

Westcrest

Episode #15: The Red Painting

While Chatravati and Sarra rush to save Marcus from a mad scientist, Conor is supposed to be looking after the group's newest member. Maybe it's the fact that, when Chatravati pointed a gun directly at Jeremy the weapon refused to even fire that makes Conor think that the blonde-haired youth is capable of looking after himself, but far more likely is the fact that Conor is too involved in his own work to care about anything else.

He is sequestered deep below the garage in a secret research lab that only he can access. There is a dossier here. And that's how—as Conor adjusts the welding mask and directs a jet of blue flame over two plates of shining metal—Jeremy finds himself alone in the Westcrest mansion for the first time.

It is a house of doors and most of them are locked. Despite this, Chatravati told Jeremy that no keys are required to open most of them. "The longer you remain here," the old man had said, "The more doors will open for you."

There is one door they are *forbidden* to open. It is a rusted metal door with a lock that consists of a complex system of gears set into the front of it. When Sarra first heard about it she couldn't help but think of Bluebeard's door from that horrible fairy tale. Jeremy doesn't remember any fairy tales and now he passes the forbidden door without giving it a second glance.

Soon Jeremy comes to a hall of paintings on the first floor. Jeremy knows a thing or two about art, though you might not expect it. He has visited DuPont's conference room—located upstairs in his nightclub, called Club Mojo—and seen the art that adorns the walls there.

The Haitian had arranged for most of the pieces in his collection to be stolen from rival collectors. Jeremy had worked for DuPont in just this capacity and on every occasion that they had met, DuPont had made a point of asking Jeremy how each of the pictures made him *feel*.

Now, Jeremy inspects each of the paintings that hang in the first-floor hallway of the Westcrest mansion. Autumnal scenes seem to dominate the walls, but here is a jungle (complete with a leopard lounging on a tree branch) and there is a painting of a woman descending a dark stone staircase while waves crash below.

Next, Jeremy passes a painting that seems strangely out of place—it depicts a World War II fighter plane tumbling through a chaotic cloudscape. And then he comes to the painting all in red.

Just looking at the picture makes Jeremy feel uncomfortable: it is little more than red splatters against red splatters. Dark, indistinguishable shapes are hinted at within the blending of hues.

Jeremy steps back, his skin prickling. It is as though his brain is telling him to run, but Jeremy refuses to give in to such a foolish impulse. It's a *painting*, nothing more, and despite everything else he has seen recently, he refuses to believe that a simple red canvas can do him any harm.

As he fights the urge to flee, Jeremy actively studies the painting. Several different shades of red have been used, crossing over one another in thick, wild strokes.

The longer Jeremy studies the painting, the more details seem to appear. Even as his stomach threatens to unload its contents onto the hallway carpet, Jeremy continues to stare. He grits his teeth and steps forward, relaxing his eyes and grips the picture frame with one hand.

And then he sees it.

An entire *landscape* is hidden amid the brush strokes, a landscape so detailed that Jeremy can't believe he couldn't make it out earlier. Pointed spires span the horizon of a painting that depicts a castle built entirely out of red bricks. Flags atop each tower stir gently in the breeze and black, wispy clouds drift across a crimson sky.

It is not until he feels the otherworldly breeze against his face that Jeremy realises that he should run. He tries to turn away from the painting, but only finds himself stepping towards it. He strikes out at the frame, knocking it askew, as a figure in red armour appears out of the brush strokes.

Jeremy tries to call out for help, but his voice is swallowed amid the swirls of red paint as a spiked gauntlet reaches out from the picture and pulls him through to the other side.