The Science of the Heart

by TriviaMasquer

Summary

Jack Carter loves everything in Eureka except for two things: scientists boosting their egos with ridiculously dangerous science and Nathan Stark. One particularly difficult day, he goes for a drive and happens across a car accident. The victim? Nathan Stark. Despite the fact Jack cannot stand Stark, he somehow finds himself falling slowly in love with him. Season one on, AU but follows near-canon.

Notes

In the first season, I really liked the Jack/Allison relationship, but as the seasons progressed, I could deal with her and Stark, but she is such a fickle irritating person in late season three and season four. I realize the Carter/Stark relationship is actually highly improbable based on their personalities, but that doesn't mean I can't put them together here!

This starts during season one, and will run parallel to the writers' canon with the exception of the Carter/Blake/Stark triangle pretty much removed. Don't worry about Ally though, she won't be alone! So, basically events will stay the same, except the events directly affected by the swapped relationships.

Read and Review! Any criticism, suggestions, or praise will be highly appreciated!

Transplanted from my FF.net account.
The Accident

Jack sped along the road, feeling completely at odds with the world, Seth and Fargo had been at it again, fighting over spiders. Fucking spiders for God's sake. Seth was working on stronger-than-kevlar body armor from spider silk and apparently, Fargo had woken up with twenty-inch-across spiders filling his bedroom. His retribution had been to let all of the spiders out of their enclosures. The investigation had been okay until one of the massive spiders had flattened Jack and bitten his chest. Before Seth had managed to scramble to the workbench and grab the anti-venom, Jack had swollen all over, apparently hyper-allergic to giant black widows.

Seth had managed to save him, but his chest still hurt where the bites were. Fargo was in the cell at the Sheriff's Office for reckless endangerment. Jack had been unable to charge Seth with the same since he turned out to be working on some DoD project to improve body armor for law enforcement. He had yelled to Jo he was taking the day off, jumped in his Jeep, and burned rubber out of town.

Three-and-a-half-hours out of town, he was cruising past the side of a partially empty reservoir, enjoying the thundering of the wind in his ears through the open windows. It drowned out his thoughts and allowed him to relax. Everything had been okay the first couple of weeks on the job, but when Nobel Laureate Dr. Nathan Stark, PhD, PhD, PhD had shown up, shit hit the fan, and fast. There had been cataclysmic, apocalyptic, and town-destroying things almost once a month since he had arrived. He shook his head, letting his eyes drift.

Then he saw it.

Long skid marks ran down the lane in front of him before abruptly turning right, plunging into a tangled mess of broken saplings and sheets of bark that had been stripped off the hemlocks. The bare, white-green patches of cambium told him the accident was recent. He slammed on the brake, flipped the hazards on, and jumped from the car.

Jack had the scene analyzed in less than a second. Two side-view mirrors lay tangled in the branches, as did half a licence plate and a scattering of window glass. He ran through the mess following two deep furrows in the steep bank. Four feet from the water's edge, the line of a spoiler stood proud of the lake water by two inches. Bubbles broke the surface a few feet beyond that.

He spun and ran back to the Jeep and threw himself across the center console, fishing in the glove box for his rescue hammer. His fingers finally wrapped around the orange plastic and he wrenched it free. The gun, taser, and club came out of his belt and bounced around the compartment as Jack raced to the shore. He launched himself into the water and kicked out to the spoiler.

Filling his lungs, he dove under the surface of the water, searching for the window in the half murky water. He located the door handle just below a reddish patch of water and wrenched on it. It was locked. Or jammed.

He squinted his eyes against the silt and peered into the window. The form of a man hung limply in the water. Jack tightened his grip on the hammer and crushed in the window.

The reddish water from inside the car swirled out as Jack reached in with the hammer. He snagged the seat belt with the blade on the back of the hammer and yanked, cutting the man free. Lungs burning, he kicked to the surface and took a deep breath before diving back down. He leaned in through the window and looped his arms around the man's torso. It was a fight to get the large man out of the small window and more of a struggle to get his waterlogged body to the surface.
Jack had to launch himself off of the roof of the car to get their doubled weight out of the water.

It was only when he was on the bank that he realized who he had just rescued. It was Nathan Stark.

A huge gash ran the breadth of his forehead and oozed nearly black blood. His skin was a pale blue and his features hung slack. Jack pressed his fingers to Nathan's throat and swore at the lack of pulse.

CPR then. He half-lifted Nathan and dragged him to the narrow shoulder of the road next to the Jeep and sat him down on the asphalt. He sat, too, Nathan drawn to his chest and began to squeeze the water from the man's lungs with the Heimlich maneuver. The water spurted out of his mouth as Jack pulled his fists up into Nathan's diaphragm. Eventually, no more water came from the man's mouth, so Jack lay him on his back and began compressions.

Ten compressions and he checked Nathan's pulse. Nothing.

Ten more; still nothing.

Ten. Nothing.

He could feel ribs beginning to creak under his hands.

Ten. Nothing

Ten. Yes!

The pulse was weak and getting stronger. Now to get him breathing. Five compressions then a breath, until he regained a normal breathing pattern.

One two three four five. Breath.

He stopped for a moment, the feeling of a beard scratching his face took his breath away. The last time- No. He had to get Nathan breathing. He could not think about his past.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three four-

CRACK! Some of Nathan's ribs snapped under the pressure of the compressions.

-five. Breath.

One two three four five. Breath.

A car coming from the opposite direction pulled up and a woman rolled down her window.

"Do you need me to call 911?"

"Yes!" shouted Jack. The woman pulled out her phone.

"Wait!" he amended, "Don't call 911. Call 867-5309. Tell Henry that you are calling for Jack, he needs help."

One two three four five. Breath.

"Tell him Nathan drove his car into a lake. He will probably have you stay on the line for a
moment to figure out where we are. He'll tell you when you can hang up."

One two three four five. Breath.

"Is there anything I can do?"

One two three four five. Breath.

"Just make the call."

Distantly, he could hear the woman making the call and talking to Henry. He kept up his rhythm.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three four five. Breath.

One two three-

Nathan coughed violently, his eyes flickering open.

"Yes! Yes!" came the woman's voice, "He just started breathing again! His eyes are open!"

She paused, then asked, "He's asking if you can bring him back in your Jeep."

Nathan looked dazed.

Jack bent and spoke quietly to Nathan, "Can you hear me?"

Nathan blinked again, his eyes struggling to focus on Jack.

"Henry needs to know if I can drive you back to Eureka. Can I move you?"

Nathan's eyes seemed to clear. "No." His voice sounded odd, like there was still water in his chest.

"I'm sorry about your ribs. Does anything else hurt? Or feel broken? Can you move your feet or toes?"

Nathan demonstrated his ability to move his feet and hands.


"How well can you breathe?" asked Jack.

Nathan shook his head. "Drowning."

Jack nodded. "Okay." He looked up at the woman. "Tell him that I think he has a collapsed lung. I have to respiration him. He can't move." Looking back down at Nathan he explained, "I have to breathe for you. Can't have you dying. You okay with it?"
Nathan nodded, not looking totally thrilled by the idea. He shivered.

A sudden thought flashed into Jack's mind.

"What's the temperature?" he called to the woman.

"What? Oh! fifty-eight!"

"Shit."

He glanced down at Nathan and saw the fright in his face.

"I have to start breathing for you. I'm going to pinch your nose shut and-"

"I know CPR."

"Oh," Jack was surprised, "Okay."

More hesitant than he should have been, Jack held Nathan's nose shut, opened his mouth, filled his own lungs, and exhaled deeply into Nathan's airways. He did this two, three more times then straightened.

"I'm worried you might start getting hypothermic. It's too cold for you to be in wet clothes like this."

He bent and blew air into Nathan's lungs again.

"I have a blanket in my Jeep. I need to take your clothes off and dry you."

"Carter..."

"I know. I'll leave you your... privacy. But I need to take everything else. I'll make sure you get your air. Don't worry."

He laid Nathan's head back down gently and stood.

"What are you doing?" The woman in the car seemed concerned.

"Getting a blanket," Jack called back, "He might get hypothermia- that would be very bad."

Jack climbed onto the running board and pulled three thick fleece blankets from the back seat. He walked back to Nathan and squatted down beside him. Gently he began unbuttoning Nathan's silk shirt. He slid that off after undoing the cufflinks at his wrists. He lifted Nathan's torso and pulled a blanket under him before tugging off his undershirt.

He returned to Nathan's head and gave him air three times.

Scooting back to Nathan's waist, he gingerly began to undo his belt and fly, keeping his fingers clear from anywhere that might cause... problems.

Looking up, he noticed Nathan's face twisted in pain and began to chatter, to try and keep him distracted.

"Your car's wrecked."

Nathan's eyes cracked open, staring at him.
"Too bad, it was quite nice. The side views are in the debris behind me. So's half of your license plate."

He glanced down as he began to pull off Nathan's slacks and felt heat prickle across his collar bones. God damnit! Why did those feelings have to surface now? He squashed everything down, telling his brain to screw off. He had a job to do.

Lifting Nathan's hips, he slid the blanket all the way underneath the other man's body.

"What were you doing all the way out here anyway? I left because Fargo nearly got me killed again with the spider-armor thing."

"Like...drive...fast," he rasped, then shot Jack an angry look like he should know something.

It took him a moment, but he understood what Nathan's glare meant.

"Sorry. I shouldn't ask questions."

He got an eye roll in response.

"Yeah, well, nobody said I was a genius."

Nathan laughed, then started choking.

Jack was back up at Nathan's head, tipping his head back to clear his airway.

"Shhhh..." When the coughing didn't subside, he began to rub circles on Nathan's chest, like he had done for Zoe when she was little and sick.

"I'm sorry. Maybe I should just stop talking."

When the coughing stopped, he bent, gave Nathan more air and began to tuck the blanket around him. Jack wrapped the other two blankets around Nathan, swaddling him against the cold air.

"Your friend says he has this location and he's on his way with the medics. I really need to pick my daughter up from school. Is there anything else you might need?" the woman asked.

"Are you warm enough?" Jack asked Nathan.

The man nodded.

"No," Jack called back to her, "Thank you so much. You're a life saver."

She nodded, put her car back into drive, and pulled away slowly.

Jack spoke quickly, "I had been driving for three and a half hours when I found you. It could be that long. Knowing Eureka and knowing Henry, it might be less. I will keep you alive."

Nathan locked eyes with him, gaze filled with uncharacteristic trust and fear.

"You will make it. I promise."

And then, Jack bent, becoming Nathan's lungs and fighting for his life.
Jack wasn't sure how long he had been breathing for Nathan, but the cramping in the leg he had thrown over Nathan's to prevent it from cramping and the loss of feeling in his right hand, the thumb of which he had on Nathan's chin to hold his mouth open, told him it had been a long while. Nathan was actually the reason his arm was asleep. At one point, his body had begun to refuse the forced inflation of the lungs and another coughing spasm started deep within Nathan's body. It was the little flecks of blood thrown onto Nathan's lips by the coughs that had twisted his face in terror and set his large hand in a painfully tight grip around Jack's bicep. Nathan's hand had loosened, but he still held on.

Jack would rise once every forty or so breaths to fill his own lungs and it surprised him to find more often than not, Nathan's eyes locked on his, full of trust.

No cars had passed since the woman who had called Henry had left, so the sound of tires approaching from the direction he had arrived, startled Jack. He looked up and sighed in relief when he saw the big, Eureka-fied ambulance with Henry behind the wheel pull to a stop only a few yards away.

"Stark," he leaned down, and the man's eyes opened slightly, "Henry's here in an ambulance. Real help is here. I told you you wouldn't die."

A hand touched his shoulder and he jumped. Turning, he was surprised to see Henry and an entire medical team standing behind him with a gurney. How had they snuck up on him?

"Great job, Jack," said Henry, smiling, "You can rest now."

Jack nodded, then looked down at Nathan, who slowly released his grip on Jack's arm.

Henry helped Jack stumble into a standing position without stepping on Nathan, as a medic fitted an oxygen mask to Nathan's mouth and nose. Another one gathered the clothes which were heaped along one side of Nathan.

Jack was vaguely aware of himself answering a question that Henry had asked, but he was unsure of either the question or his own answer.

At Henry's concerned look he managed to say, "I'm cold and very tired Henry, that's all."

He was sitting in the back of the ambulance, eyes locked again with Nathan, who probably would have been holding his arm again if he hadn't been strapped down.

How had he gotten here?

Jack opened his eyes feeling achy, but warm and no longer tired.

"When is?" he mumbled incoherently.

Henry's chuckle roused him further. "You finally understand Eureka! We're in the infirmary, about six hours after we picked you up. You passed out in the ambulance. You were suffering from exhaustion and hypothermia."

"Stark?"
"It's amazing what you did Jack. He does have a collapsed lung, like you thought, as well as two broken and three cracked ribs, from CPR, I suppose? And a fractured ankle along with minor lacerations and bruising.

"It's just-" his voice sounded awed. "Jack, you realize you not only restarted his heart, but kept a man in as unstable a state as possible alive for nearly four hours. Nobody else could have done that. Even without the hypothermia, exhaustion, and lingering effects of the *Latrodectus* venom, anybody else would have been hard pressed to do what you did."

"So he's okay?"

Henry nodded. "He will be. He's recovering from surgery right now. The bones are set and mending and he'll be breathing without need of oxygen in two or three days when we can release him."

Jack nodded. His mind skipped tracks, now that he knew nobody was in immediate danger. "Did anyone pick Zoë up from school, or tell her?"

"Yes, Allison picked her up from school as soon as I headed out with the medical team. She offered her a place to stay tonight, but she insisted on staying near you. She's in the waiting room, if you like to go meet her."

"Definitely." Jack swung out of bed, half noticing that he was no longer wearing his soaking uniform and walked quickly into the waiting room.

Zoë was asleep, curled into a large chair. Her face was pinched with worry and she kept twitching.

Jack knelt beside her and gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Zoë, Zo, honey, wake up."

She blinked groggily and stared at him.

"Dad!"

She threw her arms around him and hugged him hard.

"Dad, I was so worried when Allison told me. What happened?"

"I was at a call this morning about Fargo and Seth, and got bitten by a giant spider. I was mad, so I went for a drive. A while out, I spotted skid marks heading off the side of the road into a lake. There was the spoiler of a sports car in the water. I dove in to rescue whoever it was. It wasn't until I was on shore that I realized it was Stark I had rescued. His heart had stopped, so I did CPR until he resuscitated. He had a collapsed lung, so I did mouth to mouth on him until Henry showed up. I passed out in the ambulance."

"How did Henry know where you were?"

"A woman drove by and asked if she could help. I had her call him. I jumped in the lake with my phone in my pocket."

She hugged him again. "I was just so worried when I heard what had happened. I'm glad you're okay."

The *click-click* of heels made Jack turn. Allison stood, looking exuberant, at the door.
"Jack!" She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around him.

"Thank you," she said into his ear, "Thank you for saving Nathan."

"No problem," he replied, smiling, "I'd do it again."

He would.

Maybe not for Allison, though.

Henry entered the waiting room and placed his hand on Allison's shoulder, drawing her away from Jack.

"Nathan's awake," he said to the pair.

"Good."

"He wants to see you, Jack."

Jack frowned. That was odd. It was obvious that something remained between Stark and Allison. Why wouldn't he want to see her first?

"Why?"

Henry shrugged. "He wouldn't say. Just that he wanted to see you."

"Okay." He followed Henry through the door and recovery room to a private post-op.
Nathan sat upright in his bed, staring vacantly at the wall, obviously deep in thought, when both men came in. He glanced up at their entrance and smiled.

"Nathan, do you need anything?" asked Henry.

Nathan shook his head. "No. Thank you, Henry. I'd like to talk to Carter alone."

Henry nodded. "I'll be in the next room with Allison."

He left and Jack moved to the side of Nathan's bed.

"How you feeling?"

Nathan snorted around the oxygen line under his nose and smirked. "Fine. Well, as fine as I can having crashed my car into a lake, drowned, died, broken a bunch of bones, and had two coughing fits on a collapsed lung. I should be asking you that. CPR for four hours. You know that's impossible, right? You should have passed out from exhaustion around forty-five minutes."

"And what? Let the biggest pain in the ass I've ever had the pleasure of working with die?" asked Jack, smiling back. His face sobered, "I said I wouldn't let you die."

Jack roughed up the hair at the back of his head, randomly and suddenly nervous, remembering the look of utter trust Nathan had given him when he said that. The man had never done that before. In fact, Jack was pretty sure with the exception of Allison, Nathan didn't trust anyone. The sensation felt odd and he could feel the blood rising in his cheeks. Better there than where it could go, he thought. The skin around his mouth itched and he rubbed his hand over it, confused where the chafing had come from.

He shrugged, to cover his momentary insecurity and said, "I don't really feel tired, I've been asleep for six hours. The spider bites hurt."

"I bet that beard burn stings, too, doesn't it? Been busy have you?" There was an evil twinkle in the scientist's eyes and his smirk had grown larger.

"Oh, Shuddup!" snapped Jack, blushing. "It was your beard!"

"Hydrocortisone works. If you're allergic though, try an oil-free lotion," offered Nathan.

"I know what works for me," huffed Jack, "I don't really want to know about yours and Allison's sex life, Stark."

Nathan leaned back and crossed his arms, raising his eyebrows at Jack. "Allie made me shave, Carter. I'm talking from personal experience. But it seems you already have some."

Jack opened his mouth with a comeback, but it died on his tongue when he realized what he had said.

Wait- What?

What they both had said.

Was Nathan-?
Closing his mouth to clear his throat, Jack replied, "Thanks. I'll- I'll look into it."

Nathan nodded and they both were quiet for a minute, not looking at each other, Jack rocking up onto his heels and back down.

"I wanted to thank you, Carter," said Nathan, his tone more serious. Jack looked at him. His eyes were almost dead. "If it wasn't for you, I'd have been a pile of sludge when they found me in a month or two. If anyone ever found me."

A look of fear crossed his face and Jack thought momentarily of the one line that had stuck with him from a poem in high school, 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust.' For most people, he realized, like him, it was a reality that they avoided thinking about. Being forgotten after death. For someone with an ego the size of a planet like Nathan, it was a legitimate fear.

"We would have found you. Every car in Eureka has a GPS device that transmits coordinates on impact," Jack reminded him.

Nathan smiled wryly, a lively twinkle in his eye. "As long as it's not an invisibbling device."

"Hey! I was right about Anderson!" Jack pointed an indignant finger at him.

"You were. And you're right more often than I give you credit for."

"I- What?" Jack stared at him, not believing what he'd just heard.

"You may not be traditionally intelligent, but you have more correct epiphanies than anyone I've ever met," offered the scientist.

Jack was growing, genuinely concerned now for Nathan's mental wellbeing. "You sure you're okay? They didn't miss any head trauma, did they?"

Nathan smiled again, which just added to Jack's worry. The man had never smiled this often around him, unless it was at his expense. There had to be head trauma.

"I just came to a couple of realizations by the lake. You hate me, but you saved my life."

"I'm a sheriff. It's part of the job description." He shrugged, rubbing his hands over the back of his head again.

"Cobb might not have done it."

Jack nodded, unsure of what exactly his response to that was supposed to be.

Nathan seemed to sense his discomfort and changed the subject asking, "How did you get me out of the car?"

"Rescue hammer. I smashed the window in and cut the seatbelt. Lucky you were wearing one. Might have lost more than a few IQ points if you hadn't been."

"I like to drive fast, not stupidly."

"Huh. So why'd you crash?"

"A deer ran in front of me."

"I didn't see any blood."
Nathan rolled his eyes. "I said it ran in front of me. Not that I hit it. I'm an excellent driver."

"Except when you put your car in a lake," Jack added, grinning.

"I over corrected!"

"Cars have these things called brakes, you know. You might want to have Henry put a set in your next one."

Nathan frowned indignantly but didn't reply and Jack cheered internally that he had finally won a round.

"Did you arrest Fargo?" There was a challenge in the scientist's voice.

Jack looked up sharply at Nathan, ready to defend his position, but he must have seen the fight in Jack's eyes and nodded.

"Good. I have no idea what he's thinking half the time. What charges?"

"Reckless endangerment," explained Jack. "I wanted to add assaulting an officer, but he didn't really, so..."

"What about trespassing?"

"No. Forgot that one. I was a little busy not dying if a spider bite."

"Add it," suggested Nathan. "And you can keep him for a couple days. He needs to learn about consequences."

Jack raised his eyebrows, surprised. "I can't be sure you'll get him back in one piece. Depends on how much he irritates Jo."

Nathan smirked and they were quiet for a moment, the conversation running to a stop.

"I think Allison wants to see you," Jack said, offering an out before an awkward silence could begin to build.

"Ah, thanks." Nathan nodded, pursing his lips slightly. "Tell her I need a few minutes to rest."

"I will." Jack crammed his hands in the borrowed set of sweats he was wearing and turned to walk out. He was half out the door when Nathan said, "Really, thank you again. I'll see you around, Jack?"

The question in Nathan's voice confused Jack, used as he was to the man confidently demanding what he wanted. He smiled in an effort to give Nathan a touch of that confidence back. "Sure, Nathan."

He stepped out the door, closed it, then roughed his hands up the back of his head. Calling Nathan by his first name when he was half-unconscious to get his attention and to keep him from fainting in shock was one thing, but when they were both entirely lucid?

Touching his face in thought, he flinched at the feeling of his calluses against the beard burn. Nathan had said it first. He was just responding. Trying to... He had no idea.

It was a change, though, possibly for the good. And as much as he enjoyed hating Nathan, the scientist drove him insane. Maybe it would be good to try and make friends with him.
At least SARAH would let him eat red meat again if he got his blood pressure down.

Jack smiled at the thought, normal in the mess of his too-noisy mind which was adamantly trying to remember the swooping, bubbling feeling in his belly when he first started resuscitation on Nathan.

He walked back toward the lobby, a slight spring in his step he didn't exactly notice, wondering if maybe Nathan liked sports.
It Never Raynes, but it Always Pours

Weeks passed after Jack rescued Nathan from the reservoir with very little change in their interactions. In the first two or so weeks after the accident they had seen each other—or once to get Vinspressos at Cafe Diem, and the second time three days later at GD after another barely-averted apocalypse. They'd chatted a bit in Nathan's office before Zoë called asking for an assignment and her lunch she'd left at home and Jack had to leave to bring it to her.

Since that talk, though, everything had gone downhill. Paranoia rays and SWAT teams and senators. Anti-autism speed drugs and stealing his crime scenes and bureaucracy and boys. And giving Fargo his own damn office with a fucking Cold War Death Laser! He called Nathan on that, refusing to make Dr. Thatcher return the Nobel prize until Thatcher realized that it was made out to Nathan Stark and not himself, because, according to Jack, it seemed Nathan hadn't earned his Nobel if he could be stupid enough to give the best pusher-of-do-not-push-buttons in Eureka the controls to a machine of Mutually Assured Destruction. Turned out, Thatcher wasn't all that mad about the manipulation since it had given him his life back (and saved the world), but Nathan had been so absolutely livid that Allison had had to sedate him.

That'd only made the scientist madder.

Which was how, eleven weeks after the accident (but only four since the Nobel incident and two since the speed-drug/crime-scene-theft fiasco), Jack found himself freezing in Cafe Diem with Allison watching his deputy storm in and kiss then deliver a strong right hook to the jaw of one Callister Raynes.

"Hey. Sorry, Allison. I gotta-"

Allison nodded. "Go ahead."

Jack ran out after Callister, jumped into his Jeep and tracked the boy. He pulled up next to him and called out, "Callister Raynes, right?"

"Yes?" Callister jumped slightly and turned back to look at him.

"Yeah, I don't think we've been formally introduced," Jack said, parking and jumping out, "I'm Jack Carter. I'm the new sheriff. How you doing?"

"Did you need something, Sheriff?" Callister looked… unemotional. Which in itself was odd for a man of his age.

"I was just stopping to see if you were okay."

"Oh, right. I'll be fine." Still that strange coolness, almost as if he didn't know how to use emotions. Then again, maybe Callister was one of those weird, emo, apathetically unattached people.

"Where you headed?" he asked.

"I'm going to Beverly's."
"Really? Because that's back that way," Jack corrected, a bit suspiciously.

"Right, of course," Callister smirked.

"Here, hop in. I'll give you a lift."

Callister shrugged, dismissing him. "No, I like to walk."

Right. Awesome.

Jack's radio crackled to life and Jo's voice came out of the small box. S2 to S1. Repeat, S2 to S1. Over.

"Jo," he replied, pulling the radio from his shirt, "It's just you and me, you can feel free to be a little less formal."

He grinned when she didn't respond in the pause he gave her and added, "Over."

There was an electrical problem on Osborne's farm on the way into town, over.

"See, was that so hard?" he asked her, smugly.

"You didn't say 'over,'" Callister pointed out. Jack grinned, small though the victory was, it was the best thing that had happened today.

"I know" he laughed, "It's gonna bug her all day long."

The trip to Osborne's had been fine, even with Jo scolding him for not saying over at the end of his communiqué. Of course, that was before he'd been sucked to a magnetized fence. And that had been almost fine until a low, predatory black car pulled up. It was a new BMW, one he knew from concept sketches set for release in three or four years; the license plate read 'Stark1.'

Except- Instead of the condescension Jack had been expecting in Nathan's face, there was worry, until, that was, he saw Jack leaning against the fence and his face pinched in exasperation.

"What are you doing here, Carter?"

Jack gesticulated vaguely with the one hand that wasn't magnetically stuck to the fence. "Town sheriff. Kinda my job."

Nathan smirked. "It's your job to lounge around on duty?"

Jack didn't answer that but asked, "I thought you had some kind of meeting today. What brings you out to the farm?"

"The computers," Nathan explained, ambling forward while looking down at some electronic thing, "The electrical surge that came through here, it should have caused the fence to turn into-" he grunted and tried to backpedal, failing completely to break free of the fence's pull and crashed full-body into Jack, his cufflinks, belt buckle, and watch apparently enough to keep him there as he finished, "an electromagnet."

They were both silent for a good moment as the realization that their... bodies... were crushed together by the force of the magnetism hit them. Jack cleared his throat and harrumphed at Nathan's lips, which were all he could see given their height differences.

"What was that about electromagnets?"
He could see Nathan suck his teeth irritably and they were silent again for a minute or so.

"So," Jack asked, "How are you today?"

Nathan laughed a single, truly amused note. "Not having a wonderful day, actually."

"Raynes or the computer surge?"

"Perceptive," Nathan said with a twist of his head that scrubbed his beard across Jack's nose.

"Like I said, it's my job."

"Have you met Callister? Or did you just hear through Fargo?"

"He was in CafeDiem while it was snowing. That was moments before my deputy attempted to deck him."

"Jo punched him?" Nathan sounded amused.

"Right after making out with him."

"Oh?" He could hear Nathan raise his eyebrow in the tone of his voice.

"Yup.

Nathan chuckled and the sound vibrated into Jack. He felt blood rush south all too fast-

*Dead Grandmas.*

It worked for a moment until Nathan tilted his head to look at him, his beard scraping down the length of Jack's nose again, those brilliant green eyes so close that all the dead grandmas in the world couldn't keep him distracted, and he flushed as he felt himself begin to harden against Nathan's thigh. He searched the other man's eyes as he felt an exceptionally surprising ridge growing against his belly.

He wanted to kiss him. He saw the same reflected in Nathan's eyes.

They both inhaled quickly and looked away from each other. He crushed down on his *excitement* and looked back at Nathan, they both blushed and looked away again. A moment later, Jack quipped, "Seen any good movies lately?"

"No." He could almost hear Nathan thinking of dead grandmas or puppies, and there was another pause.

"Explain how the fence got magnetized. I'll need to put something down on my expenditures for a new shirt."

"New shirt?"

"Fence ripped my badge off. There's a hole in my shirt."

