaus died, Rolf took over Klaus's role. It's also possible Klaus told them about his brother. He may have been more open with them than he was with me."

John sat back in his chair and studied Neal. "How do you intend to prove this? Rolf's fingerprints aren't on file. His body was cremated and the ashes scattered. Do you have any DNA evidence?"

"I don't know of any," Neal admitted. "His parents may have saved something from him as a baby. I don't think Chantal has anything but I intend to ask her. The first step though is to search Chapman's office."

"You recognize that this is much too flimsy to present to the Home Office. I'd never be able to obtain a warrant for such a weak case. You should also know that I spoke with agents in Geneva this morning, and the Swiss continue to block our efforts to obtain Albert Wilmarth's bank account records. I haven't given up, but for the moment the backer of the Lovecraft board game is hiding behind Swiss privacy laws."

It wasn't a surprise but still disappointing to hear. "Don't they understand we're the good guys? What if I knew of another way to obtain evidence?"

John gave a half-smile. "That's why I like working with artists. Creativity in one field tends to lead to creativity in others. What do you have in mind?"

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Once John left, Neal placed a call to Sara. As predicted, when she heard about the attempt on Peter's life she was eager to join in. Together, they worked on their shopping list. Sara's obligations were light that day. She offered to leave work early to acquire the needed gear. Neal tracked down a motor scooter rental place in Iver near Scima. It closed at five, but Sara said she'd handle the paperwork and Neal could meet her there. The rental shop had a return box to place keys for late returns. All systems were fully operational for liftoff at six o'clock.

Neal wheeled John's metallic blue Jaguar into the motor scooter lot promptly at the appointed hour. The car drove like a dream, even better than Byron's. He still had to pinch himself that John had offered it to him. Even if Neal suspected it was partly so John would be guaranteed of seeing him after the con, he still appreciated his trust. Would Peter have agreed to the scheme John had signed
off on? Neal couldn't wait to tell him about it. Who would have thought a Brit was less of a stickler for rules and regulations than Peter?

Sara was standing outside the rental office beside a bright blue scooter. She had three large shopping bags next to her. Neal rolled down the window and waved at her as he drove past. Her face lit up when she saw who was at the wheel.

As he parked the car in the lot, she strolled over to greet him. "Nice wheels. James Bond would approve. How's Peter?"

"He's still out of it, but the doctor says that's to be expected. She believes it will be several more hours before the drug wears off. I was with Peter till I needed to leave to meet you. He woke up once but was too woozy to say anything. There's a police guard on his door and John promised to keep me posted. He's staying at the hospital during our caper."

"You realize that if Peter were awake, he probably wouldn't have allowed this."

Neal grinned. "I'm sure you're wrong. Since I started working for him, Peter's loosened up a lot. He rarely bothers quoting from the Bureau manual now."

"Oh, really? He wouldn't object to us sneaking into Scima as stunt doubles? He'd look the other way if you broke into Chapman's office?"

"Of course," Neal said, faking confidence and quickly changing the subject. "Any trouble finding the clothes?"

She eyed him skeptically, but didn't question him further on the legality of the con. "Not for a world-class shopper. I bought everything on our list, just as we discussed." She handed him a bag. "This one's for you. Brown pinstripe suit and white tennis shoes. Your helmet's in the other bag."

"What did you get for yourself?"

"I'll be a vision in a bouffant pink skirt, denim jacket, and blond wig. I scouted out locations before you arrived and there's a petrol station just down the street where we can change."

Neal grinned. "Jump in, luv. I'll give you a lift."

Minutes later, transformed into the Doctor and Rose Tyler, they returned to the motor scooter shop. Her blond wig looked better than the ones Neal had seen on the stunt doubles at the soundstage earlier in the day. Sara had pulled part of the hair back and tied it with a pink satin ribbon. Since she was going in as a stunt double, she didn't have to resemble Billie that closely, but Sara had copied her look well. She'd darkened her eyebrows, added dark eyeliner and eyelashes, and used a pale pink lipstick. When she caught Neal checking her out, she executed a perfect Billie pout. "Do I pass?"

"They'll want to hire you along with me."

"They didn't really want to hire you, did they?"

"If you don't believe me, ask the stunt coordinator, Colin Granger."

"Sure, Caffrey," she said giving a saucy toss of those blond locks. "Have you ever driven a scooter before? Maybe you should let me drive."

"Hey, I've driven a scooter in Milan and lived to tell the tale. I'll be fine on the back roads of the English countryside." Neal slapped on his helmet. "We only have three miles to go. You think you
"Can fit that skirt behind me?"

"No problem," she scoffed, swinging into position. The scooter seat was barely large enough for the two of them. It would be a cozy ride.

He turned his head to look at her, "Hang on tight, luv. Can't have you falling off."

"I was riding sidesaddle when I was five."

"Brave words. You're clear on the plan?"

She nodded. "We putt-putt in on this toy. I distract the staff in Chapman's office while you ransack it for evidence, and we scoot out of there."

"That about sums it up. I checked with John, and the agents have finished interviewing studio personnel for the day. They've gotten the names of everyone on set and will follow up over the next few days. Because of the lockdown, the tryouts will be running late. The studio should be swarming with Doctor and Rose wannabes. Two more won't be noticed. He reached into his pocket. "Here's your ID badge. Your name is Sandie Putnam. You flew all the way from Cincinnati to try out."

"Why Cincinnati?"

"I don't know where your hometown is. Sin-Sin sounded about right."

"Hey, mate, are you saying I'm a loose woman?"

"Anyone who reads the kind of fiction you do would like some sin, I figure."

"Ooh, I can play with that. I'll be a sinful Rose Tyler."

"What is your hometown, by the way?" He turned on the ignition.

"Hold on, who are you supposed to be?"

"Shawn Manchester from Boise, Idaho, trying to make a name for myself." Neal took off the brake and started to accelerate.

"Wait!" Sara dug into her purse and pulled out two pair of sunglasses. She'd brought aviators for Neal, and large pink-framed ones for herself. Good thing it was summer or it'd be too dark to see. "Now we're ready, guv!"

It was one slick operation. James Bond and Tiffany Case couldn't have staged it better. They breezed through the studio entrance, flashing their IDs. The guard simply smiled and waved them through. Sara blew him a kiss as Neal revved up the little scooter.

Although it was evening, you couldn't tell it from all the activity. It seemed that everyone was in a hurry to finish up the work which had been put on hold for several hours. The only potential problem Neal could see was that Chapman hadn't left.

When they pulled up in front of his office, they strolled inside with their Rose and the Doctor act, pretending to practice routines before going in front of the cameras. They performed a scene where they were being chased by a villain into the corridor leading to Chapman's office. No one noticed when Neal leaned against a window and unlocked it. They then returned to the front reception area where he left Sara to perform her solo act while he circled around to the back of the building. She'd prepared a script about the amorous adventures she intended to have with the Doctor and had
practiced it on Neal during the ride to Scima. That girl had a vivid imagination. Was it due to all the historical romances she read? He had enough teasing material for decades. Sara thought she could keep the staff occupied for fifteen minutes. He suspected she had enough stories for at least a half-hour.

He slipped on his gloves and waited till the coast was clear to climb through the window. His luck held—Chapman had already left for the day. The Doctor's sonic screwdriver wasn't necessary as Neal slipped into his office without anyone the wiser.

As expected, he found a few hairs on the back of Chapman's desk chair. Neal collected them into evidence bags, but he hoped for something more. Obtaining reliable DNA evidence from hair was problematic, with courts increasingly questioning its use.

Assuming Chapman was Azathoth, Neal's chances of finding anything on his computer were in the cellar. He wouldn't have been careless enough to leave incriminating evidence on it. Even so, Neal spent a few minutes trying to break into his computer. As he'd predicted, he was dead in the water without Travis's devices.

Next Neal checked the wastebasket. Some rumpled up tissues. Possible mucous membrane samples? Chapman blew his nose a couple of times during the morning meeting. Neal collected them as well. The samples might be fresh enough to use.

The desk was locked but trivial to pick. Chapman was meticulous in his habits. The drawers were all carefully arranged. It was tempting to attribute his organizational skills to German efficiency. Neal searched the files but found nothing incriminating.

But wedged behind a drawer was something more promising—a playing card from the game *Arkham Horror*. An odd item for Chapman to have, but much more likely for Albert Wilmarth aka Azathoth aka Rolf.

Chapman had left his iPod in the office. Neal found it on a shelf in his bookcase. He glanced at his watch. Enough time for a quick scan of the selections.

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

When Neal arrived back at the hospital, Peter was still asleep with John keeping watch. They moved into the family room where Neal gave him a report of what had happened and turned over his evidence bags. John promised to drop them off at the lab on the way home.

Neal settled in to wait in Peter's room. Dim illumination was provided by lights at the head of the bed. Peter was disturbingly quiet even though he appeared to have the minimal number of tubes. This was the first time Neal had stayed with a patient overnight in the hospital. Up to now he'd always been the one lying in bed. This was a different kind of torture. The stillness of the room made him focus even more on Peter's breathing. Neal kept replaying the doctor's words. Peter would be fine. But until he regained consciousness, Neal would have a tough time believing it.

Ghosts of previous stays in the hospital came back unbidden. When Neal had been a patient, either he'd been so looped on drugs he didn't realize what was going on or he was too sick to care. As soon as he felt well enough, he was hustled out before he could get into trouble.

No worries that Peter might pull the hospital game on him, although Neal wished he felt well enough to try. What must El be going through? Neal had called her when he returned to the hospital. Soon she'd be on board the plane. Did she blame him for not taking better care of Peter? He did. He never should have left Peter alone. He should have realized that Chapman was playing them. He'd seen
Chapman use that little finger tell in the office. Why didn't he grasp its significance earlier? He could have warned Peter that Chapman might be Rolf. Neal was an expert at faking death. Why hadn't he considered it earlier?

Neal had been running on adrenaline and coffee since that morning soda with Bridget, and as he slouched deeper into the chair, he realized there was nothing remaining in the tank. How close had Peter come to dying? Would Rolf have rescued him at the last minute only to use him in another cruel hoax? He was a brother seeking revenge. Why hadn't he picked Neal to be the target? Was it because he thought Neal would suffer more by watching Peter die?

Did this mean Henry would be next? Rolf knew about Peter, but how much had he learned about Henry? To keep his relatives safe, Neal had been relying on the Anastasia con. He'd convinced a world-renowned thief he was simply acting the part of a Caffrey relative and hoped the word would spread. But that might not be enough. He'd need to double his safeguards. No more slip-ups.

The hours passed. Sleep didn't come. Whenever Neal closed his eyes, he saw Peter's face as he looked when they removed the mask. He was so pale, so lifeless. Neal thought he'd died.

Last spring Neal had considered faking his death to take down Keller. After the team ganged up on him in a group intervention, he'd agreed to a compromise solution where he only needed to pretend he was mortally wounded. Peter had remarked at the time how tough it was on him. Now Neal understood.

Nurses were checking on Peter every couple of hours. They continued to assure him that his vitals were good. At three o'clock Neal gave up trying to sleep and made a quick trip for coffee from the machine down the hall.

At four Peter stirred, finally.

Neal stood by his bedside, waiting for his eyes to open. "Welcome back! It's about time."

Peter stared at him. "Why are you grinning like that? Where am I?" He looked around puzzled. "A hospital?"

Neal tried to get him to relax, drink some water—all the things he remembered others telling him to do. He was a poor substitute for El, and Peter was every bit as bad a patient as Neal was when he was in the hospital. He wouldn't lie quietly and rest. He insisted on knowing what had happened.

Neal didn't want to go into the details, but Peter pummeled him with questions. His internal clock must have gone haywire, for he was as lively as if he were running a midmorning conference meeting.

"Stop looking at me like that," Peter finally said, exasperated. "I'm fine. Is that the way I hover over you when you're in the hospital? Like you're going to break into a million pieces if I breathe on you?"

"Yep, and you must promise never to scare me like this again. I can't handle the stress. El will have my head for not taking better care of you."

Peter chuckled. "I wish I'd recorded you so I could play it back next time you pull a reckless stunt. It's a deal, Sundance. I won't scare you as long as you do the same. No more flirtations with death."

"Agreed, Butch. Neither one of us winds up in the hospital ever again."

"Let's drink to that pact with some coffee. I see yours over there. There's got to be more where that
When Neal returned with the coffee, the night nurse was checking Peter's vitals while he carried on a running conversation. Had someone put caffeine in his IV? He certainly acted that way.

The nurse laughed when she saw the coffee. "You two realize that normal people are asleep now?"

Peter reached for the coffee eagerly. "Neither one of us does normal very well."

After she left, Neal asked Peter to describe what he remembered of the attack.

"There's not much to tell. I left Chapman's office to walk to the shuttle bus. When I rounded the corner of one of the buildings—it was a soundstage I think—two men dressed in Dumbledore outfits approached me."

Neal stared at him incredulously. "Two Dumbledores? Seriously?"

Peter winced and took a sip of coffee. "They were great disguises. I remember thinking how authentic they looked. Who would suspect Dumbledore of mugging someone? They grabbed me as I passed them. One of them gave a karate chop to the back of my neck and that's the last I remember. Your turn now."

Neal described how he'd found Peter at the Underwater Stage. He held off on his suspicions about Chapman for the moment.

"You saved my life. If you hadn't gotten into the mind of Azathoth, I wouldn't have made it. I owe you one."

Neal snorted to cover his unease. Peter shouldn't feel so grateful. Neal blamed himself for not having realized who Chapman was earlier. "After all the times you rescued me? I can't begin to catch up, and don't you try to let me."

Peter gave a half-smile. "Keeping watch in the hospital is no fun, is it? You look done in. Did you have any sleep?"

Neal deflected. "You're sure you don't feel like catching some more shuteye?"

"No, I'm much more anxious to find out what you did after you rescued me. You're hiding something, and it's time to spill it. Breakfast won't arrive for a couple of hours. I intend to sit back and let you entertain me with a minute account of what you've been up to. I'll find that very restful, I'm sure. More to the point, it's essential to my recovery."

It was highly dubious that Peter would feel relaxed once he heard about it, but Neal walked Peter through his suspicions about Chapman. That part Peter handled well enough, but Neal's Doctor and Rose con? The growls were threatening to erupt at any moment.

Peter eyed him unhappily. "You're sticking to your claim you had John's blessing to break into Chapman's office? Are you sure you don't want to rephrase that?"

Neal decided to take advantage of the offer. "It was more of a gentleman's agreement. He didn't attempt to dissuade me. For the record, John lent me his Jaguar so I could take Sara on a drive through the English countryside. That we decided to explore Black Park was perfectly reasonable. It's a beautiful location. If you only had more time, you'd probably take El there."
"Uh-huh." Peter swallowed down his growls with a large swig of coffee. "Afterward, you filled him in on everything?"

"Of course. His office will handle the DNA analysis. I'm convinced Chapman is Rolf. When I heard the music he had on his iPod in his office—it wasn't just classical piano music. It was _La Folia_, Schubert's variations—those were Klaus's favorite pieces. The playlist included most of Rachmaninoff's piano music. Klaus told me Rolf and Rachmaninoff were joined at the hip. There's the tell of his finger, the leopard allusion, the knowledge of armillary spheres, the playing card—"

Peter held up a hand. "I can understand why you'd think there's a connection and Tricia felt he was our lead candidate too. But the slight problem of him being dead does complicate matters. You think it wouldn't be that difficult, but Rolf would have had to assume the identity of a known, established figure. Chapman's record with Scima goes back for around twenty years as I recall. Even if we somehow obtain usable DNA evidence of Rolf, making a positive match is extremely difficult. The _Arkham Horror_ playing card I admit is intriguing, but it simply indicates an interest in the game by Chapman. He could easily explain it away as an item left over from their research into the Lovecraft movie idea."

Peter was right. Convincing a court beyond a reasonable doubt could prove a daunting hurdle. Given Chapman's reputation, John had also alerted him that he'd need airtight evidence to force an investigation. But Neal knew he was right.

"Talk to me," Peter said quietly. "You have that look that makes me worried about what kind of crazy scheme you're about to pull. We're in a hospital, not in the Bureau. How about this? I declare myself impaired and won't hold you responsible for anything you say."

*Impaired.* That was the word Neal had used when he'd talked with Peter in St. Louis and worried that he'd revealed too much about his mom. Peter had assured him that he was too loopy from flu medicine for anything to be used against him. Neal had trusted him then, and it had paid off. But life had gotten so much more complicated. There was Hughes's warning to consider. In St. Louis, Neal wasn't concerned about what effect he'd have on Peter's career.

"I'm still impaired," Peter repeated forcefully. "Do I need to start singing to convince you? There. I knew I could make you grin. You have my word. If I feel that I shouldn't hear what you're saying, I'll stop you."

Neal took a breath and decided to risk it. "That plastic surgeon who lives in Salzburg? The one who owns the house where we were held captive?"

"I remember him well. What about him?"

"The Saturday before we left for London, I had lunch with Travis, Richard, and Aidan. We were eating pizza, talking about this and that."

"It's been my experience that pizza often produces interesting topics of conversation."

"A profound statement. You may recall that Richard will work for Scima in Los Angeles this summer. We'd already alerted him to be on the lookout for Marta. Over lunch we discussed that she may have disguised her appearance or had plastic surgery. As a purely hypothetical matter, the subject of hacking the plastic surgeon's files was raised."

"Hmm. I could see where that would be an intriguing speculation."

"Aidan believes it could be accomplished by someone who possesses his degree of expertise, and
Travis agreed."

Peter sipped his coffee and didn't say anything for a minute. "This discussion bears a remarkable similarity to a conversation I believe occurred last fall when you were being framed for the theft of Marie Antoinette's diamond earrings."

"I can see where you might make that comparison."

"The outcome of that hypothetical action resulted in the arrest of a killer. I can see where being flexible about the method would have been justified. Is it your sense that someone like Aidan would be willing to work with a trusted agent such as Travis to hack the surgeon's files?"

"Yes, I believe so."

Peter nodded slowly. "Give me a little time to think this over. I'm sure I'll still be impaired throughout the morning." He broke into a smile.

"What's so funny?"

"You and Sara—your Rose and the Doctor caper. I wish I could have seen you."

"As a matter of fact, I can satisfy your wish. We had a stagehand take our picture."

"And you met David Tennant and Billie Piper?"

"I did. I have their autographs to prove it. They were quite complimentary of my performance. David encouraged me to accept the job. Billie even suggested some love scenes we could put on."

"Now I know you're making this all up."

"Am not. You can question them yourself."

"I'll do that the very next time I see them." His expression turned serious. "We better hope Chantal has some evidence. As a last resort we can approach Rolf's parents, but we don't have enough evidence to demand anything from them. When does Chantal return to Paris?"

