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"And how would you describe yourself?'

"That's a broad question, Doc."

"Give me the bullet points, then."

"Okay. I'm a problem solver..."

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

The shrill whining wail of the microwave snapped me out of the almost meditative trance I'd found myself in amidst the bustle and chaos of the cabin I'd called home for the better part of the last year. Through the door, I could see a fire burning — the aftermath of 'Liv cooking the TPM chips of her computer setup. At least, those are the letters I think she'd said; the truth was between the snaps, crackles, and pops of the burning refuse in the microwave and the whirring of an electric drill through the wall (something she assured me was her destroying the hard drives), I'd recognized more the feeling of walls closing in than any particular move to escape. The microwave whined again, the small flames settled in place, torching whatever contents they held.

The sound of glass shattering once again tore my gaze from the microwave. The whirring had stopped, she'd moved on to the next step of the plan: smashing the monitors. Though she'd assured me that nothing at all, let alone anything of note was actually stored on the many monitors she'd set up in the months since we'd moved in, she kept her word and treated them about as well as the rest of the equipment she'd gathered. She'd exited the room she'd made the home for her setup in time to hear the smoke alarm squeal something awful.

"We ready?" she asked, covering her ears.

I nodded. Our bags were packed, jammed into the trunk and backseat of the same Buick LeSabre that shared a birth year with me. There was just one more precaution to take.

Elliott Dalton had seen fit to play dirty. To insert another element into the little cat and mouse game he'd seen fit to begin the second I disappeared from his life without a trace. We couldn't risk this place of residence being burned; the secret of our operation laid bare for them to see. And yet, we needed a cover. We needed a reason to not be locked up the second we'd inevitably have to cross the border back to the Great White Nothingness that was the 60th parallel. As hungry as the hangman's noose was, we weren't going to be its victims.

'Liv made her way to the car as smoke billowed out of the microwave. I took a quick sweep of the rest of the house, lighting a cigarette that I left in the plastic ashtray on our coffee table. The contents of Stephen Stratford's dossier had been plucked clean from the walls and stuffed back in the manilla folder from whence it came.

Before making my way out myself, I made sure to turn on the gas stove in the

"...An improvisor..."

The plan had been simple — as simple as Grace could muster, at least. We were to reconnect with one Mr. Cook, see what he knew regarding the whereabouts of his former bosses, dispose of him, and be back at MSY in time to catch a flight to Heathrow. Easy. Simple. Definitely not a precarious tightrope act where the slightest hitch could make the entire plan go tits up.

Still, as I shot a glance over both shoulders to ensure I was alone in the bathroom of a NOLA jazz club, I had to admit it wasn't all bone-deep anxiety and murmured profanity. My pupils dilated as I wiped the rim of my nose, stuffing the rest of the sandwich baggie of white powder back into my bag. Fishing around the clutter, I gripped two tiny, plastic shooters of Fireball and set them on the edge of the sink

The first went right down the hatch, staining my breath the odor of cinnamon and acetone. The second I splashed onto my throat, careful to wipe away the amber liquid with a paper towel before it stained the neckline of the floral-patterned dress I'd worn for the occasion. The tag itched, tucked between my shoulderblades. Returning it likely wouldn't be an option by the end of the night, but appearances had to be made.

There was a time to perform, and a time go method. This called for the latter.

Satisfied with the prep work I'd done to look suitably intoxicated, I ran my hands through my hair — mussing it up just enough to give 'disheveled' but not quite 'thrashed'. I adjusted my left foot in my shoe, almost smashing my pinky toe under the rest of my foot to give myself an unsteady gait as I walked heel-to-toe out of the bathroom.

The shrill bleating of trumpets greeted me full force as I stumbled into the main room, greeted by a packed crowd and the visages of jazz royalty plastered over the walls. Still, it wasn't difficult to find the needle in this haystack as he sat, alone in a crowd tucked into a nook towards the far side. For a

moment, I ducked into the crowd, settling into a more natural rhythm before stumbling out of it - just in time to run into him.

Literally.

His drink splashed both of us, the rest of it splattered the floor. My eyes widened in practiced shock, my face reddened.

"Ohmygawd," I blurted out, my voice dripping with an accent that told him I almost certainly wasn't local and likely didn't know anyone in this city. "I'm so sorry."

The corner of his mouth twitched upward, just for a second, at the sight of me as he reached for a napkin.

The trap was set.

"...Sharp-eyed..."

He had a good poker face. Better than good, probably, but there's only so much credit you have to hand someone. Still attention must be paid.

He shrugged off our introduction, his self-satisfied little smile not faltering as he dabbed at the damp spot of his shirt with the napkin. He insisted on paying for his own replacement drink just long enough to seem like a good sport before acquiescing to my insistence. And he kept the droning to a minimum — keeping his answers to the banal, getting-to-know-questions I already had the answers for brief and feigning the same level of interest when he reciprocated the same questions.

