

Spark

BD Ferguson

I don't have long – I can feel it. Ten years is too many to hope for. One year? Surely more than that.

'Long' is relative, I suppose. But I know I'm looking back at more than I can look forward to. What's more worrying is that some days I can't seem to care.

I can feel it, though, in the dull weight of my limbs and the aching of my joints. I can feel myself slowing. Mind, body, reaction, emotion – all of it sloughing off, dragging behind me like tangled, tired iron chain.

My colleagues haven't noticed. They think I'll live forever. I remember once smiling at the thought, proud and reckless. The day they realize I won't, the day I see pity in their eyes, is the day I'm done. I'd find a way. I'd rather be dust than be crippled, crushed beneath this slow press.

Two years? More than that, maybe. I push the thought to the back of my mind as I squint against the blazing sun. The rookies are always surprised when I can walk in daylight. It's true the sun makes me uncomfortable, and frankly on a day like today I would've preferred to stay indoors, but duty calls.

The day is young enough the heat has yet to reach its full potential, but already I can taste the humidity, feel it under my skin. The precinct is no relief. It's bright and stifling even at this hour. The ancient fans perched on filing cabinets don't do much except add to the noise and disturb piles of paper.

Humans I've shared danger with for years hardly look up as I pass. Most are busy with paperwork and telephone calls and the accumulated clutter of police work. The various desperate souls on the visitors' chairs look up at me and see a woman, unremarkable, maybe late thirties, who seems to know the place. A few notice the detective's badge on my belt. Only one sees me for what I am. His eyes widen and I make an effort to smile.

Closed-mouth smile, of course. No point in starting a panic. Only the oldest cops, weary cynics nearing retirement who've worked side by side with me for decades, show no reaction if I forget myself enough to show fang when I smile. The rookies' fingers twitch toward their batons. It took my partner, Trick, three years to teach himself not to shudder. I was touched he made the effort.

Do I have three years left? Maybe. On a day like today, this oven-baked kiln of a day... three hours, tops.

"You had coffee yet?" Trick searches my face as if reading my caffeine level.

"Me? You're the one who looks like hell."

Our familiar ritual, every morning: the words change, but the easy tone remains. Our actions at the counter are automatic, choreographed like a waltz as we pass each other cream and sugar. Every morning the coffee is awful, and every morning we drink it anyway.

“What’s going on?” I ask Trick. “You look like you’ve been up all night.”

“Yeah, but not all for work. Allie’s got a fever.”

“Oh. Flu?”

“We don’t think so. Maybe chicken pox. She hasn’t had them yet.” He shrugs, frowning absently. “Guess we’ll find out. But she was pretty restless last night, poor kid. We were both up with her.”

It was recently brought to my attention that I should not use the word ‘Bummer’. The consensus is that it just doesn’t sound right from me. He’d just used ‘Poor kid,’ and ‘Sorry to hear that’ seems funereal somehow, so I’m at a loss for appropriate words. It’s happening more and more often.

“But some of it was work?” Even as I say it, I know it sounds callous. Trick will understand.

“Yeah.”

I recognize the folder he hands me. “The Levoisier case?” The jolt I feel has nothing to do with the humidity or the coffee.

Trick nods, and his tension changes. He’s pushed the worry about his daughter to some corner of his mind, and somehow it changes his entire chemistry. He’s always been good at compartmentalizing, and he’s gotten better since I’ve known him. Now all I smell from Trick is a sharp, hungry anticipation. “Went down to the lab last night, harassed Ramirez for a while.”

“You’re pushing your luck with him,” I murmur as I scan the new pages. “What did it cost you this time?”

“Only some sleep.” He shrugs when I look at him. “A few threats. My tickets for the season opener.”

“Those were good seats.”

“I’ll live. You see what he found?”

“I see it. Is it enough for a warrant?”

He grins, and there’s no mirth in it at all. He pulls a folded paper from his back pocket. “That’s why I needed you caffeinated.”

