

EVENFALL

IN THE COMPANY OF SHADOWS

EVENFALL: VOLUME II
DIRECTOR'S CUT

Ais & Santino

Evenfall: Volume II
Director's Cut
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DUST WAS THICK in the air which made the hot, arid wind feel even scratchier against Boyd's skin. The sun blazed down like a ball of fire; a drastic change from the dreary, rainy climate of Lexington, PA.

Due to the impact of the war, Laredo, Texas was only partially intact with buildings scattered along the riverbed. Several of the bridges spanning the Rio Grande had been destroyed, but with the passing of years and slow degradation of borders, rickety replacements now stood in their place.

The transit station adjoined to the airport was little more than a parking lot decorated with potholes. Boyd and Sin stood in the shadows of a nearby building while Boyd flipped through a Spanish phrasebook; he was attempting to teach himself as much Spanish as he could. There were enough similarities to French that it wasn't completely confusing, but he wished they'd had more warning before taking off to Mexico—he would have attempted to become fluent.

They waited for nearly an hour before their transport arrived; it came trundling from the horizon on tires that were threadbare and two shades darker with mud. A cloth banner covering the dirty bus read in a handwritten scrawl, 'Vive México.'

"Experience Mexico," Sin translated absently at Boyd's glance. He watched other passengers drag their suitcases across the pavement, but did not comment on the other people or their surroundings.

Although Sin had complained about taking on the Jason cover, he had transitioned into it with relative ease. In the past, he had stood ramrod straight and glowered at attention, but he now stood in a sullen slouch. If anything, only his clothing was vaguely similar: ragged jeans and a sleeveless shirt that showed off the new barbed wire tattoo encasing his muscular upper arm. More than once, Boyd excused the way he ogled Sin's arms by telling himself he was examining the tattoo.

More than anything, Boyd was fairly certain it was Sin's new lip ring that would be the death of him. Watching Sin suck the silver loop in from the center of his lower lip and roll it with his tongue was outrageously distracting. Boyd didn't know how he was going to

make it through eight months alone with Sin. His mind derailed at the mere thought.

Boyd also had no idea how he was going to manage eight months of dealing with his own disguise. He'd had surgery to make his eyes blue and, although the procedure was reversible, it threw him off every time he looked in a mirror. In addition to that oddity, the Kadin Reed wardrobe was extremely dissatisfying. Boyd wore things long—shirt sleeves, pants, and hair—but now he couldn't. A short-sleeved button-down shirt exposed his arms, shorts bared his legs to the elements, and his dyed red hair did not cover the back of his neck. The only consolation was the wide leather wristbands he'd insisted on wearing to cover his wrists but, even so, he hated how unprotected it all made him feel.

Kadin's look was alarmingly attention-grabbing for someone so used to fading into the background. The shirt Unit 16 had outfitted Boyd with for the first day had a graphic of a pinwheel on it with the caption 'blow me' beneath. It had already drawn comments from several people on their journey into Mexico. Hopefully, the rest of Kadin's outfits were closer to Boyd's own style—all black and nondescript—but that was unlikely.

Boyd pushed away from the wall and hitched his duffel bag over one shoulder. "Let's go." He strode across the crackling hot pavement to the bus and felt Sin's presence behind him. By the time they boarded, a few people had already settled in.

"The back?" Boyd asked.

Sin shrugged.

They shouldered their way down the aisle, dragging their bags with them, and stopped at two empty seats. "You can have the window since I got it on the plane." It was also because Sin smelled of smoke, and Boyd couldn't decide what he thought of that. It wasn't until Sin's natural scent—soap and musk—changed did Boyd realize how much he liked it.

Sin dropped into the seat and crowded his bag between his knees. He leaned an arm against the hole where glass should have been. Tarp with loops on the bottom rolled along the ceiling, and hooks were perched beneath the windows in case passengers needed to unfurl and secure it. The bus was at once low quality and extremely functional.

