In The Beginning

by GoddessofBirth

Summary

We all live within layers. The truth is the truth, except when it isn't the whole truth. All spies have secret lives, but some have more secret lives than others. And sometimes those lives collide in ways that set destinies for hundreds of years to come.

Notes

Did I ever tell you the first convention I ever went to was for Highlander? That when I was 18, I took a Greyhound bus, solo, over two thousand miles cross country to attend? Because I did. Because I will always love Highlander more than I love most people.

Takes place sometime around the first half of season 4 of Chuck.

This isn't AU per se, at least up until mid season 4 (I did this before Summer actually DID guest star on the show. I'm obviously prescient, what can I say?) because nothing you see in any of these shows changes. This is more a...behind the scenes look of what was really happening. My brain is weird. It always has been. I wrote this a couple years ago and kind of want to play in it again. Because Reasons.
"Watch it, Bartowski!" Casey tightened his grip on Chuck's ankles, the only part of him visible through the air duct opening. If the moron hadn't forgotten the grappling cable, they wouldn't be in this ridiculous predicament in the first place.

"You hit that laser beam, you'll have a stump where your hand used to be." Then he shrugged. "Although I guess you really don't need a hand to Flash."

Chuck's aggravated voice floated back up to him. "Yeah, but it'd probably cause a kink in, oh, I don't know, my spy career! And stop jostling me!"

Sarah ended the argument. "Be quiet you two! Casey, you just concentrate on holding him steady. Chuck, are you going to be able to disarm the alarm?"

"Trying to work here, sweetie! But yes, I think we're golden. It's black before red, right?"

"You idiot!" Casey barked. "You're going to blow us all up." Well, the two of them at least. And it certainly wouldn't be enjoyable for him, either.

"Just a little espionage humor, Casey!" He could practically hear the eye roll in Bartowski's voice. "Jeez, did they remove your sense of humor when you enlisted? I've got the Intersect, remember? Pretty sure it knows it's red before black."

Casey just grunted and let Walker take care of the situation.

"Enough fooling around, Chuck. Just get it done. That guard's going to be making his return trip in 4 minutes."

"Patience, grasshoppers...just another second...one more little snip...Okay! You can lower me down."

Casey let go and smirked as he heard a satisfying thump. "Oops. My hand slipped."
Walker glared at him before hissing, "Knock it off, Casey. We don't have time for this." She grabbed the sides of the vent and lowered her body until her arms were completely extended and then she let go, landing in the hall below with a soft thud.

"Knock if off, Casey," he mimicked silently, before following her down. He made sure to wince, just slightly, as his left leg hit the floor.

Sarah had pulled up a schematic on her iPhone and they crowded around the display. "Okay, Intel places the chip in a vault located one floor up from here. There are two guards at the door, but they should be relatively easy to take out. If we can get this chip, we'll have complete control of Volkoff's satellite systems. It will be our first real chance to neutralize his operations."

She and Chuck took off down the hall, but when Casey made to follow them, she spun around and fixed him with a glare. "You. Stay!"

He started to argue but she cut him off, while Bartowski looked on with an amused grin.

"You're not even supposed to be here. And if Beckman finds out you got hurt because we let you come on a mission before you were cleared for duty," she gave his leg a pointed look, "we'll never hear the end of it. Just make sure nobody comes this way. Radio if you have a problem."

He growled, irritated, but gave a sharp nod before pulling his gun and putting his back against the wall. He watched until they disappeared around the corner before letting his growl morph to a snarl. This was the part he hated most, the pretense necessary to maintain the facade. By all rights he should be the one leading this charge, and not just because he had the most training. But he couldn't, instead had to limp and moan and prop against the damn wall because no forty something year old man, no matter how healthy, would be fully recovered from the gunshot wound he'd received on that rooftop.

It was annoying, but unless he wanted to disappear, start over, he had to play the game. That had been drilled into his head countless times since his first death. Even this much would have been impossible if he hadn't had an ally working as a doctor in the VA. Sometimes he thought about it, considered picking up and moving on, becoming someone new, but the truth was that he liked this life, was good at this job. In many ways, it was the only thing he was fit to do. Besides, he'd have to move on soon enough, and now that he had a daughter... Until that time came, he'd deal with the indignity of being left behind.

He looked at his watch. Walker and Bartowski had been gone almost five minutes. He'd give them another ten before checking in. Five for the trip, five to take out the guards and open the
vault, and five to return. Anything more and they'd have hit a snag.

He'd just holstered his gun when a he felt a slight buzzing across his brain. He shook his head to dislodge it. *It couldn't be, not here.* But his head jostling did nothing to calm the sensation, the static, and within seconds the voices had joined in, the ones that whispered and babbled, the ones he always thought that if he listened just hard enough, he could understand. But he never could. He whipped his head around, trying to pinpoint the direction before finally focusing on the ceiling above. He barely managed to take a step back and bring his hand down to the metal cylinder latched to the side of his belt before a small figure dropped gracefully through the same hole the team had come through. She stayed crouched for half a second before straightening, holding a long staff in a vertical position in front of her body.

The body definitely belonged to a female, he'd have to be blind not to see that, but that was the only thing he could be sure of. She was dressed head to toe in black, from the tips of a pair of low heeled boots, reminiscent of the ones Walker always wore, to the top of her head, swathed in a ski mask. Casey slipped the cylinder off his hip and held it loosely in one hand, thumb resting on a hidden catch. Maybe this could be settled without a fight.

He stared at the slight figure before speaking. "I am John Casey of - "

An exasperated groan caused him to falter and a light feminine voice spoke wryly. "Oh, *God.* Which one?"

His brow wrinkled slightly. "Excuse me?"

She sighed and reached up, pulling the stocking cap off her head. A riot of brown hair spilled across her shoulders before the girl spoke again. "Which one? Connor or Duncan?"

Casey blinked at her for a long minute, taken aback at her appearance. She was pretty, beautiful really, but barely more than a child, probably just past the cusp of adulthood when she'd had her first death. Now he understood why her curves had appeared so slight.

