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The Magician (cont'd)

16

NSA headquarters is a brilliant black glassy box in the middle of a massive (and I do mean massive) parking lot situated on Fort Meade about 20 minutes north of the capital. It is a building that, through its architecture alone, speaks volumes about what goes on inside... shiny, reflective, and foreboding. It's actually two black boxes with a rambling, ugly, squat little structure from the 70s wrapping around one side, but that's beside the point. I saw it as a hulking, glittering testament to the intelligence community and as the taxi pulled up, I felt my pulse start to quicken again.

Brinks had responded to my request for a meeting and I had about five minutes to figure out where her office was in the big black abyss before "John Parker" would be late and the red flags raised. I pulled out the Blackberry and looked at the number stored under "NSA Front Desk," then called it from my iPhone. There was an epic menu system to navigate through, full of various female and male voices that gave runaround options of pressing one, two, or, for all other options, pressing three. I hit zero as many times as I could.

"For national security purposes, your call may be monitored or recorded." What a relief.

The phone rang several times and was answered by a clean female voice. "NSA headquarters, Fort Meade. This is Julie; how may I direct your call?"

I half expected to get a call center in Bombay. "Victoria Brinks' office, please."

"Just a moment."

As soon as I heard the touchtones, I hung up, humming them to myself as I touched the number keys on my phone and tried to replicate the little melody. 1102. The phone tree at the

law firm matched the floorplan and I guessed the same was true for the NSA building. A long shot, at best, but simply calling and asking for the deputy security advisor's office location would have been more trouble than it was worth.

I debated taking the guns in with me. They would stop me at security and I could easily get kicked out or arrested again. Then I realized special agent John Parker would probably take his with him everywhere he went.

On a side note, what the hell kind of name was that? Who names their kid "John Parker"? I mean, honestly... I hoped the bastard when by Johnny or something. I made a mental note to give my kids distinctive names, just in case hell froze over at some point in the future and I decided to adopt or become a sperm donor for one of the lesbian couples I knew.

I slipped a phone in each pocket, left his Beretta on the floor of the car, and gave the driver an extra tip for taking my bag back to the airport and having it mailed home via the little Virgin America tag wrapped around its handle. As I was handing it to him, I felt a small rectangle I hadn't remembered putting in my bag and snatched it back, opening the other side pocket. Cal's voice recorder was tucked neatly inside. Remembering its contents, I stuffed it in my pocket, ignoring the beep from low batteries. I'd ask for some when I got inside; they *had* to have AAA batteries at NSA. I handed the bag back.

"Aldight. Take care, mai fdend."

"You, too." I won't lie: it was a relief to get out of the curried taxi. I always wonder about people that move to this country and bring their food with them. Would it kill you to eat a hamburger so you'd smell like an American? My family got rid of every shred of Croatian culture when we landed at JFK, determined to fit in with mainstream America. I had no accent, no traditions, no weird smells, and almost no fond memories of Sarajevo. Why couldn't everyone else be that way?

I mean, if you move to this country, then MOVE. Not just your belongings and your family, but your heart and mind as well. Leave the Third World cesspool behind and commit to change. At least he spoke English.

My nose twitched as I walked inside. Security did notice my gun, but only because I placed it on the table next to the metal detectors as I walked in, trying my best to breathe deeply

and just do what everyone else was doing. I swiped my keycard and a massive security guard looked at it to make the sure the picture matched my face.

“Welcome, Mr. Douglass.”

“Thank you.” I stood patiently and waited as the computer beeped approvingly for me and then moved towards the nearest bank of elevators, keeping my face stony and taut, feigning a botox injection.

“Mr. Douglass?”

My heart stopped... damn damn damn... instant jail time. Impersonating a federal officer, murder, and spying on NSA. Just add water and stir. My hands were shaking again, my chest heavy and holding my breath down. I was a felon. It stunned me that I hadn't considered that sooner. God I was stupid...

“Mr. Douglass?”

I turned around slowly, trying my best to stay calm and hoping I could explain my way out of everything.

“Better not forget this, sir.” The security guard handed me my gun, handle first.

I snickered and stifled a sigh of relief. “Thanks... that would have been bad.” I took it and shoved it in the back of my shorts, my fingers twitching.

The elevator was full of suits, uniforms, casual clothes, file folders, and PDAs. I was tremendously underdressed, an off-duty agent showing up late for a meeting and other than a few polite glances, I was left alone all the way up to the 11th floor.

The glass was coolly tinted and as I stepped out of the elevator, I noted how cold and air conditioned it was compared to the swampish, thick heat that wavered off the asphalt outside. 1102 was at the end of a long hallway that had cubicles and offices littered along both sides. I listened to the phones ring, the quiet conversations, the click click of keys on a keyboard, the overabundance of “sirs” and “ma’ams”, the teams of analysts discussing things quietly. For a brief moment I was back at the law firm, lawyers and paralegals buzzing around. I made a mental note to call Marie when I had a spare moment as she was probably still having trouble with her Blackberry. I told her she should have bought an iPhone...

Room 1102 was, to my utter dismay, a conference room, trimmed in medium colored wood with large leather chairs and a mean looking speakerphone in the center of the table. I sighed and looked at the clock, pursing my lips. What the hell...

I caught the attention of a guy chatting on his cell phone. "Victoria Brinks' office?"