"Don't know how to sew?"

Jack shot him an irritated look, then mumbled, "Might…"

The scientist chuckled then stopped as another pulse of electric heat pulsed through Jack, a similar heat probably running through him.
"Explain how electromagnets work."

Nathan pulled back and glanced at him almost thankfully and said, "Electromagnetism is like a regular magnet, but stronger and temporary. It's caused by an electrical impulse aligning the particles all in the same order of polarization, this means that they can attract basically anything metallic with an opposite polarization."

"How does it align the particles?"

"The electrical pulse is strong enough that it flipped all of the particles the same direction. A continuous current, a direct current can cause this. Electric fences are alternating current, so they aren't strongly magnetized."

"Alternating and Direct? Like AC/DC?"

Nathan snorted. "Very much like. I'm surprised you knew what that stood for."

"Hey," said Jack with mock offense, "I know my rock 'n' roll."

Shaking his head, Nathan said, "Never said you didn't."

"Zep or AC/DC?"

Nathan tipped his head, thinking. His beard scraped across Jack's nose again. Jack pulled back and rubbed at the itch with his free hand.

"Zep, definitely," Nathan said, "For their variability, though AC/DC is good for specific moods, same with Metallica and Boston."

Jack nodded appreciatively. "I'd always had you pegged for a classical Latin guitar kinda guy."

"I am, but music's not one-size-fits-all. My music differs with my moods."

Jack laughed and felt a sort of fond warmth bloom in his chest, though fortunately, no farther south.

"Hey," he said, scrubbing at the back of his head. Nathan looked down at him.

"I'm sorry about your Nobel. I was a bit pissed."

"A bit?" Nathan asked archly, though amused.

"You're the one Allison had to knock out. But, seriously- giving Fargo an office with a weird looking console for a space-death-laser?"

"I thought I was giving him a crappy office. The console wasn't on any schematics." Surprisingly, Nathan was not being terse or irritated, just truthful.

"I'd check next time," Jo's voice offered. "You know the fence has been off for like two minutes, right?"

Nathan jumped back and tugged his shirt down. Jack stepped away from the fence, mimicking the motion. Jo smirked.

"Did you need something, Dr. Stark?" she asked, still a bit smug.
"Yes," he said with a glance at Jack, "I need to see the control panel. Where is it?"

"Here's the central processing unit. It's absolutely fried. The rest's around the corner of the barn. Do you need me to show you?"

"No. I need to check it quickly. I have some things to take care of." He turned to Jack and nodded.

"Sheriff."

Jack nodded back, touching his forehead as if tilting a hat and said, "Doctor."

Nathan turned and walked around the corner of the barn with a swagger in his step.

"So," Jo said, still smug, her mouth curling into a self-satisfied smile.

"Yes?" Jack's voice was flat, even. His cop voice.

Jo nodded, full body and walked back to her car. Once she had pulled out of the driveway, Jack jogged around the corner to where Nathan was running something that looked suspiciously like a *Star Trek* tricorder over the smoking electrical box.

"Hey," he called.

"What's up?" Nathan asked without turning around. From the set of his shoulders, Jack could tell he was frowning at whatever readings the machine was spitting out.

"You may want to come to Henry's. I got the feeling you might want to see this."

Nathan grunted.

Jack walked closer. "Hey, Spock, tricorder readings telling you anything?"

Nathan turned, no amusement in his eyes, but no anger either. Just worry. "Yeah." He looked up at Jack and focused again. "Sorry, I have to take care of something. Call Allison, I'm sure she'd be interested in whatever Henry finds." He swept past Jack and jumped into his car, peeling out of the gravel drive.

Jack stared at the disappearing car and frowned. If Nathan could get that distressed, then something was rotten in the state of Eureka.

He was right. The virus Henry discovered in the intranet was especially worrying since everything ran off it, including the cars, his house, and the safety protocols at GD. Even if he didn't exactly understand it, he was concerned.

Though if people would just take a minute more to explain- His problem wasn't that he couldn't understand, it was just all the technical jargon they threw around

But he did understand one thing. The computers had started to go wrong the day the prodigal computer programmer had shown back up in town. A computer programmer with a shady past and enough of something to make Nathan Stark worried.

He sent Allison back to ask if Nathan knew anything specific about Callister and took off to pull files on the kid.

There were no files on Callister, none at all, which from his days as Marshal meant either an illegal, a drug dealer, or gang connections. That was awesome in and of itself, but the capper was
Zoë's wanted poster.

He was furious; he was so mad he was seeing red, flashes of color bursting across his vision as he drove to Beverley's and yelled at her.

But Zoë had bought the ticket to come to Eureka. She had lied and stolen her way, but she had done it to see him. He was still mad, mad enough for his hands to be shaking. Zoë had lied to him, said she was done with that kind of stuff and lies all together, but wasn't. She'd kept this one thing from him and now her face was on a wanted poster. Again.

He screwed up. And it hadn't been just then when he'd told Zoë that he would have made it so she could come live with him, because he'd been telling the truth. He would have found some lawyer to make it so. It was that he had given her enough reason to think he was lying.

When she'd thrown that back in his face, he'd left. He couldn't take it. He knew he was wrong to leave, but he'd had to. He couldn't do it.

He was still shaking when he got back to his office. Apparently, Allison didn't feel like helping with his mood.

"Carter, where the hell have you been?"

"I don't want to talk about it." He did, but not with her, and not right now.

"Are you okay?" she asked, softer, seeming to sense his distress.

"Yeah," he lied, then asked, "Could we just work now? Really wanna work."

"All right," she conceded.

Jack relaxed a bit, searching for the creamer for his coffee. "Did you get anything from Stark?"

He was a bit too wound up for even the usual buzz when he thought of Nathan to make a difference. He sat with his coffee.

"Not really," Allison answered, "He said he didn't even know Callister was here."

Jack looked up at her, staring. "What happened when you mentioned the virus?"

"He gave me this weird look and then he just ran off."

What? The two of them had had a conversation about Callister just over an hour ago. Albeit, a conversation facilitated by the awkwardness caused by an electric fence.

"That's not at all suspicious," Jack said.

"Ye-"

He cut her off, "Especially given that we had a conversation about Callister when he stopped by Osborne's. He was the one who told me to call you… Right before running off to do mysterious things."

"You think he'd be worried about the effects on Global," Allison pointed out.

"No," Jack said, remembering Nathan's face from earlier, "He's more worried about something else." He paused, realizing that Nathan had been worried- "Or someone else." He picked up the file from the fire and walked toward Allison. "This is the case file from the fire. I've been over it a
dozen times, and everything in it, everything, points to Callister torching Stark's lab. But, Stark insists that is was faulty wiring."

Allison huffed, disbelieving. "So you think that he was protecting Callister?"

"I think he still is."

Then the call came in.

He and Allison sped to Beverly's and it was still on fire when they got there, flames licking at the upstairs windows.

*Not good*! screamed his parent brain. *Zoë might be hurt!*

"Beverly, you okay?" he asked, "Is Zoë here?"

"I'm fine and Zoë left for CafeDiem, but look at my house."

"What happened?" Allison asked.

"I don't know," Beverly answered. "Stark came in screaming for Callister. Next thing I know, the whole place is on fire."

"Where are they now?" Jack asked, relieved enough that Zoë was okay that he could go back to worrying about his job.

"They left. And I think Callister got burned."

"Okay." He turned to bolt back to the car and find them, but Henry showed up, this time with a fire truck.

"Henry!" he called over the sound of the sirens, "Where's the hydrant? I'll help you hook it up."

"Carter," Henry said, pulling some futuristic don't-cross-the-streams looking device from the side of the fire truck, "This is Eureka."

The technology in this town never ceased to amaze him. The fire retardant expanding foam was one of the coolest things he had seen in a long while. And he'd seen a nine year old autistic boy save the universe from temporal collapse (not to knock Kevin in any way- the kid's sheer brilliance was always amazing).

Finding Stark was another matter. Allison had him swing by Nathan's house to see if he was there. When he wasn't, it was a simple matter of driving to GD and blackmailing Fargo with his Buffy doll into giving up Stark's location.

"There's Nathan's car," Allison pointed out unnecessarily. The low, shining black car stuck out like a sore thumb in the dirty alley. It was obvious she was distressed, though.

"You okay?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I mean… technically, I'm still married to Nathan. But right now, I have no idea who he even is."

"Well, whatever's going on, if he's lying, I'm sure he has a reason."
Allison sounded disbelieving and angry again. "What could that possibly be?"

He had no answer. "I don't know. But I think we're about to find out."

They walked into the low, sketchy entrance to the building and in through the open door. The sight of bodies hanging under plastic tarping was creepy. Almost too creepy for Nathan's MO. The guy was a jackass, not a murderer. And the place didn't smell like blood or decomp, smells Jack was too familiar with for his own liking, rather it smelled like… motor oil.

Slipping past the tarped up bodies, they moved behind a set of racks where they could see Callister and Nathan's back.

Callister looked deathly sick and the only thing Jack could hear from either of them was Nathan muttering, "I'm sorry."

Jack pulled his gun from the holster and stepped around the rack, gun up. Callister jerked when he saw them and Nathan spun in his chair, worry again the only expression on his face.

"Stark!" Jack shouted, "Step aside! Callister, put your hands in the air!"

"Carter, wait." There was a frightening edge to Nathan's words, not threatening, but protective.

"Quiet!" he snapped, approaching them. "Callister, put your hands where I can see them," he instructed.

"Carter, listen to me," Nathan said, his voice now pleading.

"Nathan!" Allison yelled.

Nathan's voice was angry, hard when he spoke to her. "Allison, I can explain." He turned back to Jack, still pleading. "Carter, do not hurt him."

"I don't want to." He didn't. It was protocol though. If Callister refused to show his hands… "Callister, I don't want to shoot you, show me your hands."

The boy shook his head. "I can't."

Nathan dropped his head, defeated. "Yes, you can." He looked back up at Jack, his brows furrowed with odd emotion.

The palm of one hand and most of Callister's forearm had been burned away and underneath was something Jack had only seen in movies. Cybernetics.

"Okay." Jack was a bit more than shocked but relieved at the same moment. "Not where I thought this was going." He lowered his gun.

They stood and watched in fascination as Nathan replaced the skin on Callister's arm and palm, then began to silently and meticulously paint over it so it would blend with the rest of his skin and look natural.

After a while, Nathan finished and turned back to them, the crease between his eyes holding an inexplicable amount of sadness. "I didn't bring Callister here," he explained softly, "I built him here. Callister's A.I."

"So he's a robot." Allison sounded pissed, but Jack began to understand Nathan's protectiveness over his creation.
"An artificially intelligent being," Nathan corrected.

"Then why keep him a secret?" Allison demanded, "I mean, this has to be one of the greatest scientific breakthroughs of the modern age."

"So was the atomic bomb," he countered. "Doesn't mean the world was ready for it. Truth is, I needed to see if Callister could assimilate." He looked fondly at Callister. "So I introduced him to Eureka as my assistant." He smiled, "And they embraced him. Callister formed attachments, developed relationships…"

Watching Nathan interact with Callister, Jack realized the boy was more than a project to him. "And you did too?"

Nathan's nod and nearly inaudible yes sparked memories of something Jack couldn't quite place. "I wasn't about to let DARPA turn him into another military project," he said.

"How is this possible?" Allison still sounded irritated.

"I don't know," Nathan offered truthfully. "I had dozens of prototypes. None of them worked. Except for Callister. I still don't know why. It's a miracle."

That was it. Nathan's quiet awe for the boy, his admission that Callister was a miracle- Jack was watching a father interact with his son.

The fire made sense now. "He didn't burn down your lab, you did."

"I needed them to believe the whole project had been destroyed," Nathan said. "But then Sheriff Cobb started asking a bunch of questions, so I had to send him away."

"But how is he connected to the virus?" Allison demanded.

"Callister transmits on a wireless network," he explained, "I thought if I changed his primary microprocessor, I thought I could fix it, but his system's totally corrupted."

Jack saw the devastation in Nathan's face and his chest ached with sadness for him. "Nathan, he can't stay here. That fire could have killed someone."

He nearly snapped at Allison and the anger still in her voice. How could she not get it? Callister was beyond sick. Even Jack could see that.

"I know. But I can't send him away. Not again."

Suddenly, outside, an engine growled to life and tires squealed as a car pulled away from the workshop. Nathan frowned and leaned to look past Jack, his face smoothing over in panic. Jack turned. The table where Callister had been sitting was empty.

Jack turned to Allison and said, "I'll drop you off at the station. You and Jo register the car stolen. Nathan and I will look for Callister."

He locked eyes with the scientist and nodded. They were going to get his son back.

They searched for close to two hours, scouring the whole town and all the side roads with devices tuned to his cybernetic frequency, even some of the parks and forest lands looking for Callister, but there was nothing. Not a wrecked car, like Nathan was terrified to find, not even a set of
footprints in the grass or at the side of the road.

Jack could sense the panic building in Nathan as they failed to find anything of Callister. He called it before Nathan could demand they go search the reservoir.

"We gotta go back," Jack said, "See if Jo or Allison have made any kind of headway with the stolen car."

Nathan's only response was a nod and a hard swallow. He couldn't tell him it would be okay. That wouldn't be right. He didn't want to think it, but it might not work out. He'd been on enough cases where it didn't to know better than to say anything.

They pulled back into the station and jumped out, Jack only managing to get in through the door before Nathan through sheer force of will.

"Get anything?" Allison asked. She seemed to have calmed down some from earlier.

"No," Nathan answered tiredly, "And we looked everywhere."

"How 'bout you two?" Jack asked.

Jo spoke before Allison could reply, obviously speaking to someone on the other end of the phone line. "Yeah, I'm here... How long ago?... Great! Okay, if you find them, stop them and call me immediately."

"Wait. Them?" Jack was beyond confused. Who was she talking about?

"They found the car at a gas station off interstate 17. The attendant said that there was a redheaded girl in the passenger seat."

Jack's stomach dropped and his heart stopped.

Zoë had run away. He'd said he was done with this and she'd thought he meant her. He swayed on his feet in abject terror.

He felt a strong, steady hand on his elbow and his eyes focused. He looked over at Nathan and met those green eyes to see a look of we will find them held so strongly in them that he couldn't help the wave of almost-calm that settled in him.

Then the US Marshal kicked in and he was doing mental calculations, trying to figure the situation out.

If they'd left the car, they had to have some way of getting around, and some way of getting around was-

"I've checked every airport, bus terminal, taxi service, train, and ferry within 50 miles and there's nothing on a Callister Raynes or Zoë Carter."

"Try another name," Jack suggested, "Try Adjeet-" He couldn't quite remember the name of the woman whose identity Zoë had stolen.

"Adjeet Ghandavari." It seemed Jo had. She typed in the name and by the time Jack made it around the desk, there was a result.

"Two tickets on an international stage line bus leaving out of Summerville. It departs in less than an hour."
There was a quiet thrill of hope in his chest "Okay, you two stay here," he instructed with pointed looks at Jo and Allison, "Nathan, you're with me."

The scientist nodded, and turned for the door.

"Call if you hear anything," Jack instructed sweeping past Nathan.

The car had been silent for just around thirty minutes when Nathan spoke.

"Listen, Jack, I'm truly sorry Zoë got wrapped up in this.

"We're gonna find them," Jack said determinedly.

Nathan seemed tired when he spoke. "Whatever you decide to do- report me, arrest me- I completely understand."

Jack blinked, understanding what Nathan was saying, but ignoring it completely. "As far as I'm concerned, the case is closed. The project was lost in the fire."

Nathan looked at him in surprise and disbelief. He inhaled and there were tears at the edge of his voice. "You must think it's kind of crazy, first guy running for a machine- Callister just became… so much more than that. I don't expect you to understand."

Jack turned briefly, to look at Nathan and said, "I'm a father. Of course I understand."

He could feel Nathan's surprise again, next to him, as well as a quiet kind of thanks.

They both sprinted from the jeep when the pulled into the bus terminal. The bus was gone, heading on to Salem. It passed between them, unspoken, and they both turned back for the jeep when-

"DAD!"

Zoë's voice broke into the single track of his current mindset and he turned to see her, red hair and all, jumping out from between two buses. They ran to her.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I think he's sick," was her only answer.

"I think he's sick," was her only answer.

"Callister!" Nathan called, running past Jack and Zoë. "Callister," he said again as he knelt down next to his boy. "Hey." Nathan gently cupped Callister's head and Jack offered to get him back to the car.

Nathan just turned to him, eyes shining with tears, face tight with grief, and shook his head.

"Give us a second, will you?"

Jack nodded and pressed Zoë back a couple of feet. He was gentle when he spoke to her and apologized for everything he had said, clarified that he would have said yes.

"You said you were done with me," she protested weakly.

"Zoë," he said seriously, "You're my daughter, and I will never, ever be done with you."
She smiled at him softly and he hugged her to his chest.

"Do you remember what Alan Turing said?" Nathan's voice was soft, full of pain. Jack and Zoë turned as Callister replied, "He figured God could give a computer a soul if he wanted to." He paused, then asked weakly, "Do you think that's true, Dad?"

Jack could hear Nathan's heart break as he answered, "I know it is."

Callister gave one final, weak smile before his eyes went dark.

Zoë gasped. She'd never seen death before. Nathan, however, collapsed forward, arms tightening around Callister as he sobbed into his son's shoulder.

Jack held Zoë as she trembled in his arms. He was watching Nathan. He knew that kind of pain, and even though Callister wasn't his child, Jack felt for Nathan with a kind of searing pain in his heart.

It was silent between the buses except for the sound of Nathan's grief.

"Everythin' okay here?"

Jack turned to the bus driver, eyes hard.

"It's just- there are paying people on the bus and the crying bothers them. I need to get going."

Jack's eyes turned to fury and he released Zoë to approach the driver.

"You can tell the passengers-"

The bus driver gasped, looking past Jack to where Nathan was hunched over Callister's body.

"Is he dead? Oh, God, the boy's dead. I'm gonna call the cops."

He backed up as fast as he could and Jack had to lunge forward to catch the bus driver's shoulders. "I'm a sheriff," he explained, "I'm the sheriff of the town they're from. I've got this. And don't worry," he spat venomously, "your passengers don't have to be disturbed by a man mourning his dead son for long."

The driver paled at Jack's anger and stepped back, hands raised in placation.

Jack turned and walked back over to Nathan. He crouched down and rested a gentle hand on the scientist's shoulder. Nathan looked up at him, his eyes red with tears, his normal mask of cool arrogance completely gone.

"Nathan, let's get Callister to the car. We need to head back to Eureka," he said softly.

"Jack-" his voice was thick with tears.

It's okay, he almost said, but there was no room for false platitudes. Not with a dead child. That never could, and never would be okay.

"We're gonna take him back home." He turned to look at Zoë. "Zo, will you take Nathan to the car? It's unlocked. Open the back door for me."

She nodded
"I'm not leaving him," Nathan protested thickly.

"No, you're not," Jack agreed. "I'll bring him to the car. I'll be right behind you."

Nathan nodded dumbly and let Zoe help him to his feet and lead him toward the car. Moving forward, Jack slid his arms under Callister's body and lifted him. He was surprisingly light.

By the time Jack reached the car, Nathan had already settled himself in the back seat and Zoe was hovering nervously by the door. Jack awkwardly hefted Callister onto the back seat, his head toward Nathan, who grabbed under the boy's arms and tugged his head into his lap. Jack shifted Callister's feet until they were resting one on the seat, one on the floor and gently shut the door.

Quickly squeezing Zoë's hand, he jumped into the driver's seat, waited for Zoë to get in the passenger seat, and started the car.
The drive back to Eureka was the probably the longest Jack had ever taken. Beside him Zoë was tight with apprehension and fear between occasional sniffle of grief for Callister. Behind him Nathan had grown silent, except for an occasional pained whimper or moaned apology.

Without the panic of finding their children, and with grief so heavy in the stifling air of the car that it was almost tangible, time dragged as if it was unwilling to grant them respite.

When Jack finally reached the intersection that would lead them either toward Nathan’s house or the bunker, he stopped, idling at the stop sign for near to four minutes before twisting the wheel toward SARAH. Zoë looked sharply up at him, startled by his choice and her brow furrowed. He nodded and looked back to the road, relaxing his hands slightly for the last mile and a half before pulling into the bunker’s driveway.

He turned to Zoë. “Zoë, I need you to go in and ask SARAH to be quiet and to air out both spare bedrooms.”

“Okay, Dad.” Zoë nodded, swallowing. She opened the car door and fled to the house. He turned off the car, stepped out and walked around to Nathan’s door. Opening it slowly, he pressed his hand against Nathan’s shoulder. The scientist turned to him and silently lifted Callister’s head from his lap. He slid out from underneath his son and stood wavering next to the jeep.

“Do you want to carry him in, or do you want me to?”

“Please?” Nathan’s question was as pleading as the word.

“I’ve got him.” Jack placed his hand back on Nathan’s shoulder then turned back to the car and pulled Callister out, cradling him in the same way he had earlier and said, “Nathan, head to the house. I’ll be right behind you.”

Nathan nodded and walked driftingly, slowly toward the front door of the bunker. Jack walked behind him.

SARAH was silent for once, though Jack would have felt better had she spoken.

“Nathan,” he said quietly, “Go to the couch. Callister is going to be in the bedroom on the right side of the hall. You’re going to be on the left, across the way.”

Nathan shuffled away, toward the living room and collapsed onto the sofa as Jack carried Callister up the stairs. He moved silently into the bedroom on the right and lay the boy’s body on the duvet.

Sighing, Jack pulled out his phone and dialed Jo.

“Carter! You’ve been out more than three hours!”

“Hey, Jo.” He couldn’t help the exhaustion and grief out of his voice when he spoke

“What’s wrong?” she asked, worry edging in, “What happened?”

“We had to go to Portland. Jo…”

“Oh, God. Zoë, is she okay?”
“Zoë’s fine, Jo,” he answered, “Callister isn’t.”

“I’m gonna kill whoever hurt-”

“There’s no one to hurt, Jo. Callister experienced massive systems failure.”

“What?” He could hear the denial thick in her voice.

“Callister died, Jo. He didn’t make it.”

There was no response. The far end of the line was silent for the longest time. Eventually, she spoke again, tears thick in her voice, “Where is he?”

“He’s here with me at the bunker,” he said gently, “Nathan too.”

“I’m coming over.”

“Please drive carefully. I don’t want to go to two funerals.”

She hung up.

Jack closed his eyes for a moment and sucked in a deep breath, steeling himself before going back down to face Nathan. He knew the pain the scientist was in and he wished he could take it away, but he was terrified. He knew that if he wasn’t careful, the memories of the pain would take him back and he would drown in in grief as much as Nathan would.

He walked quietly down the stairs and rounded the corner into the kitchen, asking SARAH to start two cups of tea. Alcohol would kill the pain better, but chamomile tea was always the safer choice, especially while incapacitated with soul crushing pain. It was too easy for alcohol to become a coping mechanism.

SARAH poured the tea and Jack grabbed both mugs, walking them into the living room where Nathan was. He sat down next to Nathan and pressed the mug into his hands.

“Drink,” he said softly.

Nathan lifted the cup to his lips and drank, pulling at the beverage until the cup was empty.

“Tea.”

Jack nodded, “Chamomile.”

“Why?”

“Helps more. Makes you sleep. You remember, and it hurts, but you can process. Booze doesn’t do that.”

“Thanks.”

Jack handed his tea to Nathan and the other man nodded, sipping at it, slowly emptying the drink. They sat silently next to each other for a long time before Jack said, “Jo’s coming over.”

“Lupo?” Nathan hadn’t looked over at Jack since he’d sat down and he hunched his shoulders slightly in distress.

“Yeah.”
“Why?”

“She loves him too.”

Nathan glanced at him, for half a second then back down at the empty mug in his hands. “I-” he started then shook his head and looked down again. He was silent for a moment then began shaking. Jack flinched back then stopped when a strangled sound of agony tore out from deep within Nathan’s chest. He was sobbing.

Jack touched Nathan’s shoulder. Nathan curled into him, crying into his shoulder. There was nothing Jack could do but hold him until he hiccuped to a stop. Still, Nathan clung onto him until he gave a breathy groan of pain and sat up rubbing his head.

“Dehydration. I’ll get you something.”

Nathan nodded.

Jack rose as the front door slammed open. Jo stood looking disheveled, her eyes red from crying.

“Where is he?”

“Upstairs, bedroom on the right of the hall.”

She nodded and ran up the stairs. Jack stared after her for a moment then walked into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of Gatorade and an ibuprofen. He was halfway out of the kitchen when he thought better and went back, grabbing another bottle and dose of medicine. They would be for Jo when she came down.

Sitting down again, next to Nathan, he passed him the Gatorade and pills, trading for the empty mug.

“Thanks,” Nathan mumbled as he cracked the seal. He downed the pills and a mouthful of the red drink. He set the bottle on the floor between his feet and sighed, rubbing at the corners of his eyes.

“‘m sorry,” Nathan said hoarsely.

Jack shook his head. “You have no reason to apologize. I understand.”

Nathan hung his head, shaking it. “No. It’s-”

The front door exploded open and Beverly burst in.

“Where’s Dr. Stark?” she demanded.

Jack rose, staring angrily at her. “Why?”

He walked around the end of the sofa, furious at her intrusion.

“He needs a therapist. Someone capable of helping him handle his grief.”

“He needs a friend,” Jack snarled, “Someone who can help him through his grief.”

Beverly snorted, “Right, because you can do that.”

Jack stepped up to her, using his superior four inches to cow her back toward the door. “He’s just lost his son.”
She rolled her eyes. “Callister was a robot, not a child.”

“Callister was an artificially intelligent being.”

“Fine,” she snapped, “What makes you capable of handling a man who’s just lost his kid?”

“I know what he’s going through.”

“Losing a child in a custody battle is nothing like having a child die.”

Jack’s face hardened. “No. It’s not.”

She laughed. “How do you know what he’s feeling?”

“How do you?” Jack spat. “You’ve never lost a kid. You’ve never even had a kid.”

“You’ve never lost one,” she said, her eyes glittering.

“Yes,” Jack said angrily, “I have. Now, get out of my house.”

“No. Give me Stark.”


Beverly attempted to slip past him, but he stopped her. “I’m taking Nathan with me,” she growled, “He needs proper care.”

“No.”

“I’m calling the-”

“Who?” Jack asked, “The sheriff?” He waved at her, an angry smile twisting his lips.

“Fine,” she huffed, “I’ll get a court order.”

“What has to go through the sheriff’s department.”

“I’ll call Deputy Lupo, then.”

“She’s not available. You need to be going. Now.”

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” she said.

“Then I’ll arrest you tomorrow.”

“You can’t arrest me for harassment after only a day.”

“I can arrest you for trespassing. And I would, now, but I have a mourning father to support.”

“I’ll go above you. I’ll make it impossible for you to get anything done,” she hissed, “You’ll regret denying me.”

Jack’s lip curled and for a moment the pressure in the room dropped, before he bellowed, “OUT!”

Beverly took a step back, shaking, and fled, tripping up the stairs that lead to the bunker.

SARAH slammed the door behind her and the deadbolt shot home with a hollow thud.
“Dad?”

He turned to see Zoë standing uncertainly at the top of the stairs. “Sorry, Zoë. I didn’t mean to scare you. C’mon down. If you want, I can find someone for you to stay with. Pilar or Henry or someone.”

She shook her head. “I want to stay here.” She paused uncertainly. “Does he need anything?”

“Time. And support. And tea.”

Zoë came down the stairs cautiously then bolted in to hug Jack. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t be. You’re okay. Go see if SARAH has some food. And you don’t have to go to therapy anymore.”

Zoë giggled. Jack released her and ruffled the horrid red hair, before walking back to sit down next to Nathan.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be so loud. She’s just so creepy.”

Nathan snorted.