"Monday. I texted her and she'll search through her scrapbooks when she returns from vacation. You were planning to arrive in Paris Sunday evening. You and El can stick to your original schedule and have your holiday in London. John's in charge of the investigation. He'll insist on you staying clear of it."

"You're still visiting Fiona on the weekend, right?"

Neal hesitated. Peter would be upset if he delayed, but he couldn't leave right after Peter was released from the hospital. "Let's see how it goes first. My reservation on the Eurostar is easily changed."

Peter frowned. "I'll be fine. El will be here. There's no need for you to sacrifice your plans."

"Need I point out that you still have a guard on your door? Would you leave me under similar circumstances? My guide service for London is almost as good as for Paris."

Peter's reply was forestalled by the arrival of breakfast, but from the unhappy look on his face, Neal knew it would continue to be a topic of conversation.

After the meal, Peter's doctor arrived to give him an exam. Afterward she pronounced him fit to leave the hospital. The constable outside the door expedited the discharge process and provided
transportation to Peter's new hotel, the St. Ermins.

John had already smoothed the way for Peter to gain early admittance into his room. Once he was safely installed, Neal went back to their traveling salesman special, checked them out, and brought their bags over. Peter had been energized by leaving the hospital. He kept himself busy with texts and phone calls while waiting impatiently to pick up El. He was a frustrated man that the New York team wasn't at work yet.

John overrode Peter's objections and insisted that the constable stay with them. After Neal pointed out the advantages of having a ride to the airport, Peter stopped protesting.

When El finally walked through the security barricade at Heathrow Airport to be greeted by Peter, Neal was sure he was standing there with an idiotic smile on his face. And he didn't care. Could he ever achieve what Peter and El had? Was that what he and Fiona would be like?

El called him over. "Don't you hang back. You're my hero. The man who saved Peter," and Neal was wrapped in a hug, too. Funny thing about no sleep. Emotions pop up to the surface. When he saw El's eyes grow bright with tears, his blurred as well.

"You're not hugging Neal Caffrey," Peter commented. "He's the Doctor now."

Her eyes widened. "Don't tell me you were acting as Peter's doctor, too?"

"Not my doctor," Peter corrected with a grin. "The Doctor."

Peter spent the drive to the hotel telling El what had happened the previous day. The Doctor and the Rose caper had to wait for when there wasn't a constable around, but everything else was on the table. Neal had kept her informed, but she didn't let on she'd heard most of it already. Clearly the sound of Peter's healthy, strong voice was all that mattered.

Once they'd returned to the hotel, Neal left Peter and El to their reunion while he took off for John's office in Pimlico. He'd left his bag with reception and made a room reservation when he checked Peter in.

Despite Peter's objections, it was unthinkable for Neal to leave for France. Rolf had drawn a bead on Peter to avenge his brother's death. Now, more than ever, it was clear that Peter was only in jeopardy because of Neal's decision to take down Klaus.

Notes: You can take it as a given that there will be words exchanged about whether or not Neal should head on to Paris in the next chapter. The poisoning incident Neal mentioned occurred in Raphael's Dragon. He's been doing his best to shield Fiona from the dangerous aspects of his work, but his attempts haven't been very successful. Their relationship will arrive at a crossroads next week.

Among the references to Penna's stories in this chapter are Neal's use of the word impaired (Chapter 9 in Caffrey Conversation) and the Anastasia con (Chapter 3 of Caffrey Aloha). The hospital game, an advanced version of hide-and-seek was first mentioned in Chapter 7 of By the Book.

The AO3 Chocolate Box gift challenge stories are now published and the authors revealed. Penna wrote 3 fantastic works for lucky recipients: Bouquet: (The Good Place), Torch Song (Supernatural), and Time After Time Lord (Supernatural and Doctor Who crossover). There are
February 20 was a major milestone for me. That was the day Penna and I began collaborating on stories. Thank you, Penna, for three glorious years of writing bliss! I wrote about the meta world she and I have been leading as writing partners for our blog.

And there's one more occasion to celebrate—Mardi Gras! Sara may be hiding where she developed a love for costumes, but for me it was growing up in New Orleans. The festivities have already started and you are all invited to the Costume Trivia Challenge which I posted on our blog. Neal and Sara dressed as Doctor Who and Rose in this chapter. Can you match the characters to the other costumes mentioned in our series?

**Blog** : Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)

**Chapter Visuals and Music** : The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

New pins this week include one of Neal and Sara in their Doctor and Rose costumes.
London. Friday, May 27, 2005

Peter stepped off the elevator on John Hobhouse's floor at the National Crime Squad's headquarters in Pimlico. Law enforcement offices all seemed to have the same feel. It wasn't very different from walking into the bullpen at White Collar. Only here Peter didn't have his team. Instead of being able to organize the investigation, he was a guest and had to rely on others doing the work. It was an unsatisfactory situation.

He felt fully recovered from the drug he'd been given. The lump on the back of his neck from where he'd been struck and a slight headache were the only lingering effects. El was in worse shape. She'd lived on adrenaline till they reached their hotel room, then anxiety coupled with an overnight flight finally caught up with her. Peter suspected she hadn't slept at all on board the plane. After an early lunch, she'd reluctantly agreed to take a nap. El also knew her husband. She realized he wouldn't relax with Neal working at NCS with John. Peter's place was there with them.

Neal was meeting with John in his office when Peter arrived. From Neal's shrug and told-you-so glance at John, Peter could tell his arrival wasn't a surprise.

Neal pulled over a chair for him. "You're just in time for the news flash."

"We've been reviewing surveillance footage," John added. "So far we've discovered no errant Dumbledores, but we did find someone else—Marta Kolar. She was recorded on a surveillance camera near the Doctor Who soundstage at eight fifteen in the morning when you were meeting with Chapman." He passed Peter a still from the feed. She looked about the same as when they'd recorded her last fall in New York. Her blunt-cut auburn hair gave her the look of a teen street urchin, but he'd grown to appreciate how deceptive that was.

Peter looked at Neal. "What's your take?"

"It's too pat," he replied, shaking his head. "I don't buy it. First the painting that so closely resembles mine, now her presence at Scima? A deliberate misdirection by Azathoth is the way I see it."

"That's my reaction as well," Peter agreed. "Marta's a decoy, but she must be on Azathoth's payroll."

"We're all in agreement," John added. "I didn't fail to miss that you both continue to use the term Azathoth. Neal, I assume you haven't changed your opinion that Azathoth is Rolf disguised as Chapman?"

"That's correct, but given the friends in high places that Chapman has, I'll stick with Azathoth."

"That's the safest policy for both New York and London," John agreed. "Needless to say, we've issued an all-ports warning for her arrest. The evidence isn't sufficient to justify placing Chapman under surveillance, but that doesn't mean we're sitting on our hands. We'd built up a substantial file on him when Scima's email was hacked. Today I initiated an inquiry by my agents into when a switch could have been made. Chapman has no wife or children. His parents are deceased. If Rolf could have pulled it off, Chapman's background makes him an ideal choice."

"I appreciate your assistance to Neal yesterday," Peter said. "It's my understanding that confidential evidence from an unknown source is being currently analyzed."

John smiled at his circumspection. "Once the analysis is complete, it will be held in a secure location.
until something is found for comparison purposes. I also intend to make another appeal to the Swiss
to release information about Albert Wilmarth's bank account. I can use a playing card that was
discovered in Chapman's office to tie the Arkham Horror game to a criminal investigation. I'm
hopeful that this time we'll obtain a favorable response."

"And if it turns out to be Chapman?" Neal asked, raising a brow.

"You want to know if that will be enough to arrest him?" John answered the question with a shake
of his head. "But since Albert Wilmarth was the name of a prospective buyer at your art exhibition,
we could bring Chapman in for questioning. My preference is to wait until we know if we'll have
any corroboration from the DNA evidence. If we tip our hand too early, Chapman could flee in
advance of an arrest and we'd be left with nothing. In the meantime, both of you should continue
with your holiday plans. Neal, you're due to leave for Paris today. Peter, you should be with your
wife, preparing to enjoy the spectacular sights of London. I'll let both of you know if anything
breaks." He turned to Peter. "You'll continue to have the protection of Her Majesty's agents as long
as you're in England."

"That's not necessary," Peter protested.

John frowned at him with an expression Peter could swear he'd employed on Neal on many
occasions. "Allow me to disagree."

When Peter gave Neal that look, it didn't sway him, and Peter felt the same way. "The way I see it,
what happened has many similarities to when Neal and I were abducted. Azathoth makes a game of
it. If we win, we continue to the next round. In this case, he used many of the same techniques as in
Prague—a latex mask with tentacles, a swimming pool. Those are all symbols of Lovecraft. They
also make me suspect that he may be obtaining inspiration from the Lovecraft games on the market."

"I'm glad you brought Prague up," Neal said. "Need I remind you that the detective died?"

"You're lecturing me to be careful?"

Neal crossed his arms and glared back at him. "Wouldn't you in my shoes?"

"You mean my training's finally worked?" Peter eyed the two of them who were looking equally
stubborn. "I appreciate your concern, but if Azathoth stays true to his pattern, he'll wait a while
before attempting anything again." He raised a hand as John began to object. "I realize that won't
necessarily continue, and I'm happy to have your assistance. I'll stay out of your way and let you
handle the investigation."

As they rose to leave, Peter asked if there were a room where they could work for a few minutes.
John directed them to the office of an agent currently on vacation. "It's nearly 8 a.m. in New York
but your people should begin showing up soon. Feel free to use our resources."

Once he'd closed the door, Peter said, "I've been giving a good deal of thought to our discussion at
the hospital and I think it's time we give Travis a call."

Neal's face lit up. "You agree then?"

"I do. Should we call Aidan too?"

"He's probably still asleep. Travis could contact him later."

"That's acceptable." Peter placed the call to Travis's cell. He found him still at home. After bringing
him up to date about Marta, Peter addressed the major topic. "This morning Neal related a discussion he'd had with you and Aidan last Saturday."

"I remember it well," Travis said in a neutral voice.

"I thought you might. In the hypothetical situation that was described, I'd advocate for its immediate implementation. Do the parties have all the information they need?"

"Yes, I believe they do. Neal, did you explain everything we discussed?"

After Neal's confirmation, Peter added, "It goes without saying that all parties are free to back out for whatever reason."

"I'm confident that won't happen," Travis assured him.

After the call, Peter turned to look at Neal. "There's only one item left to be discussed."

"What's that?"

"Your departure. You've delayed leaving for France long enough. Effective immediately, you and I both on vacation."

Neal shook his head. "Fiona will understand."

Peter got up and rolled Neal's chair away from the desk. "You have no jurisdiction here. You'll simply be in the way, and there's no way I can enjoy my vacation in London if I know you sacrificed your time with Fiona. El and I will see you in Paris Monday afternoon at the hotel. Until then, you're on your own."

"You're sure about this?"

"It's the least I can do for the man who saved my life. We'll go back to the hotel together. El will want to wish you bon voyage and then it will be au revoir till Paris."

Neal grinned. "Okay, Pierre, it's a deal."

**WCWCWCWCW**

That same afternoon Neal boarded the Eurostar at St. Pancras International Station. Peter's argument was a compelling one. Neal also realized that as long as he worked on the case, Peter would feel obligated to do the same.

His vacation was about to begin and despite everything that had happened, it had only been delayed by one day. Once Neal got on board, it truly began to feel like he was footloose. He was riding Premier Class. In New York he'd debated downgrading the ticket in light of all the extra scrutiny being placed on them, but he was glad he hadn't. There were no penalties for rescheduling in Premier Class. He saved the French money and himself the indignity of yet another round of economy travel.

He was due to arrive in Amboise at eight that evening. Neal relaxed into the luxurious chair and sipped a glass of Burgundy while contemplating the weekend ahead. Fiona had mentioned that her group was holding a celebration dinner that evening. Most of the team would return to Paris on Saturday, but she was staying on till the auction. She'd already been there for two weeks. The owners were selling their estate to a chain of luxury hotels. The team from Weatherby's had been inventorying and evaluating the contents for the upcoming auction while a restoration architecture firm prepared the remodeling blueprint.
Neal looked forward to surprising her at dinner. He'd been able to take an earlier train than what he'd told her and the restaurant wasn't far from his hotel.

He'd picked the Chateau de Noizay in town for his getaway. It dated back to the sixteenth century and was rich in history and romance. It was a splurge but Fiona was worth it. Saturday they'd stroll through the town of Amboise, take in the sights of the royal chateau. A stroll along the banks of the Loire . . . Neal smiled. It would be the perfect location for them to reestablish their connection and talk about the future.


"What happened?" Mozzie asked plaintively. "I knew something was wrong when you called this morning. You're not supposed to be in Paris until tomorrow."

The question Neal had been dreading. And bracing himself for it hadn't helped. Soon Peter and El would be asking the same thing.

Neal had arrived earlier in the day from Amboise and, after checking in at the hotel, had spent a couple of hours at the Louvre—revisiting old friends among the paintings and trying to block Fiona out of his mind.

He told Mozzie to meet him at Les Philosophes in the Marais. The bustling sidewalk café suited his mood. It seemed more anonymous, and the noise helped drown out his inner gloomy thoughts.

"Weren't you the one who accused me of making a mess of all my relationships? Neal reminded him. "According to you, this was inevitable."

Mozzie's frown deepened. "But I thought things were going so well between you and Fiona."

"How can you say that when we hadn't seen each other for nearly three months? Let's just leave it that she's in love with someone else."

Mozzie shook his head unhappily. "You can do better than that. You were her knight in shining armor. A damsel doesn't reject her knight. That's simply not done. Cheat, yes. Deny no."

His words made Neal wince. "I've discarded my chain mail. The problem with being a knight is that while you're off fighting dragons, someone else can move into the castle." He stopped, wishing he could take the words back. They sounded too bitter. "You shouldn't blame her," he added in a lower voice. "She wasn't allowing herself to believe her feelings had changed."

Mozzie gave a low moan, making Neal feel worse. He hadn't thought that was possible. "I can see it unfolding before my eyes. You threw yourself on your sword, sacrificing yourself for her happiness. And now that you can't have her, you'll want her even more, wasting away as you pine for she who is now unattainable. She was your one true love—lost forever."

Neal sank his head into his hands. "I knew I shouldn't have told you."

"How can I fix it if you don't share every detail? But never fear, your love guru is here. I'll start immediately. Sonnets . . . yes, carefully worded, they'll be a good start. I'll have this handled in no time. You can count on me."

"I'm begging you. Just leave it alone." Looking at Mozzie's face oozing with sympathy was almost more than he could handle. It made him realize the enormity of the challenge he would face in admitting he'd been dumped to Peter and El. Peter was already teasing him about wedding bells. El was probably planning the reception.
One hurdle at a time. The task at hand was to get Mozzie onto another track. "You finished the job with Gordon Taylor to your satisfaction?"

Mozzie studied him with disapproval written in large letters across his face but mercifully restrained himself. "Yes, it was lucrative beyond my dreams. You'll have to let me take you out sometime to celebrate. Through some of Gordon's contacts I've begun talking with the children of French Resistance fighters. They've related fascinating accounts of their parents' activities. I've also located a few of the original Resistance members. I haven't discovered anything yet which connects to Adler, Huber, or a missing hoard of confiscated art, but there are gemstones waiting to be discovered in this mine of stories. It's only a matter of time."

"Were you able to acquire my gear?"

"Of course, and I might add that was some intriguing equipment you had me obtain. You've piqued my interest. But before we start, tell me about London. Anything interesting happen?"

"You might say so. Someone tried to kill Peter—we assume Azathoth. And we believe Alistair Chapman is Azathoth." Neal hesitated. If he revealed his suspicions about Alistair's identity, Mozzie would draw the inevitable conclusion. Was Neal ready to handle it? If he were honest, he'd have to say no. Especially not after the disaster with Fiona. But it was his own fault for having kept it a secret from Mozzie for so long. All his mistakes were coming back to bite him now.

"What aren't you telling me?" Mozzie eyed him uneasily. "Is the suit okay?"

"He's fine now, but it was a close call. I wouldn't have left London if he weren't all right. The police haven't arrested Chapman yet, as there's no direct evidence." Neal drew a breath. "But I believe Chapman not only is Azathoth. He's actually Klaus's older brother Rolf."

"What?" Mozzie's eyes popped out of their sockets. "I'd heard he had a brother, but he's dead."

Neal shrugged. "You know how easy it is to fake a death." He explained to Mozzie why he believed Chapman was Rolf.

"Klaus was a genius. That his brother could be a cybercriminal mastermind I can well believe, but Azathoth acts as if he has a personal grudge against you and Peter." Mozzie stopped for a moment. "Neal, what aren't you telling me?"

"We've suspected for a while that Azathoth was seeking revenge."

"For what? Klaus's death?"

Neal said nothing. He'd botched this badly. He'd already lost Fiona. Was he about to lose Mozzie too?

Mozzie was studying him with a new guarded expression. "Why would Rolf seek revenge from you and Peter?"

It was time to own up. They were talking in a public place. That would help, but he might have cast aside that suit of armor too soon. Neal put down his wine glass and looked Mozzie in the eyes.

"Because Klaus lost his life during a sting we mounted to capture him last September. It was at the Met. Klaus had approached me to paint a forgery for him. I informed Peter and he agreed to my offer to work undercover. We set a trap for Klaus at the museum but he resisted arrest and was killed while attempting to scale down the back wall of the Met."

Mozzie stared at him, horrified. "It was you? You and Peter were the ones who killed one of the
legends of our time? How could you?” He was so shocked, his mouth opened and closed several times before any more words came out. "You've been brainwashed. I knew it. I never should have let you accept the suit's offer." He smacked himself on the side of his head, startling the customers at the table next to them. Eyeing him mistrustfully, they moved their chairs further away.

Neal reduced the volume of his voice even lower, forcing Mozzie to pay close attention to his words. Choosing his words carefully, he spoke slowly and deliberately. He had to get this right. "I was not brainwashed. You cannot blame Peter over this. Klaus approached me. I was the one who informed Peter and offered to go undercover. I was the one responsible. Don't hang this on anyone else."

"But why? How could you have betrayed the man who'd been your mentor, who'd taught you so much?" The anguish in Mozzie's voice stung like acid. This was why Neal hadn't told him. "You said Klaus and Chantal had been a second family to you. And you turned your back on them?" He shook his head. "No, this is not you. Plainly you were manipulated. With the new sophisticated methods they employ, you'd never know."