"All the way at the end," he said, cupping his hand over the microphone.

I almost jogged down the end of the hall and finally saw the thick wooden door with a name placard on the front that read "Deputy National Security Advisor." A trim secretary sat at a desk out front, sorting through a severe-looking stack of paperwork.

"I have an appointment with Deputy Advisor Brinks."

"Your name?"

"John Parker."

"She's on a call, but she said to show you in immediately." She motioned me through the door and I stood just inside, leaving the door open.

Victoria Brinks was a smaller woman than I had anticipated. I'd seen her only a few times on TV (National Security Advisor Wakefield seemed to give a press conference every week), but here, she was shorter and more petite. A middle aged woman with red-brown hair always pulled up into an efficient bun, she was fond of pant suits that gave her a more masculine edge, a la Hillary Clinton. In fact, seeing her in person for the first time, I was struck by how manly she was.

I didn't like it, especially in a politician. Call me old fashioned, but if you're going to be a woman, BE a woman. Wear a skirt now and then, let your hair down, and remind me of my mother at some point. Show some trace of femininity instead of making yourself as manly and cold as possible so you can "be taken seriously". Believe me, long Pantene Pro V hair, big tits, and a good pair of Pradas will get your political agenda pushed through just as easily as going all Gloria Steinem and wearing dark pant suits.

She stood leaning against the glass at the far end of her office, talking on her phone and nudging at a potted plant nearby with her toe. I squinted my eyes and, after a time, the aura of the plant glowed a very healthy green, flickering as I struggled to hold the gaze. Her desk was large, a massive flatscreen computer monitor at one end and a landline phone at the other, several

speed dials outlined in red. I looked for a moment at her cables; they were using fiber optics instead of Ethernet. I was surprised by the government for once... actually spending money where it needed to be spent.

“Yes, sir,” she said quietly. Was on the phone with the president? Oooohh!!! I got a little giddy inside, the bubbly feeling calming my nerves as I prayed silently that Cal was still alive.

Brinks glanced at me, then turned back to her phone. “Uh huh... Understood. You’ll have my support. You, too. Bye.” She turned to face me and I noticed how much makeup she wore. “You’ll have to excuse me, I have an appointment righ-

“John Parker’s dead.”

She stopped, mid-sentence, and stared at me.

“Or brain dead or unconscious... I didn’t bother to check.”

“Who are you?”

“Zach Douglass, Marine Corps. I worked with Cal Oakley at Diablo Lake.” I threw my badge at her desk, trying my best to keep my words clipped and my voice hushed.

“Victoria Brinks. Close the door,” she ordered.

I reached back and tapped it closed.

“Sit down.”

“I prefer to stand.”

“What brings you into my office? And why is one of my agents dead?”

“Lieutenant Fischer killed everyone at Diablo Lake months ago, then tried to cover it up with Colonel McNamee. Now I don’t know what’s going on, but they’ve been after me ever since. I didn’t really know who else to turn to... Cal said you spearheaded the whole energy manipulation project thing...”

“Project thing...” She looked at me for a moment and pursed her lips. “First, you’re not Zach Douglass. Who are you really?”

I frowned. “Adrian Crnkovic. I’m a friend of Cal’s.”

“Right. And you met him how?”

“He was trespassing on my property out in the Methow Valley.”

“Reasonable. What do you know about Diablo Lake?”

“Lots... I’m sure it’s classified, but...”

“Clearly not any longer.”

“Well... I won’t tell.”

She looked at me blankly. “Of course not.”

“I’ve been to the lake, I saw the bunker you guys built, all the incinerated people. I wasn’t sure if there were other bases or other people involved in the program and Cal thought it best to tell you what happened.”

“What kind of evidence do you have?”

“Here.” I fished Parker’s Blackberry out of my pocket and handed it to her. “John Parker’s Blackberry. He’s got emails from all sorts of people... military and civilian. I honestly thought Cal was a nutcase when he told me about it, but I’ve seen it work. Kind of strange the things our government gets mixed up in.”

She smiled slightly. “You have no idea. It’s not all science and technology anymore...” She scrolled through the Blackberry. “Who else knows about this?”

“No one. Colonel McNamee tried to kill Cal and me and then we were jumped by Parker and a bunch of other guys when we got to Dulles. I don’t know where Cal is... I was hoping maybe you could help me find him. I’m pretty sure he’s with Fischer at Quantico.”

“Cal and I,” she murmured.

I thought to speak, then let it slide.

“OK...” She perused the Blackberry’s emails. “You need to come with me. We need to get a sworn statement from you and then figure out how to proceed.”

Relief flooded through me. “OK. How do we do that? And is this gonna take long? Cal could be dead by now.”

“That’s the chance we all take when we enter government service.” She paged her secretary from her desk and said something I didn’t quite catch before opening the door and ushering me out into the hall. “Is this your first time at NSA?”

“Um, yeah. I’m an IT manager for a law firm back in Seattle.”

“You *are* a long ways from home. Cal brought you all the way out here?”

“Yeah. This was supposed to be my vacation.”

“Some vacation.”

“If I ever meet this fabled Lieutenant Fischer, I’m going to kick his ass... he’s made my life hell this summer.”

“Oh he’s very real. And by the looks of this, he’s in a shitload of trouble.” She shook the Blackberry in the air as we walked back along the rows of cubicles.