“Zoë’s in the kitchen getting some food. Do you want anything?”

“No.”

“If you want anything, I’ll get it.”

They were silent again until Zoë walked back into the room. She had three turkey sandwiches on a plate. Zoë approached Nathan and held out the plate in a shaking hand. He looked up at her and smiled weakly.

“Thanks.” he took a sandwich from the plate and had a half-hearted bite. She grinned back at him. She offered another sandwich to Jack before taking the last one and sitting awkwardly in the armchair near the sofa.

Nathan’s sandwich was only half-eaten when it hit the floor, his head dropping to his chest, one of his elbows sagging off his knee, his body slumping forward in sleep. Zoë looked up at Jack.

“Make sure you sleep soon,” he said softly, “I’m going to take Nathan upstairs to the bedroom, then check on Jo. She might need to crash here for the night.”

Jack reached down and grabbed the partially drunk bottle of Gatorade and stood from the sofa, touching Nathan’s shoulder to shake him awake.

"Hey," he said softly as Nathan’s eyes blinked open. “You fell asleep. There’s a bedroom upstairs if you wanna take it.”

Nathan shifted and sat up. “No. I’ll stay here,” he said groggily, “I can’t be upstairs. Not with-”

Jack handed back the bottle of Gatorade and the scientist nodded his exhausted thanks. He watched the exhausted swaying for a moment and offered, “I can stay here if you want, until you fall asleep.”

He glanced up at Jack, a silent plea in his eyes.
Jack cleared his throat and leaned forward to recover the fallen sandwich. Nathan saw his goal and leaned forward, picking up the sandwich and the two pieces of lettuce that had escaped it.

“Will you apologize to Zoë about the sandwich?” he asked quietly. “It was good. I just-”

Waving a hand dismissively, he said, “It happens. She’ll understand.”

Nathan leaned forward and placed both the sandwich and Gatorade on the table before settling back into the sofa. Jack followed suit and dropped, leaning back into the opposite corner of the couch and pulling off his badge.

“Do you want me to turn off the lights, Sheriff?” SARAH asked.

Jack looked to Nathan for agreement and when the scientist nodded, he replied, “Thank you, SARAH.”

There was silence for a moment after the room went black then Nathan said, “Thank you, Jack. For helping me find him.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t have gotten there sooner,” Jack said quietly.

“We couldn’t’ve saved him,” came a choked reply, “He was already beginning to shut- to shut down.”

Jack reached out in the darkness, his fingers coming into contact with the bare skin of the back of Nathan’s hand. He slid his fingers across his hand and gripped it tight once he found the edges of the other man’s fingers. Nathan’s hand moved in his own and twisted to hold on tight.

He woke to the pressure of something warm and heavy pressed to his side and the gentle light from the skylight. Stretching, Jack realized that in the night Nathan had gone from his corner of the sofa to curl up against his side. Even in his sleep, hard lines of grief were etched across his face and every moment or so, the corners of his mouth would twitch down and his eyes would tighten. Jack tightened his arm around his shoulders and for just a moment, the tightness in his face abated, becoming softer and less sad.

“Good morning,” SARAH said as quiet as she could to remain audible, “would you like me to make breakfast?”

“Please?” Jack asked, “Something simple. And ham or sausage if you have it.”

“Yes, Sheriff.”

“Is Zoë up?”

“She and Deputy Lupo are outside on the roof, speaking. Would you like me to call them in?”

“No. Not yet. Let them come in when they want to.”

Jack leaned back against the sofa and sighed. Nathan’s face pinched again. He squeezed his shoulder again and Nathan made a soft sound, curling into Jack’s side.

Jack remembered the strength of the pain Nathan was in; could remember the hopelessness and the dark abyss in his chest. He ached for him.
Minutes passed and the smell of sausage and coffee filled the air. Eventually, Nathan stirred against him, tightening with a small stretch before opening his eyes. He grunted, swallowed and ran a hand over his face. Nathan looked down and stiffened again, confused, then startled at the texture of the tan poly-blend. He blinked for a moment, attempting to place the fabric and jerked up, staring in horror at Jack.

"'M sorry," he grunted. "I didn’t-"

Jack held up his hands. “It’s okay, Nathan.”

Nathan sat up fully and looked around, taking in the two empty mugs, the bottle of Gatorade, and the half eaten sandwich on the table.

“It wasn’t a dream,” he said sadly.

“I’m so sorry.”

Closing his eyes and breathing in deeply, Nathan let out a shuddering breath. He had his eyes closed for another moment before saying, “Is that coffee?”

“Yeah. SARAH made breakfast. Toast, sausage, and coffee. Do you want some?”

He nodded.

Jack stood and held out his hand to pull Nathan to his feet. The scientist took it and Jack hauled him to his feet. Nathan swayed then asked, “Can I use your toilet?”

“Absolutely.” Jack gestured to the bathroom. “If you want to shower, I have a clothes you could use. Everything’d be a little short, but-”

“Thank you. I’ll take that shower.”

Jack nodded. "I'll get you a change before you start the shower."

"Thank you."

Nathan turned away for the bathroom and Jack lingered just a second, ready to answer any questions, before dashing upstairs.

He bent over his dresser, fishing through it. There was a pair of US Marshal sweats, one of three sets he owned, that were too long, that always had been a couple inches too long in the leg. He also owned a collection of slightly large t-shirts.

They should fit Nathan.

He heard the toilet flush and nearly tripped getting back downstairs. Nathan was standing awkwardly with his hands clasped behind his back in front of the bathroom door. Jack handed him the folded clothes.

"These are both a little long on me, so they should fit you." Then he nodded to the bathroom. "Green towel's mine, black is Zoë's. There are some white towels under the sink that you can go ahead and use. And you can use any of the stuff in the shower, but I'd avoid using the soap with the pink bead things, unless you like smelling like strawberries and cream."

Nathan chuckled halfheartedly. "Is that any commentary about two weeks ago?"

Jack blushed scarlet across his nose and cheeks. "It's not my fault if I'm saving the town until four
in the morning and have to get back up at six to have to save the town again."

The scientist closed his eyes with an almost smile then nodded.

“I’ll be in the kitchen,” Jack said. “I’ll have SARAH keep the food warm.”

“Thank you.”

Nathan retreated into the bathroom, the clothing held tight against his chest.

Jack walked into the kitchen and sat. There was a long pause then the sound of the shower turning on filled the house. He knew what Nathan was going through, the knowledge that everything was fine, then the odd kind of slipping sensation when the realization came crashing down that everything was wrong, followed finally by the sick constricting heat of the pain in the chest and throat that made it almost impossible to breathe.

“Would you like me to pour your coffee, Sheriff?”

Tugging at his short hair, Jack nodded. “Please?”

“While I am preparing your coffee, can I remind you that you haven’t changed out of your uniform?”

He stood. “Thank you, SARAH.”

Standing, he went back upstairs to look for a change of clothes.

When he came back down, Nathan was sitting at the bar, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, the second sitting steaming in front of the chair Jack had left out when he went upstairs to get changed.

The sexual part of his mind, the one that refused to shut up, even though the rest of his rational mind told it that it really, really needed to shut up, pointed out that even with the crinkles of sadness at the corners of his eyes and the slight puffiness to his cheeks that said he’d been crying in the shower, a damp Nathan Stark was a beautiful thing. Violently reprimanding his traitorous mind, which again rebelled and chose that moment to remind him of the ordeal at the electric fence the morning previously, he pulled walked around Nathan to the panel in the wall which pulled away to reveal the sausage and toast SARAH had been keeping warm.

“How do you take anything on your toast?”

Nathan looked tiredly over at him. “Butter, and marmalade if you have it.”

SARAH spun the rack with the jams to show the marmalade and slid butter out of the fridge. He placed the spreads on the table in front of Nathan and sat. Then stood again when he realized that there were no knives to put the butter on with. He went over to the cutlery drawer, grabbed two knives and sat back down, passing one to Nathan.

They ate in silence, Nathan finishing before Jack, eating rapidly and efficiently. He sipped at the coffee then set it down and sighed.

“Last night—” his voice was rough and he cleared it. “Last night you told Beverly you knew what it was like to lose a child.”

Jack mirrored Nathan’s sigh and set down his toast.
“I did.”

He looked up to see green eyes fixed on him, pleading.

“Abby, my ex-wife, and I had a daughter before we had Zoë. Her name was Audrey.” He smiled sadly. “She was bright, she was funny, and for a five-year-old she was incredibly brilliant.”

He glanced back at Nathan. “You would have liked her. She got in trouble once at preschool for refusing to put two wings on the same side of the profile of a bird,” he added with a chuckle. He sobered, his eyes becoming sad.

“Three months and eight days after her fifth birthday, Abby and I were cooking dinner in the kitchen while Audrey played in her room with her plastic animal toys. When I went in to tell her that dinner was ready, I found her. She had swallowed a quarter and choked on it.”

He could hear Nathan swallow as the man looked down at his hands.

“Audrey’s death was the reason Abby and I started fighting. We had Zoë slightly more than a year later. We’ve never told her.”

They were silent for a long moment. “Will it ever get any better?” Nathan asked, quietly. “Sometimes it doesn’t seem real- like maybe if I went back to my lab, he’d still be waiting there, but when I realize that that’s never going to happen again, it feels like my heart’s being pulled out of my chest.”

“It will. It took a long time to feel normal again, and it was hard to be excited when we first found out that we were pregnant with Zoë, but we got into it at about six months. We moved, bought all new baby stuff and put all off- well, almost all of Audrey’s things went into storage. I kept the iguanodon she was holding.”

“That’s the one on the filing cabinet behind your desk.”

Jack nodded and continued. “It’s also been sixteen years. It still feels wrong sometimes that although I miss her, I can’t really remember her face or feel the same guilt I used to.”

“You didn’t know that she’d swallowed a quarter,” Nathan pointed out.

“I’d only been in the kitchen five minutes. If I’d stayed with her,” he said, explaining, “I could have stopped her from swallowing the quarter. It’s like how you don’t know what made Callister work, so figuring out what was wrong with him was impossible.”

Nathan grit his teeth and looked down. Jack reached out and touched Nathan’s hand.

“I know you hurt. I know you want to blame yourself, but you can’t. You didn’t do it and you didn’t cause it.”

Nathan’s eyes were lined with tears when he met Jack’s gaze.

“How old was he, Nathan?”

“Six.” Nathan’s voice was thick.

Jack smiled gently. “I’ve heard a lot about him over the last day- enough to know that Callister was an amazing person. If he could get Jo to like him-”

A corner of the scientist’s mouth twitched into a sad smile.
“You loved him, yeah?” Jack asked.

“Yes.”

“And he loved you.”

Nathan nodded.

“Did you program him for that?”

“No.” Nathan’s voice was hoarse, shredded with his anguish.

Jack looked at him earnestly and gripped his hand. “Then he loved you because he wanted to.”

Nathan crushed his eyes shut and drew in a ragged breath.

“Jack,” he said almost inaudibly, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes.

“That’s what you need to remember about your son, Nathan. You need to remember that he loved you and you need to remember the good things that happened.”

Nathan slumped forward, his hands gripping the back of his head as he sobbed. Standing from his chair, Jack approached Nathan and pulled him to his chest in a tight hug. He stood, holding the shaking man as he clung to him, wishing there was some way he could take away his pain.

Eventually, he hiccupped to a stop, much as he had the night before. Jack released him gently and picked up the empty mug from the counter. “Do you want me to make more of that tea from last night?”

Hanging his head in shame, Nathan nodded.

Jack pulled a mug from the cabinet and went to the sink where SARAH poured out boiling water. He grabbed a tea bag, tore it open, and placed it in the mug. Nathan took it with a thankful look when Jack offered it to him.

Eventually, Zoë and Jo returned, both with a hint of red surrounding their eyes from tears. They sat for breakfast in silence. When she finished, Jo thanked them and left, citing her need to fill out the necessary forms. Jack attempted to give her the day off, but she refused, and the look in her eyes asked him not to force her, because mindless paperwork was what she needed to try to cope.

After Nathan was finished with the tea, the wandered back out to the sofa. The three sat there in the silence of shared grief and shock.

It was Nathan who eventually stood, swaying slightly.

“I need to talk to Henry about what departments at GD might benefit best from studying Callister.

Jack shook his head. “No, that’s not what you’re going do. When you call Henry, you’re gonna ask him what the next steps are in disguising him from the government and we’re going to figure out the logistics of his funeral, okay?”

Nathan closed his eyes, swaying again.

“I may have only had once conversation with him, but Callister was more of a person than some of the people living in Eureka. He deserves just as much respect as anyone.”

The black-haired man nodded and Jack stood, taking Nathan’s elbow and leading him back to the
“Actually,” Jack said, noticing the dark circles under Nathan’s eyes, “I’m going to call Henry, and you’re going to sleep on the sofa while I sit in the armchair and make the call.”

Nathan nodded again and curled into the sofa, turning to fit his entire 6’4” frame onto the cushions.

“Zoë,” Jack directed softly, “if you’d like to go to Pilar’s or to the office with Jo, you can.”

She shook her head. “I’m going to get a blanket for Dr. Stark and sit here and read while you talk with Henry.”

“Thank you, Zoë,” Nathan said quietly.

She stopped halfway up the stairs and turned to face the man staring straight ahead and half-curled on the sofa. “You’re welcome, Dr. Stark.”

Jack sat down in the armchair near Nathan’s head and pulled his phone from his pocket. He paused, turning to Nathan. “If it’s easier, I can make this call in another room—”

There was a soft snore and Jack realized that Nathan was asleep. It was so cliché Jack could have laughed, except he was calling Henry to tell him to put on his coroner’s badge. Dialing Henry, he watched as Zoë came back down the stairs clutching her spare log cabin quilt, the one she’d bought right after she’d come to Oregon permanently. She spread it carefully over Nathan’s sleeping form as Henry’s voice answered from the other end of the line.

“Jack! What’s up? I don’t have much time to talk. The virus disappeared and I need to find out how it got into the intranet.”

He looked up to see Zoë settling against the front of the sofa reading a James Patterson novel, something she’d been describing to him about genetically engineered children with wings.

“Henry—”

Exhaustion must have weighed heavily in his voice, because Henry’s tone had changed to a more worried one. “Oh, God, Jack, what’s wrong?”

Jack swallowed. “Henry, I need you to bring the coroner’s van to the bunker.”

“Oh, Jack,” there was pure panic in his voice now, “Did Zoë—”

Jack shook his head, then remembered Henry couldn’t see it. “No. It’s Callister.”

There was silence on the phone.

“Callister’s dead.”

“Yes.”

“What happened?”

“Complete systems failure.”

“Organ failure?”

“No. Callister was AI.”
Henry was silent again.

“Nathan was his creator,” Jack clarified.

Still silence, then “Do you know where Nathan is?”

“Asleep on my sofa. Callister is upstairs.”

“I’ll be over as soon as possible.”

There was the soft sound of Henry hanging up and Jack lowered his phone.

“Dad?”

Jack looked up at Zoë. “Yeah?”

“What did Henry say?” she asked.

“He’s gonna be over soon.”

Zoë looked down at her book and tightened her fingers around the pages of her book. “Is Dr. Stark going to be okay?”

Looking from his daughter to the sleeping scientist, he watched as, again, tiny pinches of anguish twisted the corners of his eyes.

“No,” he said simply, “Not for a while.”

She nodded and glanced back at her page.

“If I’d realized he was sick when we left-”

Jack stood from the chair and quickly dropped to sit in front of his daughter. He pressed the book into her lap and took her hands.

“Zoë, there’s nothing you could have done. I don’t know enough about computers to really know what was going on with him, but Nathan was terrified. There had to be something wrong before everything started to get weird.”

“Daddy,” she said quietly, tears springing to her eyes, “I watched him die. I liked him and I watched him die.”

“Shhh…” he pulled her in for a tight hug and she started crying desperately into his shoulder. “Shhh…” he said quietly, rocking her gently. They stayed like that a long while, he rocking her until she had sniffled her last tear into his shoulder.

He remembered the first time he’d watched a person die. He hadn’t cried first off, the terror of it had waited to catch up with him until two days later when he’d been sitting home alone waiting for Abby to come home from a trip to her mother’s for the weekend. He had been curled in a slightly-less-than-sober ball on the sofa when Abby walked through the door.

There was a hiss of the door unsealing and he looked up to see Henry staring at the living room like it was a war zone.
Requiem Aeternam

Chapter Summary

Jack and Nathan discuss Callister's humanity. Nathan and Zoë talk Maximum Ride pseudo-science, genetics, and quantum mechanics. They go to the funeral.

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter I have that was previously published on ff.net, which means that everything else has to be written and will be posted here and there simultaneously. However, if any of you were reading this from ff, you know that my updates have been pretty regularly spaced about five months apart. I'm currently working on the next one, and I have a place to get to the episodes (thank you, Netflix). I'm going to go add this note to the first chapter, as well as the start of the next one. I've reordered the episodes, so it's a bit more like original production order. Production order was 1.01, 1.02, 1.07, 1.04, 1.06, 1.03, 1.08, 1.05, 1.10, 1.09, 1.11, and 1.12. This means that the car crash took place some time between 1.03 "Before I Forget" (which I left in airing order), and 1.04 "Blink." My personal order for the series goes: 1.01, 1.02, 1.03, 1.04, 1.06, 1.07, 1.08, 1.05, 1.09, 1.10, 1.11, and 1.12. I've only left a little of the original reordering I intended because, partly it's easier for casual watchers to not have the major switches, and also because I lost the notebook I wrote the episode order I intended to use...

Read and review/comment/suggestion/constructively criticize. Any and all of it makes me happy.

**Thanks to Pipamonium for pointing out that I had royally screwed up and duplicated a huge amount of what was supposed to be in this chapter at the end of chapter 4.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Except that the room was mostly clean, it might have very well looked like a war zone.

He was on the floor clutching a still-trembling, violently red-haired Zoë, his own face haggard and exhausted, Nathan behind them, curled and whimpering softly on the sofa. Jack nodded for Henry to come over.

"Jack?" Henry asked quietly, "Is everything all right? You look awful."

Jack exhaled and hugged Zoë tighter as she turned to look at Henry.

"No. Everything's not all right. My daughter watched a person die today, and Nathan lost his
son." He took a breath. "Jo's a wreck, her boyfriend is dead, and Beverly Barlowe came barging in here earlier, screaming for me to hand Nathan over to her like he was a book or something. Somehow she knew Callister was AI and refused to acknowledge him as anything more than a computer in front of Nathan."

Henry closed his eyes and ran his hands down his face.

"Is he here?" Henry asked, "Even if he's AI, I can run a sort of autopsy on his systems, to try to figure out what happened to him. If Nathan agrees."

"You won't be able to," said a groggy voice behind them.

Jack twisted to see Nathan struggling to sit up without kicking either Zoë or him.

"He was programmed with a sort of internal self-destruct. If his systems ever malfunctioned to the point of total shutdown, they would wipe themselves to prevent DARPA usage. I took readings a couple hours before he-"

Henry looked at him gently. "Do you know what it was?"

Nathan swallowed and answered. "The virus on the intranet- Callister must have picked it up somewhere. It was already causing slight malfunctions. That's why he came back to Eureka, but the codes must have mutated when he came into contact with the intranet."

He refused to look at any of them, then said to his hands, "Before Henry can take him away, I'm going to say goodbye."

He stood shakily and climbed the stairs toward the bedrooms.

"What are we going to do, Henry?" Jack asked, "We can't let anyone in the government know Callister was anything other than human."

"How many know?" Henry asked, concern creasing his face.

"Seven, I think. Nathan, Allison, Zoë, Jo, Beverly, you, and me."

Henry frowned. "Beverly's really the only unknown. If we can get her to sign a nondisclosure agreement-"

"It's just a piece of paper, Henry," Jack protested. "We could use that mind-wipey thing on her that that assface Anderson used on all of us."

"Jack, the technology doesn't exist anymore. I-"

"You invented it," Jack countered, "You can make one whenever you want."

"You invented a memory-eraser?" Zoë asked, peeling away from her father's chest for the first time in close to an hour.

"Essentially," Henry said with a shrug. "It only removes some memories."

He saw the question in her eyes and inhaled sharply. "Oh Zoë, no. Even though Jason used it on all of us, it's unproven technology. I wouldn't use it on a teenager, no matter how badly you seemed to need it."

She frowned at him.
"It's not because I don't care," he explained, "It's because the brain doesn't fully mature until twenty-five and I don't know what it would do to your neural pathways. I wouldn't want to risk that brilliant brain of yours."

Zoë looked slightly disappointed, but smiled at Henry for the compliment.

"How long will it take to arrange the funeral, Henry? Nathan was asking if there were any labs in GD that might like to study him, but I'd rather he get the peaceful rest he deserves as a member of the Eurekan community."

"I can have it done and ready in three days. But if Nathan's wish is to-"

Zoë cut Henry off. "I think he's in shock," she said shakily, "he's hiding behind science to try to have it all make sense."

"Why's that, Zoë?" Henry prompted gently.

"Callister called Dr. Stark 'Dad.'"

Henry bowed his head. "I can make it tomorrow evening at the soonest."

"Thank you, Henry," Jack said.

The older man nodded.

"Can I offer you anything, Dr. Deacon?" SARAH asked quietly.

Henry smiled up at the ceiling. "No thank you, SARAH. How are you holding up?"

"I think I feel sad, Dr. Deacon. I never met Callister in person, but we did meet through the intranet. He realized he had a virus and needed another sophisticated AI to upload his memory core to. He also uploaded a copy of his programming, the files without the infectious code to my databanks.

"I miss him without having ever met him."

"Can I do anything for you, SARAH?" Jack asked.

"Thank you, Sheriff," she said, "but I will be okay. I can shut off my emotional algorithms, you cannot."

Jack smiled up at the ceiling before turning back to Henry. "How long do I give him? You know him better than I do. Do I go up there and sit with him, or do I wait here with you?"

Henry shook his head. "I don't know, Jack. I've known him since he was an undergrad, but I've never seen him through this kind of grief."

Jack scrubbed the back of his head, fighting over it for a moment then stood, remembering how desperately lonely he had felt after Audrey's death. Shooting a grim look to both Zoë and Henry, he climbed the stairs and made his way back to the room where Callister lay.

Nathan was sitting on the floor, back against the bed, head tilted neck, cheeks wet with tears. He didn't acknowledge Jack when he sat next to him; he wasn't about to force Nathan to do anything, he would be ready to speak when Nathan was.
It had been so long since he'd sat that he wasn't sure what time it was when the deep voice sounded from beside him.

"What did Henry say?"

Jack cleared his throat. "We can have the funeral tomorrow evening."

Nathan nodded. "That would be best."

"I don't want you to rush into anything-"

"Will I be allowed to make the arrangements, legally?"

Jack nodded. "I can create a complete power of attorney and backdate it to early yesterday, say he came to town for medical treatment. That will give you executive power over all decisions to be made about him."

"Thank you."

"It will also allow you to protect him legally from the government, too."

Nathan looked at him, then back forward.

"Tell me about him."

Nathan looked back at Jack, who shrugged. "I didn't get to know him. I feel like I'm missing out."

He paused, "Hey, you said he was your assistant originally, before Fargo- I bet he didn't press many large red space-death-laser launching buttons."

Nathan chuckled softly. "No, Callister didn't push buttons."

He sighed, the smile falling from his face. "Is it possible to miss someone this fast? Jack, he's been d- gone ten hours. I- I-" he choked once, whimpering, and ground his hands against his eyes. Jack gripped his knee. They sat that way with Jack's hand on Nathan's knee until the scientist stopped trembling, too dehydrated to cry properly anymore.

"Jack, he was my son."

"I know, Nathan."

Nathan shook his head. "Allie didn't think so- Beverley didn't."

"I don't know why not," Jack said, "They probably never saw the two of you acting as father and son."

Nathan looked over at him, confusion furrowing his brow. "You accepted it. You're Mayberry and you had no problem understanding it."

Jack gave him a bemused look. "I grew up in L.A. It's hardly Mayberry, and I was a Marshal for fourteen years. I've seen a lot." He shrugged, "It helps that I watched Star Trek religiously while it was on."

"Data."

Jack nodded.
Nathan looked back at him and shook his head. "You are an incomparable human being, Jack Carter… Thank you."

Jack nodded again, the slightest smile twitching a corner of his mouth. "You're welcome." It was one of the best compliments he had ever received.

They sat in silence.

"Will you be there tomorrow?" Nathan asked.

"Absolutely." There was no need for an explanation of what the scientist meant. Callister's funeral was the only thing he would do tomorrow unless Nathan asked for anything else.

Nathan yawned, leaning his head back against the bed again. "Is Henry still here?" he asked, his voice deeper for the extension of his throat.

Jack made an affirmative sound. He opened his mouth to speak, but SARAH's voice from downstairs, muffled by the floor cut him off, as did the heavy sound of Henry climbing the stairs. He came into the bedroom and sat in front of the two men.

"SARAH said you wanted to talk to me?" he said quietly.

"Can you do the service?" Nathan asked.

"Definitely."

"And you'll talk about him like he was human?"

Henry nodded. "That's what I knew him as. I didn't know he was AI until Jack called me. You did an exceptional job with him."

Nathan nodded sadly. "Thank you."

"Do you want it to be a private affair?" Henry asked. "Callister had friends in town."

Sighing, Nathan dropped his head. He was silent for a moment, thinking. "You can announce it over the PA. Anyone who wants to be there, can."

Henry went up to his knees and rested a hand on Nathan's shoulder. "I'm here if you need help, Nathan. I'll be back for him later today."

Henry squeezed his shoulder and stood. "I'll see you this evening, Nathan. Jack."

Turning, he walked from the room.

Jack and Nathan listened as Henry made his way downstairs, through the living room where there was a faint conversation between him and Zoë, then SARAH, and finally the popping hiss of the door opening and resealing.

Nathan looked at a spot on the floor near Jack's bare foot. Jack traced Nathan's gaze and glanced over at the scientist's feet, which he hadn't realized until just then were also bare.

Another part of his brain, not the same, horribly traitorous part from earlier in the day, but a surprisingly, aesthetically aware part, noticed that Nathan's feet were as elegant as a man's feet could be. Like his hands, they were well sculpted, and the digits were long, but not obscenely so— the toes were long, but the joints were just knobbed enough to make them look like the toes on a Greek sculpture, rather than creepy baby fingers like some he'd seen. There was a sparse thatch of
black hair on the top of his foot and a few coarse hairs on his first three toes.

Jack glanced away quickly when Nathan spoke. "Is it okay if I stay here tonight? I can't go home yet."

Nodding, Jack answered, "Yeah, that's totally okay."

The day was quiet and the two men sat in front of the bed where Callister's body lay until Henry returned about four hours later at three in the afternoon. They spent the time either talking softly or sitting without speaking, as comfortably as was possible with the situation as it was.

Jack had to leave the room at one point to pee. He used the time to call Jo to ask her to begin writing the power of attorney and date it to early the morning before. He also grabbed a plate with sandwiches that Zoë had made and left on the counter and some bottled water from the fridge. The bread was slightly dry from having been left out for as long as they had been, but the sandwiches were as good as they had been the night before.

"Zoë is quite good at sandwiches," Nathan said while they were eating. Jack smiled.

"You should tell her," Jack replied around a mouthful of sandwich. "She'd like that."

"I will."

The relative lightness in the mood collapsed when Henry arrived with the coroner's van to take Callister away. Together, the three men carried the covered stretcher with Callister's body on it down the stairs, through the living room, passed Zoë, who stared in mortified curiosity as they walked by and out the bunker to the van. They loaded Callister into the van and Henry shut the double doors. Henry nodded grimly to both of them and climbed in the driver's side of the van.

Nathan stiffened beside Jack as the van's engine turned over, revving to life. The van pulled away down onto the road and Nathan made a soft keening sound then closed his eyes.