It wasn't long until the bus rumbled on its way toward Mexican Federal Highway 85, and then they were surrounded by the ebb and flow of murmured conversations around them. The primary language was Spanish, but Boyd also heard a fair amount of English and a less common sprinkling of Cantonese or Mandarin. However, the two of them remained silent.

Boyd already regretted taking the aisle seat. Every time the bus rocked, he had nothing to brace himself against other than the seat ahead of him or Sin, which was a bad idea for more than one reason.

There was no question he was attracted to Sin, no question Boyd was excited about being able to live with him, but he also dreaded the idea. The privacy Boyd craved would be missing, and he worried about being literally or metaphorically exposed. Even now, the heat radiating from Sin against his bare skin was both alluring and alarming, and the wet shine of Sin's silver lip ring sent a warm tingle to Boyd's gut every time he saw it.

Pulling out an old Spanish phrasebook with Mexican trivia seemed like a good distraction, but Boyd couldn't concentrate on the words in front of him. He noticed every movement Sin made; felt it in the heating and cooling of the air on his skin.

"The French intervention in Mexico, also known as the Maximilian Affair, began in 1861 and lasted until—" Boyd stumbled when Sin ran his tongue along the lip ring. "Ah..."

Sin sucked on the metal ring, twirling it in and out of his mouth, and regarded Boyd.

"Uh... Napoleon..." Boyd tried, reading random words from the pages in front of him. "Second French Empire... And the, ah, Veracruz and... Cuba in Spanish control..." Realizing how stupid he sounded, he finished lamely, "Perhaps I will just read silently now."

"You don't have to."

"No," Boyd said tightly. "I really think I do."

Sin shrugged and ran a hand through his hair, shifting in the seat. He was sweating, and his skin was likely sticking to the seats. "It's hot."

"It's fine," Boyd retorted. Perhaps it was the realization that all attempts to distract himself were falling by the wayside, but Boyd couldn't help adding sarcastically, "Where's the Mexican in you? You should be able to handle this."

"Cállate la boca, güerito."

“What does that mean?”

Full lips turned up into a smirk, and Sin turned back to the window. “It’s a secret.”

“*Putain de beau gosse*,” Boyd muttered, flipping forward several pages.

The bus hit a huge pothole, throwing them against each other before Boyd rebounded towards the aisle. Sin grabbed his arm, and Boyd froze. He was acutely aware of Sin’s calloused fingers on his skin; they were strong but not painful.

Boyd subtly leaned away, and Sin released him.

“Thank you,” Boyd muttered and clutched the book in his lap.

The closer they came to their destination, the more his questions and anxiety amplified. He could not help but run through the what-ifs and worries with minor incidents throwing him off-kilter. The mission was as liable to be uneventful as it was game-changing. If the bus ride caused him to question whether he wanted Sin closer or at a distance, whether he was dreaded or excited about the mission, what was going to happen when they settled in?

Could he actually do this? Theories aside, looking just at the logistics made Boyd question whether he could handle living with someone else consistently. And of all people, could he handle that person being Sin?

The questions plagued him during the entire ride. By the time they arrived in Monterrey, he was hot, sweaty, anxious, frustrated, and utterly uncertain of what exactly he had gotten himself into.

Nearly three hours later, they departed the bus by a nearby taxi stand. One of the other passengers dove inside, and the taxi soon trundling off. Sin peered at the vehicle and draped the strap of his duffel bag over one shoulder. “We should take a taxi to drop off our things.”

Boyd jumped down to the sidewalk and shoved his hair away. The strands tickled his forehead maddeningly, and the heat was three times more intense in Mexico. He didn’t see any taxis and didn’t want to wait around watching Sin smoke and roll the lip ring with his tongue.

“Our bags aren’t that heavy, and we should be close. It’ll be fine.”