We walked in silence until we reached the elevator. Once inside, she swiped her keycard through a slot near the control pad and entered a code on the touchscreen next to it. The elevator shot down... down... down... past the first floor, past the basement, and I got that sinking feeling in my crotch as we sped down the shaft.

“Where are we going?”

“Deposition room. If you knew who’d given testimony to us over the years, you’d understand why we’ve got a bomb-proof box under our building. You can never be too careful.”

“I know how that goes.” I studied the steel and wood accents on the inside of the elevator, wondering how many famous people had been standing in my position, a high ranking NSA official escorting them to give testimony.

The doors slid open on a white and metal hallway, glossy and new-looking, though it was hard to tell because it was impeccably clean. She marched forward, the confident surefire gait of a career woman and politician, opening a glass door and turning to the left down another brightly lit hall.

“You’ll have to be fingerprinted.”

“That’s fine.”

She swiped her keycard again in a metal door and it opened onto a massive concrete room, brightly lit with bank after bank of florescent lights. Easily two hundred feet square, maybe more, I suddenly understood why the parking lot above was so large. There were people in the room... a metal table and chair close to the door with an anemic-looking palm tree next to it, a group of people standing in what appeared to be a semi-circle near the center of the room, and someone seated in the middle on a metal chair.

It was only as we got closer that the man in the middle materialized as Cal, beaten, broken, and bloody. I slowed my pace for several seconds, gaping in shock at how torn up he was. A massive pentagram was drawn around him on the floor in blood, presumably his.

“Mr. Fischer!” Brinks said sharply. The tallish man in the gray t-shirt that said MARINES across the front tilted his head back over his shoulder to listen. “The next time I tell you to take care of things, I expect it to be done.” She held up the Blackberry. “Parker’s.”

I stopped cold in my tracks as Fischer turned to look at her, then at me. He was attractive... tan and blond and muscular. And tall. Intimidatingly so.

“What happened to Parker?”

“He fucked up on the job. It’s a cold day in hell when a civilian can take out a member of my team.” She frowned at me as I hung back from the group. “Not going to join us? I’m sure Sergeant Oakley would like to say goodbye,” she said coolly.

He jerked his head up and grimaced at me, teeth bloody, his face already red and cut up almost beyond recognition. “Wha- what are y-you doing here? Run! Get the hell out of here!”

Fischer uttered some words and flames suddenly burst from thin air to swirl around Cal and then vanish, leaving only his screams of pain, echoing in the concrete room and grating on my ears as I tried to think of something to do.

Outnumbered, in the basement of a building I didn’t know, and amid people who turned energy into fire and lightning and shit. And then there was that horrifying pentagram on the floor that struck my eyes coldly as I stared at it. It might as well have been a swastika.

Lieutenant Fischer and the rest of the group turned to look at me as Cal’s screams died down to a groan. “So you’re the one who brought him out here? Well done! We’ve been after him for almost a year.” Dan’s voice was reedy, professional, too clean for comfort.

I looked at him blankly. “Huh?”

Cal’s eyebrows lowered, his mouth twisting into a frown. “Y-you did this?”

“I don’t know... what?”

Brinks walked towards me. “Don’t act like you’re all innocent in this.” She turned over her shoulder to look at Cal. “Adrian here told us you were coming.”

“No I didn’t.”

Cal's voice was haggard and anguished. "You- it was you who sent the message from McNamee's phone..."

"No... he probably did it before he attacked us..."

"You were in his office the whole time!" He strained against the metal handcuffs that kept him firmly mounted to the chair, the torn fabric of his clothing ripping a little more as he careened outward to get closer to me.

Fischer smiled, a beautiful, perfect smile. "And nice touch changing my password. I couldn't send emails for four days until someone finally got it fixed." He turned to Cal. "So even he isn't on your side. You sure you don't want to join us?" He cocked his head off to one side, looking at Cal.

Cal's eyes were heavy as they stared at me, wilting his eyebrows with pain and guilt.

"Look at me!" Fischer hit him across the face... hard. I heard a splat-splat as Cal's blood hit the floor in a spray of red. Fischer grabbed his chin and tilted his face up to look at him. "It didn't have to be like this," he said quietly. "I offered you a place and you turned it down. Well we finally got to you... and now it's crunch time, sergeant. What's it gonna be?"

"Treason..." muttered Cal through clenched teeth.

Fischer hit him again, so hard that the chair he was handcuffed to fell over, scraping roughly against the concrete and sending a grating echo throughout the room. He lay on his side, sputtering against the floor and I noticed the gash in his ribcage that was bleeding profusely. Something had to be done... I was panicking, my hands cold and shaking.

Brinks turned around to face the group. "He's worthless, Dan. Forget it and finish him off; we've got to meet Walid in an hour."

"Fuck Walid." Fischer was staring at his prey

"No, fuck you if you think you can sit this one out. Walid wants an update on our progress and I intend to give it to him with you there."

Fischer looked down at Cal, frowning. "I'll join you after I'm done."

"You don't show up late to a meeting with a Saudi prince, lieutenant!" She was shouting at him. "Especially when he's paying your mortgage." Brinks' voice was growing lower,

sharper and Fischer immediately turned to face her. “And I don’t trust you to do the damned job, especially with him.” She pointed at Cal.

