

## DISCLAIMER

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## *The Magician (cont'd)*

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Anyone familiar with the southern California coastline will know that Camp Pendleton is about the only piece of undeveloped land between LA and San Diego. It's a coastal desert wasteland, primarily made up of sagebrush and dirt. And almost everyone who has driven between the two cities has, at one time or another, seen the Marines storming the beach with amphibious assault vehicles, M-16s, and whole host of equipment as instructors bark orders over radios.

I find it particularly fascinating because alongside that same stretch of freeway are road signs with a man, woman, and two kids holding hands as they run, their raggedy clothing fluttering out behind them. The signs are supposed to mean "watch out for illegal aliens," a concept I find offensive. Don't get me wrong, I am all for people coming to this country. We left Sarajevo when I was 12 because life in the Balkans sucked and we wanted to make things better. However, we saved our money, bought a one-way airplane ticket, and checked in at Ellis Island the way normal people are supposed to do it. I have a butchered last name because of it.

But there's a difference when people scurry across the border in the middle of the night like rats fleeing an exterminator. I've been called an elitist by many of my friends who sit back from their middle-class upbringings and say "well why don't we just grant them citizenship?" There was even a mass protest a few years back in Seattle where nearly all the illegal aliens in the city marched for equal rights and better pay. Many of my friends joined them in their little socialist quest, ignoring the fact that if the illegals simply earned their citizenship, they would have equal protection under the law and receive better treatment at work.

And for all the pragmatics out there who questions whether or not I'd pay more for produce picked by homegrown citizens, the answer is yes. Let apples be \$5 a pound... I don't care. At least then it's legal and transparent business. We get most of our food from China and Chile now anyway, so I suppose it's a moot issue...

Our meeting with Colonel McNamee once we reached Camp Pendleton was less than pleasant.

Cal determined that we should go see him in the evening as he was about to leave, aware that we would never get an appointment with a high ranking colonel during the middle of the day. The 1920s sandstone building on the western edge of Camp Pendleton was well kept, washed over in a yellow-white paint that made it look brighter than it actually was. The building was all but empty, the majority of the staff having left for the day and Cal led me straight up a staircase and then down a wide hallway to McNamee's office, knocking several times.

“Are you sure we can just barge right in an-”

I was interrupted by the door opening, the salty looking old colonel on his cell phone. It was chucked roughly back onto his desk as soon as he recognized Cal, an incantation pouring from his mouth at breakneck speed.

Instantly, a shockwave flew outward from McNamee's tall frame, throwing me to the floor under a heap of books that came crashing down from the wall of his office. Cal was more prepared, standing on his feet despite the obvious forces at work around him. I grunted into my teeth, standing up under the heavy volumes that smacked into my head as another shockwave tore through the bricks of the wall, shattered the windows between the office and the hall, and splintered the door into a million pieces. An alarm went off somewhere and a brick struck the center of my back, sending me to the floor again, this time in mind-numbing pain that crippled me. High above on the popcorn ceiling, the fire sprinklers activated without warning and a steady rain began to soak coldly through my uniform.

I struggled to get up, pain coursing through my back as I suddenly thought back to elementary school: duck & cover in case of an earthquake. I found my hand wrapped around the back of my neck instinctively.

“So it IS you...” Cal was growling at the colonel as electrical energy crackled between them between them, their hands and arms struggling against one another as the light grew more intense and leaving a sharp electrical smell in the air.

“You’re supposed to be dead.”

“Surprise.”

A deafening noise cut through the air, terrible and grating as if a sheet were tearing in half and I covered my ears, my head throbbing as water poured down on me from above. I managed to scramble over to the wall near the door and stay below the level of the broken glass windows as Cal and the colonel duked it out in the hallway. MPs were already watching the scene in shock, guns drawn and ready to shoot.

“Elia torii kontar... misi...” Cal grunted as the colonel threw several punches to his gut, knocking him to the floor.

The noise stopped and my ears rang. My mouth was bleeding; a piece of glass had struck my lip and as I struggled to get up, I fell several more times on the wet VCT tile flooring, wild pain coursing through my back.

“Elia tori kontar misi vedanaa.” Cal’s voice was barely audible.

A cactus plant at the far end of the hallway suddenly glowed red and hurled its spines at the MPs, catching them in the face and neck. They screamed, covering their eyes as thorns flew down the hallway at an alarming rate, whistling like tiny missiles in the air. I ducked quickly as a stray one took out a shard of glass still in the frame and then stuck in the colonel’s desk behind me.

I noticed suddenly that my heart was pounding and my face was flushed red, my hands shaking uncontrollably. I felt like throwing up as I stumbled to my feet, long-forgotten memories of Sarajevo blurring my sight as the noises brought to mind shelling... endless shelling.

“What happened to Diablo Lake?” Cal grunted through clenched teeth. They were wrestling now, each one trying to make sure the other couldn’t reach his gun.