It surprised Jack that Nathan was so willing to allow himself to be led back into the bunker. He ushered the scientist down the stairs, through the heavy door, and back into the living room.

Jack settled Nathan on the sofa again. They sat, Nathan and Zoë quietly discussing the infeasibility of combining human and bird DNA, Jack breaking in occasionally to add to the conversation the slightly stupid sounding, but entirely impressive jumps in intuition he knew amused Nathan so much, until six when the phone rang. Jack called up to SARAH, "Can you put it on speaker?"

A woman's voice filled the room.

"This is an automated message from Tesla High School. Your child Zoë Carter was truant today from school. Please call within the next twenty-four hours to clear this absence."

The receiver clicked and the phone hung up.

Jack dropped his head. "Shit. Today is Monday, isn't it?"

Nathan nodded.
"I'll deal with it tomorrow," he sighed.

Zoë looked at him sideways.

He shrugged. "What are they gonna do about it? Town sheriff and head of GD against the attendance review board?"

Nathan chuckled, though the sadness didn't leave his eyes this time. "They might give you extra credit for spending a day with me."

Zoë gave a small smile, aware of the pain lingering behind Nathan's joke. The smile faded from her eyes and she tilted her head. "So no human-bird crosses?"

A flash of real mirth entered Nathan's eyes. "No. Humans and birds are both too derived. Birds are super evolved dinosaurs and humans are from a lineage that split away from reptiles way before the dinosaurs even thought about evolving. And birds have a massive amounts of chromosomes compared to humans. We have 23 pairs and birds have a lot more. Besides, you know how humans are XX for female and XY for males?"

"Yeah," Zoë nodded.

"It's different in birds," Nathan continued, "Males are ZZ and females are ZW."

Zoë frowned. "That's weird."

"That's birds. You should look up fruit flies."

"I'll do that." She looked down at the book next to her and tapped the cover.

Jack read the disappointment in her face. He reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder. It seemed Nathan saw the disappointment too. "Don't let science ruin a book if you like it. I've had to learn to separate myself from being a physicist while watching action movies. Hollywood doesn't understand the concept of how explosions actually work. That doesn't mean I like them less."

"We were talking about Star Trek earlier, Physicist. Can you watch that?" Jack asked.

Nathan's deep chuckle rumbled out of him again. "For a show started in the 1960s, it's essentially correct. There's some impossibilities, from what we currently understand, but it's pretty good. It's actually part of the reason I became a physicist. I wanted to invent warp engines."

Leaning back, Nathan laughed a groaning, ironic laugh. "God, I wanted to have conversations with a Vulcan." He took a sip from the bottle of water in his hand and continued darkly, "Instead I have Fargo."

Jack hacked, choking on his own mouthful of water as he laughed. He made a strangled, dying noise as he tried to expel water from his windpipe. He gasped and after a horrible moment of gasping, while a strong hand thumped his upper back, he managed to regain his breath.

"Thanks," he croaked, turning to look at Nathan and the concern bright in the other man's eyes.

Nathan shrugged. "I guess I owe you. You save me from drowning, I'll save you from drowning."

Jack smiled weakly, feeling slightly shaky. "I'm good now." He set his bottle to the side, glaring at it.
"Now that your biological functions have returned to normal," SARAH cut in, "Might I suggest dinner?"

Jack turned his glare to the ceiling. "Please?"

They ended up watching the first episode of *Star Trek* that evening. Zoë was a bit creeped out and exceptionally disappointed about the lack of Kirk and how odd Spock seemed. By the end of the third episode, "The Man Trap" Zoë was not only infatuated with the series, but asleep, curled up against Jack's side.

"Thank you for distracting me," Nathan said softly. "It's been a long time since I had any time to sit and just watch television." He paused. "I'm not happy with the reason why, but it was almost relaxing."

"I need to get Zoë to bed," Jack replied quietly. "We can watch another episode after she goes to sleep."

Nathan shrugged. "That's fine. If I fall asleep-"

Jack nodded. "I know. I get the feeling tomorrow is going to be long."

Nathan closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Yeah."

Looking away from Nathan, Jack nudged Zoë with his elbow. "Hey, Zoë." She grumbled and curled into him. "C'mon, Zoë, you have to get up."

She twisted again and looked up at him from under her fringe of red hair. "Did I miss anything?"

"You saw the salt thing try to eat Kirk?"

"Mhmm…"

"That was it," he said, "You must have just fallen asleep."

"I'm gonna go to bed." She stood. "Love you, Dad. Good night, Dr. Stark."

"Night Zoë," Jack said, "Love you too."

Nathan nodded to her as she left.

"Do you need to go with her?" Nathan asked.

"No. She's fifteen. She kind of freaks out if I get near her door while she's getting ready for bed."

Jack gestured to the screen where they'd been watching *Star Trek* asking if he could start the next episode. Nathan nodded.

They sat back and watched the next snippet in the neatly encapsulated adventures of the *Enterprise*.

Jack woke the next morning to Kirk threatening the outcome of attacking his ship while it carried the Corbomite device. He blinked and said, "SARAH, can you turn off the TV?"

"Yes, Sheriff." The screen switched off.
There was weight against him again, this time, resting heavily on his hip. He looked down to see Nathan's head cradled just at the junction of his leg and his torso, clear of any kind of... danger, but it was still a very intimate position.

Nathan was going to completely *freak* when he-

Nathan's eyes opened suddenly, and for a moment were unfocused. He blinked again and his eyes focused on Jack's.

"I fell asleep on you again."

"Yeah."

Nathan closed his eyes again, sighed, and sat up. He hunched forward and rubbed his forehead.

"Today is his funeral..." he paused, "Did Henry say when it was going to be?"

"He said this evening, but he didn't say when exactly." Jack looked up. "SARAH, is there anything in the town itinerary about when Callister's funeral will be?"

"Yes, Sheriff," SARAH replied, her voice modulated from its typical cheer to a more somber tone, "Dr. Deacon has scheduled it for six this evening."

"Thank you, SARAH," Jack said. He turned back to Nathan. "What do you need to do before then? Do you need to go anywhere?" He stopped, realizing something. "Your car is still in Portland."

"That is a problem," Nathan said with a bit of a strained smirk.

"I'll drive you where you need to go."

A corner of the scientist's mouth flickered towards a smile again. "Mm... Personal chauffer."

Jack snorted. "Like hell. Just until you get your car back, lazy ass."

Nathan barked a short laugh. "I'm glad you don't pull your punches."

Jack joined his laughter. "I have a degree in criminal justice. The only people I chauffer around are wearing handcuffs."

Another burst of deep laughter and a wicked glint entered Nathan's eye. "*Kinky.*"

"Oh," Jack laughed, "That is *so* not my thing."

He sobered immediately. How was that Nathan managed to get such personal stuff out of him? Twice now he'd accidentally said something about his... *proclivities* to this man.

"Too close to the job?"

Jack nodded. "Once you've seen as many smelly convicts as I have, handcuffs lose their appeal."

Nathan laughed again. "So-"

There was a scuffling sound from above and Jack held his hand up, stopping him. "No. Stop right there. My daughter is about to come down those stairs. You need to shut up."

Nathan chuckled again, then cut off when Zoë *did* appear at the top of the stairs. Jack shot him an
I-told-you-so face.
Zoë's horrid red hair was tousled, tangled some from her sleeping with it down, and she blinked slowly, groggily rubbing at her face. "Dad, do I have to go to school today? I feel kinda sick."

"No, Zo, you can stay home today. I might have to leave you here for a bit."

"M'kay," she said, then noticed Nathan's presence. "Oh, hey, Dr. Stark?"

"Good morning, Zoë," he greeted.

"Um?" She looked, confused, between her father and the other man sitting on the sofa.

"Your father and I spoke until late last night. I stayed over again."

"Oh." She nodded. "Okay. I'm just gonna grab some breakfast. And I'm going to get to my homework."

Jack smiled. "Thank you, Zo."

She trotted down the stairs past them and went into the kitchen.

Jack turned to Nathan. "Do you need to go to GD today?"

Nathan shook his head. "No, if the world was going to end, it would have been yesterday. Or it'll be on Thursday. I need to shower and get prepped for his funeral. I'll need you to take me by my house."

Jack realized something. "Nathan, I know this is Eureka and there's probably some hovery-floaty thing for it, but do you need pallbearers?"

Dropping his head to scratch at the back of it, Nathan sighed sharply. "I will."

Jack wasn't going to ask. The acquaintanceship he had with Nathan was… fascinating, but it was most definitely not strong enough for the man to-

"Will you be one?"

Jack stared at him, startled. Apparently their relationship was stronger than he realized.

Nathan looked away abruptly, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm asking too much, aren't I?"

Jack realized his blunder and put his hand on Nathan's knee. "No. It's just- I didn't think that you'd want me to."

"I don't know why you would think that. I trust you with my life, why wouldn't I trust you with my son's death?" A wan smile quirked Nathan's lips, "Besides, if you're afraid about dropping your part of the burden, I can have Henry put a hovery-floaty thing under your position."

Jack scowled, but his lips couldn't hold it and he broke into smile. He pinched the bridge of his nose. "I did say that, didn't I? I have to stop doing that."

"Don't. I like it."

The earnestness in Nathan's eyes made Jack blush. He looked away, praying for the red to fade. The wrongness of reacting to Nathan's honesty as if the scientist was flirting was, well, wrong.
"Do you want breakfast?" Jack asked, clearing his throat.

Nathan nodded, leaning back from Jack, his eyes a bit sharper, more closed off. "Sure."

Jack called Tesla high after breakfast, clearing her absence and giving permission for her absence. They sat, talking, the tension from their earlier banter relaxed until Zoë came in with a textbook.

"Dr. Stark?"

"What is it, Zoë?" Nathan asked.

"I was wondering," she stammered, "I mean, I know high school physics is below you, and you have better things to do, but can you help me with my physics?"

Jack scooted over so Zoë could sit in the space between him and Nathan. Zoë sat and opened her textbook.

"What are you studying?"

"Particle spin in a magnetic field?"

Nathan looked at her then lifted the cover of the book. He glanced up at her with a surprised look. "What class are you in?"

"Sophomore physics?"

He snorted. "Zoë, this is basic quantum physics, not high school physics. How are you doing in class?"

She looked at Jack nervously. "I'm getting a B. It's a high B, though, so-"

Jack raised his hands, placating. "I got a C in high school physics. I have no right to judge. And the only time I approached the quantum stuff was with atomic orbitals in chemistry."

Zoë relaxed visibly.

"Why are you doing quantum physics?" Nathan asked, "I didn’t get into quantum-level studies until I was an undergrad."

She shrugged. "I tested into it."

Nathan smiled at her then tucked into helping her with her science.

Jack sat back and watched in amazement as his daughter discussed something he had only the slightest understanding of. Typically, being as outclassed in knowledge like he was currently was would typically have made him defensive, but this was his daughter.

It had only been a few short years since he'd held her in his arms and marveled at how small she was, how precious and fragile her life was. And now, she was discussing the literal fabric of space and time.

At noon, SARAH interrupted the study session to offer lunch. They ate quickly Zoë and Nathan pausing in their discussion of quantum travel long enough to gulp down their food.
The two went back to working through Zoë's homework (and the next few assignments, Jack suspected) while Jack went upstairs to shift through his closet and search for his suit. He was glad his suit still fit, even though there was no reason for it not to, since the last time he'd worn it had been to a court case six months earlier as an expert witness. He stepped from his room to the top of the stairs to watch as Zoë continued to animatedly discuss physics with Nathan.

Jack wasn't particularly worried about leaving his daughter alone with the scientist. The man might have been a dick in his free time, but he wasn't dangerous. He didn't even register on Jack's combined Marshal and Dad-dar. He was actually pretty sure letting Zoë study physics on the sofa with a relatively sane Nobel Laureate was safer than letting her work at CaféDiem where she was exposed to the extreme oddness of the townsfolk.

At two, Nathan announced that even for him, four hours of uninterrupted physics was beginning to be too much. Zoë stood, put her book on the side table along with her notes. She looked up at Jack.

"I'm gonna start getting ready," she said.

Jack nodded. "Kay, Zoë." He turned back to Nathan. "Do you need me to drive me to your place?"

"My car is in Portland," Nathan said with a small smirk.

Jack turned to Zoë. "I'll be gone an hour, two, tops."

Zoë nodded. "I promise not to blow up the town. And don't worry, SARAH will put herself in parenting mode three if anything even thinks about going wrong."

Jack smiled then turned back to Nathan. "Ready?"

Nathan shrugged.

The drive to Nathan's house was silent, except for a singular note of surprise on the scientist's part that Jack knew the location of his house.

Nathan directed him to his sofa, wordlessly pointed out the decanter of brandy on the coffee table, then disappeared down the hall. It took Nathan an hour-and-a-half to get ready. Jack assumed that between finding the correct suit, the ten minute shower, and getting his hair to comply to the careful tousled-but-groomed look he always wore, it made sense to take that long.

Yet when the scientist appeared in the entrance to the hall, his beard was untrimmed and his hair was slicked back in a practical style that could not have taken more than five minutes.

Nathan seemed to see the unspoken question in Jack's eyes. "The family is expected to say something. I don't think I'll be able to do it unless I have it written."

Jack smiled reassuringly at him.

They headed back to the bunker so Jack could get ready and they could collect Zoë.

They were the first to arrive after Henry. The cemetery was still, quiet and peaceful in the late...
afternoon sun.

Henry waited by a hearse, its dark paint like a splotch of spilled ink on the sleepy green of the cemetery. Jack looked around and saw it, framed by the soft glow of the two columns of white chairs in the sun, the darkness of the grave dug in front of them.

He looked back to Nathan and saw the blankness in the other man's face as where they were standing drove home the reality that his son was dead. He wasn't crying, though his eyes were red and the skin around them swollen enough to remove the wrinkles around his eyes. Jack wasn't sure the other man had enough tears left to cry. Nathan breathed deeply once, his tired eyes closing against the green and the black and the shining white. He blew the breath out and opened his eyes then turned to Zoë.

"I want you to understand that I have no expectations, you will not offend me if you say no."

Zoë looked up at him, her eyes saying she understood what he was asking without him finishing the question.

"He was my friend, Dr. Stark. I would be honored."

He nodded, looking away. The compassion of a fifteen-year-old had just outstripped that of the woman he was married to. She offered him an encouraging smile when he turned back.

The crunch of tires roused them and they looked up to see the second sheriff's vehicle pulling into the parking lot near Jack's Jeep. Jo stepped out, hair loose and falling in gentle waves around the black fabric of her dress where it covered her shoulders. She approached them stiffly, her face hard except for around her eyes where carefully applied makeup spoke to her concealed grief.

"Dr. Stark," she said quietly, "do you have your six yet?"

"No."

She nodded. "I would like to help carry Callister," she said.

"I was intending to ask you," Nathan said. "He would have liked you to."

Jo nodded firmly, swallowing, thanking him without speaking.

Fargo pulled up next, with an obsequious, apologetic shuffle and a handshake for Nathan. "I'm sorry about Callister, Dr. Stark. Can I get you anything?"

"No, Fargo," Nathan said.

Jack understood Nathan's reticence toward offering Fargo a position as a pall bearer. The neurotic assistant was as likely to say something hateful about Callister by accident as he was to drop his portion of the burden.

Fargo stepped closer. "Are you sure?" There's still time if you need me to go back to GD or swing by your house if you need something else."

"Fargo…" Nathan growled in warning and the young man shoved his glasses up his nose, nodded once and stepped back.

"Sorry, Dr. Stark," he mumbled. "I didn't mean to- I am really sorry about Callister."

"Thank you, Fargo," Nathan said gently.
Fargo turned and walked toward the chairs.

The sound of another two cars arriving drew eyes back to the lot as Vincent and the Baker twins stepped from their vehicles. The twins headed toward the chairs to stand near Fargo. People started arriving in quicker succession until the cars started having to park on either side of the road leading to the parking lot. Allison appeared, walking with a hand on Kevin's shoulder toward them.

"Hello, Nathan," she said softly.

He offered her a weak smile in return. "Hello, Allison." Nathan paused, looking down at Keevin then said, "I assume you need to watch Kevin?"

She gave him a sad but forced smile in return. "I'm sorry, Nathan."

Nathan swallowed and nodded, his eyes hardening as she turned to direct Kevin toward the folding chairs. He looked to Vincent who was standing near Zoë.

"Vincent," he said, "I know we aren't particularly close, but I need a sixth man and I know Callister liked you."

Vincent walked closer and cocked his head, lifting his eyebrows as he looked at the taller man. "You want me to help carry him?"

"Is that-"

Vincent cut him off. "I'm surprised, not offended. I didn't realize he liked me."

Nathan gave a soft laugh. "When he discovered Café Diem, he talked about you every day."

"I will help you carry him," Vincent said.

Henry approached him. "Nathan, I've fitted the coffin with gravimetric repulsor stabilizers, but to keep it steady, you'll need at least six pallbearers. You only have five."

"I thought-" he looked at Henry worried, "I know you're doing the service, but I was hoping you'd fill the sixth position."

Henry placed a hand on Nathan's shoulder and gave him a warm smile. "Of course I will, Nathan."

They stepped apart and Nathan settled back next to Jack, watching the lot.

Cars were no longer even attempting to come down the narrow road, instead, streams of people were approaching. They were filing into the cemetery, leaving the chairs for the very oldest or the very youngest. Jack watched silently from his position between Nathan and Zoë as people continued to fill the graveyard with their subdued chatter.

He turned back to Henry. "You said you have put gravi-repulsor stabilizers on the coffin?"


Jack snorted and gave him an exasperated look. "Thanks."

Nathan nodded in acknowledgement.
People continued to stream in until there were so many bodies crowded into the green lawn between the cars and the graveside that he could no longer see the grass.

"It looks like the whole town is here," Jack murmured even as more people continued to make their way towards the crowd that had already gathered.

"I extended the invitation to anyone who knew him," Henry explained, "I just didn't realize that that meant everyone."

Just then, a scientist, obviously so given the lab coat she still wore. "I'm sorry, Dr. Stark," the woman said, "There are several of us who were working late. We didn't have time to change. And there are still two or three dozen people at GD that had experiments to maintain. My husband sends his sympathy."

Nathan nodded. "Thank you, Dr. Memon. Thank your husband for me as well."

She nodded and walked off, joining a gaggle of lab-coated scientists.

Eventually, the flow of people began to thin, slowly trickling to a complete stop.

"I've never seen so many people in black," Zoë said, her eyes raking over the mass of people gathered. "How many are there?"

Vincent looked over the crowd with a sharp eye and muttered, "Well, there are about thirty-two hundred people in Eureka and I'm not seeing certain faces. If I had to guess, I'd say twenty-nine hundred plus or minus sixty."

"The whole town," Nathan murmured. "The whole town showed up."

Jack turned to look at Nathan and saw not fear in his eyes, but thanks and relief. He was touched.

Jack was too.

Audrey's funeral had only had the people closest to her- he and Abbey, their parents, and his sister Lexie, but none others.

Nathan looked to Henry who gave a reassuring smile then to Jack. Jack reached out and touched his arm. "We're all here for you, Nathan. They're all here for you and Callister."

Nathan's lips pressed together and he swallowed, his eyes glistening slightly with moisture. "Thank you." He turned to face the other four. "Thank you," he repeated.

They nodded, none of them able to find a suitable response.

Nathan bobbed his head once and licked his lips. "I'm ready."

They took places around the coffin without comment, Nathan and Jack taking the lead, though Jack did defer to Henry and the other man bowed him forward. Behind Jack came Jo and Henry and behind Nathan, Zoë and Vincent. As they lifted the coffin, a hush fell over the crowd. The silence rippled out from around them, filtering through the crowd until the nearly stifling weight of the town's reverent silence fell on the procession.

They walked solemnly, quietly down the path the mourners stepped aside to create. There were soft words from the people and hands reaching out to touch the sleek mahogany surface as they passed. The walk felt long, almost as long as Audrey's had been, and to Jack, it seemed as if they
were on a treadmill that was running in the opposite direction.

Eventually, they came to the graveside and set Callister's coffin on the raised stand next to the grave. They all, except for Henry, went to the six seats that had been left for them and stood, waiting for Henry to approach the lectern.

He took his place and looked over the town assembled in support and solidarity for the lost son and the man who they thought had lost only his assistant. Henry spread his hands and indicated for those with seats to take them, they did and he gave the crowd a moment to quiet before speaking.

"Friends and family, we have gathered today to remember the life of one of our own, Callister Raynes. He was known to all as one of the best programmers to have ever lived in Eureka. Many of us had the privilege to count him as a friend. There were, however, a lucky few who got to call him family.

"I would like to open this time up for those who knew him to say a few words in honor of Callister and invite anyone with memories or stories about him to come forward and share. But before that, Nathan Stark, who knew him best."

Henry gestured to Nathan and waited for the man to stand before taking his seat.

Nathan walked to the lectern and pulled the folded piece of paper with his speech from his pocket. He gripped the sides of the surface almost convulsively then looked up, his eyes lifting from Jack's to skim over the thousands crammed into the small cemetery before settling back on Jack.

He took a deep breath then said, "Callister would have turned seven next month." Nathan paused to let the confused murmuring die down. "Ten years ago, he was just an idea, a dream, a project to see if it was possible to create artificial intelligence dynamic enough to successfully integrate into society."

Another pause for the explosion of noise that tore through the crowd.

"It wasn't until three years and nearly thirty prototypes later that there was one that took." He smiled sadly and looked down, to the left. "I'll never forget the moment his positronic brain first lit up in my hands. And when his eyes opened for the first time, when he took his first breath and asked, 'Who am I?...'" He stopped again, remembering.

"He was still just a project at that point, a fascinating experiment that seemed to be working. But then he started learning, and he stopped being a project. He had become a person, a fully realized, sentient person. Then one day, he called me 'Dad' and I realized that he was more than a project, he was my son.

"It was with great pride that I introduced my son to Eureka and instead of figuring him out and rejecting him like I had feared, you welcomed him. And he grew because of it. You showed him what it was like to laugh," he looked at Vincent, "to love," his gaze shifted to Jo, full of apology and thanks, "and how to handle annoyance and competition." He fixed Fargo with a firm, but humorous look.

"But I had to send him away. Callister began to experience data slips, and I realized they were caused by the interaction between systems and the Eurekan intranet. To keep him safe, he had to leave the town and people he knew as home. The night he left, I burned down my laboratory to protect him." Nathan fisted his hand and ground it against the lectern's surface as he stared at the folded paper in front of him. He looked back up, his eyes shining.
"Five days ago, my son returned home and I saw him again for the first time in almost three years. It was the first time I had seen Callister not as the boy he had been, but as the man he had become. And I knew he was dying. Callister came home to die. There was a bug, some malfunction in his programming that we had failed to find in our rush to get him out of Eureka that night and it had spent three years destroying him.

"It was a computer virus. My son was dying and there was nothing anyone could do. It felt like I was trapped in the middle ages—We had no idea what actually made him work, why he was even alive and we had no idea as to how to root out the malignant programs without destroying him.

"Three days ago in Portland, when Callister, when my son, lay dying, he asked me what was going to happen to him. We had had this conversation before, when he was questioning his validity as a sentient being and I asked him if he remembered what Alan Turing said about computers. This is what I told him the first time he asked me that question:

'Given that God can unite souls with human bodies, it is hard to see what reason there is for thinking that God could not unite souls with digital computers (or rocks, for that matter!). Perhaps, on this combination of views, there is no especially good reason why, amongst the things that we can make, certain kinds of digital computers turn out to be the only ones to which God gives souls—but it seems pretty clear that there is also no particularly good reason for ruling out the possibility that God would choose to give souls to certain kinds of digital computers.'

"And I know Callister had a soul. He had that spark, that intrinsic, defining characteristic that makes a person a person. Those of you that knew him knew that. And he was as human as any of us.

"Just a few minutes ago, there were only seven people in the entire world who knew that Callister was AI, and none of you, not one of thirty-two hundred geniuses realized that Callister was AI."

He turned and smiled softly at the coffin resting to his right.

"There was, however, a side to him that no one but I saw. Where in public he was almost always quiet, calm and assured in the knowledge that he understood, for the most part, what was going on around him, at home he was bright, curious, constantly finding wonder in the world around him. His joy in learning and in discovering what it meant to be human was incredible. He reminded me that science wasn't just about profit or the next great military discovery, it was about challenging the boundaries of what's possible and choosing to study what you want to study, not because it's profitable, but because you love to study it.

"Callister was quick to laugh, too, and once he figured out jokes, he was even quicker to make me laugh. He was—"

Nathan stopped and sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "How am I supposed to sum up my son's life? How am I supposed to find the words to explain who he was? What he wanted? What his goals and dreams and passions were? How am I supposed to tell people what it was like to work alongside him every day and to know that he was of me, but was completely and totally his own person?

"I love my son and I will miss him desperately for the rest of my life. But I will not be afraid to remember him, and maybe through me, some part of him will survive."

Nathan looked down and refolded the paper deliberately slowly before he stepped away from the lectern and moved to the coffin. He squeezed his eyes shut against tears as he brushed his fingers over the dark wood. After a moment, Nathan bent and kissed the coffin then pressed his forehead and flattened palms against it, saying in a voice so soft Jack could barely hear it, "I'm sorry,
Straightening, he regained his seat between Jack and Henry then bowed his head into his hands. Jack reached out and placed a hand on Nathan's back. The scientist sighed and looked up at him before nodding thankfully.

For a moment, no one moved for the lectern, then Jo stood abruptly, dabbed at her eyes with a black kerchief and walked towards it. She took her place behind it and looked around before pulling her face into a brave smile.

"The first time I met Callister," she said, "he held the door at CaféDiem open for me as I was heading outside to ticket a car parked illegally outside the Sheriff's Office. The second time I met him," she chuckled, "was about eight minutes later while I was standing outside the Sheriff’s Office putting a ticket on his windshield." Jo shot Nathan a grin, which he returned, obviously remembering the story. She continued, "He claimed he didn't realize that he was in an official vehicle parking space and apologized profusely. I gave him the ticket anyway.

"We met each other again, several times over the next few weeks, usually as I was coming into GD to fix something. He held the door for me every time- it didn't matter if I was carrying a huge gun, stinking of exploded crowd-dispersal grenade, or frog-marching someone from the building. He was always there with a smile and a bow. About three months after we first met, I asked him out."

After Jo finished her story of her first date with Callister, another thirty people came forward to share their memories and stories about him before dusk filled the cemetery. Jack saw Henry's arm move as he stood and small, twinkling lights appeared shimmering in the branches of the trees near the grave and hovering mid-air through the entire cemetery. Though each point of light was smaller than the tip of his little finger, they washed the yard with their warm glow and Henry was clearly visible as he stepped back to the lectern.

"We have gathered here to commend our son, brother, and friend Callister to God and to commit his body to the earth. In the spirit of faith and love, let us rise and offer our prayers for him.

"Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace." He paused and looked to Nathan who nodded before continuing.

"O God, by whose mercy the faithful departed find rest, bless this grave, and send your holy angel to watch over it. As we bury here the body of our brother, deliver his soul from every bond of sin, that he may rejoice in you with your saints forever. We ask this through Christ our Lord.

Amen"

Jack echoed the amen and was startled to hear most of the people in attendance do so as well. Henry continued:

"Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our brother. May our farewell express our affection for him; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. One day we shall joyfully greet him again."
Henry fell silent and bowed his head in prayer, silently inviting the people to join him. Jack let his own head fall forward and watched from the corner of his eyes as Nathan bowed forward and pressed his clasped hands to his forehead as he mouthed a silent hiccupping prayer and cried softly. Jack closed his eyes and mouthed his own prayer.

After a few moments, Henry spoke again. "As we now prepare to commit Callister's body to the earth, I ask his family to come forward for the final farewell."