"I've not been the victim of mind control experiments," Neal said firmly. "And I didn't betray Chantal. She'd already divorced Klaus. You shouldn't rush to judgment. I never told you why I left Klaus. You need to understand." Neal leaned forward as he attempted to explain. "Klaus was a killer. My final job in Berlin? He killed a guard in cold blood. There was no need to. The guard hadn't seen us." Neal stopped. The vision of the guard stretched out on the museum floor resurfaced, and along with it the acute nausea he'd felt. "When Klaus approached me in New York, he was making plans to move there. I thought it'd be a similar situation to what I faced with Keller, with his demands only increasing with time. I had to tell Peter. I needed to warn him."

Mozzie shook his head, the hurt evident in his eyes. "And me? Why didn't you say anything to me?"

"You were away on a job when it happened. And later, I didn't tell you because . . . because at first I felt too guilty over his death. I wanted him to go to prison, not be killed. You'd put him on a pedestal. Klaus was dead. Why should I tarnish his reputation with you?"

His expression hardened. "It was your conscience that prevented you. You knew what you did was wrong, and you couldn't own up to it."

"That's not true." Neal leaned back against the cane chair to distance himself. He refused to go down that path.

"You know it is and you still can't face it. I can excuse it that you were brainwashed or I can accept that the friend I thought I knew doesn't exist anymore." Mozzie stood up abruptly. "You made your choice. Now I need to make mine. It's best we part for a while."

Neal watched him stride off and melt into the crowd. He'd known Mozzie would take it hard. He'd expected him to yell and be angry, but his cold rejection was so much worse. Would Mozzie ever forgive him?

Neal drained the remnants of the wine in his glass and paid the bill. He'd intended to visit some of the art galleries in the Marais, and he had more time to do so now. But it would be a waste.

**WCWCWCWCWCWC**

For over an hour, he'd wandered through the narrow side streets of the Right Bank, not paying attention to where he was going. Eventually he found himself on the Pont Marie heading toward Ile Saint-Louis. He paused to take in the view of the Seine.
Last night he'd been standing on the banks of the Loire. The illuminated castle was on the hill to his left. Its reflection in the water looked like a dreamscape from the past—a castle floating on a cloud that was receding. Like Fiona...

We said we'd be safe harbors for each other. Instead I lost my heart to you.

And I to you.

And Gerald?

I never thought I could be in love with two men at the same time, but I am.

I think you're refusing to accept reality. You know where your heart lies and it's not with me.

We both know we weren't each other's soul mates. Deep down, I realized I wasn't your Guinevere, but I wished I could be.

And I knew you hadn't found your Genji. Now you have. We both know the path forward.

I wish they weren't in different directions.

From his vantage point on the bridge, Neal watched the Seine flowing underneath him. His life was defined by rivers. How often had he run along the banks of the Mississippi as a child in St. Louis when he wanted to escape the harsh realities of his life? He'd paced along the Patapsco River in Baltimore after Henry's father threatened to blackmail him if he didn't cut all ties to Henry. Fast forward to Geneva. He was running along the Rhone when he decided to quit Klaus's organization.

Fiona and he had sat on a bench overlooking the Loire when they agreed to go their separate ways. Now he was strolling along the Seine. Was this the end of his friendship with Mozzie? He'd never seen Mozzie so upset at him. And could he blame him?

Chagall had painted a work about a river—Time is a River Without Banks. In breathtaking hues of vivid cerulean blue, a pair of lovers lay stretched out on a blanket along the riverbank while overhead a clock floated by and a winged fish played a violin. Chagall had taken flight from one location to another, fleeing first the Nazis, then Stalin, then still more purges. The artist took wings, escaping the riverbank which constrained him. Was that also Neal's life? Was he destined to always be on the run? Never to have a home or a wife? Like the winged fish he was taking flight once more, leaving Fiona and her new boyfriend Gerald on the riverbank. All that was left for him was the violin and clock. You couldn't get more fitting than that. A violin and a clock.

Neal longed for his paints. He hadn't brought along any art supplies. The stores weren't open today but he vowed to purchase a sketch pad the next morning. Tonight he'd use the hotel stationery and a pen. He had to transfer these feelings to art. He'd run along the Hudson River in New York when he contemplated taking flight from Fowler's frame attempt. Would rivers be the theme for his second year exhibition? Rivers and the emotions they carried?

Mozzie once said Neal was a butterfly flitting from flower to flower. He didn't realize Neal was a flying fish instead. A fish. The word tasted bitter in his mouth. He'd sunk from being a knight to a fish. What kind of sick joke was that?

He'd rather be a dragonfly. That at least didn't sound so bad. Skimming the water, never lingering. Chagall was justified in flying away. Neal's reasons were a mixed bag. When it came to the women in his life, they were the butterflies, not wanting to get their wings wet.

Neal groaned aloud, causing a passerby to give him a sympathetic look. Did she think he'd jump off
the bridge? Not to worry. He was mired too deeply in the muck of remorse to muster the energy.

He could spend another hour wandering the streets or go back to the hotel on the Ile Saint-Louis. At the moment he didn't feel like doing anything. He'd been anticipating Paris for so long, and now that he'd arrived, he felt apathetic and drained.

The Jeu de Paume Hotel was the closest thing he had to a safe house at the moment. During the days with Klaus and Chantal, he'd stayed there frequently. Once he'd spent an entire month there. Peter and El probably wouldn't arrive for several hours. They weren't expecting him since he'd told them he'd arrive on Monday afternoon. He could use the time to pull himself together. He couldn't let them see him like this.

Neal nodded to the manager, Yves Thierry, as he walked in. Yves was busy helping hotel guests and Neal didn't linger. He headed for the piano in the lounge. Klaus used to play there so much, Yves insisted on offering them a discount, a service he still provided Neal. Neal couldn't play the classics like Klaus did, but as a piano man he was quite a success. The evening aperitif crowd was starting to fill the lounge. No one was sitting at the piano. He'd be fine after permitting himself an hour to wallow.

"Am I dreaming?" El turned away from the taxi window to smile at Peter. "We're finally in Paris!"

They'd just passed the Eiffel Tower. Peter had told the taxi cab driver to take the scenic route, and it was worth the exorbitant fee he'd undoubtedly charge. They'd taken the train from London on Neal's recommendation—Peter owed him for that tip which allowed them to avoid the hassles of airport security.

The weekend had gone remarkably smoothly. Peter was determined not to let the attack spoil El's first visit to London. He needn't have worried. The attempt on his life made them appreciate their vacation even more. They treated it as a second honeymoon. And the luxurious palace they'd stayed at thanks to Neal made it seem even more like a dream escape.

Peter spoke with John on the phone but otherwise stayed clear of the investigation. Neal texted a few times to check they were staying out of trouble. Peter planned to tease him about it. Neal was rapidly turning into as much a worrywart as he was.

Peter regretted that Fiona's work wouldn't permit her to join them in Paris. He'd been looking forward to staying in the same hotel with them just like two married couples. But he consoled himself there would be more opportunities in the future. If Neal and Fiona got married, they might take family vacations. What would Neal as a married man be like? Would he still be Peter Pan if he had Peter Pan, Jr. running around the house? Most likely Fiona would say she had two Peter Pans. Would Neal take his kids to Little League games? Go on picnics in the park? Only a few months ago, Neal spooked at the thought of bringing Fiona to their house for dinner. Now he was freely acknowledging they were a couple. How far off could the next step be?

When the cab turned onto Ile Saint-Louis, El let out a gasp. Peter was glad he'd kept the location a surprise. She knew they were staying at a place Neal had selected, so she wasn't expecting an American hotel that Peter would have picked. El probably thought Neal had chosen another palace. Instead, the island was a rustic hamlet from a bygone era. They turned onto a street filled with expensive shops—now this was looking more like Neal. The taxi stopped in front of large wooden doors. At first, Peter couldn't even find a sign. Was this the place?

El's mouth dropped as they walked inside the Hotel du Jeu de Paume. Peter had researched the
establishment. Ancient beams, soaring vaulted ceilings above rustic stone walls, contemporary artworks, piano music in the background—it was perfect. El was bouncing with excitement as she gazed around. Neal said he knew the manager and was able to get special rates. Thank you, Neal, for your connections.

Peter headed for the reception area to check in while El explored the public rooms. She returned as the clerk handed him his keys. "Neal's here. That's him singing."

Peter spun around. "He was due to arrive tomorrow."

She shrugged. "His plans must have changed. He's playing in the cocktail lounge. I don't think he saw me."

"You should know it. It's 'Fire and Rain.' That's the song Diana chose for Neal's counterpart in her stories. Do you remember when he's in the coffeehouse and Sara comments he won't sing it anymore because it was Kate's favorite? I wonder if that's what inspired Neal to learn it."

"It's a sad selection."

She nodded, looking worried. "I hope that doesn't mean there were problems with Fiona."

They stood outside the entrance to listen for a few minutes. It was early in the evening, and the tables in the lounge were filled with guests having drinks. It reminded Peter of Neal's club act at the Lynx Mountain resort last winter, but this time he was playing for himself.

"What's that song he's singing now?" Peter asked.

"A song by Coldplay. It's called 'Trouble.' Now I know something's not right."

They walked into the lounge but waited till he finished before approaching the piano. Neal's smile was broad when he saw them. Perhaps they were reading too much into his music selections? After a flurry of hugs, El commented they were surprised to see him.

"I wanted to be here to welcome you," he said cheerfully. "Have you seen your room yet?"

Neal helped them move in while zinging them questions about London. Peter didn't need his radar to notice Neal avoided any mention of Amboise. When he found out they hadn't had dinner, Neal ran through a list of suggestions.

They'd already eaten a large midday meal in London, so they decided to go casual on their first evening. Neal suggested a brasserie a few blocks away. "You'll love it. They even have a good selection of beers. It's at the tip of the island. We can sit outside and gaze on Notre-Dame while we catch up."

Neal slid into his role of travel guide and managed to keep the conversation centered on Paris throughout the walk to the Brasserie de l'Isle Saint-Louis. Peter and El were suitably impressed with the location and he was able to snare a table with prime viewing of the cathedral and the Seine. Over cassoulet and a cheese board, he pumped them for tales of their activities in London, but he realized he couldn't delay the inevitable much longer. The two had been exchanging looks for the past half-hour.
"How'd you discover the hotel?" El asked.

"This was Chantal's favorite place. I stayed here numerous times with them. Her bistro isn't far from here, on the Left Bank south of Notre-Dame."

"No ghost of Klaus at the hotel, I hope?" Peter asked.

"No manifestations that I've encountered. How about in London? Any news about the attack?"

Peter shook his head. "The British are mounting an all-out effort to find Marta Kolar, but she's probably already slipped out of the country by now." He refilled Neal's glass with wine. "Isn't it time you told us what happened with Fiona?"

"Not much to tell. She's in love, but not with me." Neal was braced for their expressions of disbelief and commiseration, but having to look at those two sets of sympathetic eyes made him feel worse than he had with Mozzie. Neal steeled himself to get through it as quickly as possible. No need to go into every painful detail. Not his arrival at the restaurant Friday evening—seeing her through the restaurant window and how happy and relaxed she looked with her friends. Then he'd walked in, and that look changed to one of worry.

"Surely not one of those Frenchman you were so concerned about?" Peter asked.

Neal forced out a chuckle. "No, it was a British invasion—the architect who's in charge of remodeling the chateau. Fiona knew him from her university days. Gerald's his name. He was a couple of years ahead of her at school. They didn't date back then, but they've been working on this project for a month now, and"—he shrugged away the details—"the inevitable happened."

El looked at him with concern. "Are you sure you're not jumping to a premature conclusion?"

"I spent the day Saturday helping them at the chateau, cataloging items. When I saw how Gerald looked at her—that same moonstruck expression Michael has on his face when he watches my cousin Angela—I knew I was in trouble. Then when I observed Fiona looking at him the same way, it was clear I was doomed. His firm specializes in historic building repair and conservation. It's a perfect match for her auction work." He cast soulful eyes at El. "Did I mention he plays the lute?"

"Oh no, not that!" She put a hand on his arm. "But why did Fiona lead you on? Couldn't she have given you a heads up?"

"Honestly? She was too conflicted about it. We hashed it through yesterday evening. She wasn't letting herself recognize that she had such strong feelings about Gerald. We'd both said that her being in France would be a good test of our relationship and that we were free to date others. We just . . . wound up deciding different things." Neal paused and cleared his throat.

A waiter came by to clear their plates. Peter ordered another bottle of wine.

"Does Fiona feel the same way about it?" El asked.

"Not at first, but she does now. Gerald's life is much better suited for her than mine. I told her she should go for it and give him a chance." Neal slapped a smile on. "Hey, don't look that way. We gave it a good shot. I'm glad I let Fiona see the kind of life I have. It's not right for her. You know I've been saying that for months. Subconsciously she woke up to the realization too. I'm fine. This sort of thing happens all the time. At least it apparently does to me. I'm getting good at handling rejection. So, what are our plans for tomorrow? You have my guide services for the day."

Peter fell in line with his desire to change the subject. El looked like she had more questions but she
gave him a break. Peter had set aside the next day as a vacation day. They weren't due at the police headquarters till Tuesday. For two days they'd meet with their French counterparts and then fly back on Thursday. It would be a full schedule, and Neal was thankful for it. There'd be little time to dwell on what happened.

Should he forget about the Braque? He'd planned to retrieve the painting on Wednesday night, but would Mozzie even be speaking with him by then? If he didn't have Mozzie's help, smuggling the painting out in his suitcase would be problematic. Perhaps he shouldn't attempt it. He'd had a black cloud hanging over him in France. Was his luck about to turn or was the cloud an omen of worse dangers ahead?

They took their time strolling back to the hotel. Neal enjoyed playing tour guide. He pointed out shops for El to explore when they were at work. She intended to divide her time between sightseeing and shopping. How she'd manage to do everything on her list escaped him.

When they said good night in the lobby, Peter pulled Neal aside. "Do you want to talk about Fiona? We could have a nightcap in the bar." Neal gazed on his awkwardly anxious face and took pity on him.

"It's all right, thanks. I'll head upstairs and work on my presentation. Nothing better than planning a heist at the Louvre to get over wounded feelings."

He looked relieved. "Bury yourself in your work. Good idea. You'll be ready to get back on the horse in no time."

Neal winced. "Please, no horse references. I'm done being a knight."

"Got it . . . but if you do ever want to talk, you know El and I are here for you."

"Yeah, I do, thanks, and I appreciate it. But I have a painting to steal." He paused and raised a brow. "Unless you and El would you like to join my crew?"

Peter was happy to change the subject. "What are you planning?"

"Marcel asked for a presentation on the Louvre. The *Mona Lisa* is an attractive target. I've never stolen a Da Vinci. What do you think? Too grandiose?"

"Not for you."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCW**

"It's a bad business," Peter grumbled as he placed his shirts in an armoire. He and El hadn't taken the time to unpack before supper. "Why couldn't Fiona have let Neal know about Gerald beforehand?"

She paused hanging up a dress. "I'm upset, too. Neal was working hard at being more open. She should have done the same. On the other hand, I can understand how she'd be conflicted. When she told Neal she was still in love with him, she undoubtedly meant it. She probably wanted Neal to remain part of her life and hated to face reality."

"I hope Azathoth's attack wasn't a factor. Neal had to postpone his trip. It was yet one more example of his job interfering with their relationship."

"You said it yourself. They needed to be honest with each other. If she couldn't deal with what happened in London, she's not the right woman for Neal."
"I hope you're right," Peter said, closing the suitcase. "I liked Fiona. She was so normal . . . and grounded."

El gave a small smile. "You were hoping she'd keep Neal from flying off."

"Sure I did. As long as he was concerned about Fiona, Neal was less likely to take risks. Now he may be worse than ever."

"Oh, I doubt that. Come and sit next to me."

They pulled up chairs in front of the French doors which overlooked the patio garden. "What's really troubling you?" she asked.

"Neal spent the past few months trying to convince himself he wasn't right for Fiona. I got the distinct impression, it wasn't so much his work that bothered him as that he felt he wasn't good enough. When he met Gerald, did he decide to be the noble knight and sacrifice his love so she could be with someone more deserving?"

She took his hand and squeezed it. "I don't think so. I'm sure he meant it when he talked about the connection that Fiona and Gerald have."

"I'm not convinced. I don't know if I told you about a conversation we had in St. Louis. I can't remember now how we got started talking about 'The Gift of the Magi'—the O. Henry story. Neal thought it was beautiful how the couple sacrificed what they loved best for each other. Was he doing the same? Sacrificing his happiness so Fiona could find love with Gerald? Did he give up without trying?"

"I know your views on that story. You think Neal should have stayed and fought for her." She paused to consider for a moment. "They may still wind up together. She could decide Gerald's not right for her after all."

"I doubt it. Neal will be in New York. She's staying in France. If it's not Gerald, it will be some Frenchman," he added gloomily.

El gave a brief chuckle. "You sound more and more like Neal. In the long run, this may be for the best although she certainly could have handled it better. I was concerned they weren't well matched, but I'd hoped for his sake that I was wrong. I'm just glad we arrived when we did. He needs our support."

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Notes: Even for someone as charming as Neal, the road to finding your soul mate can be a rocky one. Next week in Chapter 7: At the Sign of the Green Cat, he'll talk with Elizabeth about it. Also coming up is the long anticipated meeting with Chantal, and Neal reconnects with an old friend. Peter first discussed "The Gift of the Magi" in Choirboy Caffrey. That continues to be a topic next week.

Thanks to Penna for the invaluable insights she provided on the issues confronting Neal. In our series, Neal is much younger and more inexperienced than his canon counterpart. Since he didn't attend college after high school, he missed out on the training ground college provides. As for Fiona, if you've watched The Bachelor or Bachelorette, you know that being in love with two people at the same time is something that many of the stars claim happens. Like Neal, I'm skeptical. At some point hard decisions have to be made.
I wrote about Neal's flight instinct and the Chagall painting in this week's blog post. Penna wrote about the experience of writing her first crossover, Time After Time Lord, in her post: "Trying new things: Crossovers."

The Chateau de Noizay in Amboise, Les Philosophes café, Hotel du Jeu de Paume, and the Brasserie at the tip of Ile Saint-Louis are all real establishments which make me want to pack my bags. Pins for them are on the Echoes of a Violin Pinterest board.

Blog : Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com
Chapter Visuals and Music: The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: www.pinterest.com/caffreycon
El awoke when the first rays of sunshine began to peek through the shutters. She slid out of bed, trying not to disturb her sleepyhead husband. She'd only be in Paris till Thursday, and she planned to make every second count. By the time Peter began to stir, she was already dressed. She kissed him good morning and informed him he could find her drinking café au lait on the patio.

El had read in the brochure that breakfast could be taken in the hotel's courtyard. There was limited seating, and she hoped that by getting there early she'd be able to snag one of the white wrought-iron tables.