With an orienting look at the map, Boyd started off in the direction of their temporary home. While in Hawaii, he had tried to determine

where the bus would drop them off in relation to their address, and it had seemed close, but now that they were walking under the hot sun Boyd realized his map didn't account for construction. The street that would have been the shortest distance was completely blocked off. They had to take a long way around, which felt even longer with Monterrey's blocks varying in angle and length.

The city rose and fell in stark angles. Some streets were flat while others were at such an angle that all the buildings along it looked cockeyed or crooked. Apartment buildings and tiny houses butted against small businesses, but given the disrepair of the neighborhood, likely did not receive a lot of revenue.

What should have been a fifteen minute walk turned into nearly an hour. By the time they arrived at the correct street, both of them were soaked in sweat and Boyd's mood sunk each time Sin shot him an irritated look whenever a taxi or bus raced along the road.

They turned a corner and finally saw their apartment building. Relieved beyond measure, Boyd gave Sin an 'I told you so' look to which Sin responded with a 'No you fucking didn't, you were just lucky' look. Boyd turned his attention pointedly to the map, and Sin scoffed.

The squat building looked rather like an awkward cactus due to the balconies sticking out on different floors. A small air conditioner ran inside the main door and, though it did not drastically change the temperature, it was enough to allow Boyd to breathe without the heat suffocating his lungs.

They trudged up a set of small staircases and, after looking at each dingy, yellow door on the third floor, located and unlocked theirs.

The door caught. That was their first clue.

Boyd's arm muscles tensed as he shoved against the door. With a disgruntled squeal, it jerked open, and Boyd nearly fell into the room. He caught himself and stood, airing his torso by grabbing his t-shirt and jerking it away from his body to let bubbles of air beneath.

It was a studio instead of an apartment; just a single, decently-sized room but still smaller than he had expected. A tiny kitchen was sectioned off by a bar and counter, but the only closed off room was a bathroom in the far left corner. Two single beds rested beneath a set of narrow windows along the wall next to the bathroom. The walls were stained and off-white, and the floor was dirty. Thin cloth

curtains hung to the sides of the windows; the only protection they had from the outside world.

There were no lights installed in the ceiling, and no furniture aside from the twin beds. A battered lamp sat on the floor in a corner, but the only light came from the windows and a balcony door standing next to the kitchen. The room was stuffy and hot; a small air conditioner sat by the windows near the beds, looking so ancient that Boyd wondered if it even worked.

Boyd's anxiety skyrocketed; they would have no privacy at all.

Sin pushed past Boyd and dropped his duffel bag onto the floor with a resounding thud. "This is a fucking joke."

Boyd let his own bag slip to the floor and tried to kick the door shut behind him. It caught. Turning, he braced his feet against the floor and shoved as hard as he could. With another groan, the door slammed shut, and Boyd rested his forehead against it to regain his breath.

"Well. That will make it difficult to be stealthy."

"This is bullshit." Sin ripped off his sweaty t-shirt and threw it to the floor. He stomped over to the window and glowered at the air conditioner before shoving the window open. "I fucking hate this mission." He began muttering to himself in Spanish as he shoved the small, decrepit-looking air conditioner into the window.

"If you break that, I will kill you."

"*Bésame el culo*," Sin sniped as he plugged the unit into the wall. He pressed the power button, and a low hum filled the room. No cool air flowed from the vents. Sin violently smashed his finger against the buttons and set it to the coolest temperature. "This piece of shit doesn't even work."

"Well, I have no idea what to do. I've never used an A/C. We can ask someone."

Sin threw him an annoyed look. "It's probably the filter."

"Okay," Boyd said slowly. "Then, can you fix it?"

Sin grunted and unplugged the air conditioner, taking it out of the window and setting it on the floor. He sat down next to it and removed the grill. Dust exploded from the inside of the unit as Sin yanked the filter out. It was filthy and covered in a layer of dust several inches thick.

Seeing that Sin had it under control, Boyd examined the rest of

the studio. The bathroom was tiny, but there was working water in the sink, toilet, and shower. The water came out brown at first but cleared after allowing it to run for a couple of minutes.

