Make Me a Believer

by zahnie

Summary

When Parker, Eliot, and Hardison choose the Rossum Corporation as their next target, Eliot goes for a security job interview at their Los Angeles satellite branch. Who turn him into a Doll instead.

Notes

So you know how you say you won't write something but then you get amazing ideas and write it anyway? This fic, my friends. No regrets.

Post-canon for Leverage; set between episodes 1.05 (True Believer) and 1.06 (Man on the Street) for Dollhouse, though spoilers for Dollhouse to approximately the middle of season 2.

Thank you to greenmonstermash for watching basically all of Dollhouse with me and reading nearly everything here and brainstorming and calling me an evil genius <3 Also thank you to Adelaide for your thoughtful comments on the sections I sent you, hope you enjoy the rest just as much!

Title from Believer by Imagine Dragons
Parker ducks out of the doorway where she's been waiting and moves through the crowd toward Eliot.

He looks okay. A little tired maybe. It's a relief to see him, after three weeks of silence.

They knew he might have to lay low for a while, earn the mark's trust. But there is a hard limit on how long Parker is willing to wait with no word. If Eliot can't contact them, they'll contact him.

She bumps into Eliot with her head down, brushing past him without a word. He doesn't acknowledge her at all or the slight weight of the burner phone she left in his pocket. He must be being watched.

Parker keeps walking at the same pace until she's three blocks away. Then she goes into a library. It has two other exits, one of them into a busy shopping mall. She leans against one of the shelves and stares at a display of new books without seeing them.

“How is he?” Hardison asks in her ear.

She takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she whispers. “He has the phone so now...”

“More waiting,” Hardison sighs. Parker hears him typing something emphatically. “Well, the tracker is working anyway.”

Parker snorts. Of course it's working. Hardison made it himself and he doesn't make bad tech.

“One thing going right, I mean,” Hardison says.

This job has already been more trouble than their last three put together. The Rossum Corporation is a medical research company so it made sense that their virtual security would be top-quality. But finding the physical location of their satellite office in Los Angeles shouldn't have been as hard as it was. They don't let anybody in there except staff. Deliveries stopped at the gate, clients met off-site, not even contracts with independent custodians or caterers. What's the point of a satellite office that nobody can go into?

It's staffed 24 hours a day and the security guards are armed to the teeth. Lots of the staff are live-in, which might be the most suspicious part of the whole thing.

The best way to take Rossum down is to have someone on the inside. So Eliot's inside.

“When do you think he's going to call us?” she asks Hardison. They've been taking turns being worried. She knows Hardison is actually worried the whole time and really, Parker is too. They've also been taking turns being reassuring.

“Probably soon,” Hardison says. “He's in a car now.”

The phone Parker gave Eliot has one number in it, for another burner phone that's in the rental van with Hardison. They'll only be able to talk for a minute or so. Any longer and tracing could be a problem.

A man pushes past Parker and she absently takes his wallet. No cash in it, just cards. Boring. She slips it back into his coat before she leaves the library.
Laurence Dominic never minded babysitting. He remembers it being good money for little effort: mostly getting paid to watch TV while the kids were in bed. Babysitting Actives is a lot of effort for basically okay money.

He gets paid more than all of the other handlers as Head of Security, obviously, especially doing double shifts like he has been. They're short-staffed which is why he was annoyed when Adelle decided to offer the potential new guy Active status instead of the handler job he had been interviewing for. After seeing the guy, Laurence admits she has a point. Their new Romeo is pretty stunning to look at.

But short-staffed plus a new Active means Laurence is filling in as handler for Romeo. Their bond isn't as strong as it might be, but really, he won't be Romeo's handler for long. No need to get too attached.

The new Romeo's first assignment wasn't anything strenuous, just as some rich loser's high school reunion date. Pick-up was the only real risk there and it went smoothly too. As they get out of the van back at the underground parking lot, Laurence is feeling pretty relaxed, honestly.

“Mr. Dominic? Can I ask you a question?” the driver asks.

He waves Romeo on. “Go ahead.”

“Why didn't we just pick him up at the door? Why trail him halfway across town?”

To check the in-between conditioning, mostly. It's a delicate balance between the imprinted personality and the baseline Active programming. “What, you object to giving the guy some exercise?” he asks instead. He makes a mental note to recheck this driver's references.

“Oh, no, that's fine,” the driver says hastily. “I just wondered.”

“Great, glad to have your approval,” Laurence says dryly.

He turns back to Romeo and is stunned to see him holding a cell phone to his ear. Laurence lunges forward.

“Hey, that's mine,” Romeo complains mildly, as Laurence grabs the phone.

“Hello? Who is this?” Laurence barks into the phone.

No answer. Laurence waits for a second, then snaps the phone shut.

“Where did you get this?” he asks Romeo.

“It was in my pocket. What's the problem?” Romeo asks.

If it's from the client, Laurence is going to get Adelle to double-charge her. “Who called you?”

“Nobody called me.”

Maybe he was just playing with the phone. How he got it in the first place is the more troubling mystery. “Get going then,” Laurence says, gesturing towards the waiting attendant.


“No, it isn't,” Laurence snaps. He doesn't have time for this. When they're between the engagement and being wiped, the Actives are supposed to do as they're told.
Romeo still doesn't move.

“It's time for your treatment,” Laurence says, forcing himself to sound calmer. The tone is as important as the words. Or so Topher says.

“I enjoy my treatments,” Romeo says.

That's the right response, so Laurence points at the attendant again. Without any more stubbornness, Romeo walks over. But he watches Laurence until the elevator doors close.

Laurence pulls out his own phone and calls down to the lab. “Topher, make sure you wipe Romeo extra well today.”

“Hello, Topher, how are you doing? I'm doing great, Laurence, how are you?”

He really doesn't have time for Topher. “Just do it.”

“Sir, yes sir,” Topher says, sarcastically. “Any particular reason you're telling me how to do my job?”

Laurence sighs. “Potential security breach.”

“Oh, really?” Topher drops the attitude at once. “Let me check my scans... nope, everything looks okay. Whatever it is, Romeo isn't that upset about it.”

“Topher,” Laurence says firmly. You have to be firm with Topher or he will just talk forever. One time, he even called Laurence 'man-friend'. He doesn't know why Langton puts up with it.

“Fine, fine. Oh, he's here anyway so whatever, I'll deal with it.”

“I'll deal with the problem. You'll deal with the Active,” Laurence says.

“Isn't that what I said? Bye, Laurence.”

Laurence ends the call. He glares at Romeo's cheap flip phone. He was going to head home after bringing Romeo back, but obviously, the universe has other plans.

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Alec hits the burner phone again, even though it's already definitely broken. It doesn't make him feel better.

“Hey,” Parker says, right behind him. He didn't notice her open the door to the van but he never does.

He takes a deep breath. “Hey,” he says, turning. “How much could you hear?”

She shrugs. “Enough to know it's bad. Tell me the whole thing.”

“I can do one better,” Alec says, and presses Play on the recording he made of the conversation with Eliot.

“Hello?” Eliot's voice sounds odd, even in the one word, and it isn't just weird distortion from the phone.
“Hey, baby, how's it going?” Alec winces internally at how tense he sounds.

“How is this? Is this your phone?” Alec glances at Parker when recorded-Eliot says that. She's concentrating, staring at the wall of the van like she's reading a transcript of the conversation there.

“What? It's your phone now, we got it for you.” Recorded-Alec is confused and real-life-Alec is still right there with him.

“Why?”

“What do you mean 'why'? Are you okay?” Alec was freaking out by this point and it shows in his voice.

But Eliot doesn't get a chance to answer because there's an interruption of muffled noise, and then a stranger yelling, “Hello? Who is this?!” A few seconds of silence follow, then there's another muffled noise, and the recording ends.

Parker blinks at the wall and looks at Alec. “I don't think he's okay,” she says.

“Tracker shows he was at the Rossum satellite office,” Alec says. “And he called me, so it wasn't just that it was a bad time. If he called when somebody was close enough to take the phone, that means somebody is always watching.”