She stopped off at the bar for a cup of coffee then strolled outside. The staff must have just watered the flowers as the stone pavement was still damp. A few doves were foraging among the shrubbery. Even at that hour, several of the tables were already taken. One particularly dashing young man caught her eye. Neal was reading a copy of *Le Monde*, his coffee beside him.

He rose to greet her and pulled over a chair. "It's been just me and the doves," he said, pulling up a chair. "I'm glad you joined me."

"You must have been having a scintillating conversation."

"I tried, but they have more interesting things in mind." He pointed out one bird. "That handsome fellow's been courting his fair lady for the past several minutes. He puffs out his chest and swaggers up to her, but she coyly flies away—only a few feet, of course. Then she coos softly, enticing him to try again."

"I hope you're not thinking of yourself as that frustrated Romeo."

He shrugged. "Only a little." He studied them glumly. "At least he's getting come-hither coos."

"It'll get better."

He glanced at her and smiled sheepishly. "Hope for us pigeons? You're my doctor. Do you have a magic elixir handy?"

"I knew there was something I forgot to pack!" She took a sip of coffee. "I wish I could help. Playing Neal Carter's neurologist in Diana's stories doesn't give me much credibility, but I've found talking about what bothers you can sometimes achieve a cure."

Neal didn't appear inclined to take her up on the offer and she hesitated a moment, weighing her options. Would Peter want her to discuss it? She decided he would. He would be relieved that she asked the difficult questions for him. "Peter's concerned that the attack by Azathoth may have had an influence. We hope you didn't sacrifice your relationship with Fiona over fear for her safety."

He gave her a knowing look. "Confess. He brought up 'The Gift of the Magi,' didn't he?"

"You know him well," she admitted.

"It wasn't hard to guess. He loves using that story as an example of how a lack of teamwork causes problems. You can assure him that I wasn't acting out of some misplaced code of chivalry. Fiona admitted that my job was an issue, but it's not the only one. She doesn't want to wait long to start
having children. I think she finds my reliability lacking, and I can't blame her. My track record over the past few months hasn't been stellar."

"Do you think there's any chance of getting back together?"

"I can read people pretty well, and what I'm reading is making me want to close the book. I think I've arrived at the unhappy ending part."

"My only advice is not to attach a deeper cosmic significance to it." She took a sip of coffee. Talking about her own failures was not something she enjoyed, but it might help ease the pain. "When I was in college, I was in a relationship for two years. I was sure we'd get married after we graduated. I spent senior year dreaming about our wedding and our future happy life together. It's a wonder I didn't fail my courses. But once we graduated, we began to drift apart. He was working in a different city and fell in love with someone else. I can still remember vividly how much it hurt when he told me he was engaged. I focused on my career but I worried I'd never find the right person for me."

"And now look at you. You and Peter have what I want. You give me hope."

She squeezed his hand. "Some people are lucky. They find their true love the first time and don't have to go through the twists and turns we had to make. I was about on the point of giving up when I met Peter." She smiled as she remembered that first awkward encounter. "The same will happen to you. You're not destined to spend your life alone, and that, Neal Carter, is my professional opinion."

"What are you two laughing about?" Peter asked as he walked up, coffee in hand.

"Just making plans for the future," Neal said.

WCWCWCWCWCWCW

Peter stood off to the side as Neal discussed a painting by Caravaggio with El. They'd spent the past hour at the Louvre—barely enough time for a brief introduction. It was their final stop in a whirlwind tour of Paris highlights. Neal had been overly modest about his abilities. He wasn't a tour guide. He was a walking encyclopedia of Paris lore. How did he keep all that stuff crammed into his head?

By unspoken consensus, Fiona was not up for discussion. Neal appeared fine, his wounded feelings buried deep, and Peter wasn't about to unearth them. He was willing to give Fiona the benefit of the doubt that she'd been deluding herself as well as Neal. He was proud that Neal had opened up to her about his work and hoped that her rejection didn't make Neal think that had been a mistake.

Neal focused on the sights he'd thought Peter would particularly enjoy since this was his only day free. In addition to the Louvre, they'd visited the Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, the Military Museum, and Napoleon's Tomb. It was clear that Neal felt he'd saved the best for last, and he wouldn't get any argument from them. At the museum Neal was even more animated than normal. Peter longed to know what his history with the museum had been. Neal had related last night that he'd stayed in Paris several times with Chantal and Klaus. Had they broken into the Louvre? More than once?

Peter walked closer to study the painting they were discussing. It was called *The Fortune Teller*. "What are you two chuckling about? I want in on the joke."

Neal put an arm around El. "Don't you know? El's my gypsy fortune teller."

"Of course. Now I understand what you were doing on the patio this morning."

She picked up Peter's hand and stroked it. "Would you like me to read your palm, kind sir?"
He adopted a stern expression. "Do you intend to lift my ring like the gypsy in that painting?"

"What?" Her eyes widened and she turned to reexamine the painting. "I hadn't noticed that."

Neal grinned. "Sharp eyes, partner. I knew you'd spot it."

He waggled a finger at the two of them. "Let that serve as a lesson to you both. Your scheming won't stand a chance against Hawkeye Burke."

Neal muttered in a loud stage whisper to her. "We'll plan our next heist when he's not around." He nodded to the gallery on the right. "There's a painting in there I especially want you to see. It's called *The Astronomer*. When you see it, you may want to commission us."

"I've seen photos of that," Peter said, growing excited. "I didn't realize it was at the Louvre. El, you'll love this. It's a portrait by Vermeer. An astronomer's studying a celestial globe."

She linked her arm through Neal's. "Is Ursa Minor among the constellations?"

"Don't give me that innocent look," Neal protested with a grin. "You're already planning the jokes, aren't you?"

Unfortunately, the Baby Bear comments would have to wait. When they arrived at the gallery, they learned that the painting was currently not being exhibited. But there was no shortage of other paintings to admire.

After the Louvre, they stopped for an early supper at a nearby café. El planned to stroll along the Champs-Élysées while Neal took Peter to meet with Klaus's ex-wife, Chantal Delon. She'd returned to Paris in the afternoon from a short vacation. Since her restaurant was closed for the day, this was their best opportunity.

Up to now Peter had relied exclusively on Neal to understand Klaus since he knew of no one else who'd worked with the master thief. He was counting on Chantal to help fill in the picture.

Her restaurant was on a small side street on the Left Bank opposite Notre-Dame. As they walked along the quai to their appointment, Peter asked him if he'd spoken with Henry.

"He called last night," Neal confirmed.

"You told him about . . .?"

"Fiona? Yeah, but mainly we discussed his investigation. Henry had hoped to join us in Paris on Wednesday, but he has a lead on someone who reportedly knew Franz Huber during the war. Depending on how that pans out, it may be next week before he returns to New York. I assume John hasn't any breaks in the case to report?"

"That's right. They finished interviewing the Scima employees with no fresh leads. Still no reports of Marta being seen anywhere. Agents found a couple of Dumbledore outfits stuffed into a trash bag which were probably used by the men who attacked me, but they haven't been able to pull any usable evidence off them. John discussed the incident with his department head. The Home Secretary has put the kibosh on investigating Chapman. If we don't manage to find any DNA evidence, John won't be able to proceed."

Neal shrugged. "I suspected as much. It all hinges on Chantal and the plastic surgeon." They turned onto a narrow side street. "That's her bistro up ahead on the left," he said, pointing to an attractive small restaurant with a green awning. A swinging metal sign proclaimed the name: Le Chat Vert.
"What's the significance to the Green Cat?" Peter asked.

"Impressive. Your French lessons are paying off, Pierre."

"I try, so what does it mean?"

"That was Klaus's nickname for her. Green is Chantal's favorite color. And as for cat, Chantal was an expert burglar. I assumed that's why he chose it."

"Don't you think it's odd she'd use the nickname her ex-husband gave her?"

Neal paused at the entrance. "Chantal's feelings about Klaus are complicated. Even after she divorced him, they continued to be friends. She knew he was dangerous but was still attracted to him."

"He was an addiction, in other words?"

Neal nodded. He hesitated for a moment then added, "When we talked after he died, she said she understood how difficult it had been for me to betray him. No one wanted him to die, but his passing finally set her free. I don't think she said that simply to ease my guilt."

He moved to press the doorbell, but Peter stopped him, laying a hand on his arm. "Is that the way you feel—that you betrayed him?"

"Shouldn't I? Don't worry, I don't regret the role I played. But there's no point in cloaking it in a euphemism." Neal's words were disquieting. How much of his description of Chantal's feelings was true for himself as well? Tricia and Henry had both warned Peter that Neal could still be overdosing on guilt. On the other hand, Neal could simply be feeling depressed over Fiona and it was leaking into other areas.

Neal pressed the doorbell, and Chantal buzzed them up. More than ever, Peter hoped she'd shed some clarity on the situation.

Her apartment was above the bistro and accessed by a steep flight of stairs. Chantal was waiting by the front door when they arrived. She resembled the photo Peter had seen of her with short brunette hair and a turned up nose. She was dressed simply in turquoise capris and a loose sweater.

Neal sprang forward to greet her, switching into French as they hugged. He reverted to English when he introduced Peter. Luckily Chantal's English was much better than Peter's beginner's level French.

"Neal has spoken of you so highly, I feel as if we are old friends," she said, kissing him on the cheek.

"Neal explained they'd already eaten but she insisted on them sampling from an array of cheeses she'd placed on a cheese board. So many varieties Peter had never tasted and he wanted them all. She'd opened a bottle of Bordeaux to accompany them. By Neal's raised brow when he saw the label, Peter surmised this was no ordinary house claret.

They chatted for a few minutes about the sights they'd seen during the day. Peter sensed Chantal was wary of dealing with anyone in law enforcement, but her unease gradually disappeared as she talked
with Neal. Peter adapted his style to match Neal's. This wasn't an interrogation, no matter how critical she was to the case.

Neal helped, guiding the conversation onto reminiscences about Klaus and anecdotes about their life together while avoiding anything incriminating. Peter gave him points for opening her up, but it was perhaps more revealing of Neal than Chantal. Peter knew that she and Klaus had served as a surrogate family, but the attachment was stronger than he'd realized.

"Over dinner we'd discuss art and music," she said. "Klaus took it upon himself to make up for what he perceived to be the deficiencies in Neal's music education, specifically the piano. He simply couldn't understand why you preferred playing rock music to the classics."

"I didn't make it easy for him," Neal acknowledged with a grin. "He was a frustrated man and he didn't believe in hiding it. I made the mistake of playing Coldplay for him once. I sang 'High Speed' and accompanied myself on the piano. He was not kind."

"I loved it," she said loyally.

"You were the only one," Neal pointed out. "After that, Klaus monopolized the piano for days. Kept me so busy painting, I had no time to play."

"I remember! I spoke with him about it. He gave me quite a lecture, insisting that what he called 'serious' piano music would inspire your artistry. Rock music, on the other hand, would congeal your mind. Is that the right word?"

Neal grinned. "That describes it perfectly. Klaus was convinced Coldplay would turn my brain into aspic."

She gave a warm chuckle. "My poor aspic!" She turned to Peter. "Klaus loved to get inside your head and exploit what he found."

This was good. Peter was acquiring a much better profile of Klaus than ever before. Neal and Chantal were enjoying reminiscing so much, they sometimes seemed to forget Peter was there, too. Her English was spoken with a soft French accent that made Peter think of Catherine Deneuve. He wanted to keep it going for as long as possible. If Rolf or whoever was Azathoth was seeking revenge for Klaus, it was important to learn as much as he could about him. "What composers did Klaus like?"

"Mainly nineteenth century," she replied. "Schubert, Beethoven, Liszt. Rachmaninov was about as modern as he got."

"And artists?"

She spread some soft cheese on a cracker as she considered. "Vermeer, Manet, Titian . . ."

"Whistler," Neal added.

Her face lit up, "But of course! I should have named him first. His fascination with Whistler was not just because of the art, but the signature. He felt a kinship to Whistler."

"I'm not following you," Peter said. "What was it about Whistler's signature that intrigued him?"

"Whistler drew a butterfly based on his monogram," she explained. "This was no ordinary butterfly. Over the years as Whistler encountered opposition, he decided to include a long stinger to its tail as a warning to tread carefully. Klaus adopted for his symbol the design of a leopard sitting on a tree
branch, his long tail curling upward. I believe he was referencing Whistler's butterfly." She turned to Neal. "Does he know about you?"

"That Klaus called me Lion Cub?" He nodded. "You were the Green Cat."

She smiled. "And I still am. Klaus used to tease me that I wasn't wild enough to survive in the jungle by myself. I was the house cat who wanted to stay warm by the fire." She shrugged. "He was right. I wear it as a badge of honor."

"And now you have your hearth and home," Neal said, gazing at her with affection. "I'd never thought of connecting Whistler's butterfly to the leopard."

"I don't think he wanted you to know. He had a hard enough time getting you to follow his wishes. If you'd viewed him as a butterfly . . ." She raised a brow.

"Klaus was right," Neal said with a grin.

"He was more open with me. Once he told me that the consummate art thief was a butterfly flitting from museum to museum, with the world not suspecting a scorpion lurked within." Her face grew serious. "After I heard about the death of that guard in Berlin, I thought back on his remark."

Neal nodded, but didn't answer.

She leaned forward and placed a hand on Neal's arm. "Both of us learned. A leopard can be charming, but one should never forget he's a predator, a killer. I admire the strength you displayed when you told him you were leaving."

Neal shook his head, looking embarrassed. "You shouldn't. It was more a panicked flight than an act of courage. I stared into the abyss and was horrified at what I saw."

She turned to face Peter. "You may wonder why I married him. Klaus was the most fascinating person I'd ever known. If he were to walk in here today, I don't know if I'd be able to resist him."

"How long did you stay with Klaus after Neal left?" Peter asked.

"Only a month. I think it may have been Neal's action which gave me the courage to sever my connection as well. As I told Neal, I'd suspected for a while that Klaus was seeing another woman. I decided I wanted a fresh start, a life where I didn't have to worry about being arrested and sent to prison. I was delighted to learn that Neal has also made a clean break from his former life." She smiled at him. "No prison cells for either of us."

What Peter was hearing was reassuring. He'd be able to allay Tricia's fears. "Did Klaus ever mention Marta or Jacek Kolar to you?"

"No. I'd already mentioned to Neal, I have no knowledge of those names. That doesn't mean Klaus didn't work with them, simply that he didn't mention them to me."

"What can you tell us about Rolf?" Neal asked.

"I met him only once. That was when I was a member of Klaus's crew but before he proposed. Rolf was killed in a car crash in December 1999. That was two months before our wedding. At the time, I thought his death might have been one of the reasons Klaus proposed. He was grief-stricken over the loss of his brother and refused to talk about it with me. I thought it made him hold on to life more dearly."
"Do you think Rolf knew about Klaus's secret life as a thief?" Peter asked.

"I don't know," she said. "I suspected so and asked Klaus about it but he didn't answer. As you know, to the world Klaus was known as an investment banker. He could have easily hidden his illegal activities from his brother. I know he did from the rest of his family. Klaus once commented that Rolf was even better at the art of manipulation than he was. That astonished me. I couldn't imagine anyone more skilled at getting his way than Klaus."

Neal refilled her glass. "Were you able to find anything of Rolf's?"

She nodded. "A few mementos. When I left Klaus, I boxed up a couple of photo albums but haven't looked at them since. This afternoon upon my return home, I retrieved them from my storage closet." She paused. "So many memories! I'm glad the restaurant was closed this evening. I wouldn't have been able to focus on cooking." She stood up and walked over to the bookcase, returning with a small leather album. "This is something Luisa, Klaus's mother, gave me on our wedding day. I'd confided in her my hopes to have children, and she presented me with this album. It contains baby pictures of Klaus with a few of Rolf." She handed it to Neal.

He opened it eagerly. "I didn't know you had this." He began scanning through the photos.

"I held on to it," she continued, "hoping that I could change his mind about children. I used to wonder if our baby would look like him or Rolf. Today when I looked through it, I found a couple of small envelopes sandwiched between two photos. One marked Klaus; the other Rolf. They contain locks of hair tied together with ribbons. Luisa must have placed them there."

"I'll send the hair to John in London tomorrow," Peter said, "but if there aren't any hair roots, the chance of recoverable DNA is slim."

Neal nodded absently. He'd been unusually quiet on their way back to the hotel. After suggesting they take the same route along the Seine, he'd barely spoken a word. Peter suspected he was still processing the conversation with Chantal and didn't intrude.

When they arrived at the bridge leading to Ile Saint-Louis, Peter stopped him. "Let's sit down a moment and enjoy the view." On their left they could view Notre-Dame, illuminated in lights. There were few people around. It was a magical setting, and Peter vowed to return to that spot with El the next evening.

Sitting down didn't make Neal any more talkative so Peter finally had to prod him to explain what was bothering him.

"Those baby photos . . . Chantal . . . " He looked over at the cathedral. "Seeing the photos of Klaus and Rolf made me think about Henry and how I would have felt if he'd been killed."

"We're still not positive that Chapman is Rolf," Peter cautioned him.

"He is. I'm sure of it." He raked a hand through his hair. "A brother's revenge," he added quietly.

So that was it. Peter wasn't surprised. He'd been worried about it already. "If Chapman turns out to be Rolf, then most likely Rolf took his place quite a while ago—much earlier than when you went undercover with Klaus. You shouldn't feel guilty. If anything you should feel angry that Klaus played you for so long."

"Keep talking."
"All right, I will. We know the head of Ydrus is a woman. Rolf may be her first lieutenant, or the criminal genius behind the organization. He could have been working for Ydrus all the years Chantal knew Klaus. When you worked with them, Rolf could have been even then in a secret partnership with his brother and directing his activities while staying in the background. Both you and Chantal claim Klaus only divulged the essential. Are you listening to me? Don't lose yourself in the personal aspects. Focus on Rolf as the criminal Azathoth and stop thinking of him as someone's brother. You have to take your emotions out of the picture."

Neal slanted him a glance and smiled. "You're beginning to sound a lot like the Peter Gilman of Arkham Files."

"What about you? That talk of staring into the abyss when you decided to quit Klaus's crew? You were imagining your future as Diana described that stairway down to the abyss. Her stories are having an effect on both of us. I'm glad to hear it. That means they're affecting Azathoth too."

Neal nodded. "Rolf's secure in the belief we don't know who he is. That could give us our best shot at capturing him."

"That's right. Don't give up on the DNA evidence. It may not be enough for a conviction, but it could be sufficient to justify a full-scale investigation of Chapman. If we strike before he knows we're onto him, we just may be able to take out the Leopard's ghost."

For a brief moment the old Neal returned, giving him a mischievous grin. "Are you turning into a poet on me?" He stood up. "Now that you've met Chantal, what do you think?"