I return his grin, predator to predator. His eyes don’t even flicker at my canines. “Then let’s go.”

Past the noise and activity of the office, the cooler air of the stairwell is like a caress. Maybe this will be a good day after all.

“If you’d called me,” I say to Trick, “we’d be there already. It’s not like I needed that cup of sludge.”

“The warrant only just came through. Besides, everyone needs caffeine.”

“No, *you* do. I could’ve grabbed something on the way.”

He snorts we patter down the steps. “The fastest food you could catch? Yeah, right. You so much as glance at my carotid and I’ll shoot you.”

“Try it, Tricky, see what it gets you. How about this? You finish your coffee — I stop, hook one leg over the inside railing, swing myself over, and smile, “— I’ll meet you in the motor pool.” I step onto air, three stories above the lobby.

The echoes of his curses follow me down.

It should’ve been an easy jump. But I land awkwardly, swallowing the taste of dirt and blood.

Three years is starting to feel about right.

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Jimmy Levoisier likes to set things on fire.

Trick and I were brought on board because the second house Jimmy had torched wasn’t as empty as he’d thought. A young family died, and Levoisier wasn’t just an arsonist anymore: he was a killer. Apparently it didn’t bother him, because from then on he’d made sure to rig a fire at every exit.

Our piece of luck was that Jimmy wasn’t creative. He used the same entry method and burn path in every building, even used the same accelerant, every single time. The profiler said it was part of his compulsion, probably some deep-seated trauma or fantasy. Trick and I had decided we didn’t care. The body count was up to eight.

The problem had been proving it. Levoisier wasn’t creative, but he wasn’t completely stupid. He’d crafted alibis and gotten rid of evidence and generally been the biggest frustration in our caseload. Trick called him a royal pain in our ass. It was another phrase that I’d been asked not to use. Most days it was difficult to avoid.

But Ramirez and his lab had worked their magic, and Levoisier was ours. Something about partial fingerprints on a pair of gloves, and a unique chemical whist — again, I was having trouble caring. Whatever it was, we got our warrant. Now our car slices through the city like a blade, the arson squad close behind.

I look over at Trick, who's leaning forward as if urging the car to go faster. It's a testament to how much he wants Levoisier. Usually he hates my driving so much his spine burrows into the upholstery and his knuckles glow white.

"Do you think he knows?" I ask suddenly.

"That we're coming? No way."

"Knows... what I am," I say, not sure why.

Trick looks over, his face blank for a moment, then blinks in surprise. "How could he know?"

"He's been to the station. I've spoken to him."

"Yeah, briefly. I don't remember you picking your teeth or wearing your Anne Rice fan shirt. It's not like people can tell."

"Some can."

Another startled glance. "How?"

"I don't know." I'm staring at the road, but I'm hardly paying attention. Suddenly my mood is bleached of colour, like the sun-soaked landscape outside.

Trick waves a dismissive hand. "Hey, relax. You're more likely to get shot than burned in this thing."

"Does Levoisier own a gun?"

"Doesn't everyone? Besides, we're going to bust down his door when he isn't expecting it – what else could he do? Throw matches at us?"

"You brought your vest, right?"

"Of course I brought my vest. They're totally in this season – all the cool kids have them."

"And your helmet, with the visor?"

"I save that for eveningwear."

"I'm serious."

"I know, and you need to stop." He grimaces. "You sound like my mother."

“Sorry.” I brake only slightly for a stop sign, then accelerate again. “Old instinct, I guess.” I try to keep my tone light, but it clangs in my ears. I can feel Trick’s sharp glance and feel a new thread of concern from him. But he doesn’t say a word, and neither do I.

Turns out Levoisier does have a gun. Two of our arson guys fall as soon as they step foot on his lawn. So that takes my mind off things.

And then he tries to run.

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“You see him?” Trick asks me, panting along by my side.

“Eight, nine houses ahead, sticking close to the walls. There he goes. See him?”

“Yeah – just cleared - that fence.”