Nathan and Jo rose and he beckoned Zoë, Jack, and Vincent forward. A few other people Jack recognized came forward and they lifted Callister's coffin from its stand and shifted it over the grave. They stepped back as it hovered there and then slowly sank down into the hole. It took a minute for it to settle into the grave and they stepped back, ringing the grave.

"We give you now to the earth and to God, Callister Raynes, child of Eureka, son of Nathan Stark. Find peace in your eternal rest and may God embrace you with open arms."

Nathan picked up a handful of soil from the pile that had been excavated for Callister's grave and scattered onto the coffin. Jo took the next handful and threw it in. She took a rose that had been worked into the back of her hair and dropped it in after.

"Good bye, Callister," she said quietly.

They all followed suit, throwing handfuls of soil onto the grave, Zoë's hands trembling when she did so.

When Henry had added his dirt to the growing pile he said, "Any of you who wish to scatter soil may do so, those of you who must leave, do so with peace and the memory of Callister in your heart."

The few gathered stepped aside and waited as a line formed and mourners gave dirt from the pile and their farewells to Callister. People approached Nathan and Jo, forming a receiving line and giving them their sympathies.

According to Jack's watch, the receiving line, which had been close to 2000 people long, took almost four-and-a-half hours to pass. When finally it did, closer to 2AM, Nathan was swaying on his feet and Zoë was nestled against Jack's chest, yawning at regular intervals. Jack was exhausted too, but years of training for stakeouts left him with an ability to stay awake and alert all night.

Finally, after the last of the mourners were gone, Vincent turned to face the five of them.

"I'm sorry, Nathan," Vincent said. "I really, truly am. If there's anything I can do-"

Nathan nodded thankfully at him and placed his hand on Vincent's shoulder. "Thank you, Vincent, I don't need anything right now."

Vincent smiled tightly. "Still, if you ever need anything-"

"Thank you," Nathan nodded.

Vincent looked at Nathan another moment, his face softening, then turned and went to his car in the lot.

"I'm going to stay to finish the burial," Henry said, "the rest of you should get to wherever it is you're going tonight. It's very late."
"Henry…” Nathan said, protesting.

Jack removed his arm from Zoë's shoulders and brushed Nathan's arm with his fingertips. "Don't stay for this," he said, "It only makes it harder. You've done your job. He's where he needs to be now."

Nathan let his head fall forward and sighed before straightening and nodding.

Turning to Jo, Jack asked, "Are you okay? Do you need a ride?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll be fine. I'll be all right driving."

Jack turned for the car, herding Zoë before him, Nathan following just off his right shoulder. The drive back was silent, except for Zoë's slight snoring from the back seat. When they pulled up to the bunker, Jack lifted her from the car and carried her to the door. Nathan opened it with a soft command to SARAH and followed him in. Navigating the stairs was a bit treacherous with an armful of asleep teenager, but Jack managed with a steadying hand on his back from Nathan.

He laid Zoë on her bed and covered her with a blanket, then left the room and closed the door. Turning, he saw that Nathan was only a few feet away, still swaying on his feet.

"Take the guest room tonight," he directed softly, "a real bed will feel good. If you need to change, I have some other stuff you can use."

Nathan shook his head. "No, I'll be okay." He paused then added weakly, "Can I use the other room?"

Jack gave him a small smile. "Of course." He scrubbed at the back of his head, trying to think of something to say, but he knew that there would be nothing he could say to make anything better, so he said what he could. "'Night."

Nathan echoed him with a soft rumble and walked away, disappearing into the bedroom opposite the one where they had laid Callister out. Jack stared after him for a moment before retreating to his own bedroom and shrugging out of his suit coat and toeing off his shoes, collapsed into bed.

Chapter End Notes

Just a note, I don't have a kink for feet, but I'm a bit of an artist/anatomist/biologist and things like a well-constructed physique, or specific appendage make me take notice and feel happy. I based Jack's thought processes and distractibility on my own and if I'd been sitting still as long as he had been, no matter what was happening, I would start noticing random things.

Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace. - Psalms 37:37

The funerary ritual was pulled from www.ibreviary.com. I modified it somewhat, since I have no clue which denomination it's from and also because mixing science and religion is a very difficult thing. As an evolutionary ecologist who was raised religiously studying at a liberal school in a conservative state, I totally get this.
Chapter Notes

Just a short chapter to hold you over. My end of term is in a month which means my professors have started to load on the assignments. I've had 2 exams, a quiz on over three hundred terms, a medieval lit analysis paper, and an endocrinology report due this week. I'm part way through the next chapter, but don't really have time to write right now. If it goes up, it goes up, though it probably won't go up until mid- to late-May.

I tried to wrap a bit of something that was bothering me but wouldn't fit in the next chapter.

As always, read, review, and enjoy!

“I thought you wanted to keep the fact that Callister was AI a secret.” Jack stabbed a chunk of chicken from a casserole. Head bent and purportedly looking at his dinner, he watched through his eyelashes as Nathan poked a piece of broccoli around his plate.

“I thought I did, too. But he was my son. Not telling people…” Nathan trailed off.

“Not telling people would have been denying what he was,” Jack finished, looking up at him.

Nathan nodded and finally stabbed the piece of broccoli, lifted it to his mouth and pulled it off with his lips.

“Isn't you worried about the government coming for him?” Jack ate the piece of chicken off his own fork. “I mean, you told a government town full of government-paid scientists about him.”

Nathan finished chewing his piece of broccoli, swallowed, and said, “Most of them are too scared to try anything. The few that aren't wouldn't be stupid enough to try anything. And I can have Henry put surveillance on the site.”

Jack nodded and took another bite.

“This is pretty good widow’s casserole,” Nathan said, scooping up a forkful of the breadcrumbs that had topped the casserole. “Who made it?”

Jack leaned over the counter and picked the card up from the mess of cling wrap and breadcrumbs. “With sympathy, Drs. Liebermann and family.’ So one of the Liebermanns, I guess. Do you know them?”
“Not particularly well. He’s a xenogeologist and she’s a xenobiologist.”

Jack frowned. “Xeno- They study aliens?”

“She does.” Nathan shrugged. “Well, the alien algae they found under the surfaces of Mimas, Enceladus, Europa, Dione, Rhea, and Titan.”

“Greek gods?”

Nathan rubbed his face. “Uh, two giants, two titans, a conquest of Zeus, and a type of deity.”

Jack poked at the casserole congealing on his plate. ”’Widow’s casserole’?”

Nathan made a vague wave that encompassed the five casseroles on the counter and the fridge which was completely full of other one-pan meals in glass dishes. “The ‘sorry your person is dead, have some squishy food in a tin pan’ meals. They usually give them to widows. And it’s almost always green bean.”

“Or tuna,” Jack added. “Only a few people came to Audrey's funeral, but everyone sent us tuna casserole. Weeks of tuna. It was the only thing we really found amusing. For months.”

“I would understand how that could be funny.”

“You’ve been smiling a lot. Are you sure you’re-”

Nathan violently speared a noodle and a piece of broccoli. “I swear if you ask if I’m okay, you will find tuna casserole in your bed.”

“Sorry,” Jack dropped his head. “I just-” He ruffled the hair on the back of his head.

“I know.” Nathan dropped his fork and pushed the plate of half-eaten casserole away.

“It’s just-” Jack broke off, shaking his head. He could see the threat in Nathan’s eyes. “What are you going to do about Allison?”

Nathan sighed. “What do you mean ‘do about Allison?’”

Chasing a clump of breadcrumbs around his plate, Jack said cautiously, “She didn't, doesn't-” He grimaced and picked up his beer, taking a deep swig.

“She doesn't accept that my son is- was as real and valid as hers?”

Jack nodded past his beer bottle. “Yeah.”

Running his hand through his hair, Nathan rolled his shoulders. “I don’t know. I’m going to talk to her, ask her why, but I’m not doing that over the phone and I’m not doing it now.”

Jack shoved another bite of casserole into his mouth and stood abruptly, picking his plate up and carrying it to the sink. He turned back to the counter, re-wrapped the Liebermanns’ casserole and carried it to the fridge with the rest of the dishes on the counter.

He gulped the last of his beer and chucked it into the recycling. Jack left the kitchen and headed towards the living room, then turned when he felt Nathan’s eyes on him. He gestured to the television with his head.

“Star Trek?”
Nathan stood and followed him into the living room.
A Return to (Almost) Normal

Chapter Summary

They return to their respective sheriffing and sciencing and Jack begins to realize that even in a town of super-genius, Mondays suck.

Chapter Notes

Hey readers! Sorry I’m a two months late, finals took more out of me than I expected so I wasn’t quite able to get the writing done like I said I would while I was at school. I’m at home now and instead of having the absolute gobs of free time like I expected, I’ve been doing yardwork. Constantly.

Also, my parents are of the opinion that fanfiction is where nerds get their rocks off, so writing/reading it is frowned upon. As such, the time during the day that I do get to write is spent working on my original fiction and writing any of my ff is relegated to late at night when my yardworked out body is yelling at me to sleep. I do not think I can adequately express the number of times in the last two months I’ve gone to bed meaning to write only to pass out as soon as my head hits the pillow.

My sincerest apologies.

I would make promises about my writing schedule, but I won’t, because I haven’t been able to keep to them, however, I will be making my best efforts to get the chapters to wrap this episode and the ones based on ‘Primal’ out as soon as I can.

Oh! One final note before I shut up so you can read, there are asterisks (*) on certain sciency words. For those of you who do not science/do not know what they mean, I have included definitions! You can find these in the end of chapter notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first days after Callister’s funeral passed relatively slowly, interrupted only by a steady stream of callers and casserole-bringers, mainly those who had been unable to come to the funeral. Zoë went back to school the next day, her absence excused by the principal without any discussion given her participation in the funeral. Nathan remained sleeping in the spare bedroom.

When the majority of the calls had tapered off on Saturday, the fourth day after the funeral, Jack sent Zoë to spend the day with friends and the two men set out for Portland to collect Nathan’s car. They chattered as Jack drove the nearly six hours north, sometimes about nothing, but often about the implications and possible interpretations of several of the Star Trek episodes they had watched over the preceding four days.

They found Nathan’s car in a parking lot across the road from the bus station. Jack tried as hard as he could to keep the other man’s attention away from the terminal and the rows of busses parked there as they checked the car for damage, but it was hard and on several occasions he caught Nathan staring blankly across the road. Once they’d collected the car, they stopped for a late lunch at a local diner before beginning the long drive back. Jack had spent the entire trip with one eye on the road and one eye on his rear-view mirror watching Nathan’s car.
It was a long time after ten when they returned to Eureka and Jack was startled to see Nathan turn down the street towards the bunker instead of towards his own house. Jack didn’t mind, rather he was still faintly surprised that Nathan wanted to spend time with him. They’d been at each other’s throats often enough that a week ago, Jack would probably have cuffed him at the first legal opportunity and had him sit in a cell for a few hours.

Nathan returned to his house Sunday night so he could get ready to go back to GD the next day.

Jack returned to sheriffing without a hitch. Or much of one. By Eureka standards.

He had to arrest eight people that Monday for somehow switching the minds of one of the paranoia-drug chimpanzees and Taggert. It had been somewhat amusing at first that it had taken more than sixteen hours for anyone to realize the switch had been made. Then the monkey-brain in Taggert’s body had begun flinging feces.

It took almost no time at all to figure out which chimpanzee contained Taggert’s mind, then only a few minutes to switch them back, at which point Taggert disappeared into his lab, face blazing red.

Nathan’s Monday had not been good. There had been three opinions among the people that had become clear as the day progressed. The first caused him no bother, a majority of people treated him as if he was Nathan Stark and needed to be obeyed and scurried from. The second was a bit more bothersome, that he was to be pitied and treated with cautious words and gentle tones. The third had set him into the beginning stages of a blinding-red fury. Some, like the scientists who had switched Taggert and the chimp, had taken it upon themselves to completely bypass Nathan’s authority and perform dangerous unapproved experiments.

Nathan’s furious bellows at the eight scientists rattled the windows on every office in the rotunda and echoed down the halls. He’d roared, red-faced and spraying spittle at them, slowly advancing until they were cornered against the wall below his office. A gentle touch from Jack diffused much of his anger and he backed away. There was, however, a vicious glint in Nathan’s eyes as he helped cuff the eight scientists together and load them into the transport van Henry had been kind enough to provide.

Before Jack had even returned to GD to assist with the evidentiary portion of the redaction of the eight scientists and their transfer to federal prison, Nathan had peons scuttling away from him in terror. Even some of the department heads were tucking against walls in a vain attempt to disappear as Nathan stormed past with Jack near-jogging to keep up.

After a couple minutes of angrily storming through the halls, Jack felt Nathan’s mood change, going from near-murder to a grim contentment.

“Making them scurry makes you feel better, doesn’t it?” Jack asked as they strode into Nathan’s office.

Nathan flopped into his chair seeming to almost completely diffuse. He let his head drop back over the top of the head rest. “A little.” He sighed and sat up. “They thought they could bypass me.”

Jack could almost sense Nathan’s anger begin to ratchet back up.

“I showed weakness and they took advantage of me,” Nathan growled, dropping his head to his
Sighing, Jack dropped into the seat opposite the scientist. “We’ve talked about this. Crying for your son isn’t weakness, Nathan. You were at his funeral. And it’s only been ten days.”

Nathan grunted his concession, a somewhat hollow sound echoing in the hollow space between his arms and the desktop.

“Besides,” Jack continued, “The scientists aren’t acting any differently than usual. How often do the ones who fuck up, I mean really fuck up actually ever come to you to get approval for their psychotic projects before blowing the town up?”

Nathan snorted.

“No, seriously,” Jack insisted, “except for the stuff the kid used for his speed-drug rampage, you haven’t approved any of the problem projects I’ve been called in to fix.” He leaned forward, “Before you get all grumpy, nine-and-a-half out of ten calls I answer are either domestic stuff or scientists who think things have been stolen. Otherwise it’s shit like today… Or, you know, Fargo pushing buttons.”

Sitting up and looking back at Jack, Nathan’s face softened. “Huh,” he grunted, “You would think the inhabitants of Eureka would be more… peaceful.”

Jack laughed. “Nathan, Eureka means ‘I’ve found it’ not ‘I play well with others.’”

Nathan chuckled silently for half a second before his deep laugh filled the room. Jack joined him for a moment before Nathan stopped, wiping his eyes.

“You ready to arrest some scientists?” Nathan asked.

Jack grinned. “Always.”

Nathan matched his grin and pressed the button on his intercom, calling Fargo to bring in the paperwork.

The next two weeks passed quietly; after Nathan’s explosion and the near-immediate redaction of the eight scientists, nobody seemed ready to do anything to provoke his wrath. This, of course, meant that the entire town had gone nearly silent. Eureka was so quiet that even the people that normally called with their domestic issues weren’t calling the Sheriff’s Office; it was so quiet that Jo had brought in a kit and was painting a landscape at her desk and he was listening to a recap of the previous week’s town meeting.

“Carter.”

Jack jerked up from the coffee maker to see Allison striding toward him, her face tight and pinched with annoyance.

The relationships between he and Allison, as well as that between she and Nathan, which had been strained by her easy dismissal of Callister as a person, had been mended over the interceding three weeks. The blatant disapproval she now held on her face had nothing to do with that.

“What’chya doing?”

He carried the coffee back to his desk. “I’m the Sheriff. I’m… sherriffing.”
She gave him a flat, unamused smile. “Mh. You were supposed to meet me at Global half an hour ago for your physical.”

Jack felt a slight pang of guilt for having blown her off so deliberately, but he really didn’t want that physical. “Yeah, good news, I gave myself the physical, and I’m in perfect health.”

“All right,” Allison said sharply, “it’s mandatory. You can’t be insured by Global without one.”

“Yeah, now’s not a good time. We’re really, really, super busy,” he said.

Allison looked pointedly over to where Jo was painting, then turned back to him. “Okay, this is the third time you’ve put this off. What’s up?”

Jack walked from behind his desk to sharpen a pencil in the old-timey sharpener on the wall behind Allison, the one he’d purchased and installed as a reminder that an analogue world existed out there somewhere. The first two times had been before Callister. The first days after saving Nathan and the second time after the space-death-laser debacle. “You really want to know?”

“No,” she countered, half amused, mostly annoyed as she turned to face him. “I just really enjoy our morning banter.”

He crammed the pencil in the sharpener and began turning the crank, knowing as he looked back at her straight-faced, that the sound would annoy her just as much as it had any of his teachers growing up. He blew the dust off sharply and turned around. “Because I don’t want to die.”

“Isn’t that the whole point of taking the physical, Carter?”

“No, that’s tempting fate. Insure a cop today, he takes a bullet tomorrow.”

“Oh,” she laughed, “What are you, superstitious?”

“It’s not superstition if it’s true,” he remarked. “Which it is.”

“Okay,” she said, all amusement gone from her demeanor, “you’re not grasping the point here: You don’t take the physical, you don’t have a job. So strip, we’ll just do the physical here.”

Jack looked around, one part of attempting to process what Allison had just said and one part mortified at the suggestion. “Excuse me?” he managed as he caught a glimpse of Jo smirking at her easel.

“Well we all have a past, this was mine, so, um,” she snapped her fingers as if to hurry him up, “time’s a wasting. Drop ‘em.”

He crossed his arms and pulled himself up. “Ahh… I’m gonna need to see some credentials, if you are a doctor.”

“Was,” she said, mimicking his posture, smiling slightly, “a doctor before Kevin was born, but I think I still remember where all the main parts are. So drop your pants.”

Jo snickered and Jack met Allison’s gaze full on. “Yeah, no. There’ll be no pant dropping without a nice dinner and many, many cocktails,” he said, smiling slightly at her to soften the barb.

She returned the smirk and they both jumped slightly when the phone rang. He gave her a defiant smile and walked away, grabbing his pencil first as Jo answered the phone.
Carl Carlson was not what Jack expected. He’d met plenty of odd scientists, but this man was by far the strangest. In fact, he was just as unsettling as many of the people Jack had needed to work with in his days as a Marshal. The man’s posture in the door when he’d first arrived had cemented that and Jack approached him like he would have and slightly insane witness. Or frightened wild animal.

Certainly the almost instinctive lurch backwards into the protection of his house when Jack had taken a step toward him spoke to that. Carlson’s severe germophobia, however, was something Jack had seen quite often among the some of the more intense biologists at GD.

What was more interesting was Beverly Barlowe’s sudden appearance. The therapist had been largely missing since their explosive fight at the bunker the night of Callister’s death. Her fixated interest in Carlson made Jack slightly uncomfortable as did her near-complete dismissal of him. Despite her flaws and Jack’s nagging suspicion that there was something odd about her, she did seem to know how to calm Carlson down.

He’d tried to get out of going to Carlson’s lab with him, partially because he really wanted to finish that coffee he’d made but not gotten to drink back in his office, and partially because bad things sometimes happened when he went down to the labs and Carlson looked to be the sort of person to cause, although accidentally, bad things to happen.

The hairs on the back of his neck pricked as Carlson boarded the elevator car and Jack turned to see a pissy-looking Allison and a very focused but distant Nathan walking towards them. Although he wanted to talk to Nathan since they hadn’t in almost four days, the threat of the physical and the insurance made him jump on the elevator with Carlson as a lie about not being able to get enough of the Eureka’s science tumbled out of his mouth.

A sharp call of “Carter!” followed them as the elevator doors began to shut.

“So, uh, what is this breakthrough?” he asked and though only using the man as an evasion tactic, was happy to see a delighted smile cross Carlson’s face.

“It’s a remarkable thing!” Carlson said, obviously happy to have someone to explain his project to. Based on both Jo and Beverly’s attitude toward him, Jack could guess that nobody had taken the man serious in years. “What I’m working on will revolutionize the future of medicine. It might even make a profession like yours a bit safer.”

Jack chuckled. “Is it some way to overwrite Fargo’s button pushing thing?”

Carlson waved him away. “No, no, nothing like that. I’m in cellular programming- genetics. That project would be in neurology. I’m working on cellular regeneration.”


“Sort of,” Carlson said, “Nowhere near that scale, though. I’m not that good. Yet. What I’m doing is a bit more like what happens when a lizard re-grows its tail or new skin forms over a healing injury, except instead of being a non-manipulable cartilaginous structure or an aligned collagen tissue matrix-”


Carlson cocked his head. “No need to apologize,” he said as the elevator doors opened and they stepped out onto the scientist’s floor, “Sometimes I forget I’m talking to people who don’t know
what I’m talking about.” He paused for breath as they made a left turn. “When a lizard grows its
tail back, it doesn’t grow back the bone, muscle, and nerves it lost in sacrificing the flesh, rather it
grows back a— a kind of stiff replacement made out of cartilage, long muscles, and skin. And after
an injury when you get a scar, it isn’t perfect skin that grows back, it’s essentially a biological
bandage that has a completely different structure than the skin around it so it’s shiny and doesn’t
stretch. Now,” he said abruptly, “You need to put on a clean suit to enter my lab.”

“Why?” Jack asked, a bit startled by the sudden change in topics.

“I’m working with complex biological samples and the addition of any foreign genetic or bacterial
material could compromise my sample,” Carlson explained as he stepped into one of the pass-
through sonic sterilization booths Jack had become accustomed to while working in Eureka. There
was a buzz that lasted fifteen seconds and Carlson opened the door on the other side and pulled a
cleansuit from the wall.

“Come on,” Carlson said, shouting a bit to be heard through the thick double glass, “You can’t
come in until you sterilize.”

Jack sighed, walked into the booth, and pulled the door shut behind him. He separated his teeth in
his mouth as the buzz, which was bearable from outside the booth, rattled his bones and made him
feel like his insides were turning to liquid when he pressed the activation button.

Jack shook his head when the buzz sterilization was over to try to clear the rattling sensation in his
ears. He tugged the door open and stomped up to Carlson.

“I hate that,” he groused.

Carlson tipped his head, considering for a moment. “You get used to it,” he said quickly,
shrugging. “Put that on.” He pointed to a second clean suit hanging from the wall.

“Really?” Jack asked, “I just went through the sanitizer.”

Shaking his head, Carlson said, “I can’t risk fibers from your clothes or any of your hair falling in
the lab.”

Jack frowned. “But won’t the suits drop stuff?”

“Well, yes,” Carlson conceded, “But I know the compounds in the clean suit and they won’t react
with the chemicals in my experiment.”

Jack sighed, dropping his head. “Sure, fine. I’ll meet you in there?”

“Okay.” Carlson nodded sharply and turned into his lab.

Yanking on the too-short pants, the too-big too-short labcoat, the weird white cap, and the stupid
blue over-booties, Jack strode into the lab. It was primarily empty; much less cluttered than any of
the biological labs he’d been into. There was only a lab bench, a single shelving unit full of
chemicals, what appeared to be a massive centrifuge* (yes, Jack knew what that was and how to
pronounce it), and a collection of animals in very large cages.

Carlson stood by the lab bench preparing chemicals in a long test tube so Jack took the chance to
look around at the animals. There were the expected lizards, most with regrown tails, but there
were also crabs, frogs, salamanders, and two cages of very… cute mice.

“Hey, Carlson?”
“Yes, Sheriff?”

“The lizards I get, but the other animals? I remember reading somewhere that mammals don’t, uh, regenerate.”

“Oh,” Carlson responded over his shoulder. “The African spiny mice*, *Acomys kempi* and *Acomys percivali*, can almost completely drop their skin and regrow it without scarring. Fascinating. They make a much better model species for mammals than lizards do.”

“Uh huh,” Jack nodded slowly. “And, uh, the salamanders?”

“They can regrow a whole manipulable limb. Most advanced vertebrate that can.”

Jack stared at them a minute before turning to see Carlson approaching the centrifuge in the middle of the room. He ambled toward the machine, hoping to see whatever science Carlson was going to be doing. A chameleon in a large tank caught his attention and he bent down to look for a moment before wandering up behind Carlson.

“Could you- could you step back please?” Carlson asked.

He took a step back, not wanting to cause trouble, then shuffled forwards.

“I sai- I said step back.”

Jack nodded pinching his nose as he took two steps back. Carlson turned and he lifted his arms in a silent question. Carlson rolled his eyes and went back to his work, lifting a micropipettor* from a rack on the table with the centrifuge, clipping on a new tip from a box, setting an amount by twisting a dial below the plunger on the top of the device, and drew a small amount of fluid into the tip.

Carlson looked back at Jack, holding the micropipettor perpendicular to the bench, tip down. “I’m attempting to achieve adhesion affinity gradient in the proximal blastemal* cells in human tissues.”

Jack nodded, an appraising twist to his lips. He hadn’t understood a word of what Carlson had just said. Or rather, he *had* understood what he was saying, but not what it actually meant. “I’m glad someone’s on that,” he said lightly.

He just barely heard the irritated half-hiss Carlson replied with before saying, “Yes. You know when a lizard loses its tail, it grows back. It’s called cellular regeneration.”

“We covered that on the walk here,” Jack said quickly.

Carlson turned to him a smug, extremely proud smile on his face. “I’m trying to do that with humans.”

Jack stared at him in amazement. “Well that’s cool.”

Carlson pressed a key and a circular rack filled with test tubes rose up from the centrifuge and he selected one, removing the lid. “Beverley encourages me to take risks and not wimp out when I’m on the verge of something new. Moment of truth.” He lifted the micropipettor, still nearly perfectly vertical, above the rack and poised it over the tube. “Fifty microliters. Fifty microliters only.”

He depressed the plunger slowly and a small amount of liquid dropped into the test tube. Carlson let out a huffing breath and pressed the ignition on the centrifuge. The rack dropped back down into the body of the centrifuge and began spinning rapidly.
There was a sudden burst of noise from the chameleon and Carlson whipped around to look at it, the now upside-down micropipettor swiped the open tube of chemicals from which Carlson had drawn the fluid into the centrifuge.

“Uh oh,” he said quietly.

Jack felt a wave of foreboding and panic wash over him, the kind he’d only ever gotten before a case went sour as a Marshal. “What do you mean ‘uh oh’?”

The centrifuge exploded.

Not in the Michael Bay fiery-death kind of way that a piece of electronic equipment should have, but in the crackling-with-questionable-blue-energy Eureka way with a force strong enough to launch him back into a metal rack of animals and Carlson through the lab window.

There was a loud ringing, though whether that was his head or an alarm, Jack couldn’t quite decide. His head had connected with an apparently unbreakable sheet of plexiglass on one of the cages and he was looking into another, staring into the baleful eyes of a large charcoal and crème mottled salamander. Jack blinked and the salamander licked one of its eyes.

The ringing was definitely an alarm, he thought watching the salamander as it watched him, the sound in his ears was now more of a rushing, wooshing, pounding. Not the pounding, he realized, that and the shouting that he could suddenly hear as his ears cleared of the post-explosion shock were people responding in panic to the explosion.

Jack stood unsteadily, pushing himself away from the tank he’d whacked his head on and grimaced at the large, ugly, mud-colored salamander in the cage behind him. He was glad he hadn’t been staring at that one. The two-foot-long creature would have given him nightmares. He turned away from the cages and stumbled across the wrecked lab, only vaguely noticing the chameleon wandering across the remnants of its glass tank as he made his way over to where Carlson was just starting to stir against the linoleum floor tiles. He stepped over the sill of the shattered out window.

“You okay?” he asked, sticking his arm out a bit stiffly when Carlson sat up. Carlson hesitated a moment before taking the proffered hand so Jack could haul him to his feet.

“I believe I am,” Carlson said, patting his hands over his torso, checking for injuries.

“Why did it explode?” Jack asked, stretching up and twisting his back side to side.

Carlson shook his head. “I’m not really sure. It was probably an imbalance of chemicals in the reaction- Oh! Doctor Stark!”

Jack turned to see Nathan stalking toward them in full evil-boss-mode, his gaze hard and unforgiving as they bore into Carlson. His eyes softened momentarily with worry as he looked to Jack, and then hardened again as they refocused on Carlson at Jack’s nod.