Peter rose too. "That Klaus was a fool to let her go."

**WCWCWCWCWCWCW**

On Tuesday, Neal and Peter spent the full day at the headquarters of the National Police, the French equivalent to the FBI, making their presentations on Azathoth and the countermeasures they'd enacted. On hand to hear them speak were not only agents but museum representatives and members of the French government. They would be the ones Marcel Jauffret would have to persuade to allocate funds for the software purchases.

Neal didn't understand how they could refuse. If all the instances of Azathoth's malware being used didn't convince them, surely the successes White Collar had obtained in New York by using the software would.

Their work for the day was now done. Neal was powering off the equipment in the meeting room while Peter called John from an office which had been placed at their disposal. Peter had contacted him yesterday evening with the news from Chantal and received mailing instructions. John promised to put a rush order on the analysis but warned that the earliest they might know anything would be Thursday. The DNA analysis of the samples Neal had obtained at Scima was still ongoing.

After the emotional upheavals of the weekend, the work environment was a welcome relief. Neal longed to speak in French but restrained himself to the occasional remark with colleagues so Peter wouldn't feel left out.

It seemed surreal to still call the cybercriminal Azathoth. In his mind, Neal now called him Rolf.

Tricia had once called Rolf her lead suspect but at the time she thought he was dead. Now he'd risen from the grave. Perhaps Rolf was more like Bram Stoker's Dracula than a Lovecraft monster. Or was he like Doctor Who? A man who periodically underwent regeneration?
In between their meetings, he and Peter brought Marcel up to speed on the status of the Adler case and its possible connection to Nazi-plundered art. Neal could tell that Marcel, although not completely dismissive, was skeptical of the U-boat theory. He remarked that similar tales of treasure hoards had surfaced in the past and they'd never panned out.

Tamping down expectations was the apparent theme of the day. Peter spoke again of the uncertainties of DNA analysis. Was he worried that Neal would turn into a Don Quixote, obsessed with Rolf? He might have been right except that Neal had to manage the other plates he was spinning.

The Braque painting was currently the most wobbly. Mozzie still hadn't returned any of Neal's messages. How long would he stay angry? Last night Neal forced himself to realistically evaluate the odds for success if he attempted to retrieve the painting on his own, and he didn't like them. The old Neal wouldn't have hesitated, but the new, improved model had learned to exercise a modicum of caution. The safest policy would be to return later in the summer when Peter wasn't with him.

Neal shoved the Braque aside when Peter reentered the room. He looked satisfied with the results of the call. "The samples have arrived and are being analyzed. John reported that in the review of Chapman’s past, one incident popped out. In April 2000 he was in a car accident. A leg fracture resulted in him working from home for several weeks. That's the most likely time the switch could have been made."

"That was about four months after Rolf supposedly died. Enough time for him to heal from the plastic surgery and learn Chapman's mannerisms."

Peter nodded. "At this point, there's not much more John can do. He can't question colleagues without it being an official investigation. In any case, it's doubtful anyone would remember something suspicious that occurred five years ago. There are also no further reports on Marta Kolar."

"I was thinking about her," Neal said, closing his laptop. "If she'd had plastic surgery like Rolf, it's possible she wore a disguise of her former self for the benefit of the surveillance cameras."

"Good point. Or it might not have even been Marta, but someone else disguised to look like her. Everyone could be wearing a mask. Chapman's Rolf. Marta's someone else." He glanced over at Neal. "Should I check your face? You're not someone else pretending to be Neal, I hope?"

Peter's question hit closer to home than Neal liked. He slapped on a carefree look and chuckled. "No, you're safe. No one else could fake being me. If it's okay with you, I'll take off now."

"Sure. We can leave together. El called. She wants me to meet her at Printemps."

"It's a good thing you're dining late. The store stays open till eight, and you'll need all those hours."

"We'll see you at Chantal's for dinner, right?" Peter asked, standing up.

"I wouldn't miss it."

"That will give you enough time?"

"It should," Neal said, opening the door. "André suggested we meet at Lafaugère, his fencing club, which is not far from her bistro. Wish me luck."

"You have it. I was glad to hear your decision. One less secret in your life is a good thing."

Neal let a little of his nerves show. "He's a good friend. I hope he still will be after he hears how I've
been playing him for all these years."

"If he lets this come between the two of you, he's not much of a friend."

Peter's assurance hit home. Would he feel the same way if Neal told him about the Braque?

**WCWCWCWCWCWCWCWC**

Neal arrived at the fencing club before André and waited for him at the entrance. His former fencing coach knew Neal as Gary Rydell, and that had been the source of a misunderstanding. Would André take the deception as badly as Mozzie? Even if he did, it was a risk Neal needed to take. No more conning of friends. Of course, by that logic, he shouldn't be conning Peter, but that was different. Neal was doing it to protect him. In André’s case, the truth wouldn't cause him any damage. Neal would be the one who would lose yet one more friend.

When Neal initially made his plans for Paris, he hadn't decided whether to attempt a meeting. The last time he'd seen him was when André agreed to help trap the Italian criminal working for Fowler. In appreciation for his efforts, Mozzie had introduced André to Gordon Taylor and he'd been a member of Gordon's crew ever since.

"Salut, Gary!" Neal turned to see André's smiling face and knew he'd met the right decision. Soon they were sitting in the club lounge, reminiscing over glasses of white wine.

Neal asked André about his life in Paris before broaching the reason for his visit. "Has Mozzie mentioned to you—"

"—that you broke up with Neal? Yes, I was sorry to hear it. I'd hoped you'd develop a lasting relationship. Have you found anyone else?"

"No. In a sense he's still very much a part of me . . ." Neal groaned inwardly. Awkward didn't begin to describe it. He decided to try another tack before he made a total ass out of himself. "I assume you heard Keller's now in prison?"

"I did and I hope he stays there." André had also had run-ins with Keller. They were on the same page in their dislike of the man.

"Introducing us was one of the few good things Keller ever did, but he also added a complication," Neal paused to take a sip of wine. "You should know that Gary Rydell is an alias that Keller invented for me, and one that I still use. My real name is Neal."

André stared at him for a moment. "As in Neal Caffrey?"

He nodded and waited uneasily for André's reaction.

"All this time you've been conning me?" he asked incredulously. "I thought I was the master of the feint."

Wincing, Neal plowed on. "I wanted to tell you the truth, but the alias was such a good one, I hated to burn it. When you showed up in New York, it became a real issue."

"Yes, I can see that." André exhaled, studying him. Impossible to read how angry he was.

"I'm sorry about the deception. I hope you can forgive me."

"All this time, I thought I was fencing Gary Rydell. Instead you are a stranger to me. A stranger."
Neal had to suppress a flinch when he heard André echo Mozzie's words. Wasn't speaking the truth supposed to make you feel better, not worse? He was building up a lot of evidence to the contrary.

André stood up abruptly. "I demand satisfaction. You must allow me a rematch." When Neal hesitated, he raised an eyebrow. "Are you coming or not? I have extra gear you can borrow." His face melted into a large smile. "Who's the master of the feint now?"

"You're head and shoulders above me," Neal acknowledged happily. "You always have been."

When he rose, André promptly embraced him. "Salut, Neal. It's a pleasure to meet you. Now let's fence."

André gave him the tour of the club on the way to the locker room, explaining that he coached several teams. It was an excellent cover and supplemented the work he did for Gordon. Judging from the number of greetings he was receiving, André was well-liked by everyone there.

When he joined André on the fencing mat, for a change Neal was the one with no supporters. André's fan contingent on the other hand was formidable. They chose sabres. Neal was faster, but André's finesses were still unbeatable.

At the end of the match, Neal said, "That's close enough to a draw, don't you think?"

André agreed readily. "Will you have time to fence again this week?"

Neal hesitated. If he didn't hear from Mozzie, he would. "Can I get back to you? I may be free tomorrow evening."

"Of course. I'm here almost every evening."

While they were talking, a man walked up. He wasn't wearing a fencing uniform. His casual clothes were expensive. Neal noted the Gucci loafers. He looked to be in his thirties, slim with dark hair. "Care to introduce us, André?" He spoke with a British accent.

"Neal Caffrey, meet Gordon Taylor," André said with a flourish.

Neal enjoyed the way Gordon's eyes flickered recognition. If ever there'd been a sign from on high that honesty was the best policy, this was it. "A pleasure," Gordon said, shaking his hand. "I didn't realize you fenced. I've been taking a few lessons from André. He's an excellent coach."

"Yes, he is. We should fence together sometime. Or perhaps a round of pool? I hear you're an expert."

Gordon eyed him thoughtfully. "Yes, I look forward to that."

Mozzie had told him Gordon liked to assess a potential crew member by seeing how they play pool. That was a challenge Neal would enjoy accepting.

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**Notes:** Will Mozzie reach out to Neal? Will Neal go ahead and retrieve the Braque painting if he doesn't have Mozzie's help? What trap has Azathoth set? The answers are all coming next week. I hope you enjoyed Gordon Taylor's inclusion this week. He was a character I wished the TV writers had revisited. This will not be his only appearance in this series.
The paintings Neal, Peter, and El discussed at the Louvre, The Fortune Teller by Caravaggio and The Astronomer by Vermeer, as well as Whistler's butterfly signature are pinned to the Echoes of a Violin Pinterest board. Butterflies and Neal's feelings about them are also the subject of my blog post this week, "A Butterfly's Tale."

Penna earned a writer's Purple Heart for providing invaluable beta assistance even while fighting a nasty cold—thank you, Penna!

Blog: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)
The Church of Saint-Roch

National Police Headquarters, Paris. Wednesday, June 1, 2005

On Wednesday morning, Neal broke into the Louvre and stole the *Mona Lisa.*

Actually that wasn't correct. He had help.

Peter, Marcel Jauffret, and eighteen agents of the French National Police also stole the *Mona Lisa.*

Or attempted to.

For the workshop he conducted, Neal based his execution of the heist on a plan he and Klaus had devised to steal another painting at the Louvre, *The Lacemaker* by Vermeer. Neal quit Klaus's crew before they could execute the theft. When Neal was at the Louvre on Sunday, he scrutinized the Vermeer carefully. It appeared genuine. It made him wonder who Klaus used as a forger after Neal's departure.

When Marcel jokingly asked afterward if the Louvre should reexamine the *Mona Lisa,* it sounded like déjà vu. Neal had been all smiles, joshing back that a reappraisal might be warranted.

The juxtaposition of addressing the French police in the morning and breaking into a church that evening to retrieve a stolen painting was more unsettling than he'd anticipated. But the text he'd received last night had made the decision for him. The job was on.

Neal sought to appease his pesky conscience by pointing out he was training the French to prevent future heists by any successor to the Leopard. But consciences could be worse than two-year olds. Demanding little creatures who refused to listen to reason. He wished he could have left his in New York.

A call had come in for Peter from John Hobhouse during the workshop. Peter left to return the call while Neal was still answering questions. The participants had now departed for lunch, and Neal was preparing for the afternoon session. Peter still hadn't returned. John must have had a lot to discuss. Neal's imagination kicked his conscience into the cellar and went into overdrive.

When Peter finally reentered the room, Neal met him at the door. "Good news, I hope?"

"Sorry I took so long." Peter took a seat at the table. That was a good sign. If he didn't have anything of significance he would have probably related it on the way to the Metro. Before long Peter would need to leave to meet El for lunch. "John heard back from the Swiss."

Neal sat down across from him. "With the name of the backer? Anyone we know?"

By his smile, Neal could tell it was. "None other than Alistair Chapman. As we discussed, John will hold off questioning him till the results of the DNA analysis are in. But we have the makings of a strong case. Identifying Chapman as the game's backer not only proves that he was interested in Lovecraft before the hacker attack at Scima Gameworks, but establishes a link to Azathoth."

Chapman's use of the alias *Albert Wilmarth* was a brazen gesture that could now come back to bite him. He was now tied to the man who'd left the Leopard's business card for Neal at his art exhibition last spring. Had Azathoth finally been guilty of overreach?

"John also had more information on how the attack at Scima had been staged," Peter added. "And
note that I used the word *staged*. They were able to find footage of the flatbed trailer which transported the TARDIS from the backlot to the Underwater Stage. They've now interviewed the driver. He'd been given instructions from his supervisor to place it in the underwater tank. He never opened the TARDIS and didn't realize I was inside."

"Who made the request of the supervisor?"

"It was a typical Azathoth ploy. A text message was sent from the *Doctor Who* production foreman. He denies any knowledge of it and the police believe him. There's nothing in his record to indicate otherwise. Apparently his cell phone number was hacked."

Neal groaned at the news of yet another cyberattack.

"I'll second that, but there were a few other crumbs to be gleaned. The TARDIS itself provided additional evidence. Extra sealants had been used to make it virtually airtight. The police are still trying to trace how and when that was accomplished. The TARDIS had been retrofitted with a mechanism which opens a plug at the base of the unit. The circuitry within the device indicates that it could be remotely controlled."

"You mean someone could pull the plug remotely to let the phone booth fill with water?"

"Exactly. You see what this means? Azathoth placed me in the pool but could control the timing of my drowning. He could have watched the proceedings via a surveillance camera, or—assuming Azathoth is Chapman—he was present to watch. He could have had the device in his pocket and clicked it at the precise moment for the most effect."

Neal considered the implications. "We could take that two different ways. He could have wanted to crow over my despair when I found you dead. Or he didn't intend to kill you."

"I tend to think the latter. You only had a few minutes to rescue me. If he'd wanted to kill me, he could have easily done so. You would have found my corpse, and he would have been able to gloat in his sadistically mad way. But that's not what happened. He gave you a chance to save me. And if you hadn't thought to go there, it's my belief Chapman himself would have suggested it."

"Perhaps Diana's stories are also having an effect. He likes you too much to kill you. Me, on the other hand, he finds annoying and has decided to drive me crazy so I'll be hauled off to the funny farm."

Peter chuckled. "I doubt that seriously. You've been annoying me for two years and so far I've no desire to sign the commitment papers."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anytime … You haven't told me about your meeting with André yesterday."

"He gave me a tour of the club and we fenced afterward. It went well."

"Did you?" Peter made a rolling motion with his hand.

"Tell him who I was? I did and I'm happy to report we're still friends. We talked it through. I explained why it happened and he took it well." Neal hesitated for a moment. Should he tell Peter? Would it come back to bite him? But even if it did, it was still worth it. He already had enough issues from past deceptions. "After we fenced, André introduced me to a friend—Gordon Taylor. I assume you know who he is."
"Master thief? I've heard the name, read the dossier." Peter sat back to eye him thoughtfully. "Do you have anything to share?"

"We had drinks together."

He nodded slowly. "Interesting. What did you discuss?"

"Paris, fencing—the kind with blades, not goods, you'll be happy to hear. No specifics. Gordon's an expert pool player. We may have a game sometime." Neal looked over at him and grinned. "Relax. He didn't make me a job offer. But having him as a contact is useful for Neal Caffrey, master thief and con artist."

"I agree. Good thing you'd already explained who you are to André."

"Isn't it?"

"You see? Honesty does have its rewards."

"I figured you'd extrapolate that, and it's a compelling argument. But I don't think I'll tell Gordon about my true status at the FBI just yet."

Peter winced. "Touché. Let's go with honesty unless there's a compelling reason to make an exception."

Neal could easily live with that. There was enough wiggle room to keep annoying consciences locked in the cellar for a long time to come. The job tonight was simply a minor blip, one of those anomalous compelling cases that didn't change the new trajectory he was on.

"Have you decided how to handle the Gary Rydell alias? Now that André knows, should you burn it?"

"André said I should continue to use it, and since I work primarily in New York, I think Gary's safe." Neal glanced at his watch. "You should be leaving if you still plan to meet El. I'll walk with you to the Metro stop."

While they jogged down the stairs, they chatted about the dinner at Chantal's bistro the previous night. The evening had been proclaimed a success by all. The cuisine, as expected, was superb. There had been no discussion of Azathoth or Rolf to dampen spirits.

When they exited the building, Neal tossed out a remark he knew Peter would be happy to hear. "Fiona called last night."

"What did she have to say?"

"She's kicking herself that she didn't recognize how her feelings were growing for Gerald. She was worried that I thought she'd deliberately deceived me. I told her we all have moments of regret—times we look back on and wonder how we could have messed up so badly." Neal stopped himself. Was he talking about Fiona or the Braque painting or both? He stole a glance at Peter. The way he was oozing commiseration made Neal realize no matter what it was, he should tone it down. "We talked things through. I think we're in a better place. We're moving back to the friend zone. That's been experiencing a boom recently. I may have to apply for a permit to enlarge it."

"You're handling it very well," he said quietly. "I'm proud of you. Focus on all the successes of the trip. We're on our way to unmasking Azathoth definitively. No matter what game he was playing, I believe you saved my life and I won't forget that, ever, and neither will El. You have your
presentations at Interpol, you came clean with André. I know it wasn't easy to admit to him that you deceived him, but doesn't it make you feel better now?"

"It does."

"Now Fiona's beating herself up for not having given you a heads up. I realize you think I harp way too much on the issues that can happen when you don't face your problems openly, but you've taken some gigantic steps in the right direction."

There was that conscience again, rattling the cellar doorknob. Neal did his best to ignore it while exuding reassurance.

"The past few days haven't been easy for you. You're making presentations to the police about the heists you used to make. It must be unsettling, but doesn't it also prove how far you've come?"

"Yes, it does. I can talk about the heists without having any desire to pull them." That at least he could say confidently.

"You sure you don't want to join El and me for lunch?" Peter asked as they walked out the front door.

"Thanks, but I already have plans to meet a friend."

"Anyone I know?"

Neal shrugged. "Just catching up with acquaintances." He paused. It was the perfect opening. He couldn't let it pass. "It's possible we may want to get together tonight."

"And El and I've been monopolizing your time," he said, picking up on the signal. "Don't give it another thought. I'll have an evening with my sweetheart in the City of Lights. Go ahead and make your plans."

"You're sure you'll be okay? Remember, rognon is French for kidney, and the taste of ris de veau is delicious, but you may not—"

He laughed. "I have El, remember? We'll be fine."

Neal stopped at the Metro entrance. "Do you know which train to catch?"

Peter gave him a friendly shove. "Go enjoy your lunch. Just remember to be back at three for our final presentation. This will be the last chance for the French to hear how you'd make off with France's national treasures."

**WCWCWCWCW**

When Neal received Mozzie's invitation to meet him for lunch, he knew the time for wavering was over.

After a disastrous start, France was bestowing a few gifts. André had forgiven him. If he could make things right with Mozzie, Neal would be able to move forward. Retrieving the painting would prove he hadn't lost his touch, even if he chose not to use those skills anymore.