His thoughts must have been written on his face, or maybe she was just used to this reaction from her challengers, because she rolled her eyes and answered his unspoken words.

"Unfortunately, death is no respecter of age. Now, which one found you?"
She was fingering the curve of her staff and Casey backed up slightly, risking a glance at his watch. Eight minutes.

"Both. How did you know?"

She looked at him like he was an idiot and he felt his irritation return. "Because only those two think it's necessary to introduce themselves to someone they plan to decapitate."

He grunted dismissively and then fixed her with his best 'I am three times your size and will eat you for breakfast' look. It had made men bigger than him quail in their boots, but she stared back impassively. He felt an unusual flicker of admiration, but he didn't have the time to play games. If this was the way she wanted it... "Are we going to do this, or was your plan to talk me to death?"

"Fine, fine." She waved her hand at him in a bored, go ahead gesture. "Carry on."

"You could just walk away. I don't usually make a habit of beheading children."

Her brown eyes flashed into something hard and old and he was momentarily thrown off guard by the dichotomy caught there – aged wisdom mingled with an air of childish innocence. Her words were dry and humorless. "I haven't been a child in a very long time, John Casey. And unfortunately, I need something from here, and I suspect you just might try to stop me from taking it."

He'd almost forgotten they were in a high security Volkoff hideaway, and she wasn't exactly dressed for casual visiting. Better to be quick then, before Walker and Bartowski came back.

He depressed the trigger and a blade of lightweight titanium unfolded, sliding seamlessly into place at the same instant the blade guards unhooked from the sides. He assumed a defensive stance and waited for her move.

She shook her head ruefully. "You younglings and your new fangled toys." She turned her staff horizontal and made a twisting motion with her hand. The ends detached and she was left holding a slim, doubled bladed baton.

He spoke again. She might mock, but the forms should be followed. The Game was brutal enough without them abandoning all civility. He bowed his head and said formally, "I am John Casey."
She grimaced. "Oh, fine. Vera." When she saw him looking at her expectantly she expounded. "Just Vera. We weren't too big on last names when I was born. Living in a village of a hundred people kind of makes it a moot point." She cocked one eyebrow. "Shall we?"

She didn't wait for his response before swinging her staff in a tight circle and advancing. He raised his sword to meet hers, and the game was on.

Casey had been taught by some of the best, and as a result was one of the best, but this girl, Vera, she was something else. She wasn't just fighting, she was dancing - twisting and flowing with her blade; not a weapon and a girl, but a single entity, both working together in seamless harmony. And she was laughing. She obviously enjoyed a fight as much as he did.

He flashed a rare smile and redoubled his attack, appreciating having a decent opponent for once. Offensively, though, it didn't matter which way he turned, she was already there and parrying, somehow having anticipated his move. She had to have been doing this a long, long time.

He grunted and dodged a blade headed for his stomach. "How old are you?" He swept out a leg and managed to kick her foot out from under her, but instead of tumbling to the ground she caught herself on her palms and flipped back up and out of reach of his sword.

"John, John, John" she chastised, as they warily circled each other in the small hall, "a gentleman never asks a lady her age."

He scoffed at both labels before pressing forward, using his blade to push her back toward the wall. She had been careful to stay out of arms reach of him, because while she might be faster, and possibly better, he still had the advantage of height and muscle mass. If he could get within her defensive circle, he would have her trapped and they both knew it.

She took several steps back before slipping to the side around him. He swung around, barely getting his sword up in time to block her downward thrust. A loud clang rang through the hall as their blades met and he winced slightly at the sound. Why did these damn things always have to happen at such inconvenient times?

He used the momentum of his block to heave her up and back, and she stumbled, giving him the opening he was looking for. In an instant he was on her, trapping her body between his and the wall, his sword at her throat. Her own weapon was useless for this close range and she let it drop as she stared at him challengingly.
He hesitated. This was the part of the Game he really didn't enjoy. He'd shoot a man, stab him, even blow him up if he needed to in the course of his job, but decapitation? Where did that get fun? At times like this, the Game just seemed like so much stupidity and waste.

His pause cost him his advantage. He heard the soft schnick of a knife being unsheathed and when she glanced down he followed her gaze to see her holding the small blade against his groin.

She grinned gleefully. "Your move."

Her eyes told him that she'd never surrender and he felt an answering thrum from his own inability to back down. The adrenaline high crashed over him and her scent tickled his nose, light and woman. He smirked and pressed in closer against her, turning his blade slightly so that the flat instead of the edge was against her throat. His eyes dropped from hers to her mouth and he watched as her lips parted slightly.

Crackling static broke the charged silence and Walker's voice filled the air. "Casey, we've got it. We're on our way down."

He held Vera's stare for another second before, by unspoken accord, they simultaneously withdrew their weapons. She slipped her knife back into her wrist sheath and he returned his sword to its innocuous appearing cylinder. There was one more second before she shrugged.

"It's just as well. I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather do with your head than chop it off." Then, quick as a flash she stood on her toes and pressed a kiss against his lips. He froze and she laughed and ducked under his arm, scooping up her doubled bladed staff as she went.

He spun around just in time to see her grab the wooden covers from the floor and tuck them under one arm.

"Another time, Casey!" She winked and gave him a mock salute before turning and running lightly down the hall. He watched, bemused, until she disappeared around the corner. Before he could do anything more, he heard the sound of pounding feet and Walker and Bartowski came up panting beside him.

"Did we mention that one of the guards revived enough to call in backup?" Bartowksi gave him a nervous grin. "So we probably want to, you know, move quickly."
A shot rang from the way they'd come and Casey growled disgustedly before pulling himself up into the duct and turning around to reach for Walker's arms. As soon as they were safely back in the vent, Chuck replaced the cover and they began the long crawl back to the surface.