Suddenly the colonel was on top of him, landing punches to his face and uttering another incantation. I felt the energy crackle through the air as electrical pulses coursed through Cal’s

body, his legs kicking as he groaned, a slight current running through my own body as the electricity traversed the water pooling on the floor.

Then I thought about it. My gun. It was in a holster on my hip, the khaki uniform plastered to my skin with water from the sprinklers. I grabbed it, rushed forward, and hit the colonel on the back of the head with it as hard as I could. He keeled to the side, grabbing his head, and the electricity stopped.

Cal was screaming now, his body convulsing and steaming. I hesitated; he would heal. I pounced on the colonel, straddling his chest and grabbing his short hair.

“Enough of this bullshit.” I felt my temperature rising, blood pounding through my veins.

“Who are you?!”

Water was streaming down over my face from the sprinklers and I could hear the sirens in the distance as fire trucks sped our direction. “Answer his question... what happened to Diablo Lake? Why was the project cancelled?”

He smiled at me and started laughing. “I don’t have to tell you shit. Who is he, Oakley? Your new fag?”

Cal was sitting up now, heaving and shaking as he tried to steady himself. “Fag?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, sergeant... Fischer told me everything.” The colonel looked back up at me. “And what about you? You his new bitch? Oakley never could fuck a woman... never had the balls for it.”

I looked at Cal, struggling to stand up against the wall, then twisted around above the colonel, pressed my gun to his knee, and fired.

He shrieked and shook beneath me. “WHAT THE FUCK!!! GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!!! GRRRRD... JESUS FUCKING CHRIST...”

“Fag... but I’m the one holding the gun,” I said.

“Shinii wratakfor ela-”

I cut him off with a crushing punch to his face that hurt my knuckles.

“Fuck you!”

I grabbed his jaw, furious now, and pried his mouth open, reaching back with my other hand to press my gun against his crotch. “Listen to me, asshole... I don’t take shit from anyone. Now either answer his question or you won’t have the balls to fuck a woman either.”

“Ie o ai au...”

“What?” I let go of his face.

“It’s not my fault... Fischer cancelled it.”

“Fischer’s dead,” grunted Cal. He was standing now above both of us.

“No he’s not.”

“I saw the ash at the lake... they’re all vaporized. I want to know by whom and why no one reported it.”

“The lieutenant was just taking care of business. You should have been in that bunker.”

“Who bought you out?”

The colonel smiled and chuckled at Cal, his blood starting to spread like ink in the water.

“Answer him or your dick is next,” I said, gritting my teeth.

“You don’t honestly think we could let NSA get energy manipulation all to themselves... do you?”

“We? Who is we?” Cal’s face was dark and terrifying with deep set eyebrows and angry lips.

“You already know the answer to that, sergeant. You just don’t want to believe it.”

Cal looked at me. “We need to go.” The fire sprinklers had soaked everything and there was a solid inch of water on the floor now.

I rose and stepped back from the colonel, keeping my gun cocked and aimed.

“It takes more the bullets to kill me!” Suddenly, he reared up and sprang at me, his face growing wide into a horrible sneer, his old teeth glistening. He let out a deafening roar and whirled up from the water, spinning through the air with hands outstretched, energy pulsing suddenly from his fingers.

But in the time it took me to react and think about pulling the trigger, Cal had already uttered something which made the water whip up in a rainy vortex around him. It froze instantly and the colonel, suspended in midair for a brief moment, turned frosty white all over, fog rolling

off his body. He crashed to the floor, frozen solid, the ice cracking in the warm air coming in through the shattered window of his office.

I wiped the water from my face. There was an inky red blotch of blood from shooting the colonel in the knee and I felt sick again. Not since Sarajevo... This was NOT the American dream. Cal rushed to a bathroom and grabbed a handful of paper towels, then bent and diligently dug the bullet out of the colonel's frozen knee, washing his hands in the water on the floor. I looked at the grayish corpse, transfixed by the colonel's unremarkable face.

Cal handed me the bullet. "One too many episodes of CSI. They'll investigate this."

I stood for a time, oblivious to everything, the bullet clutched in one trembling hand, the other struggling to holster my gun.

"Come on." Cal's hand was on my shoulder firmly. I turned and sprinted after him down the hallway, water splashing around my feet as we bounded over the groaning MPs, down the stairs and pushed through an emergency exit and out into the balmy southern California evening.

More MPs were already moving inside and a lone fire truck was stopped at the entrance. One of the officers stopped us. "Anyone inside corporal?"

It took me a moment to realize he was talking to me. "I don't know, sir," I said breathlessly. "But I heard something happen up on the second floor, sir... I think it was some kind of animal."

"We'll check it out. Thank you, corporal. Sergeant." They nodded at one another and the MP took off towards the building, calling for reinforcements on his radio.