We quicken our pace through the backyards of a ratty little housing development, where relentless sun has dried the patchy grass to hay. It crunches underfoot. Hedges are stunted and brown, and the low fences sag enough to make the chase an easier sort of obstacle course, but Trick is cursing it under his breath. A few of the arson squad follow a lawn or two behind us. Others are cruising the neighbourhood streets, hoping to get lucky if Levoisier appears from between the houses. Trick barks into his comm set, his voice punctured by each heavy footfall.

“Suspect heading south, repeat south — on foot through residential area near Forrest Ave and Deerhurst – dark hair, medium build, red t-shirt and jeans. Suspect armed, approach with — dammit! He just – suspect heading west – west through residential area! Approaching Deerhurst! All units!“ He clicks off the comm and rasps in frustration, “Doesn’t he – seem awfully fast – for a human?”

“He had a good lead,” I say, but the thought had already occurred to me.

Trick’s flushed, angry face turns to me. “Why the – hell are you still – here? Go – get the bastard!”

“Don’t give yourself a heart attack,” I warn him, then double my speed and leave him behind.

I hear a few surprised shouts as I dart through backyards. A siren wails, but I am past it in a moment. The day feels hotter by the second. I haven’t perspired in three hundred years, but a peculiar sensation at my hairline makes me think I might today. I hear Levoisier gasping with exertion. He reeks of fear and sweat.

Suddenly the houses end, and Levoisier swerves away, finds a burst of speed to fling himself across the street to a building still under construction. It’s maybe six stories, partially-stuccoed exterior still draped in construction tarp, crisp and out of place next to the tired collection of houses I just left. Levoisier crosses a wide brick courtyard, ignores the workmen’s entrance and wiggles between pieces of plywood serving as temporary walls.

A squad car rounds the corner and jitters to a halt as I suddenly appear on the road in front of it. Two of the arson team gape at me for a moment, then fling open their doors.

“He’s in there. Let Trick know where we are.”

“Yes, ma’am,” one of them manages. The other fumbles with his radio and begins muttering as we run across the road.

“If anyone else is in there, get them out,” I tell them. “And call the fire department.”

“How did he even get in?” one of them wonders as we reach the building.

I find the gap in the plywood. “He’s not a big man.” I hold up a hand for silence.

From within the building come busy echoes – voices, footsteps, hammering – a dull metallic clang, and the rustling of plastic tarp. Levoisier’s stink is curdling in the humid air. The cops behind me are leaking anxious caution threaded with curiosity. About me.

“Assume he’s still armed,” I tell them. “Watch your backs, and do exactly as I said. If you smell smoke, get out.”

One of them recovers quickly. “You too, detective.”

“No worries there,” I murmur, winning a nervous smile from him. I put my finger to my lips, and they nod.

The ragged plywood bites into my palm as I wrap my right hand around an edge and pull. Nails pop like fireworks and the sheet separates from its fellow with an echoing crack and a shower of tiny splinters. I toss it aside and turn to find my newfound backup wide-eyed in shock.

It’s been a long time since any PD personnel looked at me like that. For a moment I savour it – then I wonder where Trick is.

I slip into the shadowy heat of the building. The first floor is hot as a sauna, and a clutch of workmen inside are still confused, staring at the new hole in the wall. By the time they recover enough to yell at me, my colleagues have wiggled through the gap and I’m on the far side of the room. I nod at their re-startled faces, and head up the stairs to the next storey.

This level is nearly done. It has a floor and walls, and the windows are in place, though many still bear manufacturer’s labels. Not yet divided into smaller offices, the space is enormous. The ceiling is haphazardly complete, spilling wires and cables every few yards. Sheets of drywall and tubs of plaster huddle near the walls. The floor is littered with sawhorses, tools and debris. Hardhats like squatting beetles are the only spots of colour.

The windows must be tinted: the room is more shadow than light, though I know it's bright mid-morning. Dust hangs in the air, tickling the back of my throat. The sensation of moisture along my hairline is stronger now.