As he shuffled along on his elbows, stuck in the unfortunate position of staring at Bartowski's backside, he heard several long spats of gunfire below them. Vera must have been pinned down, and he briefly considered going back to help. But he had no good reason to give Walker for going back, and in the end, his responsibility was to his team, not to her. He put the whole odd episode out of him mind and kept moving forward, all the time grumbling about nerds who chose to tranq instead of using real bullets.
Casey set the chip into the safe and sat back on his heels. The only CIA cryptologist skilled enough to crack the chip's data cypher was deeply embedded in Uzbekistan and it would take the rest of the weekend to extract him. Until then, it would rest here.

He punched in a code on the keypad and the missing section of his floor reappeared from its hidden recess and sealed seamlessly with the rest of the hardwood. Once in place, the safe looked like just another section of unremarkable flooring. He stood and stepped back, carefully depressing a specific sequence on a pressure sensitive spot with the heel of his shoe. There was a small hiss, and the keypad melted into the wood while a clear coating of bulletproof epoxy simultaneously entombed the entire contraption.

With a grunt he repositioned his couch before walking to the breakfast bar and pouring himself a neat scotch. He took a sip and let it rest on his tongue for several minutes before swallowing. A year ago, even six months ago, the chip would have been locked up in Castle under twenty four hour surveillance and guard, but with the underground bunker practically having a revolving door these days, it had lost a bit of its Fort Knox security.

Accordingly, Beckman had ordered him to store the chip here and not to leave his condo after his obligatory evening shift at the Buy More tonight. Of course, that last part had more to do with Bartowski letting it slip that he'd sneaked along for the mission than any worries about his safe's security. After hearing that bit of news, Beckman had fixed Casey with her steely gaze and told him to take the weekend off and at home, and if she found out he'd disobeyed her directive she'd 'have him strapped to a hospital bed at the VA.'

That thought would have made Casey shudder even back in the days when he could still be injured long term, and now that he was immortal, the idea of being confined to a bed was completely insufferable. So he'd play this one safe and do as he was told.

After his shift at the Hell More.

He looked at the clock and internally groaned. He wondered, for the thousandth time, why the CIA and the NSA had decided to rebuild the Buy More. Couldn't Castle have been located just as well under a shooting range or a sporting goods store? And why was he the one that had to be sent back in undercover? Walker could protect Chuck just as well, and the two of them would probably love all the extra kissy face time.

If he were still mortal, he was sure he would have died a long time ago from the indignation of it all.
He drained the rest of the scotch before changing into his hated uniform. At least he only worked from six until close, and then he would be free for the rest of the weekend. Well, at least free to lounge around the condo. He guessed he could view Beckman’s stern set down as a blessing in disguise.

He pulled into the parking lot of the Buy More and climbed out, carefully closing the door on the Vic. She wasn't as good as his original baby, but Bartowski had blown that one all to hell, and he couldn't discount his good fortune in finding a mint condition replacement. He treated her good, and she was growing on him.

He looked over the top of the car and nodded reluctantly to Bunny, who was leaning against her own vehicle while adjusting her watch. The expressionless, taciturn woman seemed harmless enough, but something about her made the hair on the back of his neck stand up, had done so since the minute she'd started working there. Maybe it was the way she always seemed to be staring at him whenever he looked up to scan the store.

"Casey," she greeted him in her flat monotone.

He grunted noncommittally in return. As he passed her she gave one last tug on her watch strap and he caught sight of a small tattoo half covered by the strap; he thought it might be some kind of stylized peace sign. He rolled his eyes as the Buy More doors slid open. No wonder she gave him the creeps. Damn liberal hippies.

He came to an abrupt halt just inside the doors. The Nerd Herd desk was surrounded by a wall of green and white shirts, all packed together en masse. He collared Grimes as he strolled by and Casey jerked his head toward the crowd.

"What's going on?"


Casey gave him a sharp look. He was dating Alex; the last thing he should be doing was drooling over some skirt.

Morgan held his hands, palms out, in surrender. "Hey, I'd be blind not to see she's a hottie, but she looks like she could eat me alive. Besides, it doesn't matter how gorgeous she is. Nobody
compares to my Alex."

Casey grimaced at the 'my' part, but grunted his approval of Grimes' sentiments. He set out toward the break room to clock in, intending to circumvent the pack of jackals, but as he drew closer his ears filled with the silent roaring and muttering of thousands of indecipherable voices.

*What the hell?*

He abruptly changed directions and strode over to the Nerd Herder desk. He bodily picked up Barnes and moved him out of the way. Dead weight removed, he shouldered between Patel and Skip and came face to face with -

"Vera?" He glared at her incredulously. She was dressed in the the Nerd Herder uniform, a short sleeve, white button up with several buttons undone, exposing an enticing triangle of flesh. Her tie was done up loosely, knot coming to rest at the first fastened button. The shirt was tucked into the standard short black skirt, leaving her long legs bare until they ended in feet encased in black patent leather spiked heels.

He had to admit she made being a nerd look good.

She smiled at him blandly, but her eyes flashed in warning. "Sorry. But close – it's Greta." She tapped one red lacquered nail against her name tag. "Nice to meet you - " she squinted at his own name plate. "John."

He worked his jaw for several seconds and fought down the growl in his throat.

"Greta," he politely strained through his teeth. "I don't suppose you have a couple of seconds to look at this problem I have with my phone do you? It's in the break room."

"Of course, John. I'm here to help." She turned her smile to the mooning boys watching her every move. "Okay, guys, let's get back to work! All you Nerd Herders, I'll be back for our pow wow in just a minute."

The green shirts groaned and shuffled off while the Herders grinned madly at their luck. *Morons.*
He strode toward the break room, hearing the sharp clip of Vera's heels behind him. He'd barely made it in the door when he spun on her.

"You didn't tell me you were with the CIA.," he growled out. He hated working in the dark.

She arched one eyebrow at him, unperturbed. "You didn't ask. Besides, it's not like you told me you were on a mission for the NSA, either. So, what are you doing stationed here?" Her question was a challenge.

He crossed his arms over his chest. "That's classified."

"Exactly, Casey" She grinned at him smugly, knowing she'd scored a point. All spies protected their missions. He grunted in acknowledgment of her win and her smile widened.

Then, she looked him up and down and her mouth moued and her nose crinkled. "Who thought up these uniforms? That green is really unflattering. Red would be a much better color for you."