Truthfully, this had been a better first date than most real ones I've been on When his eyes started lingering further and further from my own for longer and longer, I knew the trap had been sprung.

"Wanna get out of here?"

I smiled, pulling the corner of my bottom lip between my teeth

"Thought you'd never ask."

Reaching into my bag, I retrieved my phone. His eyes narrowed for a moment as I opened an app, scrolling haphazardly for a moment. As his gaze moved elsewhere, I sent the message I'd drafted prior: NOW.

"Just getting us an Uber," I said, perhaps a bit too chipperly. By this point, my left foot was on pins and needles, tingling without cease as I continued my practiced newborn foal walk. He slung an arm around my shoulder as I slid my phone back into my bag, which I used as an excuse to free myself from that predicament and return to something resembling normal footing.

The New Orleans night was warm and humid - a flash of headlights blinded me for a moment. As my eyes adjusted, I saw Teddy in the driver's seat, pulling up to the curb.

"This is it," I said as the car rolled to a stop and I reached for the backseat door handle. Moment of truth.

I almost didn't register his grip on my shoulders tightening as I pulled the door open; he snatched me away, back towards the sidewalk as he squinted into the car, catching a good glimpse of the woman already in the backseat.

"Hey, Doc. Hey, Errand Boy," he said, his voice tinged with wry amusement. "Long time no see."

I struggled against him as he adjusted his grip, bringing one of his arms across my throat and squeezing just enough to be uncomfortable. A fervor exploded by the entrance to the bar, a couple patrons shouting, footsteps heavy on the pavement. He shot a glance over his shoulder towards them.

"One more step and she's fucking dead," he warned the Good Samaritans with all the same energy he had talking about his work minutes prior.

There was no anger in his voice. No hatred, surprisingly little malice.

He sounded bored.

Then, satisfied that he could turn away from the interlopers, I could feel his gaze pierce through me, staring down the barrel of Grace's revolver.

"Now tell me, what's all this about?"

My focus was transfixed on his sneer.

"Do you really think so little of me that I wouldn't see this coming from a mile away?"

My grip on the gun tightened and loosened, my hands slick with sweat as I kept my aim steadied on Cook. 'Liv thrashed around in his arms, but even as she dug her nails into his forearm, he didn't seem to flinch. His eyes narrowed on me, expecting the shot. After all, this was how I'd been trained — the quickest path between two points was a straight line. There was no ambiguity in our desired fate for him. And yet, I hadn't pulled the trigger.

"What's the matter, Doc?" he asked, his eyes locking on mine. "Never took you for someone who'd get cold feet. Little Teddy Bear at the wheel, that's a different story."

I bit my tongue as 'Liv continued to try to peel herself away. His glance shot to her, then back to me.

"You and her?" he scoffed. "Always kinda figured."

I'd recognize the smile he flashed anywhere. He held the cards now. There was nothing for us to leverage.

"Should've seen it coming," he said, rolling his eyes. "You two always were amateurs. Here's how this is going to go: I let go of your bitch, and I walk away. I won't even make any phone calls, scout's honor."

I lowered the gun, watching as 'Liv finally wriggled enough to give me just a small enough window to catch him on the clavicle.

In the split second between that glimmer of recognition and me raising the gun once more, his hand reached up towards 'Liv's face as he clawed as her eyes and nose with a rabid fervor, using his other hand to shove her forward into the car, into the path of the bullet.

And I fired.

And I fired.

And I fired.

"Just, trying to find the right way to phrase it."

"I'm sure it'll come to you.'

"It has A winner "

The walls were closing in.

The crowd outside the Mahogany Jazz Hall scattered screaming into the nights as the shots rang out. Through the chaos, Cook had made his exit, disappearing into the commotion as Grace reached over the woman stumbling into the backseat beside her and pulled the door shut.

"Drive," she snarled towards Teddy, who hit the gas without a second thought.

"What the fuck, Grace?" Olive shrieked, clutching her face with both hands. In the glow of streetlights, Grace could see red molasses streaming down her paramour's arms; she tore her gaze away and stared straight ahead. "What the fuck was that?!"

Grace didn't respond, her hands awkwardly fumbling as she wiped her prints off the qun.

"Few more blocks. Then we ditch the gun and torch the car."

"That's all you have to say for yourself?"

Once more, Grace didn't respond. Her hands slid into her pants pocket, fishing out a flip phone. She tapped a number she knew by heart into it and pressed it to her. One ring. Two rings.

The line flickered to life. Silence on the other end.

"The center cannot hold," she murmured.

The silence lingered for a moment, before the sharp, impish voice of Jonathan Bacchus cut in.

"Begin again."

And the line went dead. Holding the halves of the phone in her hands, Grace's teeth sunk into her tongue as she clenched her eyes shut and snapped the damned thing in half.

In the darkness, she saw $\frac{\text{Him}}{\text{I}}$.