A small, cracked mirror hung above the sink, and Sin's reflection appeared over Boyd's shoulder. He didn't look any more amiable than he had ten minutes ago. "It's clean. Don't know if it will make much of a difference, though."

"I'm sure it'll be fine."

Boyd pushed past Sin to get out of the bathroom. He had never been claustrophobic, but he was starting to think he might develop it.

"We should probably get supplies before it gets late," Sin said in the same tight tone. "I don't know what time things close around here. Even if we were to put faith in the state of the tap water, we have nothing to put it in, and water is a necessity in this heat."

"Okay. Do you have your account information? I have limited funds."

"I have an ATM card and some cash, but we may need to convert to pesos."

"I saw a currency exchange down one of the streets." Boyd transferred the map to Sin's phone. "I can't read some of this. You should probably navigate."

Sin opened the map and studied it for a moment, eyes flicking over the streets in their vicinity. He turned off the phone and nodded, picking up his discarded shirt and slipping it back on. "There was also some kind of outdoor market a few streets over. We can most likely pick up some essential items there."

Boyd followed Sin into the hallway and yanked the door shut behind them. It would definitely need to be repaired as soon as possible.

Not far away, they found an ATM, and Sin input his PIN. Once the cash flipped down into the drawer, Boyd grabbed it and put it in his money belt before Sin had the chance to do so. Sin's jaw set, but he said nothing as Boyd started away from the bank.

The walk to the marketplace was twice as long as expected, but the market was roughly the size of a city block and had several stands covered by large umbrellas or canopies. Industrial-strength fans blew through the stalls, creating a consistent breeze that was hot but preferable to the still heat of the day.

They decided to get only the necessities: plates, silverware, water, and food. After an hour, Sin carried a large case of bottled water and

hovered nearby as Boyd examined various sets of dishes and flatware. It dragged out for several minutes before Sin burst out, "For God's sake, just pick something."

"I can't just 'pick something.' Give me a minute to decide the one that's the best usage of our funds."

"Just get the fucking cheapest one."

"Cheapest isn't always best," Boyd shot back. "It's better to invest more if it'll last longer rather than having to constantly replace them because they broke. If the quality of this is shit, we need to know."

"Well I'm sure it will survive the violence of you scraping your fork against it."

"Just—Shut up and let me think."

"Just get the cheap one! There's no concentration required."

"Jesus!" Boyd shoved the plates into Sin's chest. "Get them your damn self if you're so obsessed with them!"

Sin turned to the vendor who seemed very alarmed by the two angry men in front of him.

"Dame éstos," Sin snapped and slammed money on the table.

The startled man took the money and cast glances in Boyd's direction as he packaged the plates for them. "I speak English."

"Sorry," Boyd grumbled. "Thank you for the plates."

The vendor gave them the bag, and Sin snatched it, managing to juggle the water as he did so, and turned on his heel. He stalked off in the direction of the fruit stand without giving Boyd a backwards glance.

Boyd strode after Sin. His irritation level was at an all-time high, and the longer they spent outside in the heat, the worse it was growing.

There was food on the tables Boyd had never seen in his life, including one large, misshapen bright green thing. He eyed the fruits and vegetables surrounding them and tried to remember if he'd read about any of them in his book.

"What are we getting?"

Sin stared at the tables. "I don't eat any of this."

"I don't know what any of it is." Boyd noticed bananas as they passed and mimicked Kadin's languid, rolling shrugs. "Well. Most of them."

"Just because I'm a spic doesn't mean I know what these people eat."

“Thank you for putting such rude words in my mouth,” Boyd snapped. “I appreciate that you thought I meant that.”

Sin going silent did not improve Boyd’s mood.