He snorted, irritation replaced by amusement. "I'll be sure to put that request into corporate."

"You do that." She looked him over again, only this time in a lazy, languid way. The way a woman looked at a man whose body she was appreciating. "Even with the green, though, you're not half bad." She paused. "For a newbie." Then, she winked at him before continuing.

"Well, my Nerd Herders await. And I'm pretty sure you have a refrigerator or something to move." She waited another beat and then added, "Stock boy." She smirked before walking off to conference with the Nerd Herder staff and he found himself watching the side to side sway of the slight swell of her hips. He'd never realized how much attitude could be broadcast by a simple swish.

"Whoa there, Big Guy." A hand clapped on his shoulder and her turned his head to glare at Bartowski. He'd apparently emerged from the locker entrance and caught Casey ogling. "She's a little young for you, don't you think? Like, you know, your daughter's age?"

He shrugged Chuck's hand off, feeling inexplicably guilty, despite knowing Vera was more than likely far older than he and Chuck combined. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Bartowski. You just concentrate on your own hard drive, and leave my love life to me." He marched off toward Home Appliances, barely restraining himself from snarling at a blank faced
marched off toward Home Appliances, barely restraining himself from snarling at a blank faced Bunny.

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His shift had ended without him crossing paths with Vera again. After he clocked out, he glanced around; once he was assured Bartowski was nowhere to be seen, he keyed in the pass code to the locker entrance and slipped down into Castle.

He pulled up the security cameras for the Buy More and then fed a screen capture of Vera into the CIA’s facial recognition software. Several tense minutes passed as the program searched the database and he listened with one ear for the sounds of Bartwoski or Walker entering the substation. Or, God forbid, Grimes. The midget might be growing on him, but he'd never make the mistake of thinking he could keep his mouth shut.

The computer beeped and Vera's file popped up on the screen. He studied it for several seconds.

Interesting.

Vera, or Allison Phelps, as she was recorded in the CIA files, was a member of an elite black-ops team answerable only to the President of the United States. The nature of their activities were so highly classified that the only part of her file that wasn't redacted was her name and photo. He momentarily considered going to his documents man to see what could be recovered, but ultimately dismissed the idea. The probability was high that her team had been sent in to recover the same chip Beckman had tasked them to retrieve.

Casey smirked with satisfaction. Her team might be elite, but his team was faster. He had nothing against a little Inter-agency competition now and then; it honed everyone's instincts and kept them on their toes. He was just considering how best to engage in a bit of well earned gloating at Vera's expense when the main door to Castle hissed open.

He had barely managed to clear the screen and move to nonchalantly looking over an array of weapons before Walker stuck her head around the corner.

"What are you still doing here? You heard Beckman. No work this weekend. None." She glared at him, reminding him of his mother. "I'm not risking another lecture from her just so you can pretend you're superman. If you're not out of here in 3 seconds, I'm calling her myself, and then I'll help her strap you to the gurney."
He obediently dropped the grenade he had been toying with. "Nice nerd reference, Walker. You and Bartowski are becoming more alike every day. Next thing you know, you'll be buying tickets to Comic Con together.'="

Her face reddened and she looked anywhere except at him.

His eyes widened. "You're kidding me. You didn't."

She crossed her arms defensively. "It's very important to Chuck. And he did attend that seminar on enemy incapacitation techniques with me instead of going to the Star Trek Marathon."

He snorted and shook his head. Walker's eyes narrowed.

"And your three seconds are up." She reached her hand out to the phone threateningly.

"I'm going, I'm going. Don't get your Princess Leia panties in a bunch." With that parting shot he vaulted up the steps and out the door, looking forward to a quiet night at home, with just his scotch and some Neil Diamond for company.

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Really, this was getting annoying. The buzzing had started almost as soon as he'd stepped foot into the Courtyard and had only grown stronger as he'd neared his condo. He dropped one hand onto the cylinder at his side as a precaution, but he wasn't surprised when he opened his still locked door and found Vera sitting, legs crossed, on his couch. She closed the sketchbook on her lap and set it to the side before staring at him imperiously.

He bolted the door behind him and nearly tripped over a suitcase dropped carelessly on the floor. He raised one eyebrow. "Come to finish the job?"

She rolled her eyes. "I already told you I had better things to do with your head. Besides, the CIA got what it needed, regardless of who retrieved it. No harm, no foul." She toed her shoes off and wriggled her toes. "Speaking of, I don't suppose you'd give me a peek. Just out of professional courtesy."
He didn't even have to think about it. 'No.' He leaned against the wall and assumed his default stance, arms crossed over chest. "What are you doing here?"

She pushed herself to her feet and wandered over to the mantle. "I have to work the Greta position all weekend, and I hate hotels. They never give you enough towels, and the cleaning service stinks."

He barked out an incredulous laugh. "You're not staying here."

She barely glanced up from her examination of the room. She floated here and there, randomly touching things before winding up at his liquor stash. She opened the scotch and poured two tumblers three fingers deep. She walked one over to him before taking a small sip from the other. Only then did she answer him, lightly.

"Of course I am, John. It's only polite to offer me shelter. Besides, you're going to be here all weekend anyway." She looked at him sideways. "Word on the street is that you're on restriction."

She took another drink before opening her eyes wide and batting her lashes at him. "Were you a bad boy?"

He didn't deign to answer her and she continued her exploration. Her aimless path finally led her back to the fireplace. He watched as she examined the pictures of Alex displayed there and after a minute she looked over her shoulder at him. "She's not yours.” It was a statement of fact.

He didn't bother trying to argue. They both knew it was impossible for him to father children. "No."

She propped herself against the mantle and he watched as her eyes went curiously unfocused before zeroing back in on him.

"She was so lonely without you, but she wanted her to be yours. You wanted her to be yours. And so you pretend."

He grunted in acknowledgment. "It's the only chance I'll ever have."

She gave him a small smile before straightening up, breaking the heaviness that had filtered into
the room. "So, where shall I put my things?"