Sound and movement, to my right. I turn fast, fangs out, and I don't care who sees them.

But even as I realize that I hadn't sensed another presence, the plastic tarp outside of the building flaps against the window again. It peels away with a hollow attempt at thunder, and the room brightens a little. I watch for only a moment before I lunge for the stairs, and taste Levoisier's trail once more.

There's no one on this floor, I know that – nor the next floor, nor the next – just silent cavernous rooms, each less finished than the one below. But someone's here.

Because there's no wind outside to have moved the tarp.

Because someone smells like month-old milk, a sour tang of manic desperation, and it isn't me.

As I near the fifth floor, the smoke registers. It's stronger with every step, and it sends a warning down my spine. A drop of sweat slides past my eye, and I actually shudder. Haven't done that in years.

He doesn't hear me move into the room. He's too busy watching the crawling walls of fire outside.

There are no windowpanes here. The tarp is already alight on three sides of the building, its iridescence melting into thick black smoke. Enough has wafted in here to plunge the room into dusk. The smell is noxious, and my eyes sting as my instincts urge me to run. Levoisier is standing too close to the fire, but he doesn't seem to notice. With a sound like the opening of giant wings, the plastic slowly tears itself apart. The bottom half of disappears from view, trailing flame while the top burns steadily on. No longer denied entry, sunlight bursts into the room.

I have no time to welcome it, because Levoisier turns and sees me. And he still has his gun.

I don't quite manage to avoid the bullet. It clips my arm and spins me around as the shot echoes. I drop to the ground behind a pile of building materials and listen to his running footsteps. Twisting to follow him, I fire my weapon as his legs flash past. The report is deafening. A puff of drywall, and a startled cry from Levoisier, but no spray of blood.

He really does move unusually quickly, for a human.

I push myself off the ground, leaping up and over – twenty feet in a silent heartbeat. Levoisier skids on debris, landing hard on his rear when I appear in front of him. He gapes up at me in shock. Or maybe he's focused on my pistol, which I'm pointing at his forehead.

“James Levoisier. Put the weapon down and push it away.”

He puts it down with exaggerated care and slides it out of reach, still staring at me. He's shaking with anger, fear, and a terrible excitement. “That tarp will burn for a while.”

“Fire department’s already been called.”

“Doesn’t matter, the damage is done.”

“It’s just a tarp.” I holster my weapon, feeling as if I need both hands free, but I don’t take my attention from him.

He shrugs. “No wind. It would’ve dropped straight down, right in front of the door – and on top of anyone waiting outside. It’ll collapse in on itself. Feed itself for hours, and use the construction site as a side dish.”

For the first time I notice the sound of distant shouting.

I take a step closer to him. “Buildings have a back door.”

“I’ve already taken care of that.” He grins up at me. “I always cover the exits.”

“Liar.” I grab a fistful of shirt and lift him. He’s dangling above the floor before he can draw breath. “You had no time.”

He laughs once, half startled, half scornful. Excitement is warring with terror within him now, and the scent of that battle courses through the stench of smoke in my head. “I knew you were coming. I planned ahead.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I say, but it sounds wrong. My mouth tastes like ashes. “Why would you seal yourself in? You’d just burn with everyone else.”

“Maybe I’m fireproof.” He laughs again, then his hand moves so quickly it startles me. A butane lighter flares to life, an inch from my chin. “Are you?”

It’s such a tiny spark of flame. And yet... I feel my heart lurch in panic, and I drop him. God help me, I let him go.

He staggers a little, but stays on his feet, moves back a few steps. He pulls a handful of plastic from nowhere and holds it to the lighter. It flares into flame, belching a small cloud of acrid smoke.

It takes all my strength to step toward him.

“Ah-ah.” Levoisier waves the burning plastic at me. “There’s rumours about you. I didn’t believe it myself, but since you managed to catch up with me...”

“So? I ran track in high school.”