I was grateful it was dusk, otherwise the MP would have noticed my uniform was ripped and Cal's face was beaten up. As it was, I wasted absolutely no time in sprinting back to the car and hopping in, fumbling for my keys as I struggled to calm my hands down.

Cal slid into the passenger seat. "Deep breath, take it easy."

"Shut up." I couldn't get the key into the ignition and I screamed into the empty parking lot in frustration.

Cal's hand caught my own and steadied it, but I shook it off and pushed him away.

"Get the fuck away from me!"

I threw the keys to the floor and clambered out of the car, suddenly taking my gun off my belt and throwing it into the seat with fidgety hands. I spotted a trash can at the edge of the parking lot near a broad field of grass and headed for it, my stomach turning in knots as I dry heaved. But try as I might to throw up, I hadn't had food for much of the day and nothing came up. I found myself light headed, staggering back towards the convertible, my body shaking violently despite my best efforts to control it.

Cal was there suddenly, grabbing me from the side and pushing me down onto the grass, the black-orange of the dusky sky whirling above me as my head spun around in circles. I struggled against him, but he was stronger, more disciplined, more in control of himself than I was.

Tears were stinging my eyes and I fought them back valiantly, trying to hold on to a shred of my masculinity in front of this all-too handsome stranger that I desperately wanted to impress. But my childhood was like an unstoppable train, a slideshow of random images from the siege cutting through my consciousness.

Cal pinned me to the grass, trying to hush me. "Shhh sh sh. Come on, deep breath... That's it. Easy. You're OK. You're in one piece and you saved my ass again. Now come on... come on..." His hand was stroking the side of my face. "Easy, easy... can you stand up?" He tugged me to my feet, pulling my arm over the back of his shoulders to hold me up as we shuffled back towards the car.

An officer, briefcase in hand, was walking towards a black shiny sedan several spaces away from us when he stopped.

Cal motioned to me. "Girlfriend dumped him."

The officer nodded, frowning. "Sorry to hear that, son. Keep him out of trouble, sergeant."

"Yes, sir." Cal eased me into the passenger seat and I leaned my head on the windowsill, an emptiness creeping into my stomach. "It will pass," said Cal as he started the car.

"I know," I said thinking back to the Serbian invasion. "It always does."

By the time we pulled onto the freeway, I was already feeling better. To be clear, I had no reservations about shooting the colonel. No, my sudden sickness came from the realization that I

lacked the reservations normal people might have had. And I lacked them because of growing up in the middle of the Bosnian civil war. There would be no going back, no new found innocence to explore; I was permanently tainted by the Serbian invasion, a shell of a man with no heart and no conscience.

Even more disturbing was the news that Fischer was alive and part of some secret organization conspiracy thing which I didn't really understand. I hate things I don't understand. I'm smart and I'm a fast learner, but when people are dishonest and insist on making my life hard, I become a terrible sleuth and I tend to throw temper tantrums.

Cal on the other hand, seemed to know exactly what was going on and the moment we returned to Eric's apartment, he began packing.

"We going back north?" I asked.

"Nope. Quantico. I've got to get to the bottom of all of this. Report this to a general or Vicky Brinks or somebody..." He held up the voice recorder which had been in his pocket the whole time.

I sighed and fumbled my words. "I-I'm not sure I can help you anymore..."

"You don't have to go. I can handle Fischer."

I sat on the sofa, watching him pack. "What if it's more than Fischer?"

"I doubt it. McNamee and Fischer are probably skimming cash off the top of this project. It's happened before."

I looked down, the refrigerator humming in the background as I sat in silence. "I can't go with you."

"I'm not asking you to."

"Then why do I feel like I should go?"

"I don't know. Why do you?"

Because I'm falling flat on my face for you. "Because you need me looking after you."

"I can take care of myself."

"Oh yes... clearly," I said sarcastically.

"Can I see your back?"

I turned around and untucked my shirt, lifting it so he could have a look.



“Ouch.” He retrieved a first aid kit from the bathroom and got out a few Band-Aids to cover the gash in my ribcage made by the sharp edge of the brick. His hand held my shoulder steady and I felt an instant calm, as if I’d taken a shot of alcohol and it was slowly coursing through my body. I sagged against him, feeling the warmth from his skin as he taped the Band-Aids down.

“What did he mean when he said you didn’t want to believe it?”

“Hmmm?”

“When McNamee said you knew who he was working for, but didn’t want to believe it. What did he mean?”

His hands paused, his fingers gently digging into the skin of my back. “Well... I gotta be honest... I don’t want to believe that Dan’s involved in this. I think in a lot of ways, I still love him, but if this is the reality, then so be it.”

“I see.” Not over his ex. How boring. I wanted his fingers digging into my back for a different reason. What he lacked in emotional maturity and perspective, he made up for in kindness and simplicity. I could live with kindness and simplicity... And that tight little butt. His dick was probably huge, too. “I’ll go with you,” I said suddenly.