“That ended almost a year ago,” he retorted. “Don’t think I let my personal feelings get in the way of this project.”

“Then finish him off.” She turned to face me, pushing a stray lock of hair out of her face. “And as for you, you need to stay out of matters of national security. Elia shim nii.”

I watched in horror as the Blackberry, by far the most convincing evidence of this whole thing, vaporized into a puff of ash that settled over her hand and drifted down to the gray concrete floor.

I snapped and pulled my gun. “Let him go.”

“Or what?” she said. “You gonna shoot me? Go ahead and try.” I didn’t like her teeth when she smiled.

I pulled the trigger.

And heard a very noisy click. Like an idiot, I realized there was no magazine.

Fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

“Did you honestly think we didn’t know who you were when you walked in? This is NSA, not the god damned FBI. And for future reference, you should always check your gun when security gives it back.”

The security guard... damn him. Damn him! Damn me for not noticing how light it was when he gave it back... for being so focused on my nerves that I forgot to think. I suddenly hurled the pistol at her, nailing her in the forehead with it and watching as she clutched her face in pain, the gun clattering to the floor heavily. Fischer gasped slightly and the group’s body language changed like a school of fish turning on a dime.

Brinks looked up at me, a small gash in her temple. “Did you enjoy that? Saleini!” Her hand thrust towards me and I felt a massive weight swing forward through the air, wrap around my waist, and hurl me across the room at full force.

I was flying for a few moments, my feet several inches off the ground, air rushing past my ears and I noticed how truly large the room was. And then my back hit the wall near the door. Hard. It knocked the wind out of me, my head cracking back against the concrete and

flashing stars in front of my face as I fell to the floor. I gasped for breath, painfully clutching my chest as the tingling feeling stuck in my back and kept me from breathing.

Bitter, bitter irony... the kind you can taste like a mouthful of dirty pennies or a glass of Stella Artois. Bitterness.

They approached with nearly silent footsteps as my head spun around in circles and my lungs burned. Cal was on his side, motionless, still strapped to the chair, blood pooling around him and rapidly filling in the pentagram. I clawed my way backwards, reaching for the door, ice cold metal amid the harsh fluorescent lights.

“You need a key to open that door,” said Brinks, flashing her badge at me as she walked forward, her high heels clicking on the concrete.

They whispered to one another like shadows, fluttery and observing Brinks and Fischer as they moved in for the kill. Fischer was near the front, massaging his hands which glowed red from their assault on Cal’s face.

“Now watch,” he said glancing back at the group. “Incinerate?”

Brinks nodded and I grimaced, waiting for the flash of heat and wondering if there really was a heaven. At that point, I would have settled on hell. Just as long as this short little pathetic existence wasn’t all there was in the universe.

Fuck Sarajevo. And fuck D.C.

I looked past their legs to Cal, limp on the floor, tied like some animal, and for the first time in a long time, I let the tears go. They blurred my vision something terrible and I could hardly see Cal past the yellow haze that quickly clouded my eyes. I struggled to get to my feet, hoping I could move away from them, their dark hulking masses closing me into the corner near the desk.

The yellow haze appeared again. The palm tree was dying. Cal was probably already dead or very close to it. And it wounded me to the core, a feeling of terrible sickening sadness that washed over the tops of my shoulders and pressed me down into dark thoughts, thoughts I hadn’t recalled since Bosnia and the war.

I thought for a moment to fight the group off, but Fischer was already weaving an incantation with words and I could feel the crackle as ambient energy in the room came to a head

around his body. I could smell the spark in the air, the scent of warm concrete, the coolness of metal, the faint smell of Cal's deodorant, the expensive perfume Victoria Brinks wore, a dark planar scent of the dirt in which the palm was struggling to live. The yellow haze.

I stood up straight, letting myself cry which caused a few of the guys in the semi-circle to laugh as they stood expectantly, their nondescript faces ready for the show of Fischer's creative talent. I wondered if they had ever played with magic when they'd had sex. The sensation I felt when Cal touched my shoulder that evening in Redding had been pleasurable and I wondered if more money was to be made using this stuff in warehouses than to conjure fireballs.

What had Cal said that night? Something something vertin. Talk to the bush. Seck saini, vertin. I could feel the ambient glow of the palm tree, its fronds a little droopy, its roots dry. Seck saini, vertin. Talk to the fucking silent bush... the mystery that surrounded this whole thing was infuriating.

I said it. "Seck saini, vertin."

A rush of air swooshed over my head and yellow flooded my vision, blocking out everyone in the room. I felt a tingling rush up my arm and across my chest, slithering around my body as I leaned against the wall, still barely able to breathe. The energy from the palm was transferring to me and I felt it collect, higher and higher, welling up and energizing me through and through like a deep breath after a long race.

Then it was out of control, frothing wildly across my frame until I couldn't take it anymore and I let it rush out, collapsing to the floor and seizing up. Something boomed in the room like a mortar shell and the florescent lights shattered and rained down shards of thin white sharp glass that slashed at my bare shoulders. I wished I was wearing sleeves. It smelled funny... like an electrical fire and I didn't feel good. My stomach was bothering me suddenly and I felt clammy.