“He was being watched on the street too,” Parker says. “He didn't even look at me.”

“Who monitors their own security staff that closely?” Alec asks, baffled.

“We need to talk to him. In person,” Parker says.

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The first chance they get to see Eliot in person is almost three days later.

Hardison tracks him to a big property with horses and riding trails. It's owned by Niall London Aston, though he doesn't live there most of the time. It's almost suspiciously easy to get in. Parker and Hardison are dressed in ‘farm clothes’ to blend in, though Hardison also brought catering uniforms in case they have to go in the house. They search separately to cover more ground.

Parker finally finds Eliot in the stable, making friends with one of the horses by letting it sniff his hand. “What are you doing here?” she asks.

He jumps, like she startled him. She could count on her fingers the number of times that's happened in the six years they've known each other, and still have fingers left over. Eliot smiles awkwardly. “Is it that obvious that I don't know anything about horses?” he asks.

“You know everything about horses,” Parker says.

“Niall is going to teach me,” he says, looking back at the horse like he didn't hear her.

“Eliot,” she says, and he turns to her, confused.
"I'm Kallum, actually. Kallum McCormick." He offers her his hand. He doesn't need to make friends with her. She isn't a horse.

Oh, he's worried about surveillance. "It's okay, Hardison used the EMP thing. They can't hear you right now."

Eliot looks more confused. "The what?" He lowers his hand.

Hardison comes in then, entering at the opposite end of the stable. He looks relieved as he jogs over.

"Something's wrong." Parker tells him.

"What's wrong?" Eliot asks.

"Why do you think we're here?" Parker asks him.

"Uh, you're grooms? Is that the right word?" Eliot asks.

"He's grifting still," Parker explains to Hardison.

"It's okay, baby," Hardison says to Eliot. "I got you. They don't have audio or video on you right now."

"Hey, whoa," Eliot says, backing up. He holds his hands up, pretending to push them away. "I'm here to be with Niall. I'm monogamous."

Parker stares at him. That doesn't make any sense. Eliot hates rich people who aren't them. And he can't be monogamous while dating her and Hardison, can he? Maybe she's just not understanding what he means.

"What the fuck," Hardison says.

Eliot continues to back up. "Just... let it go and I'll forget I saw you, okay? No hard feelings." He has a weird look on his face.

She looks at Hardison and he's confused too. Good.

Eliot turns around and leaves the stable, looking over his shoulder at them in the doorway. Then he's gone.

"What just happened?" Hardison asks.

"I don't know," Parker says. Something happened to Eliot and they have to find out what it was.
“Let's go.”

“But...” Hardison trails off.

“He wants us to go so let's go,” Parker says. They'll try again another day. There must be some threat they can't see, to scare Eliot that badly.

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Eliot is in a helicopter. A Bell 206 from the sound. It's one of the most popular light helicopters in the world, for both civilian and military use.

He's sitting next to somebody he knows, but he can't remember the guy's name. That's going to be embarrassing later. He hates forgetting people's names.

He's wearing a bulletproof vest. Where are they going? There's some kind of mission or job going on, he knows that much.

Some of his hair has slipped out of his ponytail and Eliot reaches up to push it away. His hand feels strange. He looks at his fingernails. They've been manicured. Recently. The esthetician has even smoothed out some of the callouses on his hands.

No. He doesn't—he hasn't had a manicure since...

Eliot takes a deep breath and almost chokes. The smell of someone's cologne is overpowering suddenly. A very distinctive smell.

He has a sudden sinking feeling that has nothing to do with the movement of the helicopter.

No. He's imagining it. He's done that before, after nightmares. He never buys that cologne, nobody he knows wears it.

His heart is hammering anyway. Eliot struggles to control his breathing. The smell is making him sick. Is it real?

“Hey,” somebody says suddenly. Eliot's hand clenches, short smooth nails digging into his palm. He turns his head, and it's the guy he knows.

“What's going on?” the guy asks. He has to shout over the noise.

Eliot just shakes his head. He can't explain, it'll sound insane.

“Calm down,” the guy says. He sounds really impatient but that might just be the volume.

Eliot's jaw tightens. He turns away. He is trying to calm down. How does the guy even know he's freaking out anyway?

“Hey!” the guy calls again. He grabs Eliot's shoulder, hard. Eliot manages not to react violently. He knows this guy but the guy doesn't know him. That thought makes everything else worse.

“Everything is going to be alright,” the guy yells.

“Now that you're here,” Eliot says, automatically. He relaxes a little. He's safe, nothing bad is going to happen. He takes a deep breath again.

“Do you trust me?” the guy asks.
“With my life,” Eliot says.

The guy nods and lets go of his shoulder. Eliot leans back into the seat, feeling much calmer.

He can still smell it. Damien Moreau's favourite cologne.

He ignores it all the way to the landing site. The helicopter touches down on a rooftop. Eliot follows the others out into the bright sunlight. He blinks hard and squints at the skyline.

They're in San Lorenzo.

He turns and scans the rest of the surrounding buildings. It's definitely San Lorenzo. Nausea twists his stomach.

Somebody taps him on the shoulder. It's the guy he knows, holding an AK-47 out to him. “Here, maybe this will help your nerves,” the guy says.

Eliot stares at him. “No,” he says.

“Take it,” the guy orders.

“No,” Eliot says again.

“Do you trust me?” the guy asks, sounding incredibly annoyed.

“With my life,” Eliot says. He takes the gun. His hands are shaking.

“Great,” the guy says. “Can we get going? We're on a schedule here.”

“Where are we going?” Eliot asks, forcing himself to keep his voice steady. There has to be a reason for this, an explanation. The guy he knows wouldn't make him do this without a reason.

The guy groans. “You don't know? Unbelievable.” He turns away slightly and says, like Eliot can't hear him anymore. “Topher, did you forget to add in the engagement parameters? Because I kind of need him to have those.”

Eliot can't hear the response, just sees the guy listening. Then the guy says, “The client is an idiot.” He turns back to Eliot. “Fine. Here's how it's going to go: any guards you see, shoot them. Anybody I tell you to shoot, you shoot. Sound easy enough?”

He doesn't wait for Eliot to protest, just starts walking toward the roof access door.

Eliot stays still, the gun heavy in his hands, at war with himself. He does trust the guy but he can't just—he can't let it be that easy. It is so easy to kill people with guns. And he's done killing people for Damien Moreau.

The client has to be Moreau. San Lorenzo is his territory. How did Eliot get mixed up in this? He stares out at the nearby buildings and finally realizes which rooftop they've landed on. The building above the Tombs.

Suddenly, he remembers the last time he was in San Lorenzo. The team. They put Moreau in this prison and now, Eliot's supposed to help break him out. It doesn't make any sense.

“Romeo!” the guy yells to him.

Eliot wants to drop the gun more than he's ever wanted anything. Instead, he crosses the rooftop to join the guy he knows.
“Finally,” the guy says. “I don't know how you were in the military, you are terrible at taking orders.”

“Why are we doing this?” Eliot asks. It hurts that he has to ask somebody he trusts this much to explain but he really can't understand what's going on.

“For the money, of course,” the guy says.

“I don't need the money,” Eliot says. If he didn't feel so sick, he'd be angry.

The guy laughs. “No, I guess you don't. Well, then you're doing this because I said you have to. Is that good enough, or should we say our lines again?” He leans closer to Eliot. “Stop wasting my time. I know you can do this so let's just do it so we can go home.”

Home. Hardison and Parker. When he's done here, can he go back to them? He can't remember the last time he saw them.

Eliot follows the guy through the roof access door. He glances up and sees a security camera pointed right at them. The guy doesn't notice, just keeps going.

Eliot doesn't break the camera. He doesn't break any of the cameras on the long way down to Moreau's cell, deep in the basement. The gun is warm and he's almost out of ammo by the time he gets there.