“You shouldn’t.”

“I want to.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “What if you have to hack a computer?”

The front door opened and Eric strolled in, several Safeway bags in his hand, reeking of cheap Chinese food. “Did I interrupt?”

“No, no.”

“Damn. I’d have joined you both. Versa-TILE is in STYLE, baby!” He bucked his impossibly narrow hips a few times and I laughed out loud.

Eric was goofy, sexy, and out of my league. Cal was sweet, handsome, and not over his ex. I hated my life.

Eric dug through the bags and started pulling out cartons. “You bitches want some dinner?”

Flying is my least favorite way to travel. It's not a fear of heights or motion sickness or even that initial sensation when you take off and you feel the bottom fall out from under you. And no, it's not the recycled air, expensive food, or mean spirited flight attendants. It's the fact that, ever since 9/11, the airlines have cut WAY back on their budgets and they now turn airplanes around in half an hour, hardly taking the time to clean the seats, empty the toilets, or fold the blankets and pillows. It's absolutely disgusting when you board an airplane and it smells like people... that kind of humid wet Frito stench that comes from fat, sweat, and oily hair. Most of the time, I'm afraid to lean my head back for fear I'll get lice from the bitch who was in my seat before me.

Cal ended up buying tickets on Virgin America which, because it was a new airline, had super cheap prices and brand new jets. It was the first flight I've enjoyed in years and as I settled into the leather seat (yes, even coach has leather seats), I found myself relaxing slightly from the nerves which pecked at me constantly. My gun was stowed below in the cargo hold and I was more than a little uneasy about having lied to airport security about working for NSA. They were probably going to run a background check and I cringed inwardly, waiting for a plainclothes US Marshall to leap from an inconspicuous seat and handcuff me.

Furthermore, I had left my brand new car in LA with Eric and Jason, stipulating that they could drive it, but that I would inspect the tire tread upon my return and charge them for any peeling out they might have done. I had no intention of doing any such thing, but the message was clear, especially to Eric who had a small addiction to PEVs (penis extension vehicles). He needed no such extension, but when you have 8, why not go for 9? He drove a BMW 3 series that matched the rims on most of his sunglasses.

"So are you and Eric uh..." Cal twiddled his fingers together as he shuffled his tarot cards on the meal tray in front of him.

"Hmm? Oh hell no... No, no."

"No?"

“No.”

“Why have you never had a boyfriend?” His voice was low and the quiet din of the engines was welcome white noise as we skipped over the clouds.

I paused for a moment, considering my answer. “I’m not mature enough to be in a relationship.”

“Interesting,” he mused. “I think I’m ready for a relationship, but I haven’t found the right guy yet. I want that intimacy and that connection... and I’m willing to put in the work.”

“It’s not about what you want,” I countered.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s not about what you want. You can’t head into dating someone expecting intimacy or... or to come home to them every night or whatever. It has to be organic and natural.”

He straightened up in his seat. “But it is. Any connection is organic.”

“Yeah, but not when you have expectations about it. You’re setting yourself up for failure.”

“But you have to have certain expectations... like, I expect that any guy I’m with will be monogamous.”

I rolled my eyes and fiddled with the touchscreen on the back of the seat in front of me. “God, that’s the last thing I care about.”

“What?!”

I shifted in my seat. “I don’t care if a guy sleeps around as long as the commitment to the relationship comes first. He can quit his job, fuck around, have a midlife crisis... do whatever. But we, as a couple, come first. No exceptions ever.”

“Yeah but what about when relationships end? I mean, sometimes it’s just not worth the effort.”

“Then you shouldn’t have entered into the relationship to begin with. I don’t believe in divorce. You work it out, no matter what.”

Cal shook his head. “I don’t buy that. Sometimes you change. People change... they’re dynamic.”

“That’s why you wait until you’re older to get into a relationship. Wait until the rate of change slows down and then get into something serious. Or if you’re young, the dedication has to be unfailing.”

“So you’d be with one person the rest of your life?” He stopped shuffling for a moment and looked at me doubtfully, an eyebrow arched.

“Yeah. Absolutely. You have to work it out. A commitment is forever...”

“Oh no.”

“Yes! It’s binding. I mean, I don’t take that kind of shit lightly. When you say you’re going to be with someone, there is no option for ‘well, it just didn’t work out’. That’s bullshit. People say that because they’re too lazy to work things out.”

“When you’re unhappy, sometimes a relationship just has to end. When no one is getting what they want, it has to stop.”

“Yeah but a relationship isn’t about always being happy.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. That’s... that’s like eating junk food. When you become an adult, you can buy whatever you want to eat. But just because you can doesn’t mean it’s the best thing for you. And when you live on Ding Dongs and Kool-Aid, it tastes great, but it’s not healthy in the long term.”

“Being in an unhappy relationship isn’t healthy either. I mean, if a guy hits me, I’m gone.”