Mozzie had selected a café far enough away from the police headquarters that Neal didn't have to worry about being spotted. The interior was a dark cave compared with the brilliant sunshine outside. Neal had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he spotted his friend sitting in the back. Mozzie had
returned to being a man of the shadows and this was a reminder Neal should too, if only for a short while.

Mozzie had already ordered a bottle of wine. He poured Neal a glass when he sat down. "I've adjusted my sails," he said airily. "We'll speak of it no more."

"Thanks. I appreciate it." Neal wanted to say more but was interrupted by a waiter bringing them their menus. That may have been for the best. It was time to stop dwelling on the past. Over sole meunière, Neal mentioned he'd met Gordon Taylor.

Mozzie's eyes glittered in the obscurity. "You should have told me earlier. I would have picked a five-star restaurant for that."

"Don't read too much into it. I haven't accepted a job and it wasn't intentional." Neal explained the circumstances.

"Still, the three of you—having drinks, getting acquainted. I predict great things coming from this. Did Gordon invite you to play pool?"

"He did."

"I knew it!" Mozzie said, snapping his fingers. "When will you meet?"

"There's no time this trip. Perhaps when I return to Paris. I'm keeping my options open as you suggested." Having Gordon Taylor as a friend was something that would be just as useful for the FBI and Interpol as it would for the old Neal Caffrey, but he had no intention of bringing that subject up with Mozzie. His own feelings were ambivalent. He admired Gordon too much to take him down and hoped it would never become an issue.

Mozzie passed him a key and receipt. "I placed your gear in the storage locker north of Les Halles as you asked. Isn't it about time you tell me where the painting is?"

"Are you familiar with the Church of Saint-Roch?"

"The baroque church near the Tuileries?"

"That's the one."

Mozzie considered for a moment. "It has a famous history. Who chose it?"

"Klaus. He said Saint Roch was a fitting choice for us. He was the patron saint of the falsely accused."

"Did he know that Henry's father blackmailed you to leave the States?"

"No, I never told him anything about Henry or any other members of my family. Klaus asserted that art thieves were misunderstood by the public. He claimed that we were kindred spirits with artists."

"An interesting hypothesis. Museums reap profits off long-dead artists who often during their lifetimes are scorned by the purveyors of taste."

Neal nodded agreement. "Klaus believed we were in a sense like the Scarlet Pimpernel—liberating art while thumbing our noses at the institutions which were holding them captive."

"A romantic view. It's no wonder you were so drawn to him." Mozzie eyed him thoughtfully. "These past months couldn't have been easy ones for you. We must accept what happened. I'm
familiar with that church. On an earlier trip, I went there to pay my respects to Diderot at his tomb. As one of the principal figures of the Enlightenment, he is a person I admire greatly. Undoubtedly Klaus did as well. Diderot, just like Voltaire”—He paused for a moment, his eyes widening—“Did you hide it in his tomb?"

"No. The church also has a famous organ. Klaus told me that Chopin wrote a piece specifically for that instrument and performed it there himself."

"You hid it in the organ!"

"You're getting warmer. The instrument was built by master organ builders Lesclop and Clicquot in the 1700s. The case housing the pipes is a magnificent example of baroque wood carving complete with cherubs."

"Of course. You hid it behind a cherub."

Neal shook his head, grinning at Mozzie's mounting impatience. "I suggested that. There's one cherub in particular playing a cello that I was strongly tempted by. The painting is only two feet tall and small enough to fit, but it might have been discovered during routine maintenance."

"So where did you hide it?"

"You remember Azathoth's riddle? Find yourself in the sky? Klaus and I must have been prescient. We followed his advice." Neal reached inside his jacket and pulled out a photo.

Mozzie studied it. "The clock at the top of the case?" At Neal's nod, he broke into a smile. "Now I understand why you said I couldn't retrieve the painting. Perched like that, on the very top of the organ pipe housing . . ." He stroked his lip as he considered the difficulty. "You think the zipline will be adequate?"

"That's the way I scaled the pipes last time. All maintenance work is done on the front of the clock but we were able to add a false wood panel behind the mounting and secrete the painting inside. Klaus and I spent one night exploring every nook and cranny of that organ case. I was sorely tempted to sit down at the organ and play it."

"You could have acted out your own version of Phantom of the Opera."

Neal nodded. "Klaus and I were two kids that night." Careful. Don't indulge. Paris was bringing back too many memories. Neal had called his time in Europe his years of insanity, but upon reflection, perhaps age of innocence was more apt.

Mozzie touched his arm. "I have a better appreciation of why you didn't tell me. It hurt too much to admit it, didn't it?"

He nodded. "If Klaus hadn't been a killer, I never would have done it. You know that, don't you?"

"I used to think your loyalty would get you into trouble." He paused for a moment. "'We swallow greedily any lie that flatters us, but we sip only little by little at a truth we find bitter.' I, like Diderot, have sipped from the truth these past couple of days, and so have you, but our friendship is the stronger for it. So, we strike tonight. What time does the bell toll?"

"Ten o'clock. The church closes at seven."

"Will you have any trouble breaking free from the Suit and El?"
"No, I've planted the idea I'm visiting friends."

"And that you are—a violin and a candlestick. They've invited you to an organ recital." Mozzie raised his glass and clinked it against Neal's. "To our next bravura performance."

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Peter and El had already left for dinner when Neal exited the hotel. He decided to take a leisurely stroll along the quai on the Left Bank before heading for the storage locker. It would be his au revoir to Paris until next time. Between the art crimes task force and his doctorate, he was looking forward to many more opportunities.

The final presentations had gone well. He and Peter had made persuasive arguments, and Marcel was jubilant that the authorities would agree to the new security measures. Neal's pesky conscience pounded on the cellar door off and on, but at the moment was sulking in a corner.

He paused to look across the Seine at the Louvre. For a brief moment, he wished he were the Neal Carter of Diana's stories, worrying about monsters, not an art thief about to jump off the wagon. Neal Carter's life was so much simpler. He didn't do anything illegal. But this Neal was keeping Peter's hands clean by doing all the illegal stuff himself, and that would have to suffice.

Crossing the Seine, he headed for the storage locker where he picked up the backpack of gear. The zipline launcher was the heaviest item, but this was a compact model. To anyone on the street, Neal looked like someone heading for a workout. And so he was.

At the pre-arranged time of ten o'clock he met Mozzie at the pharmacy around the corner from the church. That late in the evening there were few people on the narrow side streets.

For the past several days Neal had been teaching law enforcement agents about the mindset of a thief. The experience had served as a warm-up act for shifting into his cat burglar persona tonight. While Neal was inside the church, Mozzie would pass the time at the sidewalk café on the corner. He came equipped with a stack of newspapers. Neal hoped he'd be done long before Mozzie finished reading them.

They strolled along the side of the church then Neal ducked into a back alley. Mozzie remained at the corner, keeping a lookout, while Neal disabled the security on a back door and slipped inside. He'd verified the security system on Sunday. It was the same one Neal and Klaus had disabled four years ago.

Once inside, he set down his backpack and quickly changed into a black jumpsuit. Normally he didn't wear a hood, but tonight was an exception. He wasn't leaving anything to chance. He'd already surveyed the church for security cameras and knew where they were—front entrance, back and side exits, nave, and in front of the paintings. But the south wall where the organ was located had no cameras. Who would steal an organ?

The back entrance opened onto a short corridor leading to the front of the church. When he stepped inside the nave, Neal paused for a moment to admire the gleaming white and gilt interior with its lofty ceilings. Then he turned to face his target—the immense organ housing.

Only a few ambient lights were on and the pipes glinted faintly in the shadows. In the still quiet of the vast interior it was easy to imagine ghosts. Neal sensed Klaus standing beside him as he did four years ago, telling him about the paintings which had been salvaged from churches ravaged during the French Revolution.
The job should be a simple one, assuming the painting was still there. But what if it weren't? His conscience would rejoice but without the Braque they might never discover the key to the location of the plundered art. In any case, Neal had to know.

He ducked into the back hallway to mount the stairs to the organ loft. The custodians weren't due to arrive till midnight. He got out his rope, gazed up at the clock, and retrieved his zipline launcher. It was time to scale the mountain of organ pipes.

He lassoed the clock on the first try. A good omen. He hadn't lost his touch. Climbing the wood frame of the casing was not that great a challenge, but making sure that he didn't damage it in any way was. Neal relied much more on the ropes than he would have normally. He attached one end to the marble guard rail then tied the other end to the guard rail on the far side of the organ, forming a wide triangle. That would displace his weight and ensure he didn't touch the casing except around the clock. He'd worked out the system with Klaus. As long as the church hadn't made any changes, it should work.

Neal tested the line, giving it a yank. It held.

He removed his street shoes and dug in his backpack for his climbing shoes. Slipping off his gloves, he retrieved a custom pair with special grips to help on the climb. Peter occasionally called him a spider monkey. He'd give a good imitation of one with their help.

Neal slung his backpack over his shoulders, took two breaths, and placed his hands on the rope. It was wider than the standard nylon rope but extremely lightweight and texturized to make climbing easier.

The rope held easily as he climbed. Neal kept his eyes fixed on the prize. The white face of the clock shone like the moon atop a forest of pipes. The clock was set in an ornate carved wood frame. It had been made in the eighteenth century by the house of Lepaute, clockmakers to the king.

As Neal inched closer, his heart raced. After so many months, the prize was in front of him. Chantal had first alerted him to someone searching for the Braque painting in February. Now he'd find out if it were still there. He half-expected to find one of Klaus's Leopard business cards in its place with a cryptic note scribbled for him.

Neal thought back to the Chagall painting. The flying fish, a clock, and a violin. He'd turned into the flying fish. He had the clock. Now all he needed was the violin.

He arrived at the top and with infinite care squeezed behind the clock. There was just room to crouch on the top of the organ case. The false back was still in place, just as Klaus had designed it. Neal reached into his backpack and pulled out a small chisel. He delicately began loosening the panel.

The cell phone in his pocket vibrated. Neal stopped to check the display. There was only one person he'd pick up for and that's who it was. Mozzie wouldn't call unless something was badly wrong. Neal steeled himself to make a course correction.

Holding the phone to his ear, he answered in a whisper.

"Cheese it! The fuzz!" Neal paused and listened. The faint distinctive *pin pon* of the French police siren could be heard.

"Can't. I don't have it yet."

"They're storming the gates, besieging the fortress! Flee while you can!" The line went dead.
There was no time to leave. The gendarmes would arrive any minute. Besides, he was too close to his objective.

Neal reached into his backpack and pulled out a sharp knife. Hesitating for only a second, he reached down to the base of the clock and sliced the rope in two, holding onto the two pieces so they wouldn't fall. Then carefully judging the angle, he slowly let each half drop. Just as expected, they landed inside the organ gallery. He was reasonably safe for now. He'd figure out how to get down later.

Neal lay down and flattened himself to the top of the organ case. They wouldn't be able to see him unless they used a ladder. The rope ends were problematic. They were still tied to the railing. The rope color matched fairly well the white stone of the railing, but sharp eyes would be able to discern their outline. But surely they wouldn't look at the organ loft. Any thief would go for the paintings below.

Loud footsteps pounded on the marble floor of the church. Several distinct voices. Neal cautiously peered over the edge of the organ case. He could see four gendarmes. From the voices he could tell there were more, but the others were out of view. They were inspecting the paintings, talking among themselves. Neal listened intently, but he could only catch snatches of conversation.

"The dispatcher must have heard it wrong."

"No one would steal the organ."

Laughter

Neal sucked in his breath and flattened himself still more against the case.

The gendarmes were spreading out checking the side chapels. One suggested calling up additional units. What had alerted them? Had he missed an alarm or a surveillance camera? But if he'd been spotted by a camera, they wouldn't be joking. They'd already be swarming the organ loft.

From the sound of it, a report had been called in. That could only mean someone had been watching for him. Someone knew about the painting, knew about its location.

Neal raced through the possibilities. It couldn't be Adler. If he'd known about it, he would have already taken the painting. But then maybe he had. Neal hadn't confirmed the painting was there.

Who else? The pounding of his heart was making it harder to think. Klaus knew but he was dead. Had he told Rolf? Was this a trap?

Neal heard a cell phone ring. He peered around the edge of the case and strained to hear what they were saying. A gendarme was standing in the nave a little in front of the organ bay. His back was to Neal. He seemed to be mainly listening. Must be receiving orders. He kept nodding in agreement. He raised a hand and beckoned the others over. Turning off the phone, he shouted excitedly, "That was central dispatch. There's a hostage situation at Versailles. Madmen have stormed in and are threatening to blow it up! We're to report immediately."

Neal grinned in relief. Mozzie. His guardian angel. The gendarmes ran off, abandoning their search.

As soon as they left, Neal got back to work. Retrieving his tools from his bag, he carefully pried off the back case, and yes, it was there! The Braque. The one and only. No card from the Leopard. It was just as Neal had left it. He let out a sharp exhale.

Pulling out the padded portfolio he'd brought along, he slipped the painting inside, and reattached the back of the clock case.

Now only one slight problem remained. How would he get down? His ropes were cut. But he wasn't going to let a little glitch like that stop him. This was Neal Caffrey. Master cat burglar and spider
monkey.

Neal crept to the far edge of the case and surveyed his route. Scrap spider monkey. He'd have to be a tree snake. The clearance was only a few inches, but if he could squeeze through, he could slither down the side of the case without damaging the pipes. He'd have to go feet first. Neal took in several deep breaths, compressing his muscles ever tighter . . .

"Are you okay?" Mozzie eyed him dubiously. "You're limping."

"I'll walk it off. The jumpsuit's seen better days, but this is all that matters." Neal passed Mozzie the backpack. They'd met at the designated spot in the Metro station. "Thanks again for the rescue."

"My pleasure. Anytime I can lead the gendarmerie on 'zee' wild chase of 'zee' goose, I call it a good day. The violin will be in my bunker under the Aloha Emporium awaiting your return to New York. Who do you suspect snitched?"

"Probably Rolf. Klaus could have told him about the painting."

"You don't think it was Chantal?"

"Cross her off the list," Neal said sharply. "She wouldn't betray me."

"Hey, calm down," he warned in an undertone. "You're not thinking logically. We need to investigate all possibilities. Someone has either been tailing you or had a remote camera installed to watch what was happening in the church."

"Rolf could have been overseeing the operation, but John's keeping an eye on his movements. We would have heard if he left the country, so he'd need at least one accomplice."

"Marta and Jacek?"

"I suppose. They're the only ones left."

Mozzie patted his shoulder. "Keep yourself safe, mon frère. I'll have the honey wine chilled for your return."

Neal watched him mount the stairs up to the street. Their first joint job in Paris, and thanks to Mozzie, he'd escaped unscathed. Well, almost unscathed. Neal rubbed his shoulder. He'd have an interesting assortment of bruises. Just as well Fiona wasn't around to worry about them. That proved there was a silver lining to everything.

It was after midnight by the time he got back to the hotel. They'd selected an afternoon flight to maximize their time in Paris, so he could sleep in tomorrow. A few aspirin and he'd be a new man.

He trudged up the three flights of stairs to his room. He stopped outside the door before inserting the key. A light was on inside. He was positive he'd turned it off when he left.

Neal inserted the key cautiously, tensing his muscles. Was this another trap?

"Finally." Henry grinned at him from the armchair by his desk when he opened the door. "I was about to call the cops. That must have been some party."

"When did you arrive?" Neal walked into the room and shrugged off his jacket. He was happy to see Henry, but couldn't he have waited till morning?
"Around eight o'clock. I wrapped up my business in Germany midday and decided to surprise you. Rather than fly home alone, I switched my reservations. We'll be on the same plane. I even used my pull to switch a few seats so we can fly together. I must say, I was surprised you weren't flying first class. Not even business? What gives?"

"FBI rules. We've been told to adhere strictly to standard procedures." He hadn't had a chance to tell Henry about the flak Peter had taken for not sticking to procedures. This was as good a time as any. Perhaps that was for the best. Henry would undoubtedly notice Neal wasn't in the best of moods. He'd assume it was because of the FBI regulations.

Henry must have been looking at his drawings of rivers. Neal's sketchpad was open on the desk, with the sketch of Baltimore on top. That would be a topic. He braced himself for a round of mind games. Maybe he could put it off till tomorrow. He was too distracted now by the Braque.

Henry was studying him. This wouldn't end well. "It's not that late. Our last night in Paris. It's nearly full moon. Remember, when I called you two months ago from Paris? You were getting ready for the sting against Keller at the Met."

"I'm not likely to forget."

"You were complaining about being in New York while I was strolling along the Seine. Now's our chance to make up for it. Put your jacket back on. Let's rumble."

Could he beg off? Henry would be suspicious. If Neal told him about his leg, that would inevitably lead to more questions. "Great idea. Not that I mind but do you plan to camp out in my room overnight?"

"Nah, I'll give you a break. My room is down the hall. I should give the hotel management tips on improving their locks." They left his room and walked back to the stairs. Neal's muscles were protesting at the thought, but he lectured them to cowboy up. Henry was talking about seeing Peter and El. "She mentioned you were having dinner with friends. Anyone I know?"

Neal jogged down the stairs. "No, friends from a few years ago."

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Henry put a hand out to stop him. "Enough with the act. What happened to your leg?"

Neal wasn't surprised Henry had noticed. He probably suspected the truth when Neal first walked into the room and suggested a stroll to prove his theory. "Twisted it on my way home."

"Clumsy of you."

Neal shrugged. "It occasionally happens, even to cat burglars." Henry gave him a sharp look but didn't comment. Neal sighed inwardly. He was off his game. Now was not the time to play mental chess with Henry.

"You could have said something. Why don't we go back upstairs? I'll get a bucket of ice for it."

Neal shook his head. "No, I liked your idea. There's a bench on the quai just north of the hotel where we can sit and look at the Seine while we talk."

Neal asked him about Germany as they walked to the quai, but Henry wanted to wait till Peter was with them. Instead, he asked Neal about their presentations. Neal appreciated that he didn't ask about the personal stuff but he knew it was coming.
They were fortunate the bench was empty. The night was mild and cool. Neal sat and stretched his legs out, shoving aside thoughts of the Braque for another time.

"I scanned those drawings you'd made," Henry commented. "What's this thing you have for rivers?"

"I've been thinking a lot about art. Paris is known to have that effect." Neal studied the river. Originally he'd planned daytime scenes but night would be even better. Whistler had painted nocturnes. Would Neal call his night-music?

"But they weren't all of the Seine. One of the drawings looked like Baltimore—the river entering the harbor, the skyscrapers off in the distance, almost floating. I thought I recognized the Bank of America building."

"You're right. You may wind up an art critic after all."

"Are these your version of Rorschach inkblot tests?"