They finished shopping quickly. Boyd grabbed whatever he saw that looked relatively good but was cheap. He hoped they would be able to do something with it all because he was damned if he could plan meals ahead at the moment. A quick stop at a few other tables got them a few more essentials they needed, including sheets and pillows for their beds. Boyd didn’t even bother trying to find the best quality for the best price.

Their icy silence continued all the way to the studio where Boyd slammed himself against the door more violently than was necessary. The second they were both inside and the door was shoved closed behind them, Boyd demanded, “What the hell is your problem?”

Sin tossed what he was carrying onto the floor. “Among many other things that are horrible about this mission you are annoying as hell.”

“Why? Because I made you wait two minutes to buy a plate?”

“No, because you automatically try to control every situation or mission we’re in. I make a suggestion, you completely goddamn ignore it and seem to think for some reason you’re always in charge.” Sin ripped open the plastic packaging on the pack of water.

Boyd opened his mouth to protest, paused, and then slammed a bag onto the counter. “You always say this after the fact. What did I try to control now?”

“Every step we took from that damn bus,” Sin growled. He put his bottle on the counter with equal force. “There was no point in us trekking around in the middle of the day in the heat—it must be over a hundred degrees out there. Coming back out after we unloaded would have made more goddamn sense. We are going to be here for nearly a year, there is no fucking rush.”

“Fine. Maybe,” Boyd hissed as he unloaded with rigor. “But that was one mistake, and you don’t have to act like I’ve dictated everything and destroyed the whole—”

“And the money from my account?” Sin demanded. “Do you think I’m incompetent? I can’t handle my own cash? Because that sounds really familiar.”

“What—that’s not even—” Boyd broke off and tried to form a coherent sentence as his blood boiled hotter. “I had the money belt!

Why are you already so angry over something so small when we have barely started this mission?"

"Because we didn't have to start off in mission-fucking-mode in the first hour!" Sin shouted. "I could give less of a damn about this mission. All I give a shit about is not being at the Agency for months, and all you do is remind me that I have a specific objective and task from the fucking first minute."

"Then you should have said that instead of waiting to bitch about it later," Boyd yelled back. "How am I supposed to know what you're thinking? I always take things seriously, and I don't understand why you act like it's a huge problem."

"It's not just about that. You always think you're the fucking team leader, and it never even occurs to you that it's not going to be that way. I've been doing this job much longer than you."

A harsh bark of laughter escaped Boyd. "Oh, so now it's a job? Two seconds ago it shouldn't even be treated like a mission, but God forbid Hsin Liu Vega miss an opportunity to make it clear that he is a superior fucking human being because he's been at the Agency longer and can do things no one else can."

"And once again," Sin said in a voice that had dropped several degrees. "You have missed my entire point. You can't see beyond your own bullshit for long enough to comprehend anything that I'm saying, and if that's the way it's going to be, I'd rather get my ass back on a helicopter and risk the Fourth than be stuck here with you."

"So you'd rather be tortured than be around me?" Boyd demanded. "That's real fucking nice."

Sin made a disgusted sound. "I'm going back out."

"Go ahead," Boyd snapped. "It will give you more time to come up with even more reasons for despising me."

Sin didn't say anything, but he slammed the door on his way out. Boyd stared at it for a long moment before he stiffly returned to putting away their purchases. He was so furious that he almost broke the stupid plates while unloading them.

Once done in the kitchen, Boyd prowled the studio. Resentment warred with the sting of Sin's claim about preferring the box. He knew Sin had likely spoken out of anger, but Boyd's own frustration made it difficult to believe. Over an hour went by with Boyd wondering how they were going to survive this mission if they got this mad

at each other on the first day. The excitement of being around Sin, of possibly exploring their unspoken attraction, paled as he realized maybe they were both too screwed up to deal with even being room-mates let alone anything else.

The dismal thought led to him running Sin's words over and over in his mind. He was outside leaning against the balcony when the front door wrenched open with a loud groan. Through the glass, he saw Sin kick the door shut and drop a bag on the kitchen counter. On his way back to one of the twin beds, he grabbed the duffel bag that held his weapons.