I frowned. “Well, duh. But you have to take the good times with the bad. You can’t ride a high forever and ever. You have to be sad to know what it’s like to be happy and vice versa. You have to work through the bad times because it keeps things stronger in the long run, even if you’re growing apart... you compromise and meet somewhere in the middle.”

“Not always.” he looked out the window, sunlight glinting off the wings and up into his face. “Sometimes you become two different people and there’s nothing you can do about it. Like Dan and me... Dan grew into someone more open than me... even...” He paused for moment, looking at his cards. “Even more courageous. Not that I’m a coward, but you understand...”

“Oh totally. But I think you guys could have worked it out.”

“No, there was no working it out. He wanted one thing and I wanted another. I love him more than anything, but it wasn’t meant to be.”

“If you love him so much then why isn’t he here? Why aren’t you guys still together?”

“Well, sometimes loving someone means letting them go.”

“No, that’s called giving up.” I stuffed a copy of SkyMall into the seat pocket. “I’d be in favor of an arranged marriage.”

“What?!” Cal’s eyes grew wide. “And what if you hate the person?”

“You don’t. Because you don’t have that option. You HAVE to work things out. Failure isn’t an option.”

Cal smiled warmly and dealt out several cards on his tray. “Your parents are still together, aren’t they?”

“Yep. 32 years. Because they don’t give up. Not about luck or being right for one another; when they got married, they took the commitment seriously. They knew who they were.”

“My parents divorced when I was 10. My stepdad is an ass.”

“Well... I can’t think of anything worse than being 90 and on my death bed, counting back over my relationships like some kind of... emotional timeline. ‘Well for five years I was with Brian, then I was single for six months, then I was with Patrick for two years, then I was in a hookup phase for like a year...’ that kind of thing is bullshit and a complete waste of a good life.” I ordered a can of ginger ale on the computer screen, swiped my card, and waited for the flight attendant to drop it off. “So what are you going to do when you see Fischer again?”

“Haven’t thought about that,” he murmured quietly, his voice losing the kind of self-assured command it usually held when he spoke. “Past few days, I thought he was dead. And now that he’s not... I guess it would be one thing if he were innocent in all of this, but in a way I feel worse than I did before. Knowing he’s in on this scam.” He nudged the cards absently on the tray, suddenly becoming closing down his body language, turning away from me, facing out the window and watching the clouds soar by below us.

“Sorry I brought that up,” I said.

“It’s life.”

“Well, you can’t trust anyone.”

He shot me a wounded glare. “That’s why you’re alone.”

“I’m single by choice,” I huffed after a while.

Cal smiled slightly, his pale skin glowing as the mood lighting on the Airbus jet faded slowly from bright blue to purple. The cabin quieted down considerably as passengers fell asleep and only the occasional flight attendant shuffling past disrupted the drone of the engines and the faint hiss of the air compressors.

“I feel like I should tell you,” he said. “I um... I messed around with Eric last night.”

I felt myself grin. “Really... when was this?”

“Um... you were asleep and I got up to get a glass of water. He was in the kitchen getting some food.”

“And?” I shifted in my seat, hoping not to pop a boner thinking of the two of them together.

“And what?”

“What happened?”

“A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.” He shuffled the cards again.

“I don’t see any gentlemen. Spill it.”

“We went out on the balcony and had sex.”

“Like full on sex?”

“Yeah, we fucked.”

I grinned at him, giddy and yes, just a little jealous. I would make Eric pay dearly for defiling my little military hunk before I did. “Good. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yeah. It’s been a while for me.” He looked down at his card, embarrassed and slightly on guard.

“Well that makes two of us. I haven’t had sex in... God... must be close to six months now.”

“I see.” He swallowed hard and I watched his Adam’s apple bob in his neck. “Well I hope you’re not upset.”

“Should I be?”

“Well I wasn’t sure how you... umm... how you felt about this whole thing... with us... me.”

I reached under the tray and grabbed his knee, causing his leg to jump. “Look, I don’t care who you decide to fuck. You want to be a cum sucking slut? Fine by me.”

“Jesus!”

“I obviously enjoy spending time with you. I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“OK.” His chiseled face was beet red and he glanced across me nervously to see if anyone else had heard, before smiling at me again (which left me unable to move for several moments) and then dozing off.

We banked somewhere out over the Midwest and Cal slid into me gently, fast asleep. I thought to push him away, then thought better of it and shifted so I was more comfortable. It was an act of congress to keep from groping him for the next two hours and I found myself growing increasingly accustomed to the feel of him against me, the way his hair smelled, the clean scent of his deodorant on his skin, the pattern of his breathing. I reached down to draw a card from the Tarot deck clutched loosely in his hand.

“The Lovers.” A man and a woman, twisted around one another with some kind of dark garden behind them. How appropriate. I laughed it off as an odd coincidence and reshuffled the deck, but when I drew the same card the second time, my eyes grew wide and I looked down at him suddenly, aware of his effect on me.