Allison came behind him, her movement somewhere between jogging and scurrying, having to take a much longer stride than usual. Her face was pinched and hard, like Nathan’s except her irritation seemed to be focused on Jack rather than Carlson. The two stopped a few feet away in the hall, both with arms crossed in anger.

“What happened here, Carlson?” Nathan asked sharply.

“The-” Jack started but Nathan cut him off with a hard look. “I’m asking the scientist, Sheriff.”
Jack stared at him, surprised by the sudden snap of anger directed at himself. Before any answer could be given, though, Allison said, “I’ll take your statement, Jack. In there.” She tipped her head toward the lab.

Jack nodded slowly, still a little confused at Nathan’s reaction, and stepped back through the blown-out window as Allison walked through the door and bypassed the sonic sterilizers. She entered the lab a few moments after Jack and turned to him with a frown on her face.

“What happened, Carter?”

He noted that she held to the convention of using his last name, something she had reverted to after Callister’s death the week previously.

“Carlson was mixing chemicals, trying to change the adhesion-something of the proximal blasto-cells.”

“I know what his project is,” she snapped. “What exactly happened?”

Jack barely resisted rolling his eyes. “Carlson was mixing chemicals on top of the centrifuge when the chameleon made a sound and he turned to look. He had the pipettor in his hand and it knocked the test tube of chemicals into the running centrifuge. He said ‘uh oh’ and then it crackled with electricity and exploded. Carlson was thrown through the window and I was slammed against the wall of animals.” He jerked his thumb to indicate the tanks.

“Are you hurt?” Allison asked.

Jack shrugged. “Not really. I hit my head on the one with the monster salamander, but I don’t feel like I have a concussion.”

Allison pulled a pen light out of a pocket and flashed it across his eyes. “No, you don’t have a concussion,” she said tucking the light away. “If you’d come to my office for the physical you might not have been hurt physically.”

He walked with her, a bit more stiffly now that the moment of adrenaline was wearing off, and huffed, “Well, Dr. Blake, if you hadn’t have tried to give me a physical, then I wouldn’t have had to go to such extreme measures to avoid it.”

“You got lucky, Carter,” she warned.

“Well not as lucky as him.” He pointed to Carlson who was walking, seemingly unharmed, back into the lab through the now-deactivated sonic sterilizer. He was trying to explain why the explosion had happened to Nathan, but to Jack, despite understanding only the basics of what the short scientist was explaining, it sounded like bullshit. In fact, it seemed to Jack that the only injury Carlson might face was the one Nathan would give him if the scientist kept talking.

Nathan walked past Carlson and unbuttoned his jacket as his gaze bounced off Jack before surveying the destruction. “Allison, I’m gonna need form 395 tack 2-Charlie.”

Jack looked between them in confusion as Allison began protesting.

“My call.”

Allison frowned and Jack looked back at Nathan.

“He’s all yours, Carter.”
“All mine?” Nathan left the room so Jack turned to Allison. “What's- What's, um, form 395 tack 2-Charlie?”

She sighed. “Revocation of Government property and clearances. Carl is being fired and it is your job as Sheriff to oversee the safe and orderly removal of all ex-employees from Eureka.”

Jack stared at her. “What does that entail?”

Chapter End Notes

Centrifuge: An apparatus that rotates at high speed and applies centrifugal force to its contents; used to separate fluids of different densities or liquids from solids i.e. cream from milk or blood cells from plasma. You put your test tubes of samples in a rotating disk with appropriately sized holes in it, put a counter weight in the other side and turn it on. The counter weight is important because if you don’t it makes funny sounds and your lab supervisor yells at you.

African Spiny Mouse: Two species of mice, Acomys kempi and Acomys percivali, have the ability to shed up to 60% of the skin on their back. This acts as a defense mechanism, and much like a lizard can drop its tail when captured, A. kempi and A. percivali can shed the skin that a predator has grabbed. They can then regrow hair follicles, skin, sweat glands, fur, and cartilage completely.

Micropipettor: A calibrated instrument into which small amounts of liquid are suctioned for transfer or measurements. The blue sucky-thing Carlson knocks over the test tube of clear fluid with. If you watch cop dramas/CSI, you’ve seen them being used for DNA testing. Intended for smaller volumes than a regular pipettor. These do *not* get turned upside-down.

Blastema cell: A mass of cells capable of growth and regeneration into organs or body parts.
A Pale Horse Waits in the Shadows

Chapter Summary

Second half of the "Invincible" recap. The accident in Carlson's lab appears to have some... interesting effects and Jack learns a bit of quantum physics.

Chapter Notes

I’ve changed the underlying cause of Carl Carlson’s telekinesis. Henry’s explanation of Carl being able to access all 100% of his brain instead of just 10% has been the explanation for a normal human getting super powers in many different sources, but it really isn’t possible. We may use only 10% of our brain for thought, but that doesn’t mean that the other 90% are sitting there doing nothing. That other 90% is busy doing things like breathing, beating the heart, and regulating body temperature. In other words, you’d die if you could access all 100% of your brain for thinking. Instead, I’ve made Carlson capable of accessing his subconscious mind, that obnoxious part of your brain that keeps you up at night without actually telling you what’s wrong. Realistically, it still doesn’t make sense, but it’s what I’ve decided to go with. Also, I must include a warning that the ahead chapter gets pretty quantum physics-y, although I try to explain it as simply as I can. If I’ve gotten anything wrong, and you are a quantum physicist, please contact me, I’d love to fix it.

 Apparently “the safe and orderly removal” of an ex-employee entailed babysitting a distraught scientist. The man might have been mildly annoying, and he might have almost blown Jack up, but it was hard watching Carlson have his life so thoroughly torn apart and displayed on the front lawn for the world to see. He didn’t have much beyond his work and the basic necessities of home-ownership, but what he did have appeared to Jack to be very sentimental. An old photograph of four people, a mother, a father, a son, and a daughter leaned, exposed to the sunlight, against a stack of clothing in boxes. There were a few other knick-knacks that he could see being scanned and then set into boxes.

He strode across the lawn toward the portrait and turned it around so the sunlight wouldn’t fade the image. Jack turned at the sound of metal clacking against metal and frowned as a tech opened the lid on a simple bronze funerary urn with an engraving of a man and a woman embracing on the side. The tech tugged out a plastic bag filled with ashes and moved to drop them on the ground so he could scan the inside.

“Hey!” Jack snapped as he carefully took the bag of ashes from the tech.

“Huh?” The man looked more than a little startled and flinched back.

Jack glared at him. “Odd as it may seem to you, I don’t think Carlson’s the kind of guy to hide government tech in his parents’ ashes.”
The tech looked down at the urn in his hands and turned a funny series of colors before settling on an embarrassed red. “Oh, shit, uh… Crap! I didn’t mean-!”

Jack knew the tech in passing, a man named Topulos who was very, very good at his job for his thoroughness and stick-to-itiveness but was prone to miss some of the bigger-picture things.

“Sheriff Carter, I wasn’t-!” Topulos protested, his panic evident on his face.

Jack shook his head. “I know you don’t mean it, just pay more attention, yeah? That way we don’t have a repeat of last week’s cockroach fiasco?”

Topulos reddened further at the memory of an accident during a safety protocol audit that had set close to two million oriental cockroaches loose within the building. Very fortunately for him and the rest of Global Dynamics in general, the roaches were being used in an experimental mind control program and could be recalled to the lab they were from. “No, Sheriff Carter,” he mumbled.

Jack beamed at him and clapped him on the shoulder. “Good man.” Carefully, he slid the bag of ashes back into the urn still in the other man’s hands and the tech lidded it before putting it back in the bin.

At the sound of Carlson’s voice as he angrily snapped at the woman from human resources, Jack turned away from Topulos. He walked up to the man, grimacing internally that they had turned him to the curb in nothing but his underclothes.

“I’m really sorry about this, Carlson,” he said softly. He hadn’t known about this part of the job. The only people fired during his tenure had been arrested and their belongings turned over to the government, they hadn’t been his responsibility.

Carlson grunted acknowledgement. “Where am I going to sleep?” His voice was small with worry.

Jack frowned, thinking. “Oh, I’m sure Beverly has a place.”

“No,” he replied as he tugged on the blue coat the PR woman had handed him, “she’s not returning my calls. Besides, I cannot sleep in a public bed.” He shuddered. “If Sheriff Cobb were here, he’d let me stay with him. But… he’s not here.”

Jack bit the inside of his mouth. The man was playing up his pathos, trying to finagle his way into a favor from Jack. Jack sighed. He felt horrible for what had happened to Carlson.

“Carl, I happen to live in a hermetically sealed-”

“-military bunker,” Jack trailed off.

“Thank you! I’ll just call Beverly and let her know where I’m staying. If I had a phone, ‘cause I don’t have one. Can I borrow-?”

“Yeah,” Jack reached into his pocket and drew out the phone, offering it to Carlson.

The shorter man flinched, then lifted the blue coat to use as a buffer against actually touching Jack’s phone. Jack placed it on the covered hand and Carlson darted away almost instantly to make his call.
Sighing, Jack turned to see Allison approaching with three very large boxes on a hand truck.

“Hey,” he greeted, “So, you, uh, moonlighting at Staples?”

Allison gave him a wry grin, one of the first she had graced him with in the weeks since the funeral. Although Jack had not necessarily forgiven Allison for her easy dismissal of Callister, he realized his quiet judgement was causing her huge amounts of guilt. He had eased up, working to regain something of their easy friendship from before and she had responded.

She settled the hand truck and rounded it, saying, “Form 395 tack two-Charlie. Carl has to complete these before he’s allowed to leave Eureka.”

“Well so much for your paperless society,” he remarked glibly.

“Well,” she looked over at the boxes, “this’ll get filed at the DOD. They’re not quite down with the whole save-a-tree mentality as of yet.”

Jack snorted and Allison walked up, suddenly slapping the side of his neck. There was a sharp pain as she pulled away.

“Oh, and that’s for you.”

“Oh!” Jack complained, turning to look at her. His fingers found the edge of the source of pain and he moved to pull the small plastic thing from his neck.

“Oh yeah,” she said, smirking, “it’ll hurt a lot more if you try to take it off.”

He released the edge, and moved to examining it with his fingertips. The thing was octagonal, about the size of a half-dollar coin, and had a raised dome on the lower portion. “What the hell is it?”

“Wireless body sensor. In other words: portable physical. It’s taking constant measurements of your vital signs, organ function, and blood chemistry.”

She had ambushed him. “I feel so violated,” he said, still touching the plastic octagon.

“Oh, I’ll be monitoring you,” she said, quickly turning to walk away. The way she had said that sounded so… wrong.

“Allison!”

Something beeped and she turned holding up a small device. “Blood pressure,” she reminded, “Make sure he signs every page,” before turning and almost flouncing off.

He growled his pain again then turned, remembering that Carlson still had his phone. He could see the man’s distress, especially when a tech shut the door for the last time. Jack wandered forward when Carlson hung up. Carlson handed him back the phone and drooped.

“It’s finished. Everything I’ve work for, for years- gone,” he moaned.

“Hey,” Jack said, trying desperately to cheer the man up, “No it’s not. You still have all your research. I’m sure there’s a university out there somewhere who would kill for a scientist like you.”

“I doubt it.”

Jack bumped Carlson jovially with his elbow, earning an odd look. “Come on, I mean, cellular
regeneration? What fancy-pants school out there wouldn’t want to have their name behind the discoveries of the man who made doctors obsolete?"

Carlson looked up at him incredulously. “You really believe that?”

Jack nodded. “Definitely. When you get to the bunker, I’ll have SARAH help you look at what institutions are hiring.”

“Sarah?” Carlson echoed.

“SARAH, uh… Self Actuated Residential Automated Habitat, I think. She’s my home’s AI personality. A bit neurotic, and over-protective, but she’s kind.”

“O- okay.” Suddenly Carlson sounded nervous. Plenty of people were thrown off by SARAH, and Jack figured it was probably better to let Carlson know about her beforehand.

“You gotta finish that first,” Jack said, pointing to the boxes. “I’ll drive you to wherever you want to work on the paperwork, and you gimme a call when you want me to pick you up, okay?”

Carlson nodded. “The public library on Dewey Avenue. People don’t go there anymore.”

It was a quick drive to the library, and a quick trip inside to bring in the three boxes of form 395 tack two-Charlie, then settle Carlson at a table with a pen.

Jack was home quicker than he would have imagined. He gave SARAH a cursory greeting, stepped inside and dropped his jacket on the sofa. Zoë was at the table working on something on her tablet.

“Hey, what’s up?” he greeted, unbuckling his belt and setting it on top of his wind breaker on the sofa. Zoë was old enough now that he didn’t have to put his gun away the moment he took it off, but he would later.

“Uh, organic chemistry is trying to kill me,” she growled, pushing away from the tablet and turning to look at him. She took in the bruises and the stiff walk with the practiced air of an officer’s family member and asked, “What happened to you?”

“Organic chemistry almost killed me,” Jack answered before changing subjects quickly. “We’re gonna have a house guest, so remember to pick up.”

He walked passed her and asked SARAH for a beer.

“Good going, Dad. Is it Allison or Jo?”

His traitorous mind flashed an image of seagreen eyes and a three-and-a-half month old memory of soft lips and beardburn. “What?”

She grinned at him. ”See, well, I have a bet going with Vincent. See, if I win, he’s going to make me breakfast in bed for a month, and if he wins, I have to wait tables.”

He frowned, realizing what she was talking about, and a little freaked out that his fifteen-year-old was thinking about his relationships. “Neither,” he said gruffly, turning to go get the beer SARAH had dispensed. “Stop wagering on my love life… or lack thereof.”

“So who’s this lucky person?” she called after him.
He lifted the glass of beer and took an appreciative sip. SARAH might not have always approved of his drinking, but she certainly knew how to chill a beer. Jack walked back to where Zoë was sitting. “A researcher who got canned today. He’ll be over just as soon as he finishes off some paperwork- which could take a while.”

His phone rang with the always impeccable timing that it had and he set the beer down on the table in front of Zoë, a sharp “Don’t” to keep her from grabbing a sip.

He flipped his phone open and answered. “Ah, Carter.”

“It’s Carl.”

“Oh.” Surprised, he looked down at his watch and saw that it had been less than a half-hour since he had dropped Carlson off at the library. “You done all ready?”

“Ah, no. Listen, I want to thank you for the generous offer, but I don’t think I’m gonna be needing a place to sleep tonight.”

Jack got a bad feeling. Like, right before an ambush firefight, bad feeling. “Carl, where are you?”

“Ah, just cleaning.”

The bad feeling worsened: just about to walk into a scene where people it was his job to protect were dead. “Cleaning what? Your place is empty.”

“The, uh, railing of the da Vinci Bridge.”

Jack’s gut dropped to his feet. Sometimes he hated being right. “Don’t move. I’ll be right there.”

He hung up, not waiting for Carlson’s answer and raced for the door, snagging his gun and jacket from the sofa as he passed.

Jack sped all the way there, sirens blaring as he dodged around cars and traffic. The roadway almost seemed to clear before him, most people recognizing the severity of a speeding sheriff’s vehicle in town, and he was there in less time than it had ever taken him.

Hostage situations and suicides. They had always seemed the same to Jack. Someone was always threatening to hurt someone very badly. The perpetrator always seemed to have total disregard for the victim. The victim was (almost) always scared witless and trying to survive through some baser animal instinct.

Jack had always counted himself fortunate. Almost every single time he’d tried to talk down a hostage taker or potential suicide victim, he’d had success. There was something about his amiable, affable nature, his kind features, his relatability, as one previous supervisor had said, that seemed to do the trick.

He was gentle, kind in the way he spoke to the person unless the situation demanded it, and he tried very, very hard to say whatever it was that the person needed to step away from their own personal edge, metaphorically or physically.

In this case, Carlson needed to know that there was someone willing to risk their life for him, that someone valued him enough to maybe die for him. So despite his stomach roiling at the height, Jack climbed over the guard rail to stand beside Carlson.
“If I get confused, I might—”

“Fall.” Jack made the mistake of looking down. His stomach heaved and he took a deep breath to try and calm the sensation. Vomiting in front of Carlson might completely undermine his attempts, not to mention make him look like an idiot. “I don’t— I don’t— I don’t think you want to do this,” Jack said, looking over at Carlson and carefully avoiding the ground.

Carlson gave a wry chuckle.

“I- I get it. You’ve had a really rotten day. And- and, uh, everything sucks. Okay. Why don’t we climb back over and talk about it? Huh? You know, go grab a beer? Make fun of Stark. Whaddy you say?”

Carlson looked up almost reverently. “I’ve never grabbed a beer with anybody in my life.”

“Today’s the first drink of the rest of your life. If, you know, you don’t jump.”

“You think we could be friends, huh?”

“I think that’s what the beer is for,” Jack replied with a smile.

Carlson chuckled then looked down. “What do I do? I don’t know what to do.”

“Take it slow,” Jack said calmly.

“I can’t- I can’t do it slow.” Carlson had his eyes shut and was shaking his head.

Jack sured his grip and turned to offer a hand to Carlson. “Okay, give me your hand.”

They were falling.

Jack’s mind raced, cataloguing, remembering, drawing up images of Zoë and Audrey, Henry, Jo, Angela, his friends from the Marshals, from LAPD, college, Nathan. His mind skittered away from that. Though he cared deeply for the man, he refused for his last though to be of anyone other that Zo-

Everything hurt. Ribs, neck, arms, spine-

His phone was ringing. He fought to pull it out of his jacket, to open it, to hold it up to his ear.

“Carter,” he rasped. Even talking hurt.

“Carter, are you all right?” came Allison’s concerned voice

Jack tried to catalogue the worst of the hurt, but he couldn’t tell. Everything hurt about the same. “Uh… not sure. Still taking stock.” He took a deep breath against the pain and felt two ribs grind together. He grimaced. “How did you know?”

“Your blood pressure spiked, your adrenals went into overdrive, and your white cell count suggests you may have broken something.”

“I fell down,” he grunted, sitting up. Yeah, his ribs were definitely broken. He glanced up at the bridge above his head. “A long way down.”
“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asked.

When had ‘okay’ ever come into the conversation? He looked around, realizing- “Where’s Carl?”

“What do you mean ‘Where’s Carl?’” she snapped, angry. “I thought you were staying on top of him.”

“Believe me, I was,” he managed. “I’ll call you later.” He hung up on her, not willing to hear any more of her lecture.

Standing was just about the most painful thing he had ever done, in that moment and he looked around. Henry’s was only about three quarters of a mile down the road. But first, he had to get out of the canyon.

Henry offered no help, except to say that neither of them should have survived the fall, but they had. Jack knew that. He hadn’t felt this battered since the car accident.

He had to find Carlson.

He found him in front of Café Diem. He barely noted that the man was conversing with Nathan. “Carl! I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What happened?”

Carlson held up a knife.

He was going to try to kill Nathan for firing him.

Jack’s training went into overdrive and he dove forward to intercept the blade, only for Carlson to turn it on himself and drive it through his hand. Jack stopped and grimaced, sharing Nathan’s sentiment as the knife clattered to the ground.

“Carlson, no job is worth this.”

Carlson lifted his bleeding hand and asked, “And what do you think this is worth?”

The wound healed completely.

Jack had seen some weird and amazing stuff as a Marshal and a cop, but just about nothing topped Carlson’s ‘spontaneous cellular regeneration’.

He was listening as Henry, Allison, and Nathan discussed how amazing the technology would be, if it was re-creatable, and Jack was amused to realize that the medical doctor among them seemed to have missed the implications of Carlson’s healing.

“Think of how much relief this will give everyone,” Allison said.

“Well, except for surgeons,” Jack pointed out, “and hospitals. Oh, and- and, the guys who make band-aids.”

He could feel the dirty look he was getting from Allison. He shot her a dopey grin. It was the end of her original profession she was talking about with such enthusiasm, he hadn’t done anything
wrong.

Jack turned back to watch Carlson stride purposefully around the loaned lab. The man was completely changed from the mumbling, neurotic scientist he had met that morning.

“An amazing transformation.” Henry’s voice was full of awe.

Nathan sighed. “A little too amazing. Carlson’s not just a researcher anymore, he’s the research.”

“He’s finally come through,” Allison snapped, “I think you’d be happy.”

“Look,” Nathan replied honestly, “I’ll be the first one to jump up and down if he can replicate the results, but until then he needs to be studied.”

Jack turned at the sound of feet walking down the hall toward them to see Fargo approaching them, looking confused. “Dr. Stark.”

Nathan turned.

“I have some numbers for you to sign off on,” Fargo continued.

He looked incredibly shifty. Jack hated when Fargo looked shifty.

“Thank you.” Jack hated it even more when Nathan joined Fargo in his shifty… ing. “If you’ll excuse me.” Nathan nodded to them all and left, following Fargo back down the hall.

“When I perfect this formula, I can make you invincible,” Carlson offered excitedly.

Jack grimaced. The offer was kind, but at the same time, being invincible in a town like Eureka just meant that death, if it eventually came, would be a thousand times worse than it already would be.

“That’s a very generous offer, Carl, but I think I’ll have to pass,” he responded.


“I’m not sure if that’s a good Idea,” Jack answered slowly. He’d had a partner that had a mental break back when he had first started with LAPD and the man had died within a month, because he had thought he was bullet proof. “Besides, fear is what keeps you sharp, right?”

Carlson looked over, apparently not comprehending and Jack went on, “But me a beer sometime, tickets to a ballgame.”

“I’ve never been to a ballgame,” Carlson remarked, “all that spilled food on the ground fermenting in beer and filth. It always used to make my skin crawl when I used to think about it.”

Jack sighted. He had no idea where Carlson had gotten that idea. Dodgers Stadium, any of the ballparks he’d been to, actually had been very clean, at least at the beginning of the game “Well, when you think that, it’s no wonder,” he conceded.

“Well it’s interesting, “Carlson commented, placing a sample of whatever it was that he was working on under the lens of his microscope, “it doesn’t bother me anymore. In a strange way, it’s almost appealing.” He looked up and changed microscope slides. “Ever since the accident, I’ve had this bizarre life-craving.”
Jack frowned at the scientist. That was one of the oddest things he had heard in a long while, despite working in Eureka. “It sounds like you feel pregnant.”

Carlson scoffed, considering. “Well, in a strange way, actually, I do.”

Jack chuckled at Carlson’s joke.

“It’s like a light’s been turned on. It’s like I’ve been reborn.”

Carlson wasn’t joking. Jack stared at the man, suddenly feeling very uneasy. His phone rang and he very nearly jumped out of his skin before fumbling for the device. “Carter?”

“Carter, it’s Allison. Your physical is all done. I’m at your house to collect the patch, but SARAH says you aren’t home. Where are you?”

“I’m at Global,” he answered, giving Carlson an apologetic smile for talking on his phone while the scientist was working. “I’m with Carlson in his lab. We were talking about baseball.”

“Well I’m done for the evening,” she said, “I’m not heading back to GD and Kevin’s at a friend’s house for tonight. I’ll wait here for you so I can take it off.”

His mind instantly smirked at the possible other meaning of what she’d just said. “Okay. See you in twenty.” Jack hung up the phone and looked over to Carlson who was watching him with a kind of detached interest. “I’m sorry, Carl,” he said, “Dr. Blake is gonna remove her thing from my neck. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Carlson nodded. “Have a good evening, Sheriff.”

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Jack drove home quickly but carefully, eager to have the monitoring device off his neck. Allison’s car was parked in front of the entrance to the bunker when he got there. He pulled into his normal spot, shut off the jeep and jumped out, turning in time to see Allison stepping out of her own vehicle.

“Hey.” He nodded at her and she gave him a stiff smile as they made their way to the bunker entrance. “SARAH, door.”

Allison walked inside before him.

“Good evening, Sheriff Carter,” SARAH said. “My sensors indicate that that you were injured today.”

He ruffed his hand over the back of his head. “I fell off a bridge.”

“Sheriff-”

He cut her off. “I was trying to keep someone from jumping and we slipped.” Jack turned to Allison. “Can I get you anything?”

She shook her head. “Just came for the patch.” Allison ripped it off quickly and Jack grunted at the sharp stinging. “Your exam is now over.”

“So I passed?” he asked her.
“Yes,” she had an odd smile on her lips. “You are now insured by Global Dynamics, life and health.”

He growled slightly, shifting on the normally comfortable sofa, trying to find a spot that made his ribs hurt less. “I still say it’s tempting fate.”

“Yeah, well now you can get your ribs checked out,” she countered, pointing to where he had his hand braced against his chest. “You- you do at least have them wrapped?” Allison asked disappointedly.

“Yeah,” he lied quickly, wanting to find an icepack and a beer to numb the pain. “Yeah, of course.”

She sighed and frowned at him. “Do you have an ace bandage?”

He tried to think of where one was, but couldn’t-

“In your gym bag, Sheriff; upstairs, in your bedroom closet,” SARAH offered.

Allison jerked, startled. “Okay,” she laughed, “that’s really disconcerting.”

He glanced up at the ceiling and sighed. “Yeah, you get used to it.”

He felt a touch at his elbow and looked at Allison. Her face was much gentler than it had been in weeks and he gave her a small smile that she returned as she pulled him to his feet and helped him upstairs into his bedroom.

He had little doubt in her background as a doctor after she had bound his ribs and even less after she helped him to lay back flat on his body-contouring mattress, joining him a moment later. Anything beyond that, though, Jack was unsure of as sleep took him.

Sometimes he hated SARAH.

Like now.

She had turned off his alarm clock and started cycling her lights on so far into the morning that there was no way Jack could be on time to the station. He groaned, sitting up against the pressure of the bandage, and heard an answering female groan from beside him.

He turned, almost too quickly for his protesting ribs, to see Allison beginning to wake on the bed next to him.

“Crap,” he muttered, reaching out to shake Allison awake. “Allison,” he called, “Hey, Allison, wake up.”

She opened her eyes blearily, and blinked, confused, up at the ceiling for a moment before jerking upright and shooting a worried glance at Jack’s alarm clock.

“Damn!” she bit out, throwing herself up from the mattress and straightening her shirt. “I have to pick Kevin up. I’m gonna be late for work.”

Jack stood and shuffled to his closet for a clean uniform shirt, waiting for the stiff soreness to loosen and feel less like someone was cramming knives into his lungs.

There was a chime from his pants pocket as he dressed and he pulled his phone out to see a text
from Nathan.

*Update on Carlson. Meeting @ 830A. My office.*

Jack looked over to see Allison also reading her phone. “You get one, too?” he asked.

“Meeting about Carlson at 8:30?”

He nodded then said, “Your car’s here. You go do what you need to with Kevin. I’ll go check in at the station. See you at Global in half an hour.”

Allison nodded perfunctorily. “See you then.”

As soon as Allison had collected her purse from the living room, Jack dashed out the door, to his car, and sped into town.

He swung by Café Diem before heading into the station. Despite greeting her with a smile and a fresh Vinspresso, Jo just gave him a haughty look and snatched away the coffee to which he maturely responded by sticking out his tongue.

Jo snorted and Jack grinned, pleased that he seemed to still be making progress at winning over the ex-Ranger. He quickly clocked in and grabbed the drink tray with two coffees in it before turning back to the door.

“Heading up to GD for a meeting,” he called out to her.

“Kay,” she shouted back, sounding distracted. “Try not to get blown up.”

Jack sprinted to his car and sped (only very slightly) off towards Global Dynamics, knowing that even at his (fast, but completely safe) speed, he’d never make it on time.

As it was, he still walked in through the front doors of the building at the same time as Allison, who apparently hadn’t had time to go home and change out of the clothing she had worn the day before.

He walk-sprinted ahead of her, to get to the elevator before her and pressed the call button.

The elevator doors slid open as Allison reached him, and Jack stepped to the side to allow her to enter first.