Boyd sighed. If it turned out the only way to through this year was by pretending the other didn't exist, it was better to get that figured out now so he could start convincing himself that he didn't care.

The balcony door squealed as unpleasantly as the front door when Boyd pushed it open. Sin didn't react from where he was seated on the bed until Boyd walked around the bar to enter the kitchen.

"Hey, you," Sin said. He had laid out each of his weapons and was in the process of examining each one. It wasn't an arsenal, but he'd transported his favorite .44 Ruger, two .45 Brownings, an assortment of knives, explosives, and an M24A2 sws that was still in its case.

"Hey," Boyd said.

Sin held up a plastic bag. "Want a gummy bear?"

Boyd eyed him. "Sure."

Sin tossed the bag at Boyd and watched as he popped one into his mouth. Boyd didn't particularly like sweets, but he appreciated the gesture.

"Let's make a deal," Sin said.

"About?"

"I'll stop being hostile if you stop being bossy."

Boyd stared at him dubiously. "Just like that?"

"Yes. Simple." Sin opened the case to the rifle and inspected it. "I don't feel like dealing with another long drawn out Who's More Fucked Up battle of wills. We just finished one, and I'm not looking forward to another, especially not in one room for almost a year."

"I don't want that either. But should we talk about anything first so it doesn't have to come up again?"

"Is it going to be a reasonable talk or is it going to turn into another bitch fit?"

“Reasonable. I really don’t want to argue.”

Sin opened the case to his sniper rifle and picked up the scope. He extended the piece and peered at Boyd through it. “I’m willing to talk if you are willing to be honest with me.”

“I am.”

Boyd sat on the edge of the other twin bed and tried to figure out how to continue. He wasn’t used to explaining his thoughts or explaining why he functioned the way he did. He didn’t relish the idea of starting, but if he would push himself out of his comfort zone for anyone, it would be Sin.

“I was thinking about what you said and maybe you’re right. I take over, but it isn’t on purpose. I’m used to having to deal with things on my own, and I got used to doing that at the Agency because at first you weren’t participating in missions. Maybe to you it feels like I’m taking control, but to me I’m just... bracing for the inevitable.”

“The inevitable what?” Sin dropped the scope on the bed. “It’d be nice if you stopped acting like there was reason to think I don’t know what I’m doing or that I’m not going to have your back considering how many goddamn bullets I’ve taken for you in the past eight months.”

“It has nothing to do with that, Sin. I don’t doubt you as an agent. I just...” Boyd struggled with the words to describe a mindset he didn’t even always understand. “It doesn’t matter. The point is, it isn’t personal, Sin. It really isn’t. I’m just naturally this way, whether I mean to be or not.”

“Well I can tell you now that if you always act like that, I’m always going to get pissed. I’m sick of people treating me like I’m inept and being condescending to me.” Sin’s dark brows arched. “I may be new at being a contributing member of a team, but I know that it’s a two-way street, sweetheart.”

Boyd snorted at the use of the nickname. “I can try. But if we’re being honest, then you also have to understand that the way you act sometimes makes me feel like you think everything I do is wrong. Like you see me as some stupid kid not worth your time, even when I’m doing things I know will work.”

The case for the rifle snapped shut, and Sin stood with it in hand. He frowned at Boyd before walking over to the closet. “Like what?”

“Like in Canada. I know we were both especially on edge at that

time, but still... I worked hard on everything, and you shut me down from the start. It seemed like you went into it expecting me to be incompetent.”

Silence reigned with Sin facing away from Boyd while he examined the interior of the closet. His posture had stiffened at the mention of the mission, and the tension was more obvious when he reached up to slide the case onto a shelf above his head.

“There was a lot going on in my head when I got to Canada, but I didn’t set out to make you angry.”