“Eliot Spencer,” Moreau says, drawing his name out, smiling. “It's been too long.” He's wearing an expensive suit. Of course he is. If he could arrange to get Eliot here, clothing would be easy.

The guy he knows is guarding the entrance upstairs, not down here to urge Eliot forward. Or to stop him.

“Do you have any idea,” Moreau asks, pretending to be casual but still smiling like a shark, “How much money I'm spending on this little encounter? Your services never did come cheap.”

“I should've killed you,” Eliot growls.

Moreau's smile widens. “And now you can't.”

Eliot tries to swing the gun up into position but his muscles are locked. He can't move.

“I was very specific in my instructions,” Moreau says. “If you even think about trying to hurt me, you'll freeze up. Who knew it could be so easy?”

No. It isn't possible. Eliot's breathing faster, straining against the immobility.

“Oh, how delightful. You don't know what you are, do you?” Moreau's voice is like syrup.

He's breathing too fast now, panicking worse than in the helicopter. This is straight out of one of his nightmares.

“You're a puppet, Spencer. And now, you're mine again.”

Eliot drops the gun. Fortunately, it doesn't go off. He braces his hands against his knees and works on not passing out. He can smell the cologne again. The helplessness is so familiar he could scream.

He's a total wreck and Moreau hasn't even touched him yet.
The sharp gasps of Eliot's breathing echo off the stone walls. He forces himself to take slower, deeper breaths. Finally, he can stand up again.

Moreau is watching him hungrily. He remembers that look too vividly. It never lead to anything good. “Well then?” Moreau asks, gesturing to the still-locked door of his cell.

Eliot doesn't move, on purpose this time.

Moreau smiles. “Open the door,” he commands.

Without making any conscious decision to do so, Eliot pulls the key the guy he knows gave him out of his pocket. He walks stiffly over to the door.

“Very specific,” Moreau repeats.

Eliot unlocks the cell. He even pulls the door open. Moreau grabs his arm as he steps out. Eliot freezes in place again.

Moreau leans in and sniffs him. “You're wearing my cologne. I really have to commend your handlers for their attention to detail.”

So he wasn't imagining it in the helicopter. Moreau had already marked him before they'd even landed in San Lorenzo. Eliot still can't remember how all of this happened. None of it makes any sense.

“Walk with me,” Moreau says, moving toward the elevator out of the Tombs.

Eliot does. Moreau is still holding on to his arm. They leave the gun on the floor. It has Eliot's prints on it. The whole operation hasn't been stealthy by any stretch of the word, but leaving evidence like that behind shows Eliot how confident Moreau is in his escape. No one will be erasing the cameras before they go.

Moreau wants his enemies to know how he got out. He wants the team to know he'll be coming for them. That Eliot will be coming for them.

Eliot knows what he has to do.

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When one of Eliot's phones rings, it startles Alec so much he drops his plate of microwaved Hot Pockets. It clatters on the hardwood floor but doesn't break.

Parker looks down from her rig near the ceiling. They stare at each other while the phone rings again. Then Alec dashes into the bedroom to answer it.

Normally, he'd just let it go to voicemail but it wouldn't be the first time Eliot called one of his own phones by mistake.

The country code on the caller ID is for San Lorenzo. Alec fumbles with the touch screen because his hands are shaking. He puts the phone on speaker and rushes back into the living room.

“Hello?”

“This is Minister Flores. Who am I speaking with?”

Parker starts rappelling down.
“Alec Hardison,” Alec says. “Eliot's uh, out right now. Can I take a message?” He feels like an idiot for saying that but what else can he say?

“You are part of his team?” the former general asks, solemnly.

“Yes,” Alec says.

“I have some video footage to send you.”

Alec gives him an email address and they hang up. A few minutes later, he and Parker are watching grainy security camera footage. They see Eliot walking into a building, holding...

“Holy fuck,” Alec whispers, then covers his mouth with his hand. Eliot's holding a gun. A really big gun.

There's no sound on the video. Alec's grateful for that. Seeing Eliot shoot people is just... it's crazy. It doesn't feel real.

“He's missing,” Parker says.

Alec tears his eyes away from the screen to look at her. She squeezes his arm without turning. “No kill shots,” she says. “And he's hitting the wall a lot.”

Alec turns back to the footage and Parker's right. Now that he's looking for it, Alec can see how Eliot is aiming for arms and legs. The man beside him isn't doing that though.

Then, the video shows them a very familiar place. It's the Tombs. The camera is behind him so they can't see Eliot's face and it's too far away to see Damien Moreau as anything but a shape. Before, Alec was too shocked and horrified to think of why this was happening. Now, as he watches Eliot drop the gun, he still doesn't know how but he's a lot clearer on why.

When Eliot and Moreau walk towards the security camera, and they can see Eliot's face clearly, it's worse than the violence before. Moreau's smile makes Alec sick to his stomach. Parker growls at the screen. Alec reaches for her hand. They clutch each other.

Eliot looks up into the camera in the elevator and says something. It's like he's looking right at them, the focus in his eyes going through the camera.

Parker inhales sharply. “No,” she whispers.

“What?” Alec asks.

Her hand tightens even more around his. It hurts. “He's saying goodbye to us,” Parker says, “He's going with Moreau.”

The camera angle changes. They are overlooking the rooftop with a waiting helicopter whose blades are starting to whir to life.

“He can't,” Alec says. Whatever weird horrible thing is going on with Eliot, he wouldn't go back to Moreau. He wouldn't leave them. He promised.

Alec's still trying to make it make sense when Eliot breaks away from Moreau. He runs across the roof, as fast as Alec has ever seen him go. Then he spreads his arms like wings. And jumps.

“No!” Alec yells.

The video ends, the last frame a shot of the rooftop with the frozen helicopter, Moreau beside it.
Alec is frozen too. Parker lets go of his hand.

“We have to go,” she says.

He wants to rewind the video. If he watches it again, maybe it will turn out differently.

“Alec,” Parker says. He looks up at her. “It's four storeys. He could be alive.”

That's a 40-foot drop onto cement. Maybe more. Alec shakes his head.

“Yes!” Parker insists. “It's Eliot!”

There's no timestamp on the video. When did it happen? Alec grabs Eliot's phone and calls Flores on speaker.

“When?” he asks, as soon as Flores picks up.

“Four hours ago,” Flores says. “Witnesses say he survived the fall.”

Alec exhales in relief. “Where is he? Which hospital?” He sees Parker swiping at her eyes impatiently.

“His companion took him away before the ambulance arrived.”

“Moreau did?” Alec asks.

“No. We caught him. He is back in custody and there will be an investigation into how he could fund such an elaborate escape attempt.”

Alec knows that he'll be interested in that later on, but now, his mind is full of Eliot. “Do you know where they went?” he asks.

“That was what we were hoping you could tell us,” Flores says, his voice serious. “The president of San Lorenzo needs to speak to Mr. Spencer about his involvement.”

“When we find him, we'll pass on the message,” Alec says, and hangs up. He has a flash of regret at not saying ‘thank you' to Flores because they wouldn't even know about any of this without him.

He turns to Parker. She's sitting on the kitchen counter that overlooks the living room, her knees pulled up to her chest. “We'll find him,” Alec says.

She nods, not looking at him.

Alec walks over and stands in front of her. She's a little taller than him this way.

“How?” she asks. Alec starts to answer, but Parker cuts him off. “No, how did this happen?” She finally meets his eyes. “It doesn't make any sense. I can't...” She trails off.

Alec brushes his hand on her arm. When Parker leans into his touch, he puts his arms around her. “We'll figure it out,” he whispers into her hair. They have to. They need Eliot back.

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The call from Nate comes a few hours later. Parker takes it. Hardison is researching and she needs information more than she needs someone else to explain right now. She's just going to have to make the words happen by herself.
“Why are you in San Lorenzo?” Nate asks, when she answers the phone.

“We aren't,” Parker says.

“Then what is going on?”

“We aren't,” Parker repeats. “Eliot was. We think he's coming back to LA now. Hardison's working on it.”