"You're the psychologist. You tell me." The quip had sneaked out before Neal could stop it. This night had been one error after another. Why hadn't he told Henry they'd talk in the morning?

"I'm happy to oblige but you need to fill in a few details first. That drawing of the castle, for instance. I assume that was Amboise."

Neal nodded.

"The Hudson in New York I had no problem with, but the town with a cathedral?"

"That's the Rhone in Geneva. Those are all rivers I walked along. I may make rivers the theme of next year's exhibition."

"When did you walk along the Patapsco in Baltimore?"

"2001. You weren't there. I'd met with your father at his office in Win-Win. Robert called me to a meeting." Neal swallowed. How had he gotten started on this topic?

"That's when he blackmailed you to stay away from me, and you fled to Europe."

Neal nodded.

"You'd never described that meeting to me . . ." Henry's words trailed off as he studied him for a moment. "If departure's the theme, where does the Seine fit in?"

_Not departure, flight. Fleeing from yet another failed opportunity._ When Neal didn't respond, Henry didn't press his advantage. They sat in silence a few minutes, watching the river. Neal's thoughts began to drift back to the Braque. The trap. What was Rolf's intention? Was that his revenge for Klaus?

"I'm sorry about Fiona."

"What?"

"I didn't realize you'd fallen so hard for her."

"I've become an expert in the art of lousy timing. Just when I decide I'm ready to commit, she decides I'm not worth it." Neal stopped himself before saying anything more. His mood was coloring all his thoughts. Henry just wanted to help. At this rate he'd drive him away, too.
"You know you can tell me anything," Henry said quietly.

_Not everything._ Neal sat silent. He was slamming the door on anyone, whether his conscience or Henry, poking into his psyche. They wouldn't like what they found.

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**Notes**: I wrote about Neal's pesky conscience for our blog in a post called "When a Conscience Rattles the Cellar Door." In the final chapter, coming next week, Neal will at long last have an opportunity to examine the painting and John Hobhouse calls with news from London.

When Neal visited the Church of Saint-Roch with Klaus, he was tempted to play the organ. He might have been thinking about a childhood memory when he made a 'joyful noise' on the king of instruments. That incident was related in Penna's story, Choirboy Caffrey (Chapter 5). Henry is also one of Penna's inspired creations. He will play a much larger role in the sequel to this story. I'll have news about that story and the rest the upcoming lineup next week.

Last week Penna and I took time out for a writing retreat. Our first non-virtual retreat gave us a chance to meet in person while engaging in sinfully delicious plot-spinning. If you'd like to read about it and some of the ideas which were tossed about, check out Penna's blog post: "Writing Retreat."

**Blog**: Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)

**Chapter Visuals and Music**: The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

New pins this week include images of the Church of Saint-Roch, the organ case, the clock, and the rivers Neal sketched.
A Phrygian Sky

Hotel du Jeu de Paume. Thursday, June 2, 2005

Peter grabbed a cup of coffee in the hotel bar and strolled onto the courtyard patio. El had already left. Still no sign of Henry or Neal. They hadn't seen each other for a couple of weeks and had probably stayed up most of the night talking. He wouldn't be surprised if they'd gone out on the town when Neal returned from dinner.

But it wasn't long before Henry walked onto the patio, carrying a tray loaded with pastries and coffee. He sat down across from Peter at the wrought-iron table. "Just coffee? Have you already eaten?"

He nodded. "El and I got up early. Chantal had offered to take her along on her morning shopping at the wholesale markets. Did Neal come downstairs with you?"

"I imagine he's still asleep." Henry picked up a knife and slathered raspberry preserves on his croissant. "We had quite a discussion last night. How's he been acting with you?"

Peter considered for a moment before replying. "He's had his game face on all week—tour guide for El and me, art heist expert for the French police, but you should know this business with Rolf has hit him hard. We're still waiting for the DNA analysis report, but the fact that Klaus's brother is most likely Azathoth has been tough on him." Peter explained to Henry what he'd found out from Chantal. "The way she and Neal describe Klaus is almost identical. On the surface the man was a charmer with a magnetic personality, but he used those attributes to manipulate both of them. He only revealed the bits of himself that he wanted them to see."

"You feel Chantal and Neal were both left battered by the experience?"

"That's an apt way of expressing it. When Neal offered to go undercover to take Klaus down, I realized how difficult it would be, but I didn't know the extent of his friendship with the thief."

"Did he consult a therapist after the op was over?"

"I recommended he do so, but he declined."

Henry's expression darkened as he swallowed a bite of croissant. "He must have had difficulties."

Peter didn't respond. Clearly Neal hadn't told Henry. Peter had only gotten him to admit having flashbacks because they were resulting in acrophobia.

"Let me rephrase that since your silence is alerting me I was right. How severe were they?"

"Since Neal hasn't mentioned them to you, I have to assume he'd rather we not discuss them. He worked through the symptoms on his own and hasn't had any recurrences that I'm aware of for several months."

"It's not a surprise that the guilt arising from Klaus's death would have resulted in PTSD. I won't mention this conversation, but I can tell you're concerned he may relapse."

"Rolf seeking revenge for the death of his brother? That's bound to affect him. The breakup with Fiona couldn't have come at a worse time. She was a stabilizing force in his life. Maybe I was deluding myself, but I hoped he'd be less likely to take risks."
"And now he'll throw caution to the wind?" Henry shrugged. "His emotions were all over the place last night. I wondered how much Fiona had to do with it. Do you think Rolf could have played any role in the friction between them?"

"I don't see how he could have caused it. Even for someone as devious as the man we've been calling Azathoth, to have researched Fiona's background, discover a man she used to have a crush on, and then arrange for him to be working on the same project in Amboise seems a bit of stretch. On the other hand, he could have been a factor. Neal was obsessing about my safety. It's possible he was also concerned that Fiona would be a target."

"I agree," Henry said. "Neal told me that Fiona thought she was in love with both him and Gerald. It didn't seem to me that he put up much of a fight to hold onto her. He may have thought Rolf would exact his revenge by hurting her."

"When you're dealing with a master manipulator like Rolf, I wouldn't dismiss anything out of hand. I confess that after the attack in London, I wondered if Rolf had rigged the painting competition to allow Neal to win and thus increase the likelihood of him visiting Scima."

"Does Neal know that you question the competition results?"

"I never told him, and I'd appreciate it if you don't either. Neal deserved to win, but as you know, excellence is no guarantee of success. There were many other outstanding entries in the competition."

Henry started to speak but cut himself off when Neal strolled onto the patio.

"I hope Henry hasn't already started talking about what he found out," Neal said. "He wouldn't tell me anything last night." He carried his breakfast of brioche and croissant on a tray. A waiter followed him out to refill their coffee cups.

Henry put down a puff pastry stuffed with chocolate to take a sip of coffee. "I made progress, but it took a lot of digging. The pre-war records were very sketchy. Many of them had been destroyed during bombing raids. Fortunately, I had a good team working with me. I started with Adler's father, Wilhelm. We were able to find records of him in Hamburg. During World War II, he was in his early 20s and worked in the shipyards helping to construct U-boats."

"This will make Jones very happy," Peter commented.

"That's just the beginning. I'm gonna make his day. Wilhelm Adler was fairly easy to trace. Karl Huber's father was much more a challenge, but we eventually tracked him down. Franz Huber was a year older than Wilhelm. He served in the Gestapo and was stationed in Paris during the war, working with the Rosenberg task force in charge of confiscated art."

"Where did he work?" Neal asked eagerly. "The Jeu de Paume?"

Henry nodded. "And by the way, what does jeu de paume mean? Is it a coincidence that the hotel you like to stay at has the same name as the museum?"

"Jeu de paume is an early form of tennis," Neal explained. "The building that now houses the museum was built for tennis courts back in the nineteenth century. This hotel is much older. It was originally a royal tennis court for Louis XIII."

Henry looked up at the hotel wall. "Huh. History's never been my thing but it's hard to escape it in Paris. Here's some history you may find even more fascinating. Huber was reassigned to Berlin in 1944 and was killed in a bombing raid in 1945. His wife gave birth to Karl, an only child, in late
1944. Huber's widow immigrated to the States with little Karl in 1952."

"Were you able to trace any connection between Franz Huber and Wilhelm Adler?" Peter asked.

"That was the thorniest piece of the puzzle," Henry admitted. "There were no records on file about either Adler or Huber before the war. When I delayed my arrival to Paris, it was because an investigator discovered the name of a man who'd served with Adler in the shipyards. He's in his eighties now but still spry. He remembered Adler was from a small town in Bavaria called Holzkirchen. We visited the place—charming little town. By the way, Peter, you need to go with me to Germany sometime. The beer's outstanding. Anyway, we scoured the town for records and found what we were looking for. Huber also grew up in Holzkirchen. By combing old records, we were able to confirm Franz and Wilhelm's attendance in the same school. They were only a year apart and must have known each other."

Peter paused taking notes. "So what you're saying is Huber worked with the looted art at the Jeu de Paume while Adler worked with U-boats."

"Exactly," Henry said with a broad smile. "We've found our link."

"Did you find anything that points to the sons having worked together?" Neal asked.

"Good question," Henry said. "We're assuming they're not now, since an Ydrus operative was helping to fund Win-Win's investigation into Adler. We know Karl Huber's a member of Ydrus, but he's disappeared. The last report for him was in April when he was in Greece. Adler's presumably still in Argentina. Huber's mother is now deceased but we're trying to trace any contact she may have had with Wilhelm Adler in the States."

"They could be mounting completely separate searches for the plunder and unaware of the connection," Peter mused. He eyed Neal's brioche wistfully. Last day in Paris. He could eat one more. El would never know.

Peter's cell phone rang. He glanced at it and showed it to Neal before answering—John Hobhouse was shown on the display.

Henry and Neal froze as he talked with John. By the expressions on their faces, he didn't need to tell them what John reported, but it was worth repeating. "Positive confirmation. Alistair Chapman is Rolf Mansfeld. John just got the news. They're on the way to arrest him now."

"Diana asked for Azathoth in handcuffs as a trip souvenir," Neal said, breaking into a wide grin. "She may get her wish."


"That's right. Rolf escaped," Neal helped himself to another glass of wine. In honor of the occasion, Mozzie was serving a Château Margaux. Originally it was to be a celebration but the victory was bittersweet.

"But how?" Mozzie's voice ascended to a squeak in his outrage.

"We don't know yet, but you can believe it's being investigated. We got the news when we landed in New York. John was at a meeting in the morning. When he returned to his desk, he found the voicemail from the lab. He called the Home Office to notify them that they intended to arrest Chapman. When the police arrived at Scima Workshop, they were told Chapman had left thirty minutes earlier. Obviously someone leaked word of what was happening. My money's on a snitch in the Home Office."
"Why did the Euro Suit have to make the call?"

"He had no choice, Mozz. He was under orders."

"It should be easy to trace the source of the leak. If I were there, I'd have discovered it already. Has Aidan been able to hack into the plastic surgeon's files yet?"

"Aidan succeeded on Wednesday," said Neal, happy to have a piece of good news to report.

"What did he discover?"

"We'll have to wait to find out. The files are encrypted. Aidan says it may take weeks or longer to unravel them."

Mozzie groaned. "Another mystery?"

"I'm afraid so, but given everything's that's happened so far, that comes as no surprise. We take one step forward only to have new doors slammed in our faces. Peter told Diana and Jones that we were able to obtain the files, but he didn't mention how. They probably suspect the truth, but everyone's smart enough not to mention it."

"Why does Henry think Rolf attacked Peter?"

"We discussed that at length on the flight home. Henry believes Rolf was trying to insinuate himself into being our ally. Look at all the so-called help he provided me—pointing out the location of the Underwater Stage, personally driving me there. Henry's convinced that if I hadn't asked about the site, Rolf would have suggested it."

"Not a bad plan," Mozzie mused aloud. "Infiltrate yourself into enemy lines. Sun Tzu would approve. Remember the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting. Learn what they're thinking. Just like you have with the FBI."

Neal felt the heat rise to his face. "That's not what I'm doing."

Mozzie shrugged. "Perhaps. But that's why everyone believes you're playing the long con. Rolf was doing the same. In his Chapman disguise, he would have become your trusted ally. The man who helped save one of your closest friends."

"You're right about Rolf playing the long con. Both he and Klaus were. Klaus let both Chantal and me think Rolf was dead. Why would he do something like that?"

Mozzie took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "I don't know. This has been difficult for me. I've had to reevaluate my opinion of a man I'd placed on a pedestal. I now have a much better understanding of what you went through. I agree the church was a trap and the only person who could have set it was Rolf. Klaus must have told him where he hid the painting and he's been biding his time."

Neal nodded. He found some comfort in being able to voice aloud the thoughts that had been troubling him ever since the night of the theft. It made him appreciate how much he missed being able to discuss what happened with Peter. "Rolf must have heard of Adler's offer for the painting and spread the rumor I knew where it was. I've been puzzling about that ever since Chantal first contacted me. How had my connection to the Braque been discovered? Now we know. Rolf followed Peter and my movements in the fall. He must have continued throughout the spring. He knew about our travel plans. He could have hacked my email correspondence with Fiona. He was biding his time, waiting to spring his trap. And if you hadn't been there, I would have been
Mozzie refilled both their glasses. "I wonder what his plans were after you were arrested. That would have destroyed your career with the Bureau, Interpol, and probably Columbia as well. Is that what he wanted? Or did he have something else in mind?"

"Any ideas?" asked Neal, curious for his opinion. Tricia and Peter continued to believe recruitment was a strong possibility. It was unfortunate Neal couldn't reveal this new data point. Throwing him in prison sucked badly as an inducement tactic.

Mozzie thought a moment as he sipped his wine. "We think Rolf would have rescued Peter at the last possible moment. Would he have done the same with you? It would have been difficult. He would have needed to pay off gendarmes... A challenge, yes, but achievable. Perhaps Rolf planted a couple of his own crew members. They might have claimed they were taking you back to the gendarmerie, only to abduct you instead."

"With the intent to blackmail me."

Mozzie nodded. "But even for a twisted genius such as myself, the execution would have been problematic—too many unknowns for my liking. I'll continue to ponder the matter. In any case, Rolf's now escaped into the ether."

Neal gazed around the bunker. There was no sign of the painting. "Where did you hide it?"

He smiled. "We're taking no chances, mon frère." Mozzie rolled his commander's chair to the computer station. He reached into the keyhole of the desk and slid forward a side panel to reveal a concealment space.

"Slick," Neal said, admiring the workmanship.

"Every piece of furniture in the bunker has been customized. You should let me modify yours, too."

"I don't have any furniture," Neal pointed out. "It all belongs to June."

"I'll talk with her. I'm sure she'd approve." Mozzie placed the portfolio on the table and opened it to reveal the canvas inside. "What's your secret, my dear?"

Neal echoed his thoughts. The Violin and Candlestick was safe now, but was she ready to sing?

WCWCWCWCWCWCWC

Evidently not.

No music came from the violin, although he and Mozzie had worked through the night to try to coax something out of her. No hidden messages. No code to be deciphered. Neal had intimate knowledge of the painting from having copied it after he and Klaus stole it. She hadn't disclosed anything then and she still didn't.

In Diana's stories, Neal Carter spent every free moment trying to decrypt the starfish script. Had Diana inadvertently foretold his own struggles with the painting? Which object would cough up its secrets first?

The next day Neal headed for his studio to work on his own paintings. He hoped they wouldn't be as frustrating. During his absence the building had been transformed. While classes were in session, there were always students around, no matter how late or early the hour. Background noise was a
constant—snippets of conversation, snatches of music, the random sounds of artists at work.

But not now.

Neal's footsteps echoed eerily in the quiet corridors. He'd known that only a few were paying to keep their studios in the summer, but he hadn't realized it was such a small number.

He hoped to get a head start on his paintings for the master's exhibition next spring. Last year it had been brutal trying to find time to paint when most of his evenings were taken up with art history classes and course assignments. Neal had reasoned that if he could do most of the work on the paintings in the summer, he could then focus on his courses in the fall.

If he didn't go crazy from the silence.

He didn't usually play music while he painted, but today he made an exception. First he spread the drawings he'd made in Paris on the worktable. There was an underlying emotion to all of them. He was glad Henry hadn't picked up on it. But then again, he probably did—it was Henry, after all—and he was giving Neal the freedom to deal with it on his terms. Neal appreciated the gesture.

Henry hadn't commented on their conversation that last night in Paris. When Neal apologized the next day, he shrugged it off. That in itself told Neal that Henry took it seriously. Otherwise he would have razzed him for his behavior.

Henry most likely suspected Fiona was the cause. He didn't know Neal's connection to the Braque, and Neal intended to keep it that way. Rolf knew about the painting. Henry, like Peter, had to be kept completely free of it, or he could wind up becoming a pawn on Rolf's chessboard too.

Neal pulled out a blank canvas from the storage cabinet and set it on the easel. He stood motionless in front of it for several moments, collecting his thoughts. To transfer emotions to canvas, first you need to re-experience them.

In the wall unit he had a box of CDs. He didn't have to dig far for the one he wanted. It was right on top. He'd listened to it shortly before leaving for London.

WCWCWCWCWCW

"Have you heard of the expression rubbing salt in a wound? Do you know why that's not recommended?"

Breaking into a smile at the familiar voice, Neal spun around to see Richard at the doorway. "I didn't think you'd come in today."

"I still have a few items left to pack before I vacate the place for the summer. And don't change the subject. How could you possibly think that listening to Fiona sing is a good idea?"

"Stockman said to pour our emotions into your work," Neal said with a shrug. "I thought it would be cathartic."

"And masochistic," Richard added bluntly. "You could have waited a few weeks before putting on your hair shirt."

"I prefer to get the blood and gore over with early."

"Obviously. Did you make a special CD of her top melancholic hits? 'The Old Ways'? Seriously? I heard the mournful strains of 'Beneath a Phrygian Sky' as I walked down the hallway. You'll
probably play 'Dark Night of the Soul' next. You've made me feel morose and I wasn't in love with
her. I can only imagine what you must be feeling like." He strode over to the CD player and turned it
off.

Neal watched him, feeling a little sheepish but glad he'd already told him about Fiona.

Richard began studying the painting Neal was working on. "That's Amboise, I assume."

Neal nodded. "A preliminary effort." He showed Richard the drawings on his worktable, curious at
what his reaction would be.

"You did all of these in Paris? I need to go there. If it can inspire me like it did you, it's worth the
expense. I wish I had the time to sculpt this summer, but Scima is keeping me too busy. Ian told me
they'll make a decision on whether to retain me at the end of the summer."

"I already know what it will be. They won't let a talent like you escape. I understand why you didn't
keep your studio, but I'll miss having you next door."