He tried one more time. "How do you know I won't take your head while you're sleeping?"

She gave him a predatory smile before gliding over to him. She ran one finger lazily across his chest while looking up at him through her lashes. "Because you don't really want to. I'm pretty sure there are a lot of other things you'd rather take than my head."

With that she set her glass on the entryway table and padded across the room, disappearing down the hall. A second later, her tie flew through the archway and landed on the floor, followed by her white button up.

He stayed motionless for half a second more before his lips curled into a wolfish grin. He pushed himself off the wall and headed after her, stripping off his shirt as he went.

She was right. He needed her head right were it was for what he had in mind.
They were lying on the bed, facing each other. There was a mostly empty breakfast tray between them, with only a few remnants of syrup and pancakes left smeared on the plates and a still mostly full carafe of orange juice set to the side. Vera had a sheet draped over her body, a move they had finally agreed was necessary if they actually wanted to carry on a conversation.

She propped her head up on her hand. "Okay, first kill."

Casey gave a grunting laugh. "Michael James. On a freighter somewhere in the pacific. I was stowing away with the cargo in order to sneak into China for a mission. I was all snug in my crate with my two way and the current issue of Gun Times when it hit. Turns out he was a double agent for MI-6, so I didn't feel too bad about it. And we were in a storm, so it made it a lot easier to hide."

He was pretty sure Walker and Bartowski would be jaw dropping shocked to hear him talk so freely with someone he'd just met. Hell, he was hardly ever that forthcoming with them, and he'd known them for years. But immortals had to spend so much time cloaked in secrecy, even on top of what their everyday lives might require, that when they had the opportunity to spend time with another of their kind, it made it easier to drop barriers and pretenses, at least about the details of their immortality. Of course, he certainly didn't tell her everything, just as he was sure she was holding back information from him. They were both spies; that came with the territory.

"You?" He redirected her question.

"Oh, gosh." She took a drink of juice and squinched up her face. 'Um...a very long time ago. Somewhere in Europe; I think probably what's now Kiev – we didn't exactly have maps then." She laughed suddenly. "It was a total surprise. I still didn't know what I was, and was basically living from hand to mouth, foraging in the forest. All of a sudden I had this terrible head rush and this crazy woman came at me with an ax!"

"What did you do?" He couldn't imagine fighting without having some idea of what was going on.

She smiled tightly. "Survived. Acted on instinct. I don't think she was very good herself, or I never would have been able to disarm her, especially at my size." She swept a hand down her body, indicating her shape. Casey made an agreeable sound. It was a very good shape. Small, but extremely well proportioned.
"Hey! Do you want to hear this?" She was smirking at him, well aware that he'd suddenly become distracted.

He grinned lopsidedly. "We may need to add a blanket to that."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be a boob."

"A boob? Really? Did you pick that up in third grade?"

"Anyway. She'd been screaming something about my head, so it made logical sense that when I got her pinned down, I took hers."

"And the Quickening?"

"Oh my god. I thought the devil had come to get me."

Casey threw back his head and laughed, long and hard. It had been a long time since he'd met up with another immortal, partly due to circumstances, partly due to design. When he finished, he absentmindedly picked up a used napkin, and balling it up, launched it toward the wastebasket. He missed. He picked up another one and re-aimed. He missed again.

"You need to correct your angle by 1.67 degrees if you want to hit your target."

He squinted at her and she closed her mouth with a snap. "Did you just do that in your head?"

She traced a line on the sheet. "Um...yes."

"What are you? Some kind of genius?"

"That's what they tell me." She grimaced. "I'm sorry, I try not to do that."
He was confused. "Why would you hide something like that?"

She sat up, drawing her knees to her chest. "Well, for one, it makes me talk funny. The bigger my vocabulary grew, the weirder my speech sounded. And two, people don't like it. They don't like thinking someone might be smarter than they are. It makes them nervous. It's hard enough not to stand out being like we are. I don't need any added oddness."

He reached over the tray and tweaked the toe sticking out under the sheet. "Well, it doesn't bother me. Hell, I've had to live with Bartowski the last three years; if that didn't drive me nuts, I don't think anything will."

She rested her head on her knees and looked at him. "Really?" There was a thin line of vulnerability there that he hadn't seen before.

"Really. And I bet it makes you one hell of a shot."

She grinned and then shrugged nonchalantly. "I'm alright."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're just 'alright.'" The clock was counting down time. She'd have to report to the Buy More for her shift in another couple of hours. "Okay, what else?"

She flipped over onto her stomach and the sheet rode dangerously low on her back. He'd discovered she had a very small birthmark there; a tiny, bluish spot right where the curve of her rear met her lower back. He'd spent a lot of time there earlier.

"Hmm...Oh! I can't believe I didn't ask! First death."

"Thirteen years ago. We were conducting a mission in Afghanistan, attempting a needle strike at an Al Qaeda target." He could almost taste the sand in his throat.

* * * * * * *

Afghanistan, 1997
"Jones! Keep your weapon up! I don’t want to get killed because you’re distracted by the local women!"

Casey growled low and long, irritation evident in every line of his body. He hated when he was saddled with newbies on this type of operation. The boy had obviously never been out of the U.S. before, and he was acting like a tourist and not a soldier.

"Jones, fall back! Ryker, you take point." The switch took place without incident and they continued to creep along the back alleys of the small Afghan town. He had been given five men for this mission, five men to aid him in getting close enough to assassinate Ak-alid Jiban, rumored to be Osama Bin Ladin's right hand. The success of this operation could seriously cripple Al-Qaeda's network for years.

The latest intelligence reports had indicated that Jiban had come to the tiny town, a place devoid of the luxuries of the larger Afghan cities, in order to attend his niece's wedding. The security surrounding the village certainly seemed to indicate the veracity of the Intel.

They were close to the home now, close enough that Casey could smell the Palao baking in the clay ovens.

"Barret, James!" Casey indicated directions with a flick of his fingers and the two men peeled off and disappeared into the shadows. Casey followed Ryker, both men walking on the balls of their feet as they approached the corner of the mud daub house. Casey quietly slipped his rifle from his shoulder and slowly clicked the safety off.