“Parker. What happened?” Maybe it's her imagination but Parker swears she can hear ice cubes clicking together in a glass.

She tries again. “They did something to Eliot. He's all... wrong.”

“Who did something to Eliot?”

“The Rossum Corporation. We're running a job on them. He went in to be undercover but something happened.” There. That will help Nate understand.

“Clive Ambrose's Rossum Corporation? You are running a job on Clive Ambrose?”

“Third richest man in America,” Parker agrees. That's what his bio said, anyway.

“Parker, Rossum is a medical research company. Growing organs from stem cells, that kind of thing. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize!”

“They did something to Eliot!” Parker shouts. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Hardison startle. She makes a face in apology at him.

“What did they do to him?” Nate asks slowly. He sounds calmer. He must be doing that thing where he squints and rubs his forehead.

“I don't know,” Parker whispers fiercely. “Hardison is trying to find out. But they took him to San Lorenzo and then he jumped off a roof without a line or anything and now he's hurt and we don't know where he is.”

“Deep breaths,” Nate says. “It'll be okay.”

She's crying again. It's stupid, it won't help. She covers her mouth so Nate can't hear.

“Do you want to talk to Sophie?”

She wants to talk to Eliot. Parker closes her eyes and leans against the wall. The image of Eliot looking into the security camera and saying 'I love you' replays again inside her head. It's her fault he isn't here.

“Parker? Are you okay, sweetheart?” Sophie, being kind.

Parker can't do this right now. “No,” she says.

“Do you want us to come?” Sophie asks.

“No,” Parker says again, but it isn't really her answer. She just needs to not be talking anymore. She can't think.

“I heard what you told Nate,” Sophie goes on, and Parker slowly slides down the wall until she's
sitting on the floor. “It sounds pretty serious. Do you know how you're feeling?”

Parker hangs up. She thinks about smashing the phone. It rings in her hand.

After four rings, Hardison asks, “Babe?”

Parker gently sets the phone on the floor. It's still ringing. She stands up. “Give me something to do?” she asks.

Hardison nods, and she crosses the room to join him.

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“He threatened a client and then tried to kill himself!” Dominic shouts. His voice echoes a little in Adelle's spacious office. She's definitely considering more panelling. Muffling that effect entirely would help her stress headaches no end.

“It's not unheard of,” she says, coolly. “Although in this case, it is obvious that Romeo tried very hard not to kill himself. His dislocated shoulder from hanging from that window ledge, all those bruises, despite the bullet-proof vest, from rolling on impact. He could have almost walked away afterwards, except for the sprained ankle.”

She pauses significantly, swirling her drink. “Your own conduct, Mr. Dominic, was not above reproach,” she says, at last.

Of course he protests at that, just like she knew he would. “Ma'am, I followed procedure—”

“Procedure would have led you to abort the engagement as soon as you knew how much distress it was causing the Active.” She really is angry about this, somewhere deep down, under the cool, forceful shell she always projects. Negligence cannot be tolerated.

“He has a military background! He applied for a handler job, for God's sake! How was I supposed to know his PTSD was that bad? If anything, Topher is the one—”

Adelle cuts him off again. “Topher is the one who told you about the Active's intense emotional state. Repeatedly. No excuses, Mr. Dominic. The whole escapade has 'become news'. She deliberately turns her back on him and pretends to look out the window while really watching him in the reflection. She lets the silence stretch out, just to prove she can. Then she turns back to him with a look that is almost a smile. “However, you did manage to recover Romeo alive. That will count in your favour during your review.”

“Thank you, ma'am,” Dominic says. She has left him nothing else to say.

Adelle nods and Dominic starts to withdraw.

“Show Dr. Saunders in on your way out,” Adelle says, when he's almost to the door.

Dr. Saunders stalks in, every inch of her radiating righteous fury. “Imprinting a Doll with their original self for an engagement with someone from their previous life is not only dangerous, it is irresponsible. Why was I not notified about this?”

“Why would you be?” Adelle asks, undercutting the doctor's indignation with feigned indifference.

Flustered but trying to recover, Dr. Saunders says, “It was a high-risk engagement. I need to know ___”
Adelle interrupts. “What you need, Dr. Saunders, is to take care of the medical needs of our Actives.”

“That is what I am trying to do.” She sounds so anguished that for a moment, Adelle is ashamed of being hard on her.

“And we appreciate everything you do,” she says gently. “I believe Romeo requires your attention?” It is a dismissal, not a question.

Dr. Saunders nods and leaves the room. She’ll recover her anger once she’s down in her office again. Adelle could change that if she wanted to. Just a little tweak and Whiskey—Dr. Saunders would be much more restful company. But Adelle needs efficiency and drive, not agreeableness and placidity.

And even she deserves to get what she needs sometimes.

*I*

“I think I found something,” Alec says. There’s no answer and he looks over at the couch to see Parker asleep with a tablet still balanced on her lap.

They’ve been working for hours. Following the money, mostly. Both Damien Moreau and Niall London Aston paid into the same Mayfair fund the day before Eliot was near them. After a truly convoluted runaround, the fund led back to Rossum. But that still left why.

Niall London Aston, for all his money, has basically no digital protection. Alec hacked him in about five minutes. After the trail led them to Rossum, he went back in and pulled Niall’s personal files. It was desperation more than insight, but it paid off.

Alec reads the open PDF again. It’s almost like a brochure, explaining how to hire dates from somewhere called 'the Dollhouse'. The first time through, he thought most of it was just normal exaggeration. Ultimate fantasy, exactly what you ask for, all that. The second time, he isn’t so sure.

The part that bugs him about the brochure is the Dollhouse employees forgetting their encounters afterwards. A quick search reminds Alec why. There’s a weird conspiracy theory about a place where they wipe people’s minds regularly and replace their personalities. It’s also called the Dollhouse.

He searches a little more. The FBI is investigating the Dollhouse rumours in Los Angeles. Alec finds the open case file. It’s a laundry list of failures and dead ends. Special Agent Paul Ballard must be right on the edge of getting fired.

When he turns back to Niall's files, Alec finds a profile Niall made for a fantasy Dollhouse date. The name at the top is Kallum McCormick.

“Oh no. Oh fuck no,” Alec whispers. He skims the rest of the file, not really knowing what he's looking for. Something to prove him wrong. He has to be wrong.

At the bottom, under 'Active requested', there is a photo of Eliot labelled as 'Romeo'. He's smiling, relaxed. Brainwashed.

Alec stares the photo until it blurs. Finally, he says, “Parker. Wake up.”

She's up and standing beside him in a few seconds. “What happened?” Parker asks.
“I think Rossum wiped Eliot's mind.”

“What does that mean?” She sounds scared now. Alec is scared too.

He explains what little he's found out about the Dollhouse and shows Parker the whole Kallum McCormick profile. “So, when we saw Eliot in that stable and thought he was grifting, he wasn't. He thought he was telling the truth.”

“We can get him back,” Parker says.

Alec hesitates before he says, “But he won't be... if they didn't save his original—”

Parker interrupts him. “They did.”

She sounds so sure. Alec wants to believe it too, that the two of them can fix this.

“He was Eliot in San Lorenzo,” Parker says.

Alec blinks. She's right. “Because Moreau would have wanted him to be.” The thought makes him sick all over again.

Parker nods. She starts pacing. Alec knows moving helps her think.

But he already knows what they're going to have to do. “We need the Dollhouse files. And probably their equipment,” he says. “We have to get me inside.”

Parker freezes, her back to him. “No,” she says, not turning around.

Alec stands up. Parker whirls to face him. “No,” she says again, horrified.

There's a dozen reasons why he has to go on the tip of Alec's tongue. He tries to smile instead. “I'll come back,” he promises.

“No. We'll think of something else,” Parker insists. “We'll bring in other people. We'll... you could build whatever they have. You can hack them from here.”

“I can't,” Alec says. He's been trying for days already. Weeks, really. He started probing Rossum's defences before Eliot even tried to go undercover.

