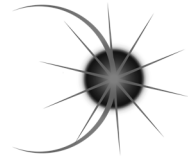


CHAPTER 2

THE PAIN BETWEEN THE BLADES



“Thou dost conspire against thy friend, Iago, if thou but think'st him wrong'd and makest his ear a stranger to thy thoughts.”

—Othello, Act III, scene 3, lines 167-169

“WE SHOULD GO,” Lara whispered through her teeth.

“No, it’s too late now. If they set a trap here, we’re already caught. Besides, John still won’t arrive to pick us up for an hour.”

“An hour? Why so long?”

“We’re supposed to dig for the supplies. And I never get time alone with you anymore ...”

“Time alone?” Lara gaped at him like he was insane.

He offered her a weak smile. “Can you blame me?”

She stared at him for a long time before she shook her head and sighed. “You are something. This thing on your Uncle’s grave isn’t part of your plan?”

“No.”

“We might as well see what it is then.”

When she began to tug in the grave’s direction, Elliott resisted. “You should stay back. If this is a trap, you might be able to escape once it is sprung.”

This time her sigh sounded more annoyed than frustratingly endeared. "'With you till the end,' remember?"

Before he could protest, she pulled him after her. Rather than fight it, he picked up his pace and got ahead of Lara.

Beside Uncle Al's grave was a deep hole. At the rim sat a box. It had been smashed open and its contents burned. The scent of the fire was still faintly on the air.

"That's not your Uncle's, is it?"

"Not unless his casket was a fake at the funeral."

"Great, so those were the supplies we're here to grab."

"Probably ..." Elliott began in answer and then trailed off. He put a finger to his lip in sign of quiet. The dark object propped on the tombstone was a tablet computer. An antique by the looks of it, but if it still worked it had a microphone and camera that would do just fine for observing them.

"What is that thing?" Lara mouthed to Elliott.

"A tablet. Old tech." He let go of her hand and motioned to it. "Let me take a look."

Lara nodded, taking quick looks around them. At least all the trees being bare meant they should see someone coming fairly early on.

Picking up the tablet, Elliott confirmed he was right. It was an iPad, probably a model from around 2020 by the look and weight. His grandfather had a couple like it in storage at his farmhouse. What felt like a lifetime ago, he would use them to teach Elliott the basics of mobile computers.

Thumbing the circle, the tablet's starry backdrop appeared with the correct date and time. He thumbed it again. A passcode prompt came up.

"Seriously?" he said aloud. A relic like this in cold weather wouldn't perform so well if it hadn't been placed recently. Whoever did so was likely close. "Isn't this kind of taunting beneath you?"

As if in reply, a series of digits typed themselves into the passcode slots. "06182035."

Elliott swallowed hard. The numbers were familiar. They formed the death date on his uncle's gravestone. A little circle swirled in the display's center. The device background shifted from a dark sky to a flat black backdrop and a bold NSA logo in the middle. Just below it was a single app. The device selected it on its own.

He tensed for an explosion, but all that happened was a video began playing. Or rather, not quite a true video, but a system view where a video player was part of a console of some sort.

A synthetic voice spoke, "Session PSM—20391121090345998 beginning."

Elliott almost dropped the tablet. It was loud enough Lara would easily hear from where she stood several feet away.

On the screen a diligent caravan of text scrolled below the video feed.

"SYSTEM: Subject—Parsons, Shane Matthew.

"Session Number: 3

"Session Facilitator: Amar, Hain Aaron

"Session Mode: Interrogation

"Session Start: 2039-11-20 19:04:12.483 EST."

More text scrolled by, but Elliott missed it. The video feed showed Agent Amar, wearing a burgundy dress shirt and dark suit sitting down opposite Elliott's roommate, Shane. His best friend.

After a brief adjustment of the camera angle, Shane came into sharp focus. He was shaking and looked haggard. Dark circles were under his eyes and his face was pale. A dark welt ran along his jawline.

What have they done to you?

Agent Amar smiled at Shane and folded his hands on the table in front of him. "Welcome back to the real world, Mr. Parsons. Your last session was quite illuminating."

Shane didn't answer. His eyes darted, taking in the room with an anxious energy.

"In our first meeting, you insisted you have had no contact with wanted fugitives Elliott Calhoun and John McIntyre. Correct?"

Shane didn't answer.

"SYSTEM NOTE: Subject's blood pressure and heart rate elevated."

Agent Amar tilted his head and began drumming his fingers on the table. As if struck, Shane winced and said, "I did."

"Did what?"

"Say I hadn't spoken to him. To Elliott. And John. I said that."

Amar nodded and peered down at display next to him. He tapped it.

"SYSTEM NOTE: Retrieving experience index for Parsons, Shane Matthew last simulation."