“Right. When was that, during the Black Plague?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I can feel every ache, every lead-filled bone in my body. His voice scrapes across my ears. The flames outside spit and hiss at me, their heat pushing at my skin.

Three years? Maybe.

Feels like a lifetime. A lot could happen in three years.

The tiny bonfire leaps and twists in Levoisier’s palm. He thrusts it closer to me as his eyes dart from side to side, looking for more fuel for the flame. His gaze falls on a discarded chunk of drywall, but he doesn’t even have time to smile before I reach out and slap his handful of fire up into his face.

Could be I hold it there too long – like I said, my reactions are slow these days.

He screams, and when I let go of his hand he has enough sense to let go of the burning plastic. Some of it sticks to his cheek, though, curling and bubbling like a living thing on his skin. He flails at it, shrieking.

I throw him into the far corner. He cracks the drywall and slides into a heap, still clawing at his face, still gasping for air.

Moving to the window, I keep one eye on the burning plastic above, trailing smoke and sparks into the sky, and one eye on the whimpering man.

He was right about the fallen tarp: it’s a smoldering, sprawling heap five stories below. In a few places, fire licks the side of the building, testing and teasing. The sunlight sends blinding flares off the fire trucks on the street, and yellow-suited figures scuttle between coils of hose.

Something scrabbles behind me.

I tackle Levoisier before he can get far, knocking the wind out of him again. I don’t growl, exactly, but I must make some sort of sound that reaches him, because he freezes beneath me. Terror is the scent now, sweeter than all the others, flooding from him, rich and dark like fine chocolate. I’ve always enjoyed it.

My hand is around his throat, firm enough to make him gurgle. I can feel his vertebrae under my fingernails, his Adam’s apple lurching beneath my palm. “Let’s check the other exit, shall we?”

He struggles less when I tighten my grip and lift, his heels tracing snakes through the dust on the floor.

I guess I make that same sound again when I see what he’s done to the back exit, because he starts squirming, trying to get away. Panic and glee pour from him in a strange cocktail. I tear my gaze from the firefighters below and shake him until his jaws rattle. “How were you going to get out?”

The melted plastic on his face wrinkles as he tries to grin. Alongside the charred and puckered flesh it looks more like a death rictus. “Maybe I’m fireproof,” he rasps.

“Guess we’ll find out.” I drag him through the debris of the room and step again into the glare at the front of the building. The landscape ripples behind the greasy waves of heat from the fire below, as if the earth itself is beckoning.

“Now, Jimmy.” I turn to Levoisier and smile. Open-mouth, of course. “You do know fireproofing isn’t really the issue here.”

His eyes, bloodshot and smoke-smudged, fix on my fangs.

“It’s the fall you should be worried about.” I squeeze his neck cheerfully, feeling the thunder of his blood.

It’s awkward, getting him through the window without letting go – he’s struggling quite a bit – but I manage.

I straddle the windowsill for a moment, ignoring Levoisier’s thrashing as he dangles from my hand. The sunshine is flat and punishing – must be close to noon by now. A slurry of smoke and adrenaline and someone else’s terror coats my insides. I feel that odd prickling sensation along my hairline again.

Below, the firemen are scrambling to set up a jump net. A few are shaking their heads, sure that from this height, with the burning heap of plastic in the way on the ground, the danger is too great. I can see Trick. He’s standing with his face to the sky, watching us. He’s worried about me. Usually he doesn’t broadcast that strongly, but I can feel his concern from here. It leaves a clean taste, like fresh lemon, on my tongue.

I drag the pleading Levoisier across the stucco until there’s a decent chance he’s lined up with the net. Then I swing him out, away from the building, and drop him. He starts shrieking as soon as I let go.

From above, a shred of burnt tarp peels away and follows him, trailing sparks that last only seconds before they disappear. The blackened plastic twists on, glinting in the sun.

I wave at Trick, then launch myself into the air, five stories above ground.

Levoisier screams all the way down.

I land with a laugh, hardly feeling my age.