“I can go in,” she says, desperation in her eyes. “You can walk me through it.”

It would be faster and safer for Alec to go. She already knows that. “Babe,” he says, gently.

Parker just shakes her head, looking away from him and wrapping her arms around herself.

“If I go in, we'll get everything we need to take down Rossum and find out what happened to Caroline Farrell,” Alec says.

“What if the same thing happened to her that happened to Eliot?” Parker asks. “What if they do it to you too?” She finally looks at him again, sad now, like he's already gone.

“It won't happen to me,” Alec says. “I'll be so careful, Parker, I promise. They won't suspect a thing.”


“Yeah, he is. But he didn't know about this. I can be prepared.” Alec tries to sound totally sure
that he can do this. He isn't, but he'll do anything to get Eliot back.

Parker takes a deep breath. “Okay,” she says. She walks back over and gives him one of her almost-crushing hugs. “I’ll steal you back, if they get you. Both of you,” she says into Alec’s shirt.

He hugs her back. “Of course you will,” he says into her hair.

* 

Echo looks up from her painting to see Romeo standing in front of her. “Good day,” she says.

“I know you,” he says. He has a crease between his eyebrows.

“I’m Echo. I know you too. You're Romeo.”

“I saw you when you weren't Echo,” he says, slowly.

Echo thinks about that. Sometimes she isn’t Echo. Then, she’s Echo again but different. It's confusing. “That's confusing,” she says.

“It is,” Romeo says. He puts his hands down flat on the art desk between them, leaning on it. There's a bandage holding two of the fingers on his right hand together.

“You're hurt,” Echo says.

“I try to be my best,” Romeo says. He looks tired.

“You look tired. Sit down,” Echo says. She stands up from her chair and guides Romeo into it. His left foot has a big boot on it.

“That's a nice picture,” Romeo says, looking at Echo’s painting.

“Thank you. It's the sky,” Echo says, proudly. She's used blue and purple and pink and orange and gray so far.

Romeo stares at the painting and then nods. “It is.”

Echo smiles. He's nice. She likes him. “Want to be friends?” she asks. “Friends help each other out.”

The crease reappears on Romeo's forehead. “I have friends,” he says.

More than one friend is good. “Sierra and Victor and I are friends,” Echo says. “We eat lunch together.”

“Will they be my friends too?” Romeo asks.

“I think so,” Echo says. She is pretty sure they will but she has to ask them first.

“It isn't lunchtime now,” Romeo says.

“No. Would you like to paint?” Echo asks. She wants to help him.

“Yes.”

Echo brings Romeo some blank paper, picking her painting up carefully. She pushes one of the other desks a little closer to Romeo and settles in to work on her painting some more. But she can't
concentrate.

Romeo is carefully making tiny dots of paint, holding the brush in his left hand. The brush slips a lot so some of the dots are bigger.

“What are you painting?” Echo asks.

“I don’t know yet,” Romeo says.

Echo nods. Sometimes she needs to wait for all the pieces to come together too.

*

“Can I... uh, help you?” a pretty East Asian woman in a lab coat asks, when Alec encounters her in the sterile white hallway inside Rossum's LA branch. She's holding a tablet in one hand and a package of turkey jerky in the other.

“Hi, I'm James Maddox. Here to look at your firewall?” Alec says, smiling and leaning into the English accent a little.

“Oh, the consultant!” she says, relaxing visibly. “We're expecting you.”

“That's why Security let me in,” Alec says.

“I'm Ivy,” she says. She sticks her hand out like she wants to shake his but ends up just offering him the package of jerky.

Alec accepts it. Ivy quickly takes it back. “Sorry,” she says, flushing a little, “It's the last one and Topher won't be happy you're here.”

“Is Topher your dog?” Alec asks, just because he can't resist. Topher Brink is the chief programmer here. That much Alec got from the online staff directory.

“No, no. He's my boss. Well, not my boss. I'm his assistant,” Ivy explains.

“Alright,” Alec says.

“I'll just take you to the lab then,” Ivy says, turning and walking briskly down the hall. Alec follows her.

The door she opens reveals a surprisingly large space. They're on a kind of balcony hallway, above what appears at first glance to be a peaceful indoor garden full of people. There's rock paths, a fountain, and a bamboo shrub that's working hard on becoming a tree. Lots of wood and soft lighting. No windows, since they are way underground.

It isn't anything like what he expected. Not that Alec really knows what he expected. Just not this.

He knows he shouldn't but he can't help scanning the people below, looking for Eliot. He doesn't see him. Instead, Alec finds himself making eye contact across the room with Caroline Farrell. She's wearing workout clothes, like most of the people wandering around down there.

It's a surprise to find her here. Their clients, her friends from college, thought she was probably dead. Caroline's boyfriend was shot and killed by Rossum after the two of them broke into one of Rossum's labs to expose animal cruelty. After that, her friends lost track of Caroline, though they thought she probably had something to do with a later bombing of Rossum's headquarters in Tucson.
Caroline doesn't look like she's being held captive. But that doesn't mean this isn't a prison.

“The lab is this way,” Ivy says.

Alec blinks and pulls himself together enough to follow her. The room they enter has a glass wall overlooking the main space. It's dominated by a futuristic dentist's chair in the centre, with various connected computer towers in shelving against the walls.

A skinny blondish white guy, probably a few years older than Alec, turns around from the stand-up desk he's been working at. He stares at Alec. “Who's this?” he asks.

“James Maddox, computer consultant,” Alec answers.

Topher points at Alec accusingly. “I told them not to hire you!” He turns to Ivy, still pointing. “Everything is under control. I can handle this!” He sounds slightly hysterical. Alec can recognize the signs of too much frustrating work and not enough unbroken sleep, from the countless times he himself has been in the same position. It's pretty satisfying, knowing his attacks have actually been affecting the other side.

“Nobody said you couldn't, Topher,” Ivy says soothingly and hands Topher the jerky package.

Topher gestures at Alec with the jerky and makes a noise like 'and yet here he is'.

“But... we are getting really backed up because the attacks keep interrupting you,” Ivy says.

Topher groans. “The solution to that is not to hire some random person to come in here and interrupt me more,” he says.

Ivy takes a couple steps closer to Topher and says, quietly, “You were the one who said imprinting a Doll as you to help with this was 'incredibly foolhardy and not in the fun way'.”

“Fine. Come here, random person,” Topher says, turning and wandering into a connecting room.

Alec says, “My name is James,” as he follows him into a larger room with a sit-down desk, fridge, and arcade game machines. The outer wall of this room is glass too. Alec forces himself not to look for Eliot again.

“James, sure,” Topher says, waving his hand dismissively. “I'll show you around. First rule, do not eat my snacks. Second rule, we are not kidding about that confidentiality waiver you signed. Nothing you see leaves this lab. With me so far?”

“I'll let you know if I get lost. Where's your server room?” Alec asks.

Topher hesitates, then answers. “Uh, sure.” He opens another door about halfway down the room. “It's here.”

Alec takes one step into the room and stops dead. “Topher, why is there a bed in your server room?” he asks. It's not quite a bed, more of a messy futon with crumpled sheets. Clothes carpet the floor. The whole scene is pretty horrifying.

Topher babbles, “Listen, there have been a lot of late nights lately. I have been on-call so much. And this job is like fuller than full-time, okay?”

“Not okay. I'm amazed you haven't had problems with this hardware going down, let alone cyber attacks,” Alec says.
“The environmental cycling is very good here,” Topher says, apologetically.

Considering how far underground they are, that's not surprising. “It'd have to be.”

“Anyway, I have actual work to do so I'll leave you to it,” Topher says, and leaves.

Alec immediately starts in on the Dollhouse's files. He has to work fast if he's going to be able to switch the newest client personality with Eliot's real one. Because first, he has to find it.

*

Eliot wakes up. He's lying back in a chair that's moving him into a sitting position. The last thing he can remember is being interviewed for the security job with Rossum. He's been drugged, that much is obvious.