All at once there was a pained scream to the left, in the direction James had disappeared, and a strafe of gunfire threw up the dirt directly in front of Ryker's feet. Casey grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him back.

"Ambush! Fall back, fall back!" A hail of gunfire fell from the surrounding buildings and Casey returned fire, running backward toward the cover of the hills enveloping the village. He could hear the nervous breathing of Ryker, Malloy and Jones around him, but there was no sign of either Barret or James. They would be two more letters home. If he survived long enough to write it.

A hoarse shout came from behind him. It sounded like Malloy. He turned his head just enough to see him clutching a bloody arm. "Keep moving! You’re only dead if you stop!"
From the corner of his eye he caught a red glint and he whipped around to see a laser sight target Jones' back. He didn't have time to warn him, so he acted on instinct, reached out and pushed him, taking his place. In the next instant he felt a stabbing pain as a bullet pierced his spine. His legs disappeared from beneath him and he fell to the cobblestones, landing hard.

"Sir!" Jones and Ryker were staring at him, wide eyed. Malloy was nowhere to be seen.

"Run, you Morons! Transport is a mile away. You can make it if you don't stand here like idiots!" Another strafe of gunfire punctuated his words, sending the two men diving toward the shadows. He was finished, he knew that. The bullet had most likely shattered his spine, and he couldn't feel anything below his waist. He heard the sound of his remaining men retreating, and he sent out a silent prayer to a God he didn't believe in anymore that they would make it out.

He used his arms to roll himself to his back, still clutching his weapon. He might could take out a few of these terrorist bastards before they killed him. There was the sound of unfamiliar boots, and then a dull, heavy blow to his head, momentarily disorienting him. When he shook his head awake only seconds later, his gun was gone and he was staring into the muzzle of a pistol. It was held in the hand of a fiercely grinning Ak-alid Jiban.

"Hello, American. And good-bye."

Casey's nostrils flared and he gritted his teeth against the pain in his head and back. "Casey, John, Captain, Service number 547 - "

"Oh, Captain Casey...we don't have any need for that." Jiban aimed the muzzle of the pistol between Casey's eyes and smiled as he pulled the trigger.

* * * * *

"When I came to, I was buried in a shallow grave just on the outskirts of town. It took me two hours to dig my way out. I guess I should be grateful the beheading of enemy combatants wasn't as popular then as it later became. I was...confused, to say the least. I knew I had died. I had felt the bullet enter my brain. And that is not a good feeling, I can assure you."

"There was no reason for me to be alive." He was mopping up the remaining syrup with the last bits of pancake and he took a second to shovel it into his mouth.

"What happened?" she prodded eagerly, looking like a kid completely enthralled in a fairy tale. It
make him feel slightly dirty, and he took a second to remind himself that she wasn't anywhere close to a child.

"I was lucky that Duncan and Connor were working with the Red Cross then and had been doing humanitarian work in the area. They stumbled across me less than a day after I'd dug myself out. They explained things to me, and after a few memorable...demonstrations, I believed them. When I made my way back home, I asked for leave to deal with the death of my team and the military granted it. I spent that time with the two of them, training. They cut me loose a year later, and here I am."

"Did you ever complete the mission?"

He snarled, baring his teeth. "Of course. And I made sure he knew exactly who was holding the knife before I cut his throat."

The smile she returned was just as fierce. The fact that she wasn't remotely disgusted by the blood lust dripping from his voice only turned him on even more.

"What about yours?" he questioned, before he became totally distracted.

"Me? As near as I can remember, it was the U.K., sometime around 900 CE, give or take a few inaccurate calendar years." She smirked at his look. "Yes, you are sleeping with a much older woman. You just can't imagine the things I go through to keep my skin this young looking."

"What happened?"

The smirk left her face. "I was burned at the stake as a witch."

He didn't like the idea of that at all. And he'd thought feeling a bullet was bad. "Why?"

"Oh, you know," she waved her hand in the air vaguely, "for a female in those days, anything made you a witch. I could have accurately predicted the weather and that would have been enough."

She wasn't being entirely truthful, he could tell by the look on her face, but he let it pass in favor
of a more interesting question. "How old were you?"

She smiled just slightly. "Seventeen." She looked down at her hands and said softly, "I was going to be married in two weeks."

He reached out a hand and pulled back a sheet of hair that had fallen to cover her face. "What about your fiancé? Didn't he try to help you?"

Her face twisted sardonically, but she didn't look up from her hands. "Oh, he helped alright. As my intended, he got the honor of lighting the pyre. He was blessed to be able to cleanse my soul." There was a shadow of an ancient hurt on her face, faded and old enough that he could barely see it, and he wondered if she even realized she felt it anymore. Would he survive long enough to reach an age where past pains would be reflected that dimly?

"Didn't anyone defend you?"

Another small smile, this one warm. "I had a brother – at least in name, although obviously I know now it wasn't blood. But that didn't matter. He was my best friend. He tried to stop them. He thought that if he climbed up with me, it would deter them." She rolled over on her stomach and stared at the ceiling. "It didn't."

"I came back in the refuse pile outside the village. He...didn't. I had no idea what had happened, but I knew enough to know I had to run. I lived in the surrounding forests for two years. I died twice more in that time. A bear and a bad fall. I'm probably lucky I didn't lose my mind from the pain and confusion. Can you imagine anything worse than going through immortality insane? I actually started thinking I was a witch.

"Eventually, though, Amanda found me."

Casey couldn't help it, he laughed. "Amanda trained you? Well that explains a lot."

Her lips quirked and she turned back on her side to face him. The sheet had slid completely to her waist and he used all of his military discipline to keep his mind on track.

"You've met her, then?"
"Oh, yeah. She came to visit Duncan while I was training. I think by the time she finally left she'd managed to wrangle him into helping her rob a bank and break into a museum. And then there was the whole blackmail thing..." He trailed off. He still couldn't understand why Duncan put up with her. He'd of booted her out on her ass the first day she showed up, but Duncan not only let her stay, they were together, despite the fact she seemed to be his exact moral opposite.