From the way Amar relaxed into his seat, he must have been pleased with whatever the report said. "Yet, we have records of a call from Mr. Calhoun to you hours before your apartment complex burned down. What was your roommate calling you about?"

Shane grew pale.

"SYSTEM NOTE: Subject sweating profusely. Previously observed nervous tics commenced. Advise continuation of question line."

"Come on, Shane. What was he calling about? The first time we had you in, you said he just called about pizza. Was it about dinner again? Was it to let you know he wouldn't be back for a few days?"

"Yeah. Just checking in," Shane answered, easing his tensed posture.

"So, you wish to amend your previous statement on record that he didn't call you?"

"Wait, no. I mean. You said he called about the pizza!"

"Did I? Shouldn't you know? Or are you having trouble holding to your story?"

SYSTEM NOTE: Subject heart rate spike. Evidence of adrenal flight response. Advise agent caution. Approved use of aggression to restrain subject as necessary."

"I'm not telling a story! He did call and then he didn't call. I'm not a traitor."

"You're not a traitor? Is Mr. Calhoun?"

"I wouldn't be here if he wasn't, right?"

"And have you ever observed any odd behavior from Mr. Calhoun to confirm your suspicions?"

"I don't know ..."

"Think hard."

Shane's knee bounced up and down like a jackhammer. "Uh, yeah! The week he disappeared. I saw him trying to go into another apartment unit. He was acting a little weird."

"Apt 5210?"

"Yeah! That's the one."

"That was the site of the fire's start. Did you notice anything else?"

"His cousin, John, started calling him a whole lot leading up to it. Which is weird, because he never really called before."

"Interesting. Would you characterize Mr. Calhoun as being violent or unstable?"

"Elliott? No. He never—"

"Could anything have provoked him? Sudden changes in campus or personal life?"

“SYSTEM NOTE: Subject blood pressure and pulse normalizing. Maximum window of cooperative communication reached.”

“Well, rumor has it he was just expelled from his art program for plagiarizing some artist’s work.”

“Mm. Anything else?”

“His, uh, girlfriend might have been cheating on him. I called her looking for him and heard another guy on the phone. It was kind of late, so you know ...”

“Interesting you bring up his girlfriend. Are you aware Ms. Hopewell has been missing for roughly as long as Mr. Calhoun?”

Shane averted his gaze and rubbed his hands on the table in listless circles. Biting his lip, he said, “No. No, I wasn’t.”

“There’s something else, isn’t there, Shane? Something you’ve been reluctant to share, before now?”

“SYSTEM NOTE: Subject heart rate fluctuating. Polygraphic assessment initiated.”

“I guess so. It’s just. He’s always been my boy. I never would have thought...Yeah. He called me a while back. Wanted some cash and a ride out of state. Said he’d messed things up.”

“Did you help him?”

“Well, yeah. I sent him the money. I just thought he meant he had trouble with Lara.”

“SYSTEM NOTE: Subject polygraphic examination complete. Verified as truthful statements. Subject confessed to aiding and abetting a wanted fugitive. Notifying booking staff and cell unit of impending arrest.”

Amar stood. “I believe you.” He walked around the table with a slow purposeful gait. Shane just stared at the table, his expression haunted. Once behind Shane, Amar slipped out a

pair of cuffs. In a quick series of moves, he pushed Shane's head down into the table, grabbed both hands, and cuffed them behind his back. "Shane Parsons, you're under arrest for aiding and abetting a known traitor to the United States. You have the right to remain silent—"

The rest of Agent Amar's Miranda recitation was drowned out by Shane wailing and thrashing. Another system note chimed in, but it too was lost in the shrieks. Just before Shane was drug out of the room by a trio of brutish-looking officers, he shouted, "He's the traitor! I'll tell you anything. Get him! Get him!"

The app closed. Sudden silence jerked Elliott back to where he was with as much easing as crashing into a brick wall. He felt as if his entire torso had imploded.

A hand on his back made him jump. Whirling around he found Lara standing there, teary eyed. One hand was still held out as if to say, "Easy, easy."

For several seconds Elliott just stared at her trying to get ahold of his suddenly jagged breathing. "They turned him against me," he said. "Those things he said. They're not even true."

Lara drew closer, put her arms around him and laid her head against his chest. "He was just protecting himself. Or thought he was," she soothed.

"No, it's worse. I saw his eyes. He believed it. Somehow they made him believe it." Elliott couldn't say it, but the most horrific part was just how many elements of truth had so skillfully become woven into the tapestry of deceit. Shane was as loyal a friend as there was, if he could be twisted like that...

A shudder ran through Lara's body. "Elliott. Elliott, the tablet is doing something."

He spun around just in time to see a new app finish installing and open. This one was an old live video chat program. Ten seconds after it installed, Agent Amar's face appeared, wearing a wicked grin. "Hello, Elliott. Lara. Long time, no see."