A blonde white guy he's never seen before is standing in front of him, wearing a buttondown shirt, sweatervest and khakis. Dozens of tiny blue and green lights blink on the assorted technology mounted on the walls.

Eliot takes a deep breath and winces. He definitely has a cracked rib or two. They must have beaten him while he was unconscious.

“Be careful standing up, Tyler,” the guy says. “Your walking cast isn't up for much pressure. Should be good for getting around tonight but no wild dancing, okay?”

“Okay,” Eliot says. None of this makes any sense. 'Tyler' isn't part of the alias he used for his application.

He looks down at himself. He's in different clothes too: a dark green tank top and light grey sweatpants. He can barely feel the plastic boot on his left foot. It's padded and fitted properly. What the hell is going on?

He stands up cautiously. The guy makes no move to help him, which is unfortunate, since it means Eliot will have to limp over to punch him. He's only taken one step when he sees Hardison. It takes everything Eliot has to keep the surprise off his face.

“You good, mate?” Hardison asks, his terrible English accent telling Eliot to play along. Eliot pretends to stumble and Hardison lunges forward to steady him.

“Thanks,” Eliot says. He feels Hardison pass him something small. He tries not to clutch it too hard.

Hardison steps back. “No problem,” he says.

The sweatervest guy clears his throat. “Well, Tyler, you'd better go get changed,” he says, gesturing to a petite woman standing near the glass door.

Eliot obediently follows her out. He even manages not to look back at Hardison. Every instinct is screaming at him not to leave Hardison in that room. But he has to trust there's some kind of plan.

While he's behind a curtain in a room down the hall, where he's supposed to be changing into the tailored suit the woman handed him, Eliot slips the tiny earbud Hardison gave him into his ear.

“What the hell is going on?” he growls under his breath.

“I already told you it worked,” Hardison says, though he sounds almost as relieved as Parker does. “Sorry, but don't talk, El. I don't know if they have you monitored right now.”

Eliot clenches his jaw in frustration. He needs to know how the plan changed so completely.

“I'll explain when you get here,” Parker says.

When he gets where? He's still in the Rossum building somewhere. If he even is still at Rossum.

“Do not fight your way out,” Hardison says. “They're going to take you right to Parker. Just hang on, okay?”

“Are you doing alright in there?” someone asks Eliot from the other side of the curtain. He's about to answer when she pulls the curtain open. “You haven't even started changing,” the woman who brought him here says, disappointed.

“Why can't I just wear what I have on?” Eliot asks. He makes himself smile because that usually helps. There's some kind of con going on and it's like everybody has the script except him.

“Oh great, a wise guy,” she says. She picks up the bundle of clothes from the stool where Eliot dropped it. “No, you can't go to a fancy charity dinner in sweatpants.” The woman points at the stool with her chin. “Sit.”

Eliot sits. The woman kneels down and starts undoing his walking cast. Eliot moves his foot experimentally when it's off. His ankle hurts but not enough to be a break.

“Stop that,” the woman says, like Eliot's a dog she's housetraining. She reaches up like she's going to take his sweatpants off.

“I've got it from here,” Eliot says, quickly, leaning away.

The woman smiles for the first time. “Shy, huh? That won't last long.” But she stands up and pulls the curtain closed behind her as she walks away.

A stab of pain when he takes the tank top off shows Eliot that his right shoulder is injured too. He's more careful moving around after that, unsure of what else he'll find. His chest and stomach are covered in bruises, especially on his left side where his ribs hurt more.

All through getting changed, Eliot can hear Hardison muttering nonsense to himself, like he usually does over his hacking. Parker doesn't say much.

After Eliot is finally dressed in the suit, which fits almost too well, with his walking cast back on, the woman leads him to an elevator, then across an underground parking lot to a black van. The van has a bunch of screens and computer stuff in it as well as seats for the two of them. The woman doesn't speak to Eliot for the whole ride. He's glad for the reprieve but a little creeped out too. He's still not sure who she thinks he is.

The van stops and Eliot gets out, blinking, into the sunlight. They've pulled up in front of a nice hotel. “Room 1437,” the woman says, handing him a key card. “See you tomorrow afternoon. We'll pick you up for your treatment then.”

Eliot nods, even though he doesn't know what that means. He limps into the lobby and finds an elevator up to the right room. He knocks.

Parker opens the door. Her face lights up when she sees him. Eliot never gets tired of that. He smiles back, forgetting all the confusion for a second. “Hi, darlin',” he says.
She pulls him into the room, tugging on his right arm which sends a shot of pain through his
shoulder, jolting Eliot back to reality. After the door closes behind him, Eliot says, “So, I'm here
now. Are you going to tell me what the hell happened?”

Parker isn't smiling anymore, but she nods. “It's really bad,” she says. Her whole body is tense,
like she's braced for something.

Hardison chimes in over the comms, “Baby, you're gonna want to be sitting down for this.”

“Just tell me,” Eliot says. He's dreading the answer now but he has to know.

Parker takes a deep breath. “We just thought you were grifting at first, like they were watching
you all the time,” she says, sounding like she's starting in the middle of the story, like she usually
does. “But then... Hardison found out that you weren’t.”

She pauses. Eliot doesn't interrupt and neither does Hardison. Finally, Parker continues, looking at
the floor, “You thought you were different people. Rossum pulled you out of your head and put
whatever they wanted in there.” She meets his eyes. “It's been six weeks since you went in
undercover.”

For a few breaths, Eliot doesn't believe it's true. But why would Parker lie to him? “Why?” he
asks.

“That's what they do to people,” Parker says.

“They hire them out,” Hardison says. “Put the new personality in, take it out after. That's why you
don't remember.”

Eliot's going to be sick. He swallows hard to keep the bile back. “Hardison. Get out of there,” he
croaks.

“I will, promise. Just finishing downloading copies of all their files,” Hardison says.

“Go faster,” Eliot and Parker say at the same time.

“How many times do I have to tell you two that I can't just make it go faster?”

Eliot snorts. He's seen Hardison do the impossible before. Parker smiles at him.

It's all so normal for a second. Eliot doesn't want to ruin it. But it's important for him to know.
““You saw me when I was...” He doesn't know what to call it.

Parker nods. “Twice. The first time on the street when I passed you a phone. When you called us,
you didn't know who we were.”

Eliot leans against the door. His ankle is starting to hurt from all this standing. He closes his eyes
and focuses on the pain to ground himself. “And the second time?” he asks.

“You told me you didn't know anything about horses,” Parker says.

Eliot opens his eyes again. Why would somebody hire him to not know about horses?

“I have the file for that one,” Hardison says. “It's classified as romantic.”

A missing piece clicks for Eliot. Hire somebody for the night, they won't remember. They'll be
whoever you want. He shudders. His legs feel like they're going to give out.
Parker’s there, pulling his good arm over her shoulder to support him. “The couch?” she asks.

Eliot nods. She helps him walk over to it and sits down next to him. Eliot rests his head on her shoulder. It’s easier to breathe with Parker beside him. They stay like that for a while.

At last, Parker takes a deep breath. “There’s something else,” she says.

Eliot sits up. He can’t even imagine what she’s going to tell him now.

“Damien Moreau hired you to break him out of jail.”

Eliot gasps a little. A little is still too much for his ribs and distantly, he can feel the pain. He stays very still. Parker already looks anxious and Eliot doesn’t want to scare her with how big his emotions are.

He should’ve killed Moreau when he had the chance.

“They caught him again,” Hardison says.

Caught means he did get out. “How—” Eliot starts to ask but has to clear his throat before he can continue. “How long was I with him?” Six weeks of his life gone and how much of that did Moreau take?

“About seven minutes,” Parker says, immediately.


She leaps up from the couch, like she’s been waiting for an excuse to move. “You can watch the video.”

“Parker, babe. Weren’t we going to wait with the video?” Hardison asks.

“It’ll be easier if he can see what happened,” Parker says, bringing a tablet back over to Eliot.