They stood silently next to each other, Allison eyeing the two coffees he carried before asking, “How are your ribs?”

Jack shrugged, trying not to breathe too deeply, as he had been all morning. His adrenaline had been running too high to feel much more than an occasional twinge. “Painful. Not too bad, at least. It’s the grinding, crunching that bothers me.”

Allison looked a little disgusted at his description. Jack was confused. She had to have heard and seen worse as a doctor.

The doors opened and he deferred, again waiting for Allison to step out first before following.

Nathan looked up when Henry greeted them as they walked into his office, his sharp green eyes nearly immediately picking out Allison’s blouse and Jack’s rumpled uniform pants’

“Weren’t you wearing that yesterday?” he directed at Allison.
“Uh… no,” she lied, “just similar.”

Nathan shifted his gaze to Jack, his eyes somewhere between confusion and accusation.

“Oh, don’t look at me. I wear the same thing every day,” Jack sassed, hoping Nathan heard the ‘I didn’t sleep with your wife’ in his tone.

“I found traces of radiation in his white cells and his exotic particle count is off the charts,” Henry explained, clearly in reference to the tablet he had handed Nathan.

Jack frowned and stretched slightly, pulling at the tightness of his broken ribs. “Is there any chance the explosion could have caused that radiation to leak from an adjacent lab?”

Nathan shook his head. “Not that I’m aware of.”

“Well, whatever Carl was exposed to, it’s created a spontaneous genetic mutation that is accelerating rapidly. We just have to figure out what those mutations are doing to him.”

Nathan reached forward and handed the tablet back to Henry. “Whatever it takes, Henry.” He looked back to Jack, then to Allison. Allison flipped her hair nervously and turned, half-fleeing from the room. Nathan’s eyes trailed her as she left the room. They were hard when they flipped back to Jack, and he stared, assessing.

Jack rolled his eyes and when he heard the elevator doors shut behind Allison he stepped forward and set one of the Vinspressos on the desk in front of Nathan. “Nothing happened,” he said, dropping into the chair. “Allison came over last night to remove the portable physical thing from my neck and bind my ribs. I laid down on my bed and she passed out next to me. Literally, nothing except sleeping happened last night, and I didn’t mean for even that to happen.”

Nathan’s face relaxed and Jack smiled slightly before wincing when a breath pulled at his ribs.

“How do you feel?” he asked, concerned.

Jack gave a half-smile as he tried to temper the pain. “Hurts like a sonovabitch. Nothing I haven’t dealt with before.”

Nathan frowned. “Jack-”

“Nathan, I was a federal Marshal for eleven years before getting ‘promoted’ to Eureka. I’ve had broken ribs. I’ve even been shot and stabbed. I’m going to be okay.”

Nathan continued to watch him, contemplating. He sat back and gave a roguish grin. “So nothing happened between you and Alli?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we managed to wrinkle my sheets.” Before Nathan’s eyes could get too angry, Jack continued, “That’s what happens when you pass out on top of them.”

Snorting, Nathan echoed Jack’s eye-roll.

“How do you feel?” he asked, concerned.

Nathan continued to watch him, contemplating. He sat back and gave a roguish grin. “So nothing happened between you and Alli?”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we managed to wrinkle my sheets.” Before Nathan’s eyes could get too angry, Jack continued, “That’s what happens when you pass out on top of them.”

Snorting, Nathan echoed Jack’s eye-roll.

“Also SARAH turned off my alarm clock.”

“What?” Nathan nearly choked on a mouthful of coffee. He set the cup down and eyed it warily.

“SARAH decided to turn off my alarm clock last night, and she didn’t start cycling the lights on until 7:45.”

Nathan lifted an eyebrow.
Nathan lifted an eyebrow. “My freaking house won’t listen to me.” He dropped his face into his hands. “Will you talk to her? She likes you. And she listens to you.”

“You just have to know how to talk to the ladies,” Nathan grinned and Jack glared at him. “Or have the overrides for her basic personality protocols as well as the security clearance and knowhow to do something about it,” Nathan shrugged.

Jack laughed and immediately winced at the stabbing from his ribs. “Oh, my God,” he managed, “you blackmail my house.”

Nathan grinned and fished under his desk. There was a rattling and he produced four red pills which he held out to Jack.

Jack looked questioningly at them.

“Advil,” Nathan supplied. “I have a bottle of a thousand under here. You’re on duty so it’s all you can have, but I’ll bring you a prescription of something stronger tonight.”

Jack took the pills and moved to drop them in his mouth. Both of their phones rang.

“Sheriff Carter.” He wasn’t sure what Nathan was saying, but he looked serious.

Henry’s voice crackled over the speakers. “We’re having an issue with Carlson.”

“What?”

“He’s exhibiting- he- Are you with Nathan?”

“Yeah?”

“Just- the both of you get down here.”

“Kay.” Jack hung up, threw the pills back dry, and lurched to his feet as Nathan stood on the far side of his desk. “You get a call about Carlson too?” he asked.

“Alli wouldn’t say what was happening just to get down to Carlson’s lab.”

Jack nodded. “Henry said the same thing. What do you think happened?”

Nathan looked at him. “I have no idea.”

“The lab tech said Dr. Carlson attacked him telekinetically,” Allison said.

Henry shrugged. “I wouldn’t discount it.”

Jack wasn’t sure whether to be confused or amazed. “Seriously?”

“When I first looked at Carl’s blood work, I thought that the explosion had somehow reprogrammed his cells to spontaneously regenerate,” Henry explained.

Allison frowned. “It didn’t.”

Henry shook his head. “No. His cells aren’t doing the work, his brain is. Here, take a look at this.” He held a tablet out to her. “Now most people are only realistically able to concentrate 70% of their conscious focus on any one task. The rest of the conscious brain is constantly distracted by
other things, and the subconscious brain is... subconscious. This mutation has allowed Carl to put 100% of his conscious focus and 100% of his subconscious focus on any one task."

Jack frowned at Henry, not understanding how exactly concentrating better would allow Carl to fling things around a room like a Jedi. “Okay,” he said, “well, maybe I’m only concentrating... 40% of my conscious focus at a time, but that would just make him smarter, right? Like, not invincible?”

“The conscious and subconscious mind have powers that are completely uncharted. Apparently in Carl’s case, it’s allowed him to create, project, and manipulate quantum entanglement fields.”

“What?” Nathan lurched forward looking shocked. Fear twisted in Jack’s gut. Anything that threw Nathan for that much of a loop was far too beyond his scope to be able to deal with.

Henry shook his head in amazement. “He’s creating quantum entanglement fields. We’ve been able to measure them before, but never on this scale. Carl was using the field to manipulate the quantum state- the universal coordinates- of the tray so quickly that he essentially created kinetic energy.”

“Please,” Jack butted in before the vocabulary being used could get too far away from him, “will someone explain in what’s happening in English?”

He could see Allison sag, looking relieved at his question.

Nathan looked over at him. “Quantum entanglement is a phenomenon that we are just starting to understand. It is a physical phenomenon that happens when two, or more in this case, particles become entangled... it becomes impossible to describe one particle without describing the other because the quantum state of both particles change to become the same, and you can use the same quantum state to describe both particles. Think of... a home address. You can say resident of 3 Coriolis Loop and mean either you or Zoë,” he directed to Jack. “If I understand what Henry is saying, it means that Carlson is capable of creating a quantum entanglement between some portion of his brain and any number of particles.”

Henry nodded in affirmation and Nathan continued, “When he’s using telekinesis, he’s using entanglement to change the fundamental locational information of the particles. He’s essentially telling the particles that they should be over here,” he stuck a hand out to demonstrate one hypothetical point in space, “instead of over there,” Nathan held his other hand out as an example of another hypothetical point, “and the particles move to... fix the error.”

Jack blinked, glad for the explanation, but now feeling as shocked as Nathan had looked earlier. That’s why he had been a criminal justice major. The workings of the universe were completely beyond him. He realized that his initial question had not been answered. “But the whole invincibility thing- I mean, I landed on Carl yesterday after we both fell off da Vinci Bridge. I’ve seen fifty-foot jumps that ended with crushed bones. I broke a couple of ribs, but Carl woke up before I did and he looks perfectly fine. And I saw him cram a knife through his hand and heal it last night.”

Henry shook his head. “He must have been manipulating protein synthesis on a molecular level, speeding the regeneration and healing processes. As a biochemist, he would have the understanding of what needed to be done, and with the mutation advancing his brain, it makes sense that he would have known what particles needed to be manipulated to completely heal himself.”

“Even before he realized that he was causing the changes to happen?” Allison asked incredulously.
All Henry could offer was a shrug. “Like I said, the mind has powers that are completely uncharted. Tibetan monks have been using meditation to promote healing for centuries. Maybe one day man will evolve to the point that he no longer needs doctors. He’ll be able to heal himself with thought.”

“But not for thousands of years,” Nathan interjected, “Tens of thousands, even, if ever.”

“Carl is already there. And he’s still mutating,” Henry said.

Nathan glanced down at the data and back to Henry. “Into what?” he asked.

Jack looked to the faces of the others and was glad to see he wasn’t the only one terrified of the possibilities. The X-Men were one thing, safely inside the realm of fantasy, but this was something completely different, and it looked to him that even science wasn’t ready for what Carl was becoming.

“We need to speak to him,” Allison said.

Nathan nodded. “I’ll go.”

Jack glanced up at him. “Yeah, ‘cause that went so well last night. I’ll go. Carl trusts me.”

Henry and Allison both looked relieved and Jack had to refrain from commenting as he and Nathan turned to open the door to the temporary lab that Carl had been assigned to.

The short scientist was sitting at a table half-heartedly drawing as they entered.

“Hey buddy,” Jack greeted.

Carlson looked up. “I guess you heard about the accident?”

“Uh… yeah.” Jack nodded and adjusted his gun belt.

Carlson straightened. “I don’t understand what’s happening.”

Nathan cleared his throat and answered, “It appears you were exposed to something during the explosion that’s… altered your brain function. That is why you’re able to heal so… quickly.”

Jack cut his eyes over to Nathan. He knew the scientist well enough now to be able to tell when he was only telling part of the truth. Nathan knew what Carlson had been exposed to, but he couldn’t or wouldn’t tell.

“So.” Carlson dropped his head. “My research is a failure. I didn’t do this.” He dropped his pencil.

Jack hated to see the man so dejected. “No, no. Yeah, you did. Just, um… with your mind.”

Carlson had picked his pencil back up and was sketching again. “I guess that’s why I can’t get this out of my head.”

Stepping around Nathan, Jack moved closer to see what Carlson had been drawing. “What is it?”

“I have no idea. It’s like a song that you can’t think of the name of and I’m starting to sense things. Feelings.” Carlson jerked his head over to look at Nathan. Jack followed his gaze, startled by the fright on Nathan’s face, barely registering as Carlson continued. “Thoughts.”

“Do you know what this is?” he asked Nathan.
“No.” Nathan’s fear said otherwise. “Dr. Carlson, I think it’s time we went somewhere to run some more specific tests.”

“Why?” Carlson’s voice had taken on an ugly twist.

Nathan returned the nastiness, his voice taking on his executive tone. “Determine what’s happening to you.”

“I think you want to study me,” Carlson sing-songed before thrusting the drawing at Nathan. “Just like you want to study that.” He beat out a rhythm on the table top and jumped up, striding around them toward the exit.

Nathan called out his name and they turned to follow him. A table jerked across their path and Jack felt a lurch of fear. Understanding what was happening didn’t make the fear any less. He stared at Carlson’s back as the other man paused a moment before storming out.

Jack blinked and looked up at Nathan. “Holy shit, that’s terrifying.”

Nathan nodded, not looking at Jack.

“I mean, I thought telekinesis would be cool, but understanding what makes it work- changing the fabric of reality with his mind?”

Nathan didn’t respond.

“Nathan,” Jack prompted softly. “Nathan.” He nudged the scientist with his elbow.

Nathan looked over at him.

“You know what Carlson was drawing, don’t you?”

Nathan stared at him for a long moment. “I do.”

Jack frowned. “But you can’t tell anyone. It’s classified, isn’t it?”

“Extremely.”

“It’s in Section 5?”

“It is Section 5.” There was a wild light of excitement in Nathan’s eyes that Jack had seen only a few times before. Frissions tingled down his spine in shared excitement, and maybe a little bit of fright.

“And it’s what made Carl able to… quantum mechanics all over the place?”

Nathan snorted and Jack smiled at him. “It is,” Nathan replied, still grinning. His expression sobered somewhat. “But I really have no idea what it is. And I don’t know what it’s made him capable of.” He looked back in the direction that Carlson had gone in. “But I think he does. Or he will.”

Jack studied the side of Nathan’s face, watching as he fell into deep thought. What was in Section 5?

His phone rang and they both jumped. Nathan swung around to look at him as Jack cleared his throat and answered the phone. “Sheriff Carter.”

“Dr. Marchand and her husband are screaming at each other again. The neighbors have all
called in,” Jo reported.

Jack sighed. “And?”

“You need to get over there and do something about it.”

He growled “Why aren’t you dealing with it? I’ve got a guy here at GD who can manipulate subatomic particles with his brain.”

“I’m updating the weapons catalogue so General Mansfield doesn’t have reason kill you.”

“Is it due today?” he asked.

“Next week, Thursday.”

Jack counted quickly in his head. “That’s eleven days, Jo.”

“It is.” There was no compromise in her voice.

Jack sighed. “See you later, Jo.”

“They’re at 2947 Bohr Street.”

He crammed his phone back in his pocket, dropped his head back, and closed his eyes, exhausted. His ribs were aching despite the four ibuprofen and the thought of hauling himself across town to deal with a domestic was irritating.

“Jack?”

Jack opened his eyes slowly and lifted his head to look at Nathan. “I’m fine, Nathan. Just tired.”

Nathan tipped his head, watching him. Jack felt bared under the intense green gaze, and nearly shivered. He wanted to-

Jack blinked rapidly and looked away feeling his cheeks heat. He scruffed the hair at the back of head and cleared his throat. “I have to go deal with the Marchands. Apparently they’ve got the whole neighborhood calling in.”

Nathan smiled gently. “I’ll bring something by tonight after I deal with Carlson. You take it easy once you’re done with the Marchands and take a couple days off to recover.”

Jack smiled back. “Thanks. See you around seven?”

“See you then.”

It turned out that the Marchands were not having a domestic spat, they were testing nano-microphones that were worn in the form of temporary tattoos applied directly to the skin covering the larynx. They were supposed to communicating with one another in whispers, but something in the process of the radio wave transmission between the microphone and the matching earpiece that they were both wearing, as well as the house-wide sound-proofing the city council had forced them to install the year before Jack had moved to town had turned their home into an amplifier. This broadcast anything either of them said at just over 110 decibels for the entire neighborhood to hear. Jack had had to clamp his hands over his ears just to get at all close to the house.

They had resolved the issue by testing the microphones outside, at Jack’s suggestion, and he was able to leave for the station in just over thirty-five minutes.
Jack rocked back in his chair and glared at the clock on the wall. It was only 11:47.

His ribs were aching and he was exhausted. He had forgotten how much pain like his could tire a person out. He pressed his hand against the bandage and winced as he tried to inhale. “Jo, I’ve finished the report on the Marchand case. I’m gonna clock out early.”

She looked up from her desk where she had, in fact, been working on the weapons catalogue for the station. “You don’t look so good.”

He rolled his eyes. “Gee, thanks.”

Jo straightened. “I mean it. What happened?”

“I got banged up yesterday falling off da Vinci Bridge.”

“What?” She looked somewhere between appalled and horrified.

He looked at her, confused. “Did no one tell you what happened yesterday?”

“I-” she glanced down at the document on her desk. “I got wrapped up in this after you left to go drive Carl to GD. I heard there was a form 395 tack 2-Charlie.”

Jack nodded. “Yeah, it was Carl. He tried to jump. I tried to stop him. We both fell.”

She frowned. “Carl? Why the hell’d Stark fire him? I know Carl is a raving agoraphobe and is waaay too concerned with germs for a micro-biochemist, but-”

“There was an explosion in his lab that he may or may not have caused. It got both of us and caused a lot of damage,” he explained.

“What’s going to happen to-”

There was a commotion outside, the sound of people shouting, and a couple people sprinted past the door to the station. Jack lurched to his feet and moved to the door and stepped outside to see Carlson stumbling down the middle of the street as people aggregated on the sidewalks, watching.

“Carl!” he called, forcing himself to jog after the scientist, “Carl, slow down.” Jack walked up behind him. “Carl, I’m a friend, remember?”

Carlson turned to look at him. “I thought I’d created something incredible.”

Jack felt for Carlson. As frightening as Carlson’s mutation was to Jack, it had to have been a thousand times more terrifying for the man himself. “I know. But it was something at Global, some-”

“Some strange kind of radiation?” Carlson finished for him.

Jack stared at the scientist. Carlson had literally finished his sentence, he had just said the exact words Jack had meant to use. “H- How did you know?” He paused, remembering something Carlson had said earlier in the day to Nathan. “Because I was thinking it?”

Carlson gestured around his head with both hands and inhale deeply. “Loud and clear.”

“Okay… that’s a little disturbing,” Jack admitted. Was that another phase to the mutation, or some other function of the quantum entanglement field? He continued, trying to think calm at Carlson,
“So, then you know the only place that can help you is Global.”

Carlson shook his head, frightened. “I go back there, they’ll never let me leave.”

Jack looked at him sadly. In Global as a research subject was far better than what could happen to Carlson outside of Eureka. “Trust me,” he said.

There was a screech of tires and they whipped around to see two of the large black SUVs that usually transported the SWAT teams to raids. Nathan and Allison tumbled out of the first, and a half-dozen SWAT agents leapt from the second.

“Carl, you gotta trust me,” he repeated as the others came up behind him. He could see Carlson begin to freak out more than he already had.

Nathan’s voice sounded from behind Jack. “I’ll take it from here, Sheriff.”

“We’re doing just fine, thanks,” he called back. He trusted Nathan with the scientific decisions, most of the time, but this was what Jack had spent years training to do every day. In his Marshal district, he had been one of the guys they called when they needed a dangerous or frightened person talked down.

“Jack.” Nathan’s tone was warning.

“Nathan,” he growled back. He didn’t need the stress of throwing six heavily-armed men into the mix with a panicking telekinetic.

Allison looked pissed. “Okay, the two of you just take a breath.”

Jack turned to glare at her as Nathan said, “Dr. Carlson, let me help you. Before it’s too late.”

Carlson shook his head. “You don’t want to help me, you want to use me.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Nathan countered.

“Because you think I’m the key.”

“Key to what?” Allison asked.

“Nothing.” Nathan dismissed her question quickly.

“Section 5,” Carlson said, “to his precious Artifact.”

“What is he talking about?” Allison demanded, glaring up at Nathan.

Nathan was visibly irritated as he turned to her. “I have no idea,” he ground out.

Carlson tipped his head to the side, suddenly having gone from frantic to knowing. “The sad thing is, you really don’t know what it is, do you? You! You’re obsessed with this object you know absolutely nothing about!”

“Do you?” Nathan said it so quietly, so simply, that Jack could see that Nathan had done it. He had managed to calm Carlson. He had tapped into the shared, innate curiosity that Jack had seen in all the best scientists, and had managed, in two words, to explain that he had no intention of harming Carlson, that he saw him as the expert.

Something happened then, in between that moment and the next, likely a stray thought, and Carlson wheeled around on his heel, half-stumbling away.
“Carl, you can’t leave,” Nathan called after him.

Carlson paused for a moment and swept the SWAT agents’ guns away with his mind. All but one. The one remaining armed agent slipped behind Nathan and Allison.

“Nathan!” Jack warned, seeing the agent raise his pulse gun.

Nathan spun, raised his hand, calling “Wait!” and everything fell into slow motion.

Jack saw the man fire, light blasting from the end of the gun, his body recoiling from the kick of the shot. He saw the blast fire across the space, felt the hot air displaced by the bolt, as it arced towards Carlson. Then Carlson lifted his own hand, redirecting the blast.

Jack had a moment of clarity as the pulse of light changed direction.

He was going to die.

His first thoughts went to Zoë; what was going to happen to her, whether Abby would allow her to stay in Eureka, how she would suffer when she was told and that he wouldn’t be able to help her.

Then he saw Nathan move toward him, arms out stretched, face twisted in panic and fear as he started to shout something. Jack felt a moment of sadness when he realized that he’d never be able to figure out what exactly it was building between him and Nathan.

And then the bolt of light and heat struck him. He felt fire explode against his chest and wrap down his limbs before black overtook him.
Hey everybody, sorry this has taken so long. I could give you the usual excuses of finals, homework, and research projects, and they'd all be correct, but so would writers' block and procrastination.

I just want to thank you for sticking with me.

I was going to wait to publish this, but then I realized I'd be hitting you with something over 10,000 words. So despite my wishes to wrap this episode up in less than five chapters, it's gonna be five chapters. I have time now to write, though, so I'll do my best to get it up soon!

Read and review as always, and if you spot any mistakes, shoot me a message. I proofread this at 3 last night.

Nathan watched in horror as the discharge from the pulse gun ricocheted from Carlson’s hand and slammed into Jack’s chest, throwing fire across his body. He was frozen, stunned, his mind failing to process and suddenly he was on the ground, Jack’s head and torso cradled in his lap.

He looked down at the form of the man who was fast becoming more than a friend and felt gorge rise in his throat. The pulse had seared through Jack’s shirt and undershirt, melting the poly blends to his skin before burning away the flesh and muscle, leaving sternum and broken ribs and viscera exposed. Like this, Nathan could see Jack’s heart.

It wasn’t beating.

He felt a wash of terror burn though him as if he had been the one struck. He jockeyed Jack further into his lap and felt for breath coming from his nose.

Nothing.

He looked up, mind racing as he took in the shocked crowd and the silent SWAT team. “Someone do something!” he commanded. “Someone call an ambulance!”

Carlson stepped forward, gold swirling around his irises. “It’s too late for the doctors to do anything.”

He placed his hand on the singed bones of Jack’s chest and gold light, like the light swirling in his eyes, like the light filling the Artifact chamber, twisted out from under his palm and curled into the burn. The light wrapped around his hear and then for a moment, seemed to constrict. Jack’s heart gave a few fluttering beats beneath his ribs before stilling again.

“I’m not close enough,” Carlson said, looking up at him, an odd multiplicity echoing in his voice, just present enough that Nathan could barely detect it. “I need to get closer.”

Nathan nodded, pain and fear clenching in his chest.

Jack couldn’t die. It’d kill Nathan.
Losing his best maybe-more-than friend would be as hard as losing his son.

“Get closer to what?” Allison asked.

“Classified,” he growled before wrestling Jack’s limp form into his arms and standing, walking gingerly back to his BMW. The doors unlatched and sprang open without anyone touching them. As carefully as he could, he strong-armed Jack into the back seat.

He stared, bile rising in his throat at the sight of Jack’s blood, thick, sluggish, and almost black from hypoxia oozing out onto the white leather of the back seats. A hand gripped his shoulder and he turned to see Carlson looking at him with his unsettling gold eyes.

“I will keep Jack here. You get us to the Artifact.”

Nathan blinked at him, then stepped around him toward the driver’s door. He flinched as the car’s ignition turned over and started without him pressing the ignition on his keys. He turned to stare at Carlson, but the short man was paying no attention to him, rather, was telekinetically lifting Jack’s chest to slide underneath him.

“You need to drive, Nathan,” Carlson said, smoothing the hair off Jack’s forehead. “I cannot keep him here for too long.”

Nathan nodded wordlessly and punched the accelerator, forcing people to throw themselves out of his way as the car shot forward. He forced his mind to go blank, not thinking about anything, rather focusing only on the road and trying to stay on it.

Weaving his car in and out of traffic on the narrow road to Global Dynamics, he made it to the parking lot and turned off the car. Nathan flung himself out of the front seat and dashed to yank the door open before Carlson could telekinetically do it. What he saw made him stop.

Carlson was sitting with his head bowed, eyes closed as he cradled Jack’s head in his lap. One hand rested on Jack’s forehead, swirling with gold light. The other was inside the wound in Jack’s chest. The same gold light twisted wildly from the fingertips into and out of the hole, appearing to caress Jack’s heart and organs as it danced passed before flickering over the surface of his skin like electricity.

Nathan’s thoughts skittered across his consciousness like the light across Jack’s skin and he found himself incapable of latching onto a single one.

Jack couldn’t be dead. That was the only thing that was obvious against the panicked white field of his mind. He coul-

Carlson’s head snapped up sharply and Nathan found himself staring into two swirling orbs of liquid gold that arched and flared beyond their proper boundaries. Nathan shivered in fear as he got the distinct feeling that Carlson was looking into him. “There is no time for panic, Nathan Stark.” Carlson’s voice sounded like a thousand people speaking all at once and every single hair on Nathan’s body stood on end.

“He is slipping away, Nathan Stark, you must hurry.”

Nathan nodded then bent, and with help from Carlson’s telekinesis, pulled Jack from the car. Carefully but quickly, he swung Jack into his arms and carried him in through the front doors of Global Dynamics.

People scattered in front of him, some seeing him and stumbling back with white-faced shock, others appearing to be knocked back out of his way by visible distortions in the air. The scientists
cleared a path to the elevator without needing to be directed and Nathan rushed across the lobby, Jack’s arm slipping off his torso to bounce limply with every step Nathan took.

Out of the corner of his eye, Nathan could see Carlson gliding alongside him, the gold light whipping around him in tendrils, distortions in the air making it hard to look at him.

The elevator doors dinged open without anyone pressing the call button and Nathan had to turn sideways to get Jack in the elevator without hitting his head or feet on the sides of the elevator. The doors slid shut and Carlson reached out and pressed the button for Section 5.

“Fingerprint not recognized,” a computerized voice said, “Access-”

“Voiceprint recognize:” Nathan barked, “Director Stark, Nathan; emergency security code: Alpha-two-niner-niner-five-Echo-Kilo-November-Sierra.”

“Voiceprint recognized: Director of Global Dynamics, Nathan Stark. Emergency access granted.”

The car jerked and began to descend, emergency code moving the car much faster than normal. Still, as Nathan looked down at Jack’s face, muscles gone lax, not dancing through their usual range of expressivity, he felt an urgency, terrible and consuming pressing behind his eyes, in his throat.

God, no, please.

Jack couldn’t be dead. Nathan couldn’t imagine a world where Jack didn’t exist.

The elevator dinged signaling their floor, and the doors dissolved into a swirl of glowing white particles. Nathan blinked, then shot out of the elevator, turning sideways again to keep from injuring Jack. He raced down the hall, the wait in the elevator grating on ruined nerves.

The limited AI in Section 5 tracked his progress, throwing the doors open ahead of him, leading him to the Artifact Chamber. He could feel the pulsating, distorted presence of Carlson keeping speed a stride behind him, growing stronger with every stride toward the Chamber.

The last door, the door to the shielded hallway, refused to open.

“Access denied, security code required.”

Nathan nearly screamed, nearly sobbed aloud and sank to his knees. “Recognize: Emergency security code: Alpha-three-eight-seven-five-Alpha-Charlie-November-Sierra!”

“Emergency security code recognized. Access granted.”

The whooping sirens started and orange lights flashed in the hall beyond as the door slid slowly open. He let out a cry of desperation at the slow speed of the door and it dissolved like the elevator doors had, in swirling white particles and he rushed through. Nathan reached the inner door, thirty inches of steel and shielding separating him from the brunt of the Artifact’s radiation. He could still feel it, though, a sort of burning, pulsing, song behind his eyes.

“This is close enough.” Nathan flinched and looked back at Carlson.

The man was nearly unrecognizable now, gold light shining from beneath his skin, age lines completely faded, his posture hard and completely unlike the Carlson he had seen only ten minutes previously in the town center.