Richard perched on a work stool. "I will too. I have no one to jam with at Scima. They play video
games to relieve the pressure. I know this will shock you, but I've discovered that being repeatedly
outwitted by bad guys who always seem to have an inside track does little to alleviate my stress."

"I know where you're coming from." Richard's situation didn't sound that different from his own.

"If you don't have any plans this evening, why don't you come down to the club and jam with Travis
and me? Our pianist is out of town." Richard was a skilled jazz guitarist who performed Saturday
evenings at Marmalade's in the Village. He'd roped Travis into playing drums with his group. "This
will be my last evening there before I leave for L.A."

"I'm tempted but you know I don't have much experience playing jazz."

Richard made a face. "As opposed to Travis? He hadn't played much of anything before he started.
You should come. It'll give you a chance to do something you're not good at. That's the problem
with you overachievers. Me, I don't have to worry about failing. I do it all the time."

Neal snorted. "Right, and this is coming from the guy who won the internship at Scima and is such a
talent that they're sending you to L.A. for training. Just to prove you wrong, I'll show up and
disgrace myself horribly."

Richard grinned. "A likely story, but I'll forgive you if you should happen to not totally suck. I'll
even let you sing the blues, if that makes you feel better. Nothing like the blues to rip your heart out."

Neal was happy to agree. Compared with the alternatives of self-flagellation while painting the scene
of Amboise or another frustrating evening of staring at a mute violin, Richard was tossing him a life-
 preserver.

"Have you had lunch yet?" Richard asked. "We could grab a sandwich."

"I could use a change of scenery," Neal admitted, screwing on the caps on his paint tubes. "Until you
showed up, this place was a mausoleum."

"You won't be the only one here this summer. There are a few others who are keeping their studios." Richard grabbed Neal's brushes to clean. "You're a polyglot. Did you ever pick up any Hungarian?"

"No, why?"
"I met a new student last week. She's been assigned the studio next to yours."

"Not your studio?"

"No, on the other side. Her name is Bianka Kaldy. She's signed up for a dual master's in art and is getting an early start. She's taking English courses this summer." Richard shrugged. "She seems nice. A smoky-eyed blonde some might find attractive."

Neal groaned. "Not me, that's for sure."

"Yeah, right. Neal Caffrey the monk. How long will that last?"

**Riverside Park. Sunday morning.**

Neal slowed to a jog on his favorite trail along the Hudson River at Riverside Park. He'd already been running for an hour. In the afternoon, he might go for a swim in the Columbia pool. Then it would be back to work on the Braque painting.

The previous day, when he returned home he sat down at the piano and rehearsed a few numbers for Marmalade's. June was out. No one to hear his choice of music. As he sang he thought about Richard's suggestion. Did he really want to expose his soul before a crowd of strangers? Instead he opted to do it in the quiet of June's music room, belting out "Warning Sign" by Coldplay and several other angst-ridden selections, finishing with an angry "Fake It" by Seether. With that out of his system, he was in a much better mood to enjoy the evening.

Marmalade's had worked out well. Aidan and his girlfriend Keiko had shown up at the club with Michael, Angela's boyfriend. He was a bachelor these days like Neal since Angela was working on a field project in West Virginia.

Neal was suspicious that the others hadn't just chanced by, and when Henry and his boyfriend Eric arrived too, the setup was obvious. After dropping in on Neal at his studio, Richard must have rounded up the others for an intervention. Neal was embarrassed that he'd appeared that pathetic, but he enjoyed the company too much to be bothered by it.

When he saw his friends at the club, Neal was relieved he'd already decided to restrain his lover's blues. He only sang one solo piece, a Muse version of "Feeling Good," aimed at reassuring everyone he was done with wallowing. The rest of the time he restricted himself to backup. Richard called Henry up to play as well. Of course, he'd insisted on showing off, singing Santana's "Oye Como Va" and jiving on stage. Hanging out, making music . . . Neal had spent worse Saturday nights.

He sat on a bench to look out at the Hudson. The summer would pass quickly. The weekends shouldn't be too lonely. He'd have his paintings to work on. He could go to Marmalade's on Saturday nights. If he could solve the mystery behind the Braque, events could move quickly. He, Peter, El, as well as most of the group would be in San Diego in six weeks when Aidan would be presenting his video. Yep, plenty to do.

When his cell phone rang, Neal's first thought was that it was Fiona calling. After she moved to France, they used to talk every Sunday. Instead, it was another familiar voice and a welcome one.

"Did I catch you loafing on the terrace?" Sara asked.

"I'll do that later." Neal hesitated. Had she talked with Fiona? He should let her know to prevent any awkwardness. But before he could broach the subject, she beat him to it.

"Fiona called me to explain what happened. I wanted to say how sorry I am things didn't work out."
"Thanks."

"I hope you don't think I misled you. I honestly didn't realize her feelings were becoming so conflicted."

"I understand. Fiona didn't know it either." Sara had experienced a worse romantic disaster than him. Less than two months ago he'd been consoling her about Bryan McKenzie.

"We really should try to avoid emotional train wrecks in the future," she said. "Next time you spot me getting in the path of a locomotive, please shove me out of the way."

"Agreed. You do the same with me. Although, I have no intention of being anywhere close to a train track for a long time to come."

"You and me both. Dating's not the only thing in the world. We have our careers, friends, hobbies . . . ."

He watched the boats on the river and nodded. "Workouts are on my list. I was running in Riverside Park when you called."

"Highly recommended for exorcising frustrations. I've started a regimen too."

"You do realize that shopping doesn't count as a cardio workout?"

"That shows how little you know. I've taken shopping to new heights. Besides, I have other interests."

"How could I forget? I wouldn't have thought historical romances qualified either, but if the scenes are sufficiently steamy I suppose they could get your heart rate up."

"Would you like me to send you a list?"

He chuckled. "Maybe later."

"When Neal returned to work on Monday morning, he brought presents. He'd picked up an Hermès scarf of sea life for Diana. The scarf reminded him of the luminous ocean filled with bizarre creatures that she described in her first story. They hadn't been able to bring back Azathoth in handcuffs as they'd hoped, but they'd ripped off his mask. Perhaps next time they could dispatch him to the bottom of the abyss."

For Travis and Jones he had autographed photos of David Tennant and Billie Piper from the Doctor Who set.

"Are you sure these are their genuine autographs?" Jones asked, scrutinizing the signatures carefully. "Not that I don't appreciate it, but given your skill . . ."

"Does no one trust me?" Neal said with a moan, milking the wounded feelings routine to the hilt. "I suspected your reaction, so just to prove it to you, here's a photo that I had the stunt coordinator take. It shows me watching as they sign them."

Travis examined it. "You're even wearing a brown pinstripe suit. This is the photo I want you to autograph for me. Your future career as a stunt double . . . I don't suppose you have any of yourself and Sara in costume?"
Neal grinned. "Glad you asked. We had a stagehand photograph us." He passed them the photo.

Jones chuckled when he saw it. "My opinion? You should retire your James Bond and Tiffany nicknames and be known as the Doctor and Rose from now on. What was Billie like? Is she as gorgeous in person as she is on TV?"

"More, she—"

"We're wanted on the bridge," Travis interrupted, jerking his head toward the balcony.

Neal turned to see Peter standing outside his office, giving the three of them the double finger-point in one sweeping gesture.

When they were seated in the conference room, he filled them in on a phone conversation he'd just had with John Hobhouse. "They've traced the source of the leak. I'm sure you recall that John was required to notify the Home Office before taking any action at Scima. A personal assistant to the Home Secretary has confessed to alerting Chapman. Over the weekend agents interrogated everyone who had knowledge of the case, and she admitted to having had an affair with him."

"How much did she know about the case?" Travis asked.

"That's where we have a bit of luck. All she knew was that the police wanted to bring him in for questioning. She was unaware of the DNA evidence. She claimed her intention was to give him the opportunity to come in on his own. She believed he was innocent and didn't want his reputation damaged."

"So Chapman doesn't realize we've uncovered his true identity." Jones considered a moment. "That gives us an edge although at the moment I don't see how we'll be able to take advantage of it."

"He won't take any chances," Neal warned. "Now that he's fled, he may have already undergone surgery and is preparing to assume another identity." The knowledge of how Rolf managed to elude capture was bittersweet. "We're back at square one."

"That's not true," Travis objected. "He may have escaped, but we're in better shape than ever to track any attempts to employ his malware."

"You should feel proud," Peter added. "When you created those paintings for the sci-fi convention, you said you were tossing down the gauntlet. And the tactic worked. We suspected for a long time that Azathoth's brazenness would prove to be his undoing and it was. We may not have caught him, but we've stripped away the mask. He can no longer use Scima as his base of operations."

"In addition, we have the files from the plastic surgeon," Travis added. "Aidan and I spent the weekend working on them."

"Is Hughes comfortable about Aidan's company handling the project?" Jones asked.

Peter nodded. "Hughes and I discussed it on Friday. As you're aware, Hughes was taking some heat for us not following standard procurement procedures. After the attack at Scima Workshop he reviewed the entire situation with the Assistant Director and secured his approval. Azathoth's actions bolstered our case for extraordinary measures. The fact that Aidan's anti-malware program has been so well received by Interpol provides the kind of evidence that Hughes needed that we're on the right track."

"Hughes also secured approval for us to be in charge of analyzing museum security programs in cases where his malware is suspected," Travis added. "He told me he was sending D.C. Art Crimes
the directive this morning."

"Kramer won't be happy about that," Jones noted.

"He'll have no choice but to comply," Peter said, shrugging. "The AD has signed off on all matters concerning museum security and Azathoth being treated as covert operations. Aidan's work on the plastic surgeon's files falls under that umbrella."

"How is Hughes referring to Azathoth now?" Jones asked. "As Rolf Mansfeld or Azathoth?"

"We should all continue to call him Azathoth," Peter advised. "As long as an FBI informant remains at large, we don't want to take the risk of Ydrus discovering we've identified him." He turned to Travis. "Have you anything to report on the surgeon's files?"

"The code is written in an esolang," Travis said. "That's not the first time we've encountered it. Parts of Rolf's malware were also written in an esolang."

"Am I the only one who doesn't know what that means?" Neal asked.

"No, you can include me in too," Peter said. "Someone care to explain?"

"Esolang is short for esoteric programming language," Jones said. "They're sometimes used by hackers because they're nonconventional and can be devilishly difficult to crack."

Travis nodded. "Devilish is a good word to use, particularly in this case. A few of the key commands — both in the surgeon's files and in the malware—are in a variant of Malbolge, an esolang named after Malebolge, which is the eighth circle of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. That heightens the probability that the same programmer worked on both the malware and on the surgeon's files."

"And if you're looking for arguments to bolster the case against Rolf," Jones added. "Among the courses he taught at Bremen University was one on esolangs."

Peter jotted a note. "When we worked on the forged Galileo manuscript, we had to make use of Apian wheels to solve the mystery. The number seven was a key element. I remember Mozzie warning us shortly before we were kidnapped that Azathoth might be referring to Dante's seventh circle. It's tempting to think there's some other connection to Dante, or it could simply be more mind games. I'll let Tricia know."

"We believe the files of four patients were encrypted," Travis said. "They were identified only by number codes. Decrypting the files themselves, however, will take weeks, perhaps months."

"Is there any indication of dates on the files?" Peter asked.

"Nothing that isn't encrypted."

"We assume Rolf was one of the patients," Neal said. "The second might have been the car crash victim who was identified as Rolf. While Rolf was being operated on to assume Chapman's identity, someone else became Rolf. As for the others, Marta and Jacek are good bets."

Neal wished he were able to discuss what role the Braque painting played in Rolf's strategy. But that route was closed to him now.

**A Castle in Hungary. Monday, June 6**
The sun was sinking behind the mountains, casting a tangerine glow to the sky. Klaus rose from the piano and switched on a table lamp.

Anya flung open the doors into the salon. She'd finished her workout and had changed into a black crepe dress for dinner. The plunging neckline beckoned him in. She stood for a moment at the doorway as if to let him admire her. He loved to watch her walk. He called himself the Leopard. She had the grace of a cheetah. So much more appropriate than being called Python, but he'd never been able to dissuade her from her choice.

She walked over to the sideboard and poured two cognacs. "Come sit beside me. Have you heard from Rolf?"

He took a seat beside her. "He's recovering well. The surgery presented no complications."

"I hope this doctor is as skilled as Bergeron."

"According to Rolf, he's better, and he also presents fewer risks. Interpol has been making inquiries of Bergeron. It would have been too dangerous to use him again."

She nodded agreement. "Rolf was wise to have cultivated that secretary. If she hadn't alerted him that the police were heading his way, he could have been arrested."

"I doubt it. It was more likely they simply had additional questions about the attack. Rolf is confident they don't have anything incriminating against him. There's nothing in Chapman's background to suggest an expertise in computer programming. No one could possibly know that Rolf assumed Chapman's identity. His transformation was too thorough. Frankly, I'm surprised that Rolf didn't stay to have his fun with the police."

"He was being prudent. That's a trait you should adopt as well."

He shrugged off her comment. "I suspect the main reason was he'd grown bored with the Chapman identity. He's maintained the alias for five years. I don't blame him."

"Will you grow bored with me, chéri?"

He pulled her close, twisting her long hair in his fingers. "Never."

Some minutes later, she pulled back. "I applaud your inclusion of the contingency measures for Paris. Neal escaped capture this time, but it won't help him. We have him recorded. We have the ultimate blackmail tool to use whenever we wish."

Klaus took a sip of cognac. "With someone like him, we always need to have multiple weapons in our arsenal."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "I confess I thought your plan was flawed. Planting our agents to rescue him at the last moment was a high-stakes gamble—"

"—which would have resulted in his gratitude. The rescue would have been a valuable step in securing Neal's loyalty. He'd have been in our debt, and we could have worked that to our benefit. In addition, we'd have the recording of him being assisted by Ydrus to provide a more forcible means of persuasion if necessary."

She nodded. "Having multiple coercion resources would have strengthened our position, but we still have the video to use." She relaxed against him. Was this the right moment to let her know? Her reaction wouldn't be easy to control.
She pulled away and turned to face him. "I sense your unease. Did something else go wrong?"

He nodded. "The video won't help us."

"Why not?" Her low voice deepened still further, a sign of her displeasure. "Did Neal spot the camera behind the clock?"

"No. It was hidden too well. But our lion cub was wearing a hood. All we have is footage of a thief in black clothes. It's not possible to connect him to the execution of the theft."

Her eyes flashed angrily. "You're telling me that despite all our efforts we have nothing to blackmail him with?"

"Of course not. Now you understand why we made provision for the additional trap. Neal retrieved the painting. That in itself gives us sufficient leverage to move forward, but *The Astronomer* provides yet another weapon. The Louvre worked out exactly as Rolf predicted. We even have footage of Neal standing with Peter and his wife in the Vermeer gallery."

Anya appeared to be satisfied. "Now that I've seen the painting, I understand why you and Rolf value the work so highly."

"Rolf wants it for his private collection. He's asked it to be installed in his suite."

"It will be there waiting for his return," she assured him. "What odds do you give for the authorities discovering the switch before we're ready to move?"

"At an off-site facility? I'm confident the risk is minimal. The forgery I replaced it with is quite adequate to stand up to casual inspection. The Vermeer Exhibition is scheduled for December. That leaves us ample time to put the painting into play."

"I heard from Marta. She's in position in Los Angeles. She had no difficulty in arranging for Neal's friend Richard to be sent there for training."

"Has Rolf reached a decision about him?"

He nodded, stroking her hair. "A little extra insurance is warranted. Rolf will arrive in Los Angeles the first of July to supervise operations."

"I heard from my sister. She was able to secure the studio next to Neal's. She's already met Richard. Now that Neal's back, I expect her to waste no time in establishing a connection."

He took a sip of cognac. "That's excellent news. Rolf's prediction was accurate. Neal broke up with his girlfriend, and that will make Bianka's task all the easier. He won't be able to resist a woman of her skill. Neal may have grown wiser, but he's still a romantic. I'm no longer interested in trying to change him. We can use that weakness to our advantage."

"As long as Bianka doesn't fall for him first. I know my sister. She's young. She doesn't have our discipline. And your lion cub may prove irresistible."

"If Bianka loves him back, so much the better. They'll both be easier to control."

She leaned her head next to his. "I have a buyer who's interested in the Hilliard miniature. Should I offer it to him?"

"I've decided not to sell it," Klaus replied. "*Young Man Among Roses* belongs to me now. Soon Neal will as well."
**Notes:** Klaus and Rolf are confident that they're in control, but are they really? Neal has the entire White Collar team and Henry on his side. I like his odds much better. The differing viewpoints are the subject of my blog post: "A Question of Ownership." It's fitting that Henry realized what kind of game Rolf was playing at Scima Workshop. That a disguised Azathoth might try to become friends with Neal and Peter was originally Penna's brilliant idea. Thank you, Penna, for that and all the idea-bouncing, editing, hand-holding, and encouragement you've provided over these 9 chapters!

Currently in Neal's timeline it's early June. Rolf and Klaus are plotting, but the action won't start till July. Neal and Peter have both been put the wringer in this story. Father's Day is coming up. And if that weren't enough of an excuse to take a break from their machinations, yesterday in our timeline (March 21) was Neal Caffrey's birthday. In honor of the occasion, Penna wrote a post for our blog: "How I met Neal Caffrey," where she chronicles how she became interested in White Collar. I'm so glad she did!

My birthday gift to Neal is to send him off on a summer vacation with Peter. Neal doesn't like to be bored on his vacations so there will be a Supernatural twist. The story's called Fireflies at Midnight and begins in a couple of weeks.

Once it's concluded, it's time for Peter to plant some subliminal messages for Azathoth in the next Arkham Files story, The Crypt. That leads directly to the sequel of Echoes of a Violin, Nocturne in Black and Gold. Some foreign travel will be involved—no teases on where or who does the traveling. Comic-Con in San Diego will also be featured. The story is in the editing phase now and promises to be a much longer story. I'll begin posting it in July.

Thanks for reading and special thanks to all who've left comments! I'll be back on April 5 with the first chapter of Fireflies at Midnight. I hope you'll join me!

**Blog:** Penna Nomen & Silbrith Conversation: [www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com)

**Chapter Visuals and Music:** The Echoes of a Violin board on the Caffrey Conversation Pinterest website: [www.pinterest.com/caffreycon](http://www.pinterest.com/caffreycon)

New pins this week include the autographed photo of David Tennant and Billie Piper, Diana's scarf, Bianka, and the music mentioned in the chapter.

**Upcoming Stories:**
- Fireflies at Midnight: starts April 5 (Crossed Lines series)
- The Crypt: starts in May (Arkham Files series)
- Nocturne in Black and Gold: starts in July

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://www.pennasilbrithconversation.blogspot.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!