Then nothing. Silence except for the crackling of a few lights which were shorting out. Several banks of lights were still on at the other end of the room and they cast long shadows over me as I lay on my side, breathing the metallic air and waiting for the quakes in my muscles to calm down. I got up slowly, the sick feeling fading quickly and a dull ache taking its place where my back had hit the wall. Shadows of bodies, the desk turned over on its side, and a

pathetic little shadow from the palm, now tipped over and wilted beyond saving. It was forever before I registered what had happened and slowly stood upright.

The cluster of agents lay scattered around the room like marbles thrown into a pit, the stench of blood and fire in the air. Lieutenant Fischer, the group of agents... all of them were smoldering, bleeding, laying limply like rag dolls after a child's temper tantrum.

Brinks was remarkably intact, on her back, her leg clearly broken and twisting her pants at an odd angle. She looked up at me, dazed, eyes fluttering past her hair which had fallen in her face. I noticed the pretty hair clip she had been wearing.

Then I saw Cal. About twenty feet from where he should have been, still on his side, the chair having protected him from most of the blast as it skidded away, leaving a trail on the floor and smearing both the pool of blood that had formed around him and the now semi-dry pentagram. I turned around and searched Fischer's right leg (or what was left of it) to retrieve a blood soaked key which unlocked the handcuffs. Cal's body was massive and warm, sticky. I tugged him up towards me.

"Cal?" I whispered. I pressed my fingers against his neck, feeling his sporadic pulse with red stained hands. I paused, wondering if I should just get the hell out and leave. It would be easy... grab the keycard from Brinks, head up the elevator, call 911, and surrender to the security guards until things got straightened out.

But as I looked at Cal, my chest ached strangely, as though something were squeezing inside it. It was a strange sensation, wrought with a dull pain that I grimaced through as I heaved him to his feet, wrapped my arm around his waist, and dragged his limp form across the room, pausing several times to catch my breath.

He was a heavy fucker.

Brinks muttered something as I dragged him past. I stopped, leaned down, and snatched the badge from her hand.

"Cal and me. If you take out Cal, you wouldn't say: 'Colonel McNamee tried to kill I'. Learn your personal pronouns, you stupid bitch."

“That was three days ago.” I gulped down a glass of water and nodded at the senators, some of whom were musing over my story, some of whom were writing notes furiously, and one (who shall remain nameless) who had fallen asleep.

Senator Gordon looked down at his papers. “And the voice recorder?”

“Umm... the beep I heard was actually the damned thing turning on. I guess it got pressed just right in my pocket. I figured it was low on battery or something.”

“And this was the recorder you sent to the Seattle P.I.?”

“Yeah. Overnight express. A friend of mine works there; I didn’t know how to call any of the other newspapers.”

Gordon smiled slightly and looked down again, then at me over the top of his glasses. “The emails on the Blackberry you say you saw... do you remember their contents? And please keep in mind you’re under oath.”

“Um, no... I-I don’t remember. But I have them all right here.” I pulled out my iPhone and launched the email client as I handed it to an aide. “I disabled the security settings on the Blackberry and forwarded all the messages to my personal account.” At that, there was some polite laughter from the audience and Senator Frey snickered. “I figured just in case something happened to the Blackberry, I’d have an extra copy, you know? Always keep a backup...”

Kettleman took the iPhone and whipped through the emails, leaning close to Gordon so they could both see. Frey tapped her pen on her desk.

“Mr. Crnkovic,” she said. “Have you been contacted by or taken money from any member of the Saudi royal family?”

“To the best of my knowledge, no. I’ve heard of Prince Walid because he was funding the guerillas in Afghanistan, but that’s about it. Nothing you wouldn’t know from Anderson Cooper.”

“And energy manipulation... have you tried to further your course of study?”

“Absolutely not.”

“You have no interest in it?”

“No. None. It’s more trouble than it’s worth. And the doctor I saw said I could have died from that palm tree. I don’t know if it was the explosion or what, but I can’t even see auras anymore... let alone manipulate.”

Kettleman handed the iPhone off to an aide who made the rounds behind the senators, showing each one in turn as they swiveled the massive brown leather chairs around.

“Mr. Crnkovic.” Kettleman was ex-military and chilled me to the bone with his sculpted features and buzzed hair. He looked out of place in a suit and tie. “What do you hope to gain from all this?”

“Huh?” I looked at him. “I... I don’t know what you’re asking.”

Kettleman frowned at me. “Well let’s recap... you take your vacation and turn it into a private investigation of NSA and the Marine Corps’ involvement with energy manipulation. You manage to fight off trained agents who specialize in transferring potential energy from their surroundings into electrical impulses. And then you find out that the Deputy National Security Advisor is taking bribes from a Saudi prince who also finances the Taliban. And yet! You manage to come through it all... alive and well and with the smoking gun in your hand, no less. Most people would have turned their backs and quit. I want to know why you didn’t.”

I scratched my head for a moment.

“Well... I went with Cal ‘cause I... well, I guess I was trying to have a shot at something with him.”

“I didn’t ask, and you shouldn’t have told, Mr. Crnkovic,” said Kettleman firmly. “Everyone has a motive. If your sole purpose was to pursue a romantic relationship with Sergeant Oakley, you would have been less calculating and you both might be dead right now. But something made you forward those emails. I want to know what it was.”