“It wasn’t just you; it was everything, but that’s the sort of reaction I mean.” Boyd didn’t want to think about Alexis or start another blame game so he focused on the hard lines of Sin’s back. “What do you mean going on in your head? Did something happen before you showed up there?”

Sin closed the closet door and swiped a hand through his inky, sweat-damp hair. “I’d just come from a long mission, and it wasn’t good.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Had to assassinate someone I didn’t want to kill after destroying his reputation. It was a high profile individual—a philanthropist.”

Boyd’s brow puckered, and he recalled news reports circulating around the time of Sin’s extended mission. His stomach sank. “Was it Anderson McCall?”

“Yes. But even if it wasn’t—” Sin shook his head sharply. “Whatever. It just put me in a bad mood.”

There had been a time when Boyd had admired McCall because of his work with orphans of war. Though Boyd’s mother had survived, she had been neglectful for as long as he could remember, and the war had taken his own father and both of Lou’s parents. That was the only reason Boyd—when not caught in the cycle of his own fatalistic thoughts—had followed the coverage of the alleged downward spiral and subsequent suicide of Anderson McCall.

After a pause Boyd said, “I can see why.”

“Yeah, well, doesn’t matter now. The motherfucker is dead, and my hands got nice and dirty doing it.” Sin returned to his bed and stared down at the array of weapons without touching them. He sucked the ring into his mouth again. “And it wasn’t just that, by the way. Since

we're being open and honest, I guess I should tell you that I also had less sympathy for your plight because I was still pissed about France."

Boyd wasn't surprised by the information. Sin had made it quite clear how little he had thought of Boyd in France, and he knew that in large part it had been because of the valentine aspect. "Because I didn't listen to you again?"

"Maybe," Sin said vaguely.

"If you don't want to talk about it we don't have to." It would have been easier to end the conversation rather than push the wrong buttons, but Boyd had obsessed over France for months. "I do want to know something, though."

Sin looked at him expectantly, and Boyd forced himself to go on. "Would you have been that angry if it had been anyone other than Thierry?"

Sin rubbed the back of his neck, frowned when his fingers came away damp with sweat, and stripped his t-shirt off. "Probably."

Boyd didn't know if it was negative or positive that the anger hadn't been specific to Thierry. He had no idea if it was the valentine aspect in particular or if Sin just thought he wasn't good at negotiating in general. "Well, next time I'll ask why you're so opposed or resistant to something on a mission. Clearly you are aware of far more Agency intricacies than I am, so if we're more open in the future, we can avoid any other issues like that."

For some reason the words prompted Sin to roll his eyes. "Look, it wasn't just you not taking my advice, okay? That made it worse, but I was... I was just jealous in general. You would barely look at me or say two words, but you were hanging all over and flirting with him, and it made me want to crack your skull open."

Boyd blinked, startled by the admission. "So then... what happened that night..."

Sin tossed his shirt on the bed. He'd been wringing it in his hands as the conversation progressed but now sneaked a glance at Boyd before opening another of his duffel bags. "That was a bad idea for any number of reasons."

The hope that had bloomed in Boyd's chest was already tempered by uncertainty. He wondered whether Sin regretted it all or whether he would ever want to try again. Before Boyd could figure out whether he could even ask, or if he should, Sin spoke again.

"But I have started wondering if you abruptly acted like I was a serial killer because of... Because when we were—" Sin scowled and continued to stare into his bag. "I know you have a problem with people seeing you shirtless. So, I wondered if you freaked out because of that. Because I got so caught up, and I didn't remember."

Boyd started to cross his arms over his stomach but aborted the motion and pressed his hands to the mattress instead. Part of him wanted to shut down, to say nothing and walk out, but he fought the inclination.

"Yes. You unknowingly did two things that terrify me more than anything else. You were holding me down and pushed up my shirt. And... And like I said, I panicked."

"Yes, but why?"