“Set Jack down here,” Carlson commanded, thousands of voices echoing inside his own.
Nathan complied quickly, laying Jack carefully down on the floor, and leaning him against the wall. He turned and looked up at Carlson who nodded. “Step back.”

Nathan stumbled back, fell away from Jack and Carlson and watched as Carlson knelt next to Jack, next to the door. Carlson reached out, placed a hand on the door and lurched slightly as gold light pooled on the surface of the door, then streamed, twining down his arm, across his chest, then down his other arm to collect, twisting, and dripping off the palm of his hand. He paused for a heartbeat and then placed his hand on Jack’s chest, on his sternum and unmoving heart.

The gold light flared, burning brightly, tendrils of it whipping out, twisting over burnt skin and exposed organs, rebuilding it as Nathan watched.

A moment and the wound was healed.

A moment and Jack sucked in a massive breath, limbs jerking and head rolling as he revived.

Nathan sobbed and sank to his knees, falling forward to catch one of Jack’s hands in his own. “Jack,” his voice broke on the single syllable of the name, precious, like a prayer falling from his lips. “Jack.”

Jack’s eyes fluttered as he looked over at the sound of his name, his breath sounding loud and joyous in the hall even over the insistent whooping of the sirens. Jack seemed disoriented, head sagging and Nathan stood, realizing that Jack had to get to the Infirmary. He reached out for Jack’s other hand and pulled him up as Carlson pulled his hand from Jack’s chest, revealing a small patch of burns that hadn’t healed.

“Hey, welcome back, Sheriff,” Carlson said softly, all multiplicity gone from his voice.

Jack slumped over, muscles still lax from death and caught himself on the floor, one hand jerking out of Nathan’s grip.

“C’mon, Jack,” Nathan urged, his voice suddenly, inexplicably calm, despite the storm of emotion inside. He gripped Jack’s bicep, tugged him up and was glad when Carlson assisted, wedging himself under Jack’s arm to help him rise.

“There you go,” he said, as they stumbled back up the hall together, Jack’s heart beating insistently against the hand he had on his chest. “C’mon.”

His burden was suddenly heavier, Carlson having disappeared from Jack’s other side, turned back down the hall, and Nathan adjusted, moving to take Jack’s weight across his shoulders. He blinked at the sight of the two medics waiting at the door, and a half-memory told him that they had their own medical access codes that allowed them into any part of the building in an emergency.

“Get him to the infirmary,” he commanded, “I’ll be right behind in a moment.” Jack would be okay for the moment. The wailing of the sirens in the hall to the Artifact told him that Carlson was still in there. Nathan turned to see the door rematerialize, glowing white particles swirling back together. He threw himself to the computer screen that monitored the feed from inside the hall.

The grey-scale images showed Carlson slowly approaching the inner door. Nathan keyed on the intercom and called, “Carlson, wait!”

The heavy inner door opened, white smoke from inside the Chamber billowing outwards. Nathan’s heart raced as he realized what Carlson was about to do.

“Don’t do it, Carl,” he asked.
“It’s going to be all right,” Carlson answered, his voice echoing.

Carlson was more than halfway down the hall. “It’ll destroy you,” Nathan said.

“I’m not afraid.”

“Carl, please,” he begged, “I have to know. What is it?”

“One day you will know,” Carlson answered, the light from the chamber beginning to blur out the edges of his silhouette. “Question is,” he asked, “will you be ready?”

Carlson stopped on the threshold of the Chamber, door completely open, the gold light, the burning, pulsing energy of the Artifact whipping out around him, running across his back like arms beckoning him forward. Nathan had to press his fist to his mouth. He felt ill. He was about to watch a second man die that day.

And then Carlson spoke, his single, human voice clear beyond the crackle of the speakers, the cries of the sirens, the roar of the Artifact inside the Chamber.

“I am.”

And then he walked in, swirling light wrapping around him, welcoming him home. The door to the Chamber slid down, blocking the sight of the faint shape of Carlson disappearing into the light of the Artefact.

Nathan jumped up, lurched to the observation window into the hall and stared at the grey door, unthinking when a voice sounded in his head.

*Go to him. He needs you.*

It was Carlson’s voice.

Nathan needed no other urging. He spun on his heel and raced for the door.

This time, he had no need to call his security code as he sprinted through the building, long legs flying. The AIs were working together, throwing open the doors ahead of him, leading him on the shortest, fastest route to the Infirmary. Anyone in his path through the halls stumbled back against the walls at his approach, not moving from their spots until long after his passing.

He took the stairs instead of the doorless elevator, bounding up each flight two steps at a time. Nathan burst out into Section 2 and flew along the long corridors, heart racing. It seemed an eternity before he finally slid into the Infirmary, sucking hard for air like a winded horse. But when he looked around, Jack was nowhere to be seen, the only people he could see were nurses racing back and forth gathering items and equipment before darting into one of the private rooms.

Nathan stepped forward, moving toward the private room but was stopped by a hand on his arm.

“Nathan.”

He looked back to see Allison watching him with concern, worry tightening the skin around her eyes. “Nathan, you can’t go in there yet. He looked like he was in pretty rough shape when they brought him in. They’re still working on him and they won’t even let me in there,” she said softly. “Where were you when they brought him in here?”

Nathan was surprised at how rough his voice was when he spoke, gasping out words between
breaths. “Carl went- he killed himself.”

“Oh, Nathan,” she put her hand on his cheek. “I’m so sorry.”

He shook his head, still not quite able to put his thoughts together coherently.

“Do you know anything?” he panted.

Allison shook her head. “About Carter? Only that he was unconscious when they got him in here.”

Nathan nodded, not looking away from the door to the room where the doctors were working on Jack. He needed to get in there, he needed to see how Jack was.

This was his fault. If he hadn’t followed SOP, if he hadn’t brought the SWAT team with him to intercept Carlson, Jack wouldn’t have been shot, he wouldn’t have died, and he wouldn’t have the entire Global Dynamics medical staff in a flurry of panic.

“Are you okay?” Allison’s voice was soft, calm and that, somehow, made him irrationally angry.

“I watched two people die today!” he bellowed, turning on her. “Two men died today because of decisions I made!”

She flinched back, staring up at him. She seemed at a loss for words.

“Dr. Stark?”

“What?!” He rounded on the source of the voice, face red, veins popping on his neck.

There was a young-looking nurse half-cowering, but still looking up at him. “Dr. Baxter wanted me to tell you that Sheriff Carter will be all right. The burns on his chest might scar, but otherwise he’s healthy. There don’t appear to be any lasting effects of his ordeal.”

Nathan let out a shuddering breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “His ribs?”

The nurse nodded. “None broken.”

“How?”

The nurse blinked, confused. “Perfectly healthy.”

Nathan smiled, then blinked hard against tears well up in his eyes.

“He also told me to tell you that it should only be a few minutes more, but he’ll come to get you and Dr. Blake when you can come in to see Sheriff Carter.”

Nathan nodded. “Thank you,” he managed.

The nurse smiled and darted back into the room.

“You really do care about him, don’t you?”

He turned to look at Allison, brow creased in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I just-” she started, “I just never thought you two would be friends. You hated his guts when you first moved here. You couldn’t even be in the same room without fighting like cats and dogs.” She gave an incredulous scoff. “When you first started being nice to him, I seriously just thought that it
was some game to lead him on and then break him down.”

“What?” He stared at her, bristling.

She shrugged defensively at his tone. “It didn’t seem like something you’d do, but you’ve been so brutal since you came back that I thought- I was worried that you might have changed.”

“Changed.”

Allison threw her arms out in exasperation. “I don’t know, Nathan! Changed! You’re meaner than I remember. You seem to take joy in making people scurry. It’s a bad day if you only make three people cry.”

Nathan dropped his face into his hands. He’d had this conversation with Jack two weeks earlier. “I-”

“Dr. Stark. Dr. Blake.”

They turned to see Dr. Baxter, a whip-cord thin man who was the lead physician on the day shift, approaching them.

“How’s Jack?” Nathan asked quickly.

Baxter smiled. “Sheriff Carter is fine. It’s amazing. By all rights according to Dr. Blake, from her description of his injuries, he should have been… irretrievable. What was it that let you heal him so completely?”

Nathan shook his head. “I don’t- It isn’t recreatable.”

The doctor sighed. “That’s too bad. Harnessing whatever it was that healed him would completely change the field of medicine. The only sign that he was ever injured is a patch of burns on his chest.”

Relieved, Nathan let out a shuddering breath. “Can I- can we go in and see him?”

Baxter shrugged. “I don’t see why not. He’s asleep, however, so be quiet.”

Nathan brushed past the man, using his long legs to cross the infirmary as quickly as possible without full out running. He pushed into the room and stopped, staring at Jack’s form laying still on the bed.

Well, almost still, Jack’s chest rose and fell, in long even breaths. A heart monitor behind him beeped steadily at 65 beats per minute.

Nathan sagged, knees buckling in relief. Allison caught him, helped him to steady.

“You okay?” she asked.

“I saw his heart today,” he answered quietly. “I literally saw his heart, and it wasn’t beating. Oh, God, Alli, it was so still. He was so still.”

“But he’s alive now, and he’s going to be okay,” she answered gently.

Nathan felt like he should have turned to look at Allison, but didn’t. He couldn’t look away from Jack. “But he was d-” he choked on the word “For a few minutes today, I lost my best friend. It was my fault, Alli!” he cried.
She moved to hush him, but it was the sudden spike in Jack’s heart rate at his cry that quieted him.

“If I hadn’t brought the SWAT team, if I had just trusted his ability as a law enforcement officer instead of following SOP, Jack wouldn’t have been shot.”

Allison shook her head. “It wasn’t you, Nathan. It was the officer, the one who shot despite orders not to. He’s the one responsible for shooting Carter. He made the decision to shoot, and he was the one who shot Carter, not you.” She smiled softly. “You sit with him. Is there anything I can do for you? Can I get you anything?”

The thought of Zoë crossed his mind. “Someone needs to get Zoë, we need to tell her before anyone else does.” He swayed towards the door, drawn by the thought of helping Zoë, but terrified to leave Jack’s side. “I should-”

Allison frowned at him and pushed him toward the bed-side chair. “No. You shouldn’t. You’re in no state to drive. I’ll-”

There was high-pitched, panicked-sounding shouting from outside the room. Even muffled by walls, Nathan recognized Zoë’s voice and rushed out through the door followed by Allison.

“My dad!” she was shouting, “Where’s my dad?”

Her skin was ashy white, contrasted sharply by eyes bright red from crying and the mascara streaked down her cheeks.

The nurses in the main ward were spinning, shouting back at her, demanding to know who she was and how she had gotten into the Infirmary, into the building. No one was answering her questions.

“Zoë!” he called, pushing through the nurses to get to the panicked girl.

She turned at the sound of his voice. “Dr. Stark! The people at school, they were watching a video, they said- they said Dad’d been shot.” Her voice pitched up into a wail, “They said he was dead! Oh, God, Dr. Stark! I watched him die!” The last came out in an explosive sob. She threw herself at him and wrapped her arms around his chest, sobbing into his shirt.

He hugged her reflexively. “He’s not! Zoë, he’s not.”

She pushed back, eyes wide and glassy, and looked up at him, “He’s not? But I saw in the video-”

“He’s alive. He’s in one of the private rooms, sleeping,” Nathan said. “According to the doctors he’s fine.” He was surprised by his own sudden calm. Zoë’s panic had given him a place to channel his shattered thoughts. Keeping her calm was suddenly imperative.

“But, I- I saw it, one of them showed me the video. He died. You were screaming for an ambulance and- and-”

He took her hand and led her, stumbling behind him as they crossed the ward towards Jack’s room. Nathan pushed open the door and pulled Zoë in to stand beside him.

He pointed to the heart monitor. “See that?” She nodded and he continued again. “It’s your dad’s heartbeat. The monitor beeps every time his heart beats. That number is how many times it beats per minute. 64 is a good resting number.”

Zoë nodded again. Nathan knew she probably very likely knew this, but explaining it to her made him feel less like throwing up and sobbing at the same time. Jack was fine, he could see that Jack
was fine, but he was scared, bile was high and hot in his throat. He wouldn’t be able to breathe until Jack was awake and smiling, life and laughter twinkling in his eyes.

“And that-” he pointed to another machine, with rows of squiggly lines crossing the screen, “Is an EEG, and electroencephalogram. It’s hooked to the white discs on your dad’s head and is measuring his brainwaves. Those big, wide curves show that he’s sleeping very deeply, which is good. He’s recovering from the shock of what happened.”

He squeezed her hand and she looked up at him. “Your dad’s a strong man, Zoë. He’s going to be okay.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Dr. Stark.” Zoë hugged him again, hard and started sobbing quietly into his suit jacket. He wasn’t sure what to do at first, but vaguely remembered what Jack had done for Zoë in the horrible days after Callister’s death and wrapped an arm around her back, gently stroking her hair with the other.

She cried for a long time, a lot longer than seemed normal, but he understood. He realized he needed to cry, too, needed to cry out all of the fear and anger and relief welling up inside him, but he couldn’t. Not yet, not now with the teenaged daughter of the man he cared for weeping in his arms.

Eventually Zoë looked up at him. “Thank you, Dr. Stark.”

He smiled gently at her, feeling his withheld tears burning behind his eyes. “Nathan.”

She returned a flickering smile of her own. “Thank you, Nathan.” Zoë rubbed suddenly at her cheeks, smearing her running mascara as she tried to dry her tears before gesturing at his chest. “I’m sorry about your shirt. I probably ruined it with my- Is that blood?” Her face had gone white and she was perfectly still.

He looked down at his shirt and felt the blood drain from his own face.

His calm shattered.

He wanted to scream.

There were smears of dark, half-dried blood staining the fabrics from where he had held Jack’s bleeding body against his own as they raced to the Artifact. He looked at his hands and saw that they were also red, blood crusted in between the friction ridges and in the creases across his palms and fingers. Nathan looked up at Zoë in horror and saw that Jack’s blood had stained her shirt as well.

He swallowed bile and she looked down then back up at him. “That’s- it’s-” She let out a strangled scream and began pulling at her shirt, trying to pull it off over her head. “Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!” she shrieked, ripping at the fabric.

Nathan lunged forward and stripped her shirt off over her head and then turned away, bolting for the door before he saw anything. The doctors met him at the door.

“What’s wrong?” Dr. Baxter demanded, trying to look around him into the room. “Is something wrong with the Sheriff?”

“I need a scrub top,” he demanded. “Small, for Zoë.” He glanced down at his own stained clothes. “And one for me.”

He remained in the doorway, blocking the view of a shirtless Zoë from everyone in the Infirmary,
listening to the sounds of her hyperventilating behind him. She was gasping for air on every third or fourth breath and the slow beeping of Jack’s heart monitor had accelerated.

A nurse reached through the crowd of doctors at the door, two green shirts in her hand. Nathan nodded and grabbed them, then shut the door on the crowd.

He pulled the shirts apart, handing the smaller to Zoë without looking up from her shoes and turned away. He shed his jacket, tie, and shirts, letting them fall on the ground as he pulled the scrub shirt on. He wanted to burn the pile of clothes, wanted no evidence left that Jack had ever been hurt so badly.

His hands.

His hands were still bloody.

He crossed to the sink and turned on the tap, letting the water run over his hands.

A part of his brain, the scientist part that he could never quite shut off, watched in fascination as the water hit his hands clear, but swirled down the drain red, carrying away the blood that had pumped fourteen hundred and eleven times per day through Jack’s heart.

Nathan roused himself and started scrubbing, forcing the blood to wash away faster.

When the water finally ran off his hands clear again, he shut off the sink and turned back to see Zoë staring at her father. She looked up at him. “Thank you, Dr.- Nathan. For the shirt. I didn’t mean to flip out on you, but it was Dad’s blood. And it was all over my shirt.” She paused speculatively. “I mean, I’ve seen him cut himself before, but I never realized there was so much, never realized that that much could be outside his body at one time.” She looked over at him. “Is he still injured?”

Nathan shook his head. “Not seriously. There are some burns on his chest, but other than that, he’s okay.”

Zoë sat in the chair by Jack’s bed and Nathan took the chair next to the counter.

“What happened to him?” she asked.

Nathan was slow to respond, trying to figure out exactly how much to tell her.

“I’m not a kid, Nathan,” Zoë said archly.

Nathan lifted an eyebrow and Zoë rolled her eyes. “Look,” she explained, “I impersonated a flight attendant despite the post-9/11 air travel regulations, and I’ve gotten away with more crimes than Dad will ever know.” Her eyes darkened slightly. “And I was there in Portland with Callister. I’m not a little kid, despite my age and propensity for acting out.”

“That’s not the biggest issue, Zoë,” Nathan replied, “Although, yes, I think people your age should still be somewhat protected from the harsh reality of the world. What happened is the result of a classified project in Section Five. I can tell you what happened but not why any of it happened.”

Zoë frowned. “O-okay?”

Nathan sighed before speaking. “Do you know who Carl Carlson was?”

She nodded. “Yeah, he was the scientist Dad was firing yesterday. He was a biochemist or
something.”

He nodded. “That’s him. There was an explosion in his lab yesterday and he was exposed to… exotic particles that gave him what were essentially telekinetic powers. His powers and instability turned him into a threat to the public and he got away from J- your dad and I before we could talk to him. Your dad was downtown and he was talking Carl down and,” he paused clearing his throat, hoping Zoë wouldn’t hate him, “I brought a SWAT team with me to confront Carl. I didn’t realize that your dad had it under control.”

She cut in. “The guy didn’t listen to you and he shot at Dr. Carlson.”

“Yes.” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. “Carl was able to redirect the blast and it ricocheted and struck Jack.” Nathan took a deep breath, steadying his voice before he spoke again, not daring to meet Zoë’s eyes. “It killed him instantly.”

Zoë gasped, hands flying to her mouth, eyes wide. She stared at Nathan then looked down at Jack, sleeping quietly on the bed. “He was- was that why- you were screaming for an ambulance.”

Had he been screaming?

She was hesitant when she spoke. “In the video, was that Dr. Carlson with the freaky gold light?”

“It was. He saved your father’s life. The same project that gave Carl his abilities allowed him to completely, totally heal his injuries. He made it as if your dad had never been hurt.”

“I want to thank him,” she blurted, the words coming out in a tumbling rush.

Nathan grit his teeth. Today had been brutally hard enough without having to recount all of this. A part of him wanted to get blackout drunk on $200 a bottle scotch and a part of him wanted to lay on the bed next to Jack and curl his body around the smaller man’s. The realization was startling.

“I’m sure he would have appreciated the sentiment, but Carl committed suicide shortly after saving Jack.”

Zoë bowed her head for a long moment before looking back up at him. “Today sucks doesn’t it?”

Nathan snorted. “It does.”

“Dad’s really okay?”

“Except for being an incorrigible Dodgers fan, he is.”

Zoë frowned. “What’s wrong with being a Dodger’s fan?”

Nathan gave her a sly smile. “I grew up in Berkeley.”

Her eyes went wide and her hands went back up to her mouth in horror. “No, please don’t say you’re an A’s fan.”


Zoë groaned and slumped in her seat. “Oh, God. Does Dad know?”

“Nope.”

“Dad’s gonna have a coronary when he finds out. You know he has a World Series bat signed by
Nathan lifted his eyebrows. That was an expensive souvenir. He looked down at Jack. They’d only been friendship-close for three weeks, but he wanted to know everything about Jack. And not in a dissect-him-to-get-ahead-in-business sort of way, but in a way that felt new but half-remembered.

There was a sudden movement from Zoë’s direction and he looked up to see her yawning and curling in on herself like a kitten. She blushed when she realized he had been watching. “I-”

Nathan smiled gently. “It’s been a long day. You go ahead and sleep. I’ll wake you if he wakes up.”

She yawned again and Nathan felt one prickle at the back of his throat, which he stifled by clenching his jaw and breathing in deeply through this nose.

“Thanks, Nathan,” she murmured before turning and curling sideways in the seat. Zoë tucked her head against her shoulder, arms crossed high on her chest and settled, falling asleep quickly.

Nathan watched her for a moment before looking back at Jack.

He’d- they’d nearly lost Jack today. Nathan didn’t know what he would have done if Jack had been… irretrievable. Hot fear flashed in his throat and for a moment he couldn’t breathe.

Nathan reached out and touched Jack’s hand, trying to prove he was alive and warm and solid. Jack made a small sound and turned slightly, curling part way onto his side to face Nathan, eyes still shut, still sound asleep. Nathan’s stomach flipped and he looked away for a moment before looking back.

Jack.

His heart gave a lurch as he looked at him.

Jack.

A thought broke across his mind, an epiphany. It felt just like the epiphany that won him his Nobel.

He… cared… for Jack.

A lot.

He moved his hand and gripped Jack’s tightly, briefly before letting go. God, the realization was so startling. Three weeks.

But he could wait to see if Jack felt the same.

Exhaustion hit him, fast, and hard. Nathan sagged, and instead of fighting it, crossed his arms on the edge of Jack’s bed, bowed his head to rest on his arms, and fell asleep.
Hey everybody, I’m sorry it’s been so long since I updated this story. I can’t really write over the summer months, and it’s taken me a while to settle back in at my university. I’ll try to make my updates much more frequent. The short length of this chapter is a… placation of sorts while I write a longer interstitial chapter.

Please read and review!

Jack blinked up at the white-and-speckled ceiling tiles and started, jerking upright, fingers scrabbling at his hip. Where was he?

There was an uncomfortable pinch in the back of his hand and tugging like tape on his chest and forehead, and a rapid, steady beeping.

He was in the infirmary at Global.

Jack sighed, trying to calm his heart from the moment of panic and reaction. He looked around and saw Zoë curled, asleep in a chair, and Nathan asleep, arms crossed on the mattress, head pillowed on his arms. Jack was surprised that his sudden movement hadn’t woken Nathan. He reached out and touched Nathan’s shoulder. There was no response.

“Nathan-” he pressed down and Nathan’s head came up, eyes blinking blearily at the room. He turned to look at the source of the pressure on his arm and jerked, staring up at Jack, eyes slowly widening.

“Jack.”

Jack was taken off guard by the emotion in Nathan’s voice in the moment before Nathan slammed into him, squashing him back against the pillows in a tight embrace. Jack lifted his arms and hugged Nathan back.

When Nathan pulled away, hands still on Jack’s shoulders, he was breathing hard, eyes glistening. “God, Jack.”

Jack looked at the raw emotion on Nathan’s face and lifted his hands, gripping Nathan’s forearms. “I’m here, Nathan.”

Nathan took a shuddering breath. “You died.” His voice came out as a croak.

The pulse gun, Jack remembered suddenly, recalling the searing heat that crawled across his chest and the engulfing peace and warmth of the black and the light that followed.

He reached out for Nathan, feeling his arms trembling under his hands, and drew him against his chest, pulling him back into an embrace and tucking Nathan’s head to his shoulder with a hand in his hair. “I’m so sorry, Nathan,” he soothed, “God, I’m so sorry.”
Jack’s heart lurched. It had only been three weeks.

Only three weeks since they had buried Callister and he had gone and died on Nathan, died in front of Nathan.

Jack held him until the trembling subsided, rocking slightly as he soothed.

He had come to terms with his own mortality years ago, but he knew it wasn’t so for other people. When he eventually died, he would be dead. His will gave everything to Zoë, including the half a million dollars in life insurance, and was so air-tight that Abby couldn’t touch a cent. His parents held his power of attorney and there was fifteen grand in a semi-hidden account for funeral expenses so his family wouldn’t be caught off guard.

Nathan pulled away and wouldn’t look at Jack, cheeks slightly red. Eventually he spoke.

“Zoë saw you get shot. Some asshole kid in one of her classes showed her the video that somebody took.”

Jack looked away from Nathan and spotted Zoë, curled and sleeping in a chair. He felt a stab of guilt for not thinking of her immediately.

“Is she okay?” He turned to look at Nathan. “Why is she wearing scrubs?” He blinked, realizing Nathan was wearing the same thing. “Why are you wearing scrubs?”

It took Nathan a moment to answer and his voice was hoarse when he did. “I got b- blood on my shirt, and it got on Zoë and she freaked out and so did-”

Jack could see faint traces of blood on Nathan’s arms and he realized it must have been his. And that Nathan must have carried him at some point. He grimaced. “Mine?”

Nathan just nodded.

He glanced over at Zoë, who was still sleeping. If a kid at school had shown her a video of him dying, she probably needed sleep to de-stress. Jack changed topics and asked, wondering if Nathan really had carried him, “How’s your back?”

“My back?” Nathan frowned at him.

Oh shit. Had Jack misread the location of the bloodstains on Nathan’s arms? “I- I mean, I weigh like one eighty-five.”

“Oh.” Nathan appeared to understand. “Uh, I didn’t really notice. Adrenaline, I guess.”

Jack grimaced. “All the way here? You’re gonna feel that tomorrow.”

Nathan cleared his throat. “Actually, the thing we used to fix you is in Section 5.”

Jack looked down at his hands and clenched his fists, which were starting to feel a little tight from the saline drip. “I didn’t-“ he looked up at Nathan. “Thank you.”

Nathan gave him a shaky smile and an even shakier laugh. “No problem.”

Placing a hand on Nathan’s interlaced fingers, he said, “I mean it. Thank you.”

Nathan glanced at him, eyes soft, and nodded.

There was something else in his eyes, though, something darker, damaged. “Nathan, you said
‘we.’ Who else was with you?”

There was a very long silence. “Carl. He used the source of the exotic particles that gave him his ability to use entanglement fields to fix you.”

“So I was exposed?” Jack frowned, not wanting to deal with what was happening with Carl to happen to him.

Nodding Nathan said, “We both were.” Jack’s eyebrows jumped up in surprise and Nathan continued. “But I don’t think we’ve changed. They did molecular level full-body scans on you, SOP, and I think the doctor would have mentioned something about exotic particles.”

That was… marginally reassuring, in the way of most reassurances regarding to science in Eureka. “Where’s Carl?” Jack asked, “I want to thank him.”

The hurt around the edges of Nathan’s expression swept across his face and Jack grimaced.

“After he fixed you,” Nathan let out a sharp breath and paused, swallowing, “He killed himself. I-I tried to talk him down, like you were in the Square, but-”

Jack squeezed Nathan’s hands and shook his head. “Sometimes there’s nothing you can do. You can’t blame yourself. The people nearest, emotionally or physically, to people who commit suicide tend to blame themselves. You can’t. It’s not healthy; I know, I’ve been there.”

“Daddy?”

Jack looked up at Zoë, who was slowly unfolding in her chair.

“Oh, God! Dad!”

There was a clatter of noise, like chair legs scraping over the floor and suddenly Jack’s arms and lap were full of teenager. Zoë was crying into his shoulder, arms tight around him as she repeated something incoherently into the fabric of his hospital gown. He returned her embrace, pulling her close against his shoulder as she sniffled. “It’s okay,” he murmured, “I’m here.”

He could feel her smile suddenly against his shoulder and she rose away to look at him. “I know. I was just worried.”

Jack smiled at her and cupped her cheek, rubbing away a tear. He hugged her again, kissing her hair and looked up at Nathan. He was startled by the softness in Nathan’s eyes and offered a small smile, feeling strangely warm when Nathan returned the expression. Jack cleared his throat and looked away, smoothing a hand down Zoë’s back.

There was a sound at the door, and it swung open, allowing Dr. Baxter, a man Jack recognized from his emergency treatment for the bite from the giant black widow at Seth’s, in.

Zoë clambered off his lap, making Jack wince a moment as one of her knees landed on an area that was a rather sensitive. He looked up at Dr. Baxter as he said, “Okay, Sheriff, I just need to do a final exam and you’ll be good to go. But, I do need to know, do you have a ride home?” He looked pointedly at Zoë, “Preferably one with a valid license?”

Jack turned to stare at her, his eyebrows creeping upwards, and she ducked her head and blushed.
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