"She can be a bit impulsive, I agree. She tends to get herself into the kind of trouble that needs people to do things get her out of." Vera's eyes were shuttered for half a second and then it was gone so fast he thought he might have imagined it. "But underneath it, she's an amazing person. You may not see it, but Mac does."

"You know Duncan?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course. Stay with Amanda long enough and there's always Duncan. I assume one day they'll get things together and actually make it official.

"Anyway, I was really lucky she was the person who found me. I stayed with her for close to fifty years that first time, and we generally drift together every hundred years or so. In fact, I just left her before I got assigned here."

Casey was about to ask another question when his cell rang. He grabbed it from the bedside table. "Bartowski," he muttered.

He lifted it to his ear. "What?" he growled.

"Well, Casey, it's great to hear your voice as well."

"What do you want?" His eyes were tracking Vera's movements as she got to her knees, the sheet completely abandoned now, and carefully set the breakfast tray on the floor. The action contorted her body in interesting ways and he cursed Bartowski's ill timed call.

"Just seeing how you're doing, Big Guy. I know you're not super fond of the whole stay at home thing. Just wanted to make sure the complex is, you know, still standing."

Vera had repositioned herself at the bottom of the bed and was currently crawling her way up his body.
"I'm a big boy, Bartowski, I can take care of myself. It's not like I haven't had down time before."

Her hair was brushing across his thighs and she was drawing lazy designs across his abdomen. She tilted her head and looked up at him through her lashes. He really needed to get Bartowski off the phone.

"Yeah, but we all know how cranky you get."

Vera had reached his chest and he propped the phone between his ear and his shoulder so that his hands were free to spread across the curve of her back. Her skin was silky smooth beneath his fingers and he trailed them up and down her spine. She rubbed up against him in response and his palm slid down to her bottom to tug her tight against him.

"Bartowski, did you need anything else? I'm kind of in the middle of something here."

"No, no, nothing important. Just kind of bored. We don't have any calls, and I'm waiting for the Greta to come in so I can talk to her about some mission reports."

Casey slipped a hand between their two bodies and smirked as Vera's eyes fluttered shut. "The Greta? Oh, I'm sure she'll be coming soon. Gotta go, Bartowski." He threw the phone across the room and rolled until Vera was securely beneath him.

"Don't you know how dangerous it is to distract a spy when he's talking to his partner? There could be consequences."

She curled one leg around his waist. "I'm not sure they taught me that lesson in basic. Maybe I could use a refresher course."

"Absolutely, ma'am." He was only too happy to comply.
When he walked in the room after showering, Vera was sitting cross legged on the floor, rapidly drawing on her sketchpad. When she heard him come in, she flipped it shut and grinned up at him. She had already showered but had only progressed to her white button up as far as dressing went and the front still hung open. The Green Shirts' uniforms may have been a debacle, but the Nerd Herders' had been inspired. Well, maybe not on Bartowski, but on Vera? Definitely.

"What are you working on?" He bent down to pick up her sketchpad but she snatched it from his fingers and danced away. Quite literally. She turned a pirouette and leaped on top of the bed. "Ah ah ah...no peeking. You can see it when I'm done."

"You dance, too?" He shook his head in disbelief.

"Casey, I've been alive over a thousand years. After awhile you get bored. Who knows what skills you'll acquire after two hundred years or so?"

He shrugged, sitting down on the edge of the bed, his towel wrapped around his waist. She immediately sat down behind him, letting her legs straddle out around his, and began rubbing his shoulders.

"For all I know, I'll be dead by then. The Game could be over. No point in speculating."

She pressed her lip against his shoulder blade and then rested her cheek against it. "Oh, I'm sure you'll still be kicking around in a few hundred years. And I know I have no intention of dying before then. It stands to reason then that since I'm not interested in your head – well, at least not in that way – the Game will still be going strong. So, you should start thinking about the future. Maybe make some investments, buy up some property. Nobody wants to live on a government salary forever. Literally."

He flipped around and pinned her down on the bed. "You're a real smart ass, you know that?" He lightly nipped the side of her neck. "Are you ever serious?"

She turned her head to the side to give him room to scrape his teeth along the underside of her jaw before sliding out from under him. "Only when I have to be." Her look turned wistful. "And now
happens to be one of those times. Duty calls." She ran a thumb across his bottom lip. "I really wish we could have met under different circumstances."

"We're spies. What other circumstances are there?" She started to fasten her shirt and he brushed her hands aside. "Here, let me." He deftly buttoned her up before grabbing her necktie from the lampshade where it had been hastily tossed. He slipped it over her head and knotted it. "Almost presentable."

She'd laid her skirt out across her suitcase and he retrieved it before kneeling down on the floor by the bed. He held the waist open with both hands. "Come here." She swung her legs off the bed and stepped first one foot and then the other into the opening. He slowly stood, bringing the skirt with him, letting her shirttails fall inside it. When he reached his full height he slipped one hand behind her and pulled the zipper up.

Then he sank back down to his knees and picked up one of her feet in the palm of his hand. It was so small it barely spanned the distance from his fingers to his wrist. He ran his thumb across her ankle before sliding her heel on. He repeated the motion with the other foot and finally hoisted himself to his feet.

"There. All ready."

A slow smile spread across her face and she hooked two fingers inside the edge of his towel. He let her pull him to her and she put her hands on his shoulders and hauled him down to give him a blistering kiss. By the time she pulled back his towel had ended up somewhere on the floor and his hand was fisted in her hair. He smoothed his palm down the chocolate locks. He could easily get addicted to the feel of those strands running across his fingertips.

"Sorry. You may have to re-brush that."

She was busy stroking light fingertips across his hip bones and it took her a minute to drag her attention back to his face. He smirked at her. "Like what you see?"

"Oh, immensely." She retrieved her brush from her bag and held it out to him. "You do it?"

"That's not really part of my skill set. I don't want to hurt you."