Something about Cal Oakley was different. There was a brilliance to the way I felt when I was around him, as though he were constantly pushing me beyond my normal capacity and simultaneously bringing out the very best I had to offer. I felt lustrous, adventurous, cocky, edgy... more than just my usual confidence. There was a terrifying easy feeling that coursed through me when I was around him and though I was happy to have even this much time with him, part of me was worried about Lieutenant Daniel Fischer, the mysterious man who had apparently loved Cal for three years. After all, exes have a funny way of making guys reconsider their interest in a current prospect.

Eventually, my arm fell asleep and I drew it up gently from behind Cal, wrapping it over and around his shoulder to rest my hand on his chest, pulling him snugly against me and stuffing the Tarot deck into my pocket. I caught an obviously gay flight attendant staring for a moment before I drifted off.

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I dislike the East Coast. And easterners. Cramped, humid, overpopulated with patricians who have lived in this country for centuries, and steeped in too much history. It reminded me of Europe, not America. There was no open space, no free land, no sunsets over the ocean, and no relaxed attitude. The megalopolis that stretched from Boston down to DC in one endless sprawl of urban development was dirty and intimidating, lacking the comfortable wide cityscape of LA, let alone the ease of West Coast sensibilities and progress one finds in Seattle or San Francisco.

It's not that Washington D.C. is an unfriendly city, but every time I've been there, I always get asked what I do for work, what kind of car I drive, and what my stance is on healthcare reform (and two of the three times I've been, I've had my wallet stolen). There is this level of fast-paced pretense that is ridiculous, an infection of attitude that comes from New York being in such close proximity. While you might find egos in LA, you find attitude back east. I always marvel when friends paying \$1000 a month for a 200 square foot studio in Manhattan come out to Seattle, take one look at the apartment and promptly say "well *I* wouldn't live here, but it's very nice..." Of course you wouldn't live here. There's no starving violinist down the hall, no rats in the alley behind the dumpster, no bossy Russian landlord, and no mold growing on the walls of the bathroom. Trees and open space are too close for comfort. Careful... the wild untamed jungles of the West might overgrow your unit!

It didn't help that we were apprehended at Dulles as soon as we got off the plane by eight men and three women in casual clothes and tiny, barely visible little wires running over the backs of their ears. Instead of making a scene, they simply closed in around us and before Cal could say a word, one of them pressed between us, draping both arms over our shoulders and grinning as though we were his oldest friends.



“Don’t even try to manipulate... we’ve got an electro-magnetic field around you both.”

His voice was low and nondescript.

I glanced around in a sudden panic, my heart racing, watching as people dropped calls on their cell phones and cussed aloud.

“You think we wouldn’t know?”

Cal frowned slightly. “I killed the colonel... how did you find out?”

“He texted us that you might come hunting out this way just before you froze him.”

“I see.” Cal looked at me. “You can let him go. He doesn’t know anything about this.”

The man looked at me. “No... I think Dan may want some collateral to bargain with.”

“I ran into him at Diablo Lake. He’s just tagging along.”

“Really...” The man slid forward between us as we walked down through the terminal, a masterpiece of modern architecture with a giant curving ceiling and immense walls of glass strung between pillars of white concrete.. “What’s a tag along worth these days?” He studied me for a moment, then looked behind us to the other members of his team. “Tell you what... Jacobs, Parker... take him out someplace quiet and get rid of him.”

My heart raced a million beats a minute and I felt myself start to shake. They were going to kill me. Me! And for no reason... Well, they had a few good reasons. But even so, I wasn’t involved and it was with a certain amount of disbelief that I realized this kind of stuff could still happen in America.

Cal gripped the man in front of us and slammed him into a wall as I felt a pair of strong arms grab my elbows from behind. “I told you he has noth-”

“Just tagging along and yet you’re so defensive,” said the man, grinning down at Cal. Someone walked up behind him and tasered Cal in the kidney which dropped him to the ground. The man looked down at him, straightening out his pale blue polo shirt and tapping the wire behind his ear. “Absolutely lame... Dan is going to have a field day with you. You’re one of only three that are unaccounted for.”

He motioned to the man behind me and I was ushered down through the terminal towards the baggage check. I cast a quick glance back at Cal who was struggling against his captors,

causing several people to stop and stare. I watched a woman in a brown skirt reel in her young daughter as Cal stopped fighting and looked at me.

Then he was being hauled off to the right, down an escalator to somewhere I couldn't see. The hands on my elbows tightened and a foot kicked the back of my legs. I started walking again, trying to think of something to say. It was one of only a handful of times in my life when I was truly speechless. What would I say? What *could* I say? There was nothing that would convince them to let me go. No pleas for life or promises to keep my mouth shut... they had a mission and they were going to carry it out. That was the end of it. If I were in their position, would I have done anything differently? Absolutely not. I looked up at the LED sign above the baggage claim that had our flight on it and shook my head. At least it was a good flight.