I felt a little ashamed as I looked up at the senator. “I was trying to do the right thing?” It wasn’t much of an answer, but what the hell else did they expect?

You could hear a pin drop in the silence that ensued. I looked side to side as my hands shook, trying to figure out what I had said that caused the entire chamber to freeze up.

“The right thing?” Gordon was eyeing me over his glasses again.

I imagined a tumbleweed rolling by. “Yeah. I mean, I knew something was wrong when I went to Diablo Lake. So it started there. And then it went past the colonel and all the way up the chain and I just followed it.” I took another drink of water. “I don’t know... I mean, can I say that? I just wanted to do what I thought was right?”

Gordon eyed me suspiciously for a moment, then took a sip from a coffee tumbler I hadn’t noticed before. “You strangled an NSA agent with a cell phone cord, Mr. Crnkovic.” More silence. “Normal people simply don’t think to do those things. I suppose I’m trying to decide whether you’re a spy of some kind or just clever.”

I paused, stunned by his accusation.

“A spy?”

“It would not be the first time a spy has used the guise of ‘doing what’s right’.”

“Because I’m from Bosnia... is that it? I’m foreign born, so I must not be trustworthy.”

“Please look at it from our perspective...”

“I know how it is from your perspective, senator.” My hands clenched up into fists. “You were in office from ‘92-’96. So was everyone else in here except for Senator Levitt. Four years of hell that I lived through and you people did nothing about it.”

“Mr. Crnkovic, this is not a discussion about the Bosnian War.”

“That’s exactly what it’s about!” I stood up, my blood pressure rising and pounding in my temples. “I have every reason to hate each and every one of you for what you neglected to do, but I still came to this country because... I came here because I believed that there was some still some good in this world worth living for. Now I’m sorry that I’m not the perfect all-American, but I pay my taxes, I vote, I try to do what’s right. What more do you want?” I sat down and gulped the last of the water. “You have some nerve questioning my loyalty.”

Gordon took off his glasses. “Take a deep breath, Mr. Crnkovic. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“Then don’t insult me again,” I muttered.

Frey looked at him, then at me. “I think what we have here is the only honest man left in Washington.”

I frowned, embarrassed, as Kettleman led the audience in uproarious laughter. Believe me when I say I hate the East. This is why.

Senator Gordon quieted the chamber down. “If no one else has any further questions, I think we can conclude this hearing. No one?”

I got up to leave and just as I was turning, Frey’s voice rang out.

“Mr. Crnkovic? One last thing...”

I turned to look at her.

“How is Sergeant Oakley?”

The tightness in my chest was back and I struggled to speak. “He’s still in a coma.”

18

Cal woke up just a few hours before I had to be at Dulles for my flight back to Seattle (Eric had readily agreed to drive my car back up the coast for me). Cal’s parents had turned out to be nice enough people and, though I’m certain they didn’t like the fact that I was having serious thoughts about banging their son, they did appreciate that we had been through a tough week together and allowed me into his hospital room to check on him.

It’s funny what almost losing a kid will do to parents. Cal had made them out to be these bigoted people, republicans living in Southern California who were too conservative to allow anyone different into the family. But after years away from them in the military and then almost dying, Cal had somehow warmed the cockles of their icy hearts and the little faggot son was welcomed into the family once more. Though they were less than enthusiastic when the story about him and Lieutenant Fischer hit the news, they were still there, by his bedside, praying for him to get better in more ways than one.

To be honest, I take serious issue with whole “love the sinner, hate the sin” mentality that a lot of Christians have these days. I find it to be a tremendous waste of time, especially given my own personal belief in free will and the nature of humans to generally do what’s in their own best interest. Sin and sinner are one and the same; we consciously make choices to do right or

wrong and trying to pick and choose what part of a person you want to like and dislike is basically akin to having your cake and eating it, too.

And no, you bitches, I'm not saying that being gay is a choice. But coming out is, deciding to live with it is, and deciding to continue on with the rest of your life in spite of it is. And to that end, I think people like Cal's parents had more of a problem with his coming out than they did with him actually liking guys. Because once he's out, there's no distancing themselves from the concept of "gay"... now they're part gay, too, and they have to deal with the consequences of it, the judgement, the "well you must not be good parents otherwise your son would be normal" implication. And for parents who think that now, at last, finally this kid is turning 18 and moving out and we can take a break from parenting, that added burden of gayness must have been, at the least, an unwelcome shock to them.

So I saw where they were coming from and I looked down on them for it. Me and my elitist ass...

I bought a big, bright bouquet of gladiolas to brighten up the drab interior of Cal's hospital room. It was a sterile white, smelling of fresh paint from a recent remodel and a faint electrical stench from all the equipment. He had an IV in his hand and a whole bunch of shit stuck to his chest and bandaged head, but he was breathing on his own when I arrived, the thin polyester blanket shifting as he slept.

I waved to the nurse as I came in and she smiled at me.

"Hey tiger," I said softly as I closed the door.

He stirred, his face bruised and slowly healing over. Damn he still looked good. Even after all this, the bone structure was there and his skin glowed that healthy light color that he naturally had.

His eyes opened slowly and he brought a groggy hand up to rub them. I set the flowers down on the table at the foot of his bed and moved to sit on the edge of the mattress. First thing I wanted to do was explain what had happened; I didn't need Cal thinking I had betrayed him.