Eliot’s about to ask how the hell they have video of him breaking Moreau out of prison, when the grainy, silent footage starts playing. Security cameras.

He watches himself shoot guards and winces. Not because it’s horrifying, though it is. But at the knowledge Parker and Hardison saw this. They probably watched it more than once.

He thought he was prepared for the confrontation between past-him and Moreau but he isn’t. The camera is too far away to really show what is going on. It’s bad. Eliot can feel that it’s bad. He wonders if the skin-crawling panic is a memory from this encounter or just left over from years ago.

In the elevator, past-him looks up into the camera and says... “That’s how we knew for sure it was you,” Parker says.

Eliot’s hands spasm a little, reminding him not to hold on to the tablet so tightly. “Did you know about the personality thing before?” he asks, proud that his voice doesn’t waver.

Parker shakes her head. “We just knew something terrible happened to you.”

Eliot nods. He focusses back on the video, just in time to see himself running across the roof and jumping off of it. Then the last frame of video freezes dramatically.
“What the hell was that?” he asks, letting the tablet fall onto the couch.

“Did you get to the part where you jumped off the fucking roof?” Hardison asks.

A completely inappropriate laugh escapes Eliot. He coughs. “Yeah,” he chokes out. “Any guesses why I did that?”

“You were escaping,” Parker says.

Eliot isn't sure he was. At least, not the way she means it.

“You caught some kind of window ledge on the way down,” Hardison says. “I just read the report. You dislocated your shoulder from that and then sprained your ankle when you landed.”

Eliot exhales in relief. His ribs protest again. “And rolled to distribute the impact,” he says.

“But you still cracked some ribs,” Hardison agrees. “Because you jumped off a four storey building.”

“You don't have to convince me it wasn't a good plan,” Eliot snaps.

“Right, sorry,” Hardison says.

Eliot instantly feels awful. He opens his mouth to apologize too but Parker says, “Stop reading the files and get out of there, Hardison.”

“Babe, I am like ninety-six percent done, I promise.”

Parker sighs. She leans against Eliot a little, like she's checking he's still really there. He pushes back in answer. “We probably shouldn't all meet here,” she says, out of the blue.

Eliot wishes they could all just go home. They could catch a flight back to Portland and just remote-detonate the Rossum Corporation. But their clients will be wanting their news in-person.

“Did we find out what happened to Caroline Farrell?” Eliot asks.

“Yep. Same thing that happened to you,” Hardison says.

She's been missing for months. Nausea threatens to overwhelm Eliot again. “How many people did this happen to?”

“Too many,” Parker says. She springs up from the couch again and comes back with a first aid kit.

“I don't need more bandages,” Eliot protests.

“You will after I get that GPS strip out of your neck,” Parker says, almost cheerfully.

Eliot automatically touches the back of his neck. He can feel something hard under the skin. “Dammit,” he sighs.

“You want some painkillers?” Parker asks.

This whole thing has been way too much like waking up after being drugged. “No, just do it fast,” he says.

*
Alec mutes his comm because he really doesn't need audio of the GPS strip removal to go with the imaginary visuals already running through his mind. All the Dollhouse files are finally copied and at last, he can get the hell out of here.

Just as he's about to cross the server room to leave, the door opens. Topher is standing there, blocking the doorway. He asks, “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Sure,” Alec says. “Looks like your firewall is all good now.” It was strong enough before to keep him out at a distance so 'good' is an understatement. Alec still isn't sure how Dollhouse/Rossum has that much computing power. They must have like ten warehouses full of servers hooked up somewhere.

“Who sent you?” Topher asks. He's deadly serious.

Alec's stomach lurches. “Uh, you called me, remember?” he asks, going for confused innocence. Parker told him to bring a taser and he should have listened.


“What are you talking about?” Alec asks. He can feel his heart pounding in his ears. “I came to fix your system, I've been in here the whole time.”

“No true!” Topher cries, dramatically pointing a finger at Alec. “You were out in the lab earlier!” He takes a step closer. “Everything is still there but I saw you go into one of the storage cupboards.”

He'd switched the labels between Eliot's original brain scan and the fake one they were just about to put into him. At least Topher hadn't noticed before Eliot left. Alec takes a deep breath and says, “I don't know what you think you're doing to these people, but it is sick, okay?”

Topher stares at him. “Your accent...” he says, then recovers at little. “Hey, they get paid at the end!”

“That doesn't make it right!” Alec yells, leaning forward with the force of his anger.

“I've called Security, they're on their way,” Topher says, backing up out of the server room.

“Okay,” Alec says and punches Topher in the gut, aiming for his solar plexus. From the way Topher doubles up wheezing, he hit the target.

Alec smiles grimly and quotes something he heard Eliot say once, “I only use violence as an appropriate response.”

Then he gets the hell out of there.

*

One of the best days of Paul Ballard's career starts the same way as some of the worst.

He wakes up about an hour before his alarm and lies in bed thinking about the Dollhouse case. When his alarm finally goes off, Paul hasn't made any progress. It's a familiar feeling.

He rushes getting ready, like it's vitally important to be on time. Like it's going to change anything. Paul skips his morning run. He'll go boxing again after work, when the futility of everything gets to him. Not that it hasn't gotten to him already. He is no closer to finding Caroline than he was
when that photo of her first arrived on his desk.

Traffic is terrible and he's almost late getting to his desk. Agent Loomis strolls by on her way to the break room. “Good morning, Agent Ballard,” she says in passing.

Paul manages a smile that makes her raise her eyebrows and keep walking. Loomis comes back with coffee a few minutes later. She asks, “Is there any real reason you look like warmed-up death today?”

“Are you saying I'm hot?” Paul asks back.

She rolls her eyes emphatically. “Never. You need a hobby. Something to distract you in your downtime.”

“I have a hobby, it's my job,” Paul says.

“Definitely doesn't count,” Loomis says, over her shoulder. She almost always gets the last word. Paul spends an unproductive few minutes wondering what her distracting hobbies are.

By the time Stevie comes around with the mail cart at nine, Paul is already annoyed, frustrated, and exhausted. He isn't expecting any packages so he doesn't even glance up until Stevie thumps a big box down on the corner of his desk, making his computer monitor shake.

“Where's this from?” Paul asks. The box has nothing written on the outside except his name.

Stevie just shrugs. “I didn't open it,” he says, and moves on.

“Fair enough,” Paul mutters. He slits the tape on the box with his letter opener, the one he kept even though his ex-wife gave it to him.

The box is full of portable hard drives. There's an envelope on top of them that says, 'Read this first: Time sensitive'. Paul opens it.

The first sentence of the letter makes him just about drop the paper. It reads: 'These drives contain copies all of the files of the Los Angeles branch of the Dollhouse.'

Paul looks around wildly to see if anyone is watching him. If this is a prank, he is going to break something over the culprit's head. No one is looking at him.

He keeps reading. 'As you know, the Dollhouse is a secret, criminal organization that imprisons, brainwashes, and tortures its captives. These files will help you, Special Agent Paul Ballard, bring the parties responsible to justice.'

Paul sits down heavily in his chair, breathing hard. This is... amazing. He's been fighting so hard for so long for some kind of break, with nothing but failure after failure to show for it.

Of course, he'll have to make sure this tip-off is legit. Cross-check what he can. Get a warrant, assemble a team. There is a lot of paperwork in his future. But for the first time in what feels like forever, Paul feels real hope that the end of this case is in sight. This will change everything.

Paul takes a deep breath and gets to work, grinning like he just won the lottery.

*  

Eliot, Hardison, and Parker are waiting outside the Rossum building, watching the FBI agents bustle in and out. They aren't just here to gloat. Eliot's sure that all of them need to see this job
finished in person, to make sure it's really over. He knows he does.

Eliot sees somebody he recognizes being led out of the Rossum building by an FBI agent. The man who was in the San Lorenzo video with him. She hasn't cuffed him yet.