It suddenly occurred to me how pathetic everyone else was, picking up their bags from the noisy stainless steel carousels that whirred and droned like the day to day grind of their pointless little focused lives. They would go to work, day in and day out, nose to the grindstone, never see the bigger picture. They would die having taken out only a tiny chip of the statue of life rather than a large chunk. A chip versus a chunk.

This was not how I wanted to go.

I did NOT survive the entire siege of Sarajevo only to die in some back alley in D.C.

And that's when I did it.

Wrenched my hands free from whomever was behind me, threw my elbow into the man walking beside me, and lunged for my backpack as it slid by on the steel plates, the Virgin America tag wrapped around the strap.

They were already on me by the time I caught hold of the zipper, pulled it open and reached inside. I fell to the floor at the edge of the carousel, my chin hitting the steel edge and sending a shooting pain into my teeth. I accidentally bit my tongue and flinched, jerking away from them, kicking with my feet and clawing at my bag as it sped away from me.

I caught it and deflected a large plastic suitcase heading my way.

“Get back here!” I felt hands on my shirt, jerking me back as I thrust my hand into my bag and felt for something solid. A tank top, a change of underwear, some toiletries, my cell phone charger.

Fuck.

The plastic suitcase I had shoved away was there again, insistently pressing forward, as the plates ground onward from below. I grabbed the dog-gnawed handle, reared up, and threw it headlong into the face of the man grabbing my shirt. He stumbled backwards, blood spurting from his nose as someone nearby gasped, the suitcase hitting the floor and cracking open like a giant clam vomiting clothes across the tiled floor. I swung the other way wildly, catching the other man in the side and sending him sprawling into the baggage carousel which clacked disapprovingly as he slammed into the insistent metal plates.

I dropped the suitcase, grabbed my backpack and sprinted back down the concourse to the terminal where I had seen Cal last.

“Stop him! He’s under arrest!” The man on the carousel was up again, trailing me and shouting at airport security. Two burly men in white button up shirts caught sight of me and I heard the crowds start to chatter as their footsteps picked up speed behind me.

I glanced back to see them closing in, bobbing up and down as they shoved travelers aside. Suddenly there were people all around me as a massive tour group, chatting excitedly in an Asian language, poured out of one of the terminals and into the gray-blue of the concourse. I merged into them, ducked down slightly, and made my way to the edge of the massive hallway and into a men’s bathroom.

I looked back. No one. My heart fluttered at an alarmingly fast rate and I thought to pop a few Bayer to ease any risk I might have of a heart attack. I ate healthy, but you could never be too careful... I leaned against the wall by the baby changing table, watching the sinks and stalls opposite me carefully to make sure no one was there and then looked into my backpack for my gun. My heart sank as I realized they probably took it at LAX, tipped off by Fischer’s men. If they knew we were coming to D.C., then they knew we were leaving LA at some point.

Dammit...

And then he was there, the stocky man I had thrown onto the carousel, his gun drawn as he leaned down to look under each toilet stall. My heart stopped and I held my breath, pressing gently into the wall behind me in a vain attempt to disappear.

“I know you’re in here,” he murmured.

Slowly, I crept my shaking hand down and gingerly felt in my bag, trying to make as little noise as possible. Nothing... a tank top, a stick of deodorant.

“Make it easy on yourself.” He was halfway down the stalls now, crouching at each one to look inside, his gun poised in the air like a hot branding iron, ready to strike. In several moments, he would turn and find me and shoot me. I knew what it felt like to be shot... I had an ugly scar on my right thigh from venturing into a Sarajevo sniper alley when I was 11, searching for a soccer ball that had rolled away. I didn’t want to feel it again.

My cell phone charger, some socks... my cell phone charger.

He sighed audibly. “Where the hell...?”

I felt myself wind one end of the cord around my hand. I lowered my bag to the floor silently, catching the other end of the charger with my other hand, wrapping the cord around it, too, the wall plug securely in my fist. I took a deep silent breath and padded forward on the balls of my feet, moving over to stay all the way behind him and out of sight, my breath frozen in my lungs as my neck bulged with my sudden blood pressure increase. I could hear the faint drip drip of a faucet, a muffled flush from the women’s restroom on the other side of the wall, the thin buzz of the florescent lights above me.

“Nope, not there... shit,” he said to himself.

I could smell his cologne, hot and spicy and a little cheap. I was right behind him now, the musky heat pouring off his back. I would only get one shot at this...

My hands raised in the air and with a burst of adrenaline, I brought the cord down in front of his face, pulled it back against his throat, and held on as hard as I possibly could, my fingers turning white.