"You look like hell," I said afraid to touch him for fear of hurting him.

He looked up at me blankly, his green eyes searching mine.

“We got ‘em, though.” I smiled at him. “We took down the whole thing. Brinks has been indicted and the project is now under federal investigation.”

“Do I know you?” He stared at me for a moment, then squinted.

I stopped for a moment, then burst out laughing. “Don’t shit with me!”

He looked at me, arching his eyebrows expectantly. “OK and...?”

“Cal... it’s Adrian.”

“Come again?”

“Twisp? Diablo Lake? We drove to LA and then flew out here...”

“Are you from the press corps?” He eyed me suspiciously, the stubble on his face highlighting his jawline.

“No, I-”

“Because if you are, tell them it wasn’t my fault the chopper went down. I tried to warn them before we left. Hassan Walid’s been financing the Taliban for years; they’ve got rocket launchers now.” He sighed and looked down at his hands. “Is everyone else OK? There should have been eleven of us in all... if anyone is missing they need to get a platoon out there looking for him before he gets his head cut off on Al-Jezeera.”

My breath was gone. Was he serious?! “Cal, that helicopter crash was almost two years ago...”

His face darkened. “What?! We left on that mission last night, 1900 hours. Recon out in Kunar Province.”

“You’re not in Afghanistan,” I said shakily. “You’re in Washington D.C. You’ve been working for NSA.”

“Where’s the CO? In fact, I’d like to see Lieutenant Fischer... he can set all this straight.” Cal was agitated now, his eyes roving quickly around the room. “And who are you? You’re not medical staff... Where’s your ID badge?”

I stood up suddenly, backing away from him as the tight feeling hit me in the chest again, crunching down my heart and lungs as my shoulders sagged. I could not believe what I was hearing and as Cal looked at me, that same unfamiliar glaze in his eyes, I felt my pulse start to

pound. It ripped through my neck and then behind my jaw, a healthy thump thump that made me force several deep breaths.

“Cal...”

“How the hell do you know my name? Have we met?”

I stared at the bandage on his forehead, picturing Fischer slamming his fists into Cal’s face, the chair tipping over and crashing to the floor, and then the blood... God, the blood. So much of it.

I turned and scrambled through the door, hurrying past the nurse who asked me something I didn’t catch, and then down the stairwell and out into the humid hot air or the parking lot. My taxi was still waiting for me and the ticket was in the computer system at the airport. I could do electronic check in. Just me, my iPhone, my wallet... I could buy an in-flight meal if I got hungry. Yes, that would do. Home was where I needed to be. Home on the left coast where these kind of problems don’t happen to people who stick to their normal everyday lives. Why did I have to take that vacation? Why Twisp? Why not Hawaii or Chicago?

But I couldn’t leave... The feeling in my chest was stronger now, slowing me down, pulling me back and bleeding tears into my eyes as reached for the taxi door. My reflection stared back at me from the glass window, hollow and empty. I flicked my eyes away.

I couldn’t leave...

Yes, I could.

I could and I did, fed up and finished with the histrionics of senate depositions, hospitals, and investigations. The airplane flight held absolutely no solace for me, just that omnipresent drone of engines and air compressors. I found myself looking at the empty seat across the aisle from me, wishing Cal were in it, thinking that maybe I could have refreshed his memory over four hours at 35,000 feet...

Maybe not.

How do you regain a year and a half? Especially when you’ve already lived it... How do you piece together the fragments of a life that you don’t remember living?

And how do you tell someone you like them when there’s no way it will have any significance?

Regret is a funny little feeling. It always crops up at the most inopportune times, a little voice of “coulda, shoulda, woulda” nagging in your ear as you realize the boat has left and you’re not on it. That day, I learned that there are actually two kinds of regret. There’s the kind we all feel on a pretty regular basis... dammit, I should have bought those stocks when I had the chance. Dammit, I knew I should have taken my car in for servicing! Fuck... I wish I’d used these tomatoes before they started molding. It’s a dilettantish kind of regret, swirling around in a quagmire of materialism and consumerism, having no direct bearing on our lives or our happiness. They are brushed off with a kindly “oh well” and the ever popular “everything happens for a reason”.

But then there’s that other kind of regret... the kind that makes you wonder if things will ever be the same, if life is even possible beyond point X. It’s not easily brushed away, a sinking feeling harbored in your gut. The kind you feel as a child when you sleep through your alarm and realize you’re late for class... dammit, that better not have been the bus. Dammit, I have cancer. Dammit, that better not have been the guy of my dreams.

And fuck... that was the last chance I’ll *ever* get with him.

19

It was raining when I landed in Seattle, a warm, humid, comfortable rain that begged for either a hot makeout session pressed against a tree or a quiet day inside, wishing it were sunny. I chose the latter and quickly threw my bags into the back of the Saturn as Eric pulled it around the terminal to pick me up. I disliked the way he dressed when he came to visit: parka and boots and a knit cap.

“Hey bitch!” he said.

“You going snow camping?”

“Hey, it’s raining and 60... it’s cold.”

“Pussy.”

“Did he wake up? I heard on the news he was in a coma.” The airport was busy with automated messages and a flurry of taxis circling by over and over again.

“Yeah. Doesn’t remember a thing, though. It’s like he’s back in Afghanistan,
I said flatly.