As they watch, the man shoves the agent. She stumbles into a group of other agents and he starts running. There's shouting, confusion, guns being drawn.

Eliot steps into his path and punches Laurence Dominic in the face as hard as he can. He goes down like a rag doll. Behind him, Eliot can hear Parker and Hardison yelling at the feds to back off but he doesn't really care. Rage flows through him like a tide. It's such a relief to push it outward instead of inward. He bends over Laurence so he can hit him again.

This is what he's been waiting to do ever since he found out about the Dollhouse.

Laurence opens his eyes, squints to focus on Eliot. Eliot punches him again. He groans. Out of the corner of his eye, Eliot sees federal agents rushing over to investigate. He straightens up. It isn't enough, but it's better than nothing.

On the ground, Laurence looks up at him and laughs a little. He spits blood out of his mouth. “Romeo, do you trust me?” he asks, the words garbled but still understandable.

The words mean something, remind Eliot of something he's forgotten. Just for a second, they freeze him in place. And then it's over. “Fuck you,” Eliot growls.

Laurence's eyes widen. He stares at Eliot like he can't believe what he's seeing.

The FBI agents surround him then, guns ready. Eliot lets Parker and Hardison pull him away slowly.

“I think we've overstayed our welcome,” Hardison says. Eliot looks up to see more agents heading their way.

“Are you ready to go?” Parker asks.

“Yeah,” Eliot says. That's as much closure as he's likely to get. There's no point in staying longer.

*  
Parker is more than ready to leave their place in LA. They never meant to stay this long. But the one last thing they have to do in LA before they go is meet up with the clients. It's more of a formality than anything else.

Hardison sent the files on the international Dollhouses to Sterling. Parker's seen the raids on the news the last couple days, Interpol breaking apart a huge human trafficking ring. Sterling isn't going to be happy owing them a favour, so it's a win-win-win situation.

Eliot suggested they have the client meeting here instead of in a public place. It might just be an excuse for him to cook for more people. Parker thinks he'll be glad to get back to their brewpub and start feeding everybody again. They're going put this apartment up for sale tomorrow anyway so it doesn't matter who knows where it is.

“That smells delicious, baby,” Hardison says, coming into the kitchen. He leans over Eliot's shoulder.

Eliot nudges him. “Yeah, well, it won't in a minute if you don't get out of my way,” he grumbles.
Hardison doesn't move, still leaning against Eliot's back. “Is that black pasta? I love black pasta.”

“I know,” Eliot says, nudging him again. “Go help Parker with the dicing.”

“You can do the garlic,” Parker says, pushing a cutting board toward Hardison.

“Thanks, babe,” Hardison says and kisses Parker on the forehead. She grins.

“Is it just me or is this way too much food for five people?” Hardison asks.

“Six. They're bringing Caroline too,” Parker says, cutting up strawberries for the spinach salad.


“Huh. That's a bit rude, inviting yourself and two more people,” Hardison says, getting to work on the garlic.

“Is it?” Parker asks.

“No, it's fine,” Eliot says. “They've been through a lot.”

“You've been through a lot too,” Hardison murmurs. Parker elbows him gently in the ribs. Eliot's already said he isn't ready to talk about it.

Eliot sighs. He shifts his weight, like his ankle hurts. He took the walking cast off yesterday. Parker put a stool near the stove earlier, in case Eliot needs to sit down.

They finish getting ready and right on time, the building intercom buzzes.

Jessie and Drew Fowler, Caroline's friends from college and their clients, come in first when Hardison opens the door. The other three people are close behind them.

“I know you,” Caroline blurts out, as soon as she sees Eliot.

Eliot looks a little startled. He keeps saying he doesn't remember anything about being a Doll, even when they don't ask.

Caroline smiles. “You were one of us, weren't you? But I didn't see you at the Bureau.”

“They got me out first,” Eliot says. “You remember... being there?”

She shrugs. “Bits and pieces. Priya and Tony remember a little too, don't you?” Caroline turns to the people standing behind her. Priya Tsetsang and Anthony Ceccoli, aka Sierra and Victor.

“Hardly anything,” Priya says.

Tony ducks his head a little. “Just Priya,” he says.

“She is pretty unforgettable,” Caroline says. Priya rolls her eyes.

They do the rest of the introductions, then everybody wanders into the dining room. Jessie brought wine. It's local and will probably clash with the food but Hardison still thanks her.

“We should be the ones treating you to dinner in an expensive restaurant somewhere,” Drew says.

“The food wouldn't be as good,” Parker says. She's just stating a fact but everybody smiles like she made a joke.
“What a nice place. Have you been here long?” Jessie asks.

“It’s a rental,” Hardison lies breezily.

Eliot goes back into the kitchen to plate the food. The place settings and salad are already on the table.

“Oh, wow. This looks...” Caroline trails off, gesturing at the black noodles.

“What is it?” Drew asks.

“Tagliolini nero con gamberi,” Eliot says. “Squid ink pasta with prawns.”

Tony’s face lights up. “Did you make your own pasta from scratch?” he asks, as everyone starts eating.

“Of course,” Eliot says.

“I haven’t had fresh pasta since before I shipped out,” Tony says. He pauses and stops smiling. “Well, maybe I did, in the last four years.”

Four years. It hits Parker how long that is. Eliot was gone six weeks and it felt like an eternity. “What about your family?” she asks.

Hardison kicks her lightly under the table.

Tony smiles a little bit but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “To them, I was in a program for treating post-traumatic stress disorder with no outside contact. They aren’t expecting to hear from me for another year.” He shrugs. “I, uh, burned most of those bridges a long time ago.”

“None of us had close family,” Caroline says, slightly emphasizing the word ‘had’. “That’s part of why they targeted us, I think.”

Priya clears her throat. “Well, they targeted me because they thought I was a paranoid schizophrenic.” She smiles tightly at everyone and looks down at her food. “Luckily, the FBI’s consulting doctor said since what happened to me is right out of The Stepford Wives, there’s no way of knowing what kind of medication I should or shouldn’t be on.”

Tony covers Priya’s hand with his. Caroline pats her back. Some of the tension goes out of Priya’s shoulders and she starts eating again.

“This pasta is amazing,” Jessie says with her mouth full. She swallows. “Sorry, it’s just so good.”

Eliot smiles. “I’m glad you like it.”

“So, you made this?” Caroline asks Eliot. He nods.

“We have a brewpub in Portland,” Hardison says. “Come check it out if you’re ever in town.”

“Oh, I thought you lived in LA,” Drew says.

“We used to. But that was... five years ago?” Hardison says.

“Five and a half,” Parker and Eliot say at the same time.

“Is it difficult running a brewpub?” Priya asks.
“It's like anything, really. You just have to put in the effort,” Hardison says.

Caroline slaps her left shoulder with her right hand in a weird kind of salute. “Shoulder to the wheel,” she says.

Parker isn't sure what she means but since nobody else comments on it, it probably doesn't matter.

The conversation becomes more general then. Eliot goes through the black pasta recipe step by step with Tony, while Hardison, Drew, and Jessie small-talk. Priya and Caroline talk to each other a little but they're mostly eating. The whole thing is easier than Parker expected, though she's glad Sophie isn't watching her performance.

When everybody has finished eating, Jessie announces, “I want to propose a toast.” She raises her wineglass. “You listened to us and helped when... when nobody else was even trying. Thank you.” Her voice wobbles a little but she's smiling.

“That's what we do,” Parker says, smiling back.

“Thank you,” Jessie says again, and all of them clink glasses.

After Jessie and Drew have left, the others stay behind. “So, any big plans for the future?” Caroline asks. She leans against the doorframe but her eyes are sharp.

“We're going to take down the Dollhouse clients,” Parker says. It's the obvious next step. Some of them are probably even in the Black Book.

Caroline, Tony, and Priya all look at each other, talking without words. Then Priya asks, “Can we help?”

“Are you sure you want to?” Eliot asks.

“Friends help each other out,” Caroline says, firmly. “Count us in.”

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