He gasped and thrashed wildly against me as I retched, threatening to throw up the ginger ale I had sipped throughout the plane ride. Straining from side to side, I held on as tightly as I could, afraid to let go. His gun clattered noisily to the floor and his hands reached back to grab my wrists with surprisingly little strength. We flew back into the edge of a stall with its door open. My back hurt. And then in moments, he had stopped moving.

When I was sure he wasn’t faking it, I let go with trembling hands, a feeling of dread washing through me that I quickly brushed aside. It needed to be done and that was that. I

shoved him into a stall and sat him on a toilet, snatched his gun from the floor, raced over to retrieve my bag, and then returned to the stall to lock myself inside with him.

I took his shorts and changed into my tank top, shoving my Sevens and rocker tee into my backpack. The man also had a pair of Ray-Ban aviators hanging from his shirt. I snatched them with an uneasy hand and pulled them on. In the side pocket of my backpack was my NSA badge and at the very bottom of the bag was my gun, trigger lock and everything. I clipped the badge to my belt loop and tucked the Baby Eagle into the back of my shorts, relieved it was here with me and not in a security bin back at LAX. His gun lingered for a moment in my hands as I debated whether to take it with me or leave it. I was unfamiliar with Berettas, how to load or clean them, what to expect when it fired. It was strangely light compared to the Eagle and it was shaped funny.

When he suddenly stirred from what was (to my relief and disappointment) a blackout, my mind made itself up. I thrashed him across the head with the butt of the Beretta, watching him slump into the tiled wall as I slipped the gun into the backpack, slung it over my shoulder, and walked out of the stall, my hands suddenly calm again and my breathing back to normal.

I paused at the mirror, looking at my messy hair and the welt on my chin. I pumped several squirts of Purell from the dispenser mounted on the wall and spiked my hair with it, dabbed some cold water on a paper towel to ease the redness in my chin, and tugged down the shorts to show the top of my underwear before heading calmly back onto the concourse.

I had no idea where Cal was and leaving the sprawling maze that was Dulles made me acutely aware of how lost I was in a city I didn't know that well with a purpose that was anything but clear. I shoved my hands in my pockets and discovered the stocky man's Blackberry and for a few moments as I stood in the humid heat of the terminal while taxis buzzed by, I went through his emails and text messages, hoping to find something.

I slipped into the first taxi that neared me.

"Whay to mai fdend?" It was a Somali man with a broad smile, a picture of a rather beautiful wife and kids stuck to his dash, and one of those wooden bead massaging seat covers. The car smelled like curry.

"Quantico."

“You got eet, mai fdend.”

I figured the group that had jumped us would doubtlessly take Cal to Dan. He *did* know magic/EM/whatever the hell they wanted to call it and might join their cause at the last moment. More than likely, Lieutenant Fischer just wanted to see his former bitch one last time before killing him.

The Blackberry was full of emails sent from various people with very nondescript names. Then there were the ones from Lieutenant Fischer, USMC, Quantico, VA. More references to Project Delta. A few from people at NSA who were clearly oblivious to what was going on, asking for detailed reports by such and such a time. All addressed to the stocky and now brain-damaged John Parker who, I was certain, would soon be discovered naked in a bathroom stall in Dulles. Charming.

I looked out the window at the scenery going by, suddenly happy to be alive... for the moment. A fat lady was driving down the side of the street in an electric wheelchair, her muumuu fluttering in the micro-breeze she created at 5 miles per hour. Her Jabba the Hutt arms drooped off the armrests and I could make out the web-like blue veins in the scaly, fungus-infected skin that puffed out from between the straps of her Wal-Mart sandals.

“Han, mah bookay...” I pictured Princess Leia dancing on a chain in front of the wheelchair.

It infuriated me. Instantly. That bitch was probably on welfare and if nothing else, I was certain she didn't have health insurance. MY tax dollars were going to pay for her inability to waddle her fat ass on a StairMaster. She might as well have been a drug addict, stumbling into the ER high on meth, bleeding from tripping over a traffic cone. Either way, I was financing the continuation of an unhealthy lifestyle. Thyroid disorders be damned, she was obese and in an electric scooter. That meant she didn't *care* to get in shape, otherwise she would have been walking. She was lazy.

My Somali driver, like me, had come to this country for a better life and was working his ass off for what I knew couldn't be great pay and all the while, Bertha Butt had been handed the American Dream on a silver platter and had squandered it to the point where she was now feeding off the very society that doubtlessly had given her ancestors a second chance at success.

How was that fair? Why was everyone else paying for her stupidity? Why do we punish the team for one person's mistake?

That's when it occurred to me.

"Driver?"

"Yes, mai fdend."

"Can you take me to Fort Meade instead?"

"You wit NSA?"

"Sure am." I held up my badge for him to see in the rearview mirror.

"You got eet, mai fdend."

As he turned onto the highway, I found Victoria Brinks in the global address book on the Blackberry and sent her a priority message asking to meet. Then I started playing with the security settings.

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