“Jesus... I’m so sorry...” He headed for the driver’s door.

“Doesn’t matter. He probably had HIV anyway.” The words were out before I could stop them.

Eric stopped in his tracks. “Sour grapes, you little asshole. Good thing I used a condom with him, huh?”

I nodded bitterly.

He shook his head. “You know, you can be a real prick sometimes.”

“Well, I’m just saying...”

“No.”

I closed my mouth and looked at the wet asphalt.

“Maybe someday you’ll learn to show a little grace when shit gets thrown your way. And don’t be jealous of me for fucking your boy before you.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m just saying, it wouldn’t have worked out... he was way out of my league.”

Eric caught my arm and jerked me towards him, forcing a crushing hug on me.

“Attention travelers: this is a reminder that Seattle Tacoma International Airport is a nonsmoking facility. Smoking is allowed only in the designated areas of the terminal. Thank you.”

He grazed the back of my head with his hand. “There are people in this world that give a damn about you,” he growled into my ear. “Don’t throw them away because of your own self-doubt.”

It was an eternity before I could speak. Cal did care and I suddenly felt guilty for walking out on perhaps the most decent man who had ever graced my short life. It was moments later that I realized Eric might have been talking about himself. His hug was tighter than it had ever been, his voice smoother and less sarcastic. And he didn’t smell like pot.

“I won’t,” I whispered.

There was a gravity to him that I had never felt before, a central point of existence that I realized was very dear to me. It was as if he were a possession, a prize, something valuable and significant in my life and here I was, holding his physical body with my own. I couldn't tell if it was Eric, de-stoned and feeling very motherly, or if it was me, suddenly aware of how valuable our friendship was because of what had happened to Cal. Either way, there was an element of human warmth, missing up until that point, which flared and burned steady and low inside me. This was a man... a living, breathing, thinking man with feelings and fears and hopes and dreams. Someone's son, someone's brother, someone's friend. My friend.

A light bulb went off in my head and I clutched Eric to me, sinking into his frame as his scruff grazed the stubble on me face. So *this* is what it felt like...

A car honked behind us for parking too long and we both hurried into the little roadster, driving in silence back to my apartment, my eyes fixed on the scenery going by as summer slipped and fell, far too early as it always does in Seattle. And every so often, I would flick a tear away from my face, sniffing quietly and readjusting my slouch in the two-tone leather sport seats as I considered my new found heart. Funny how you don't know something's missing until it's suddenly there.

Mrs. Winston opened the door for us, a book with Fabio and some unconscious big-breasted blonde twisted across the cover tucked under her baggy old arm.

"Hello there, boys. This reminds me of the summer back in '47 when it rained all the way from May through October. I was working down at Boeings, though, so I didn't notice much."

I smiled weakly at her and went to unlock my mailbox. "Mrs. Winston, you remember Eric?"

"Hi," he said.

"You mean the *slut* from LA?!" she said loudly, her voice ringing off the walls. "I remember."

"Crone," he muttered under his breath, fishing for a blunt in his pocket.

She swatted the lighter away before he could smoke it. "Don't do that! You set off the smoke alarm last time and we had to wait outside for the fire trucks to get here."

“Worried you might melt in the rain?”

“Don’t get smart with me, young man! I know your kind. You’re bad for the heart.”

“So’s your cooking, but that doesn’t stop you.”

She moved past him with a huff and dropped something at my feet. “This arrived for you yesterday, hun.”

I looked down and found my daypack in an opened cardboard box.

“I’m sorry I opened it, but I thought it might be a bomb,” she said, stoking the flames in the fireplace. “You’ve been on the news so much... there were reporters here yesterday and some government men in a car across the street. They might be there now...” Her cane left little charcoal footprints on the floor as she hobbled back to a chair.

“Thanks Mrs. Winston.”

But she was already absorbed back into her novel, oblivious to Eric’s glare that could have stripped paint off the walls. I picked up the bag and caught Eric’s belt loop as I headed towards the elevator, dragging him back to avoid a potentially deadly conflict between crone and slut.

My apartment was still clean as I opened the door and that same relief washed through me, this time with an air of finality about it. I would be back at work in a few days, my friends would call for one last camping trip, and then the fall and winter dinner parties would start. The rains would come, the cold air, the trees would turn, jackets would be dusted off, tans would fade, and the city would go through a nine month long wash cycle. It was pleasant, too. An occasional snowfall, lots of rain, and about six months of straight overcast weather. None of the bitter cold they have in Chicago or Boston.

I thought very suddenly of huddling alone in my bed on chilly nights, Cal presumably back with his family in San Diego, Eric only visiting every other month or so and preferring not to cuddle (it was, as he said “too intimate”). I shoved the thought aside and rummaged through the daypack as Eric started fixing some soup, occasionally stepping out onto the pint-sized balcony to take a few puffs from his blunt. My jeans were there, the shirt I was wearing that day, the now-infamous cable for charging my iPhone, a stick of deodorant. Something was in the Sevens as I folded them up and I reached into the pocket to grab it.

There in my hand was the Tarot deck. I stared at it blankly for a moment, gritting my teeth as I thought of Cal playing with it relentlessly on the airplane. I shuffled it a bit, spread them on the entry table, and drew a card.

End

Your feedback is welcomed: adrian.crnkovic@gmail.com