She pressed the handle into his hand. "It's easy. Just start at the bottom and work up." She turned
He'd never given much thought to hair brushing. He generally kept his hair short enough that it wasn't something he really needed to worry about. And the women he'd been with had certainly never required it of him. But as he wrapped strands of her hair around his hand and started carefully working the bristles through it, he decided he may have to reconsider.

It was...soothing. The repetitive motion set his brain to a quiet hum as he worked out the tangles his grasping had caused. At the same time, though, having his hands in her hair was somehow incredibly erotic, bringing back flashes of her over him, under him, beside him, around him, her hair always the curtain his hands hid in. By the time he undid the last snarl, he was hard enough that he wished she wasn't on her way out the door. He noticed she wasn't exactly breathing normally, either.

"Completely presentable now," he graved out. She looked at him over her shoulder, her eyes almost black.

"I might need it brushed again when I get back tonight. The Buy More can be hell."

"Don't I know it. But...I'll be glad to help anyway that I can." He bent down and placed a sharp bite just underneath her collar, hard enough that he left a mark. He liked the idea that she would wear it throughout the day. "If you don't leave now, we're going to have to redress you all over again."

She sighed and faced him. "And as much as I'd really, really love that, I have a job to do. Hold that thought though." She snatched her purse and sketchpad off the table.

"Oh, you can count on that." He stopped her right before she walked out the door. "What would you like for dinner? I can cook, or there's always delivery. Bartowski raves about this Chinese place downtown."

She arched an eyebrow. "You cook?"

"I made breakfast didn't I?"

She shook her head. "That doesn't count. All men can make breakfast. It's some kind of odd
universal constant."

"Well, I can do more. Do you want me to?"

She pursed her lips as she thought and his mind immediately went to the other things that perfect 'o' could do. Her eyes widened. "You have a very one track mind."

He huffed. "That obvious? I must need to work on my poker face." Then he grinned. "But what can I say? You're distracting."

"You're not very conducive to clear thought yourself. Let's do delivery. I don't want to share you with the kitchen." She winked and slipped out the door, leaving him alone for the rest of the day.

The first 2.5 hours were spent cleaning up the mess they'd made. There was syrup in the shower, two shattered picture frames in the living room and a broken chair in the guest room. She was right – he'd better start investing more, if only to pay for the all the things they'd wrecked.

After he'd set his house to rights, he double checked the security of the chip. He'd feel far more comfortable when it was safely in the cryptologist's hands. That action only took up about two minutes, so he moved on to cleaning his weaponry. Even with his vast arsenal, the task didn't take up the rest of the day and he was left at loose ends.

Bartowski was right. He hated downtime. Inactivity bit at him, made him itchy, jumpy. Gave him too much time to think about things he'd rather avoid. Like his old life, and Kathleen; the fact that Alex wasn't really his and the dull ache the thought of Kathleen's infidelity still gave him. In the grand scheme of things, though, he supposed his lie had been much worse – he'd let her think he was dead. It had been good practice, all things considered, since he'd soon have to pass that same deception off to everyone who knew him now.

Everyone except for Vera.

The ease that settled into him with that thought made him extremely uncomfortable and so he turned to the ordering of dinner to distract himself. Half an hour later he heard the doorknob rattle and then it opened to admit Vera.

"Hey. Dinner should be here in - " He caught sight of her face. "What's wrong?"
"There's been a change of plans. I'm being shipped out tonight."

He followed her into the bedroom where she began throwing her things into her suitcase.

"What? I thought you were here all weekend?"

She zipped her bag. "You know how this goes, Casey. Nothing is set in stone."

"I know, but - " How could he say *I wasn't ready to let you go yet?* She was right. This was their life.

She stood in front of him. "Just promise me one thing. Promise me you'll keep the Volkoff chip safe."

His mind immediately went to the safe he had checked earlier, but before he could say anything a smile broke across her face.

"Thank you," she breathed before launching herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him deep. He was confused, but returned the kiss enthusiastically. It went on for what seemed like hours, like they were pouring the next few days they wouldn't have into each other's mouths. When she finally drew back he felt almost woozy.

"I really, really wish things could have been different. I wish they didn't have to end like this."

He made a face. "It's not like we won't - " the beep of his cell phone interrupted him - a text from Walker. "Hold that thought."

He picked his phone up but had to read the message twice, because for some reason the letters started jumping and blurring halfway through his first attempt.

*Report to Castle immediately. New Greta is rogue – working for Volkoff competitor. Possibly attempting to locate the chip*
He dropped the phone and spun around to face her. Only now there were two of her and she was weaving back and forth. Or maybe that was just him.

"Vera?"

He blinked hard as the two Veras spoke in unison. "I'm really sorry, Casey."

He reached for the gun underneath his nightstand but stumbled and had to catch himself before he fell. "What did you do to me?"

She shook her head and started backing away. Suddenly it hit him. He ran his tongue over his lips. He could taste it then, the slight hint of toxin on his skin. He looked at her in horror.

"You drugged me, you bi -" that was as far as he got before he collapsed across the bed and the world went black.

* * * * * * *

He didn't know how much time had passed before he came to, but it was enough that true night had fallen. He lunged to his feet and ran for the safe. The furniture was turned on its side and the safe sat open, gaping wide. The transponder chip was missing and in its place were two sheets of paper. The larger one, torn from Vera's sketchpad, was a hand drawn schematic of the chip, detailed enough that they might be able to reconstruct it sometime in the next five years – if they were lucky. The other was a note.

Casey,

* * * * * * *

We all live within layers, and loyalty is a funny thing; sometimes we don't always have a choice. I am truly sorry, but I needed it more than you.

Vera

At the bottom of the page was a hastily written postscript.
Casey, I promise it wasn't all a lie.

His vision went red and he growled long, low and furious. *That bitch.* He had no idea how she had managed to crack his security system, or how she'd even known where to look, but one thing he was certain of - the next time he saw her, he wouldn't hesitate to take her head.

As it turned out, it would be another five hundred years before he got his chance.

Chapter End Notes

Look for "Who The Are Now," the second story in the trilogy, which will pick up in the Firefly 'verse.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!