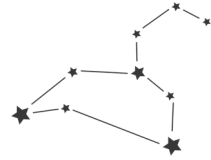


CHAPTER 3 CAT AND MOUSE



*“Love’s not love when it is mingled with regards that stand aloof
from th’ entire point.”*

—King Lear, Act I, scene 1, lines 275-277

THE WORDS WERE FAR TOO smooth and calm from the feminine British voice delivering them. Behind, the SUV was accelerating and only inches from ramming them. Lara tapped on the console, and their side windows went from opaque to clear, revealing a winding sweep of mountain interstate. Far below stretched green fields and tiny trees. A bump at just the wrong moment would send them careening into the bucolic valley below.

A particularly precarious stretch of road was only a half mile ahead. Elliott tore free the console’s access pad and began working on the internal access menu. Normally for engineers to verify a car’s safety and perform tune-ups, they had to use it to adjust their custom programming for the car.

“Elliott?” Lara’s voice quavered. From his semi horizontal angle, he could see one of her feet tapping rapidly on the car’s floor. She must have noticed the turn up ahead too.

“I’m on it,” he replied.

“Please hurry. You know, just a little.”

Elliott didn't really hear what she said. He was too busy sorting out what rate of speed increase would be manageable without the aid of the interstate control network. Normally it would control positioning and speeds to keep them from an accident. While off the network to remain invisible as they were, the car was having to make those calculations with far less processing power.

“Elliott!” Lara yelped.

The other vehicle hit them. Lara's car shuddered and took a few seconds to correct itself, slamming Elliott's head into the console. He rubbed at where he'd hit and peaked over the dash. They were past the curve. A warning.

As if to confirm, the British voice of the car made note, *“You have an incoming call from, UNLISTED.”*

Seconds later, a face appeared on the display of a heavysset man in his forties with ruddy hair and faint hints of a beard. His voice was as gruff as his gaze. “Elliott Calhoun, this is Agent Owens of the NSA. No doubt you understand what could've just happened. Set your vehicle to pull over at the next overlook lot, one mile ahead. Otherwise, in the next turn, we won't throttle our speed.”

Elliott glanced out the windshield. He could see the overlook lot and the curve alluded to maybe another two miles beyond that. They were the only vehicles on this stretch of road.

“No witnesses,” he muttered. “Stop or not, we're as good as dead.”

“I suggest we do something about it,” Lara whispered back. She was crouched low by the access panel now. Lara's eyes held a volatile mixture of fear and hopefulness.

The SUV bumped them again. “Don't try anything,” Agent Owens instructed. “Pull over now.”

They couldn't outrun a government issue vehicle and make the tight turns coming up ahead. Elliott's code changes weren't that refined yet. What options did they have?

Slush barked. Probably at the unpleasant hologram of Agent Owens. Elliott typed away, trying different inputs.

They whipped past the overlook. The SUV bumped them again.

"You were warned," Agent Owens noted, dispassionate.

Inspiration struck Elliott. He began typing as fast as his fingers would allow.

Please, Lord, help me.

"Hurry!" Lara implored from above. She was watching their final turn rush toward them. Slush whined in the back.

The SUV bumped them again and began pushing steadily against their flank.

Lara wrapped her arms protectively around her head and crouched down for their impending impact.

There was a loud buzzing sound, and the car fishtailed. Then the buzz subsided. They righted themselves. Elliott leaned back from the console and closed his eyes, "Thank you, Lord," he gasped, relief heavy on his breath.

"What?" Lara unfurled herself and looked around. "We're still on the road!"

"Yup," Elliott chuckled.

"What did you do? That SUV looks like it's stopping."

"It's slowing down to allow time for local authorities to reach them."

Lara's face was elated and confused in turn.

"I couldn't put us on the network," Elliott explained. "But thanks to their call, I had access to their vehicle's networking card. I put them on the network. Unfortunately for them, they hit us a split-second later. The system logged it, as well as their vehicle's immediate attempt to drop off the network again. So now, the local police will think they're some kind of siegers or something."

Lara combed her fingers through her dark hair, made wild over the past minutes. She flung it neatly back over one shoulder

and sighed. "Right. I don't think fortune had much to do with that."

"Like I said, thank the Lord."

"And you," she said, jabbing his shoulder. It was a little harder than playful. Her nerves must still be frayed.

"I'm the clay, He's the Potter. In all things." Elliott scooted back up onto the car's front seat. From the back seat, Slush poked her head up again.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence just now," he chided, but gave her head a rub all the same.

"Hey, don't blame her. That was too close." Lara got back up onto the seat and rubbed Slush's head as well. "Closest yet," she added, quieter.

"They must have been looking for us before we got in the area," Elliott surmised. Though he had an aching suspicion his secret activities had been giving a digital hand to them being tracked.

Lara looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "I think we should lay low for a while. Find a motel to stay at for the night, then drop off the grid in the woods for a bit."

Elliott gnawed at his lip. "Last time, you were almost bitten by a copperhead. Plus, after a week out there roughing it, you remember how hard it was to not raise eyebrows when we stocked up on supplies again."

"Fine. We'll clean up first and then pick up supplies," she countered.

Elliott's brows furrowed. He didn't say it, but it also meant another delay in finishing his grandfather's work. And though his heart still raced from their chase, Dr. Almundson's pledge to restore Project Alexandria anew in this Babel Initiative only set him even more on edge. "An unassailable bastion of unity and equality that will carry man into the heavens and beyond," he had called it. It sounded like something unobtrusively good. But Elliott knew even things meant for good could be misused, and no one behind Project Alexandria could have truly altruistic

motives. Which meant this new system was something far darker than Project Alexandria.

He had to discredit Almundson by revealing the truth before the new system could cause any more damage to society. But to do so, he had to find his grandfather's files. No time could be lost to treating it as a side quest anymore.

Lara quirked one side of her mouth up. "Can we at least agree to get off the road for the night? I know your trick slowed them down, but it won't stop them."

She was right, of course. "Find us a place well off the interstate. Use the county roads and drive us about an hour from it." After a second's extra thought, he amended, "And make sure this one—"

"Is low tech. Already on it. It'll have a working shower this time, though," Lara replied. One hand nimbly typed in search parameters and drug out a route on the console while the other rubbed absently behind Slush's ear.

Elliott watched as Slush's tail swished contentedly back and forth. He would have to tell Lara about what he'd found so far. His teeth clenched at the thought of it. What other choice did he have now? Dr. Almundson had just raised the stakes beyond anything Elliott could have guessed. Now it was a race for not only men's hearts, but their minds. And, a part of him quietly dreaded, for their very souls.