Boyd picked at his wristband, refusing to look up. He was silent, considering his wording and what was safe to say aloud. "When I was younger, I attempted suicide. I don't want anyone to..." The words brought back a phantom smell of blood, and the feel of a blade slicing into flesh. "I hate it."

"Was it after your friend died?"

"Yes." Boyd's nails scraped the leather. "How do you know about that?"

"I read your file. It's not easily accessible information, though. I had to use Ryan's clearance to get in that deep."

The information sidetracked the darker thoughts that had stirred. "Why would you go to that much trouble? You had the file before and never bothered."

"I didn't give a shit about you before."

"What changed?"

"I don't know." Sin was clearly reluctant, and Boyd feared the answer would go no further, but then Sin quit fiddling with his bag. "I don't know how to explain it. You grew on me, and I wanted to know things about you. I wanted to understand you. And then when I found out what happened to you... I thought someone should pay."

"Oh." Boyd could not think of one other person who would have cared, and Sin's words poked the blossoming feelings and confusing emotions that already plagued Boyd every time they looked at each other too long or touched. It was dangerous territory. "Thank you, Sin."

“Uh huh.” Sin went back to rummaging, presumably, for clean clothing. “Now that we’re all squared away, I picked up something for you when I went out. It’s on the counter.”

Surprised, entered the kitchen and found the bag Sin had dropped on the counter. Inside was his favorite tea. It was a small gesture, but Boyd had been given so few gifts in his memory that he didn’t know how to respond. Especially since it had come from Sin.

Perhaps their truce would work after all.

SIN HATED HIS stupid cover.

Even if interacting socially came easier when he was around Boyd, the skill did not transfer to other people. Especially civilians.

Spending most of his life in isolation was a definite hindrance to this assignment, and Sin had been forced to abort his (completely unsuccessful) job search for a couple of days to devise a strategy.

Finding a balance between Jason's lazy sarcasm and his own curt disinterest was more difficult than he'd anticipated. To temper the two, Sin had begun to study the civilians around him, and had even dredged up the mercurial memories of his father. Emilio Vega had excelled at undercover assignments; he'd shifted between personas as easily as changing his clothes. Sin didn't think he'd ever be able to master the art of subterfuge to that extent, but he tried to at least stop failing abominably.

It was not perfect by any means, but Sin managed to adjust his body language and tone enough to stop intimidating potential employers into silence. Some people still reacted as if they were resisting an instinctual urge to flee from a wild animal, but it wasn't as bad as it had been at the start.

Not that it was getting him anywhere.

Over two weeks in and job hunting like any other average jerk sucked just as much as Sin had expected. No wonder people resorted to a life of crime.

Finding employment in Monterrey was not as easy as Carhart had made it sound, and Sin was kicking himself for not predicting this problem all along. There were so many ex-pats living in Monterrey that jobs were scarce, and the available ones were competitive. To make matters worse, he'd taken to walking around in the heat to scout businesses that didn't already have ads listed, but that was getting old as well.

After several hours of wandering on the twelfth day of his search, Sin sat on the grass in a large plaza and seriously debated returning to the studio. The air conditioner still did not work for shit, but at least it got the place down to a temperature that wasn't unbearable.

The downside to this plan was more time spent locked in a room with Boyd. They hadn't had another fight like their first day in Monterrey, but the heat served as a constant irritant. The combination of sexual frustration and an inability to get any privacy only heightened his bad mood. If Sin was this testy after two weeks without the ability to jerk off in peace, he had no idea where he was going to be after months of sleeping three feet away from Boyd, and the dirty fantasies that were starting to become a nightly thing.

Because apparently he liked to torture himself.

Sin groaned and got to his feet. He shaded his eyes and squinted around the plaza, but there were few people in the vicinity. All the smart people had taken themselves out of the sweltering heat while he sat there like an idiot wearing all black clothes.

Cynthia's idea of an appropriate Jason wardrobe was Sin's idea of a practical joke. She'd saddled him with skintight shirts, too-narrow pants, and everything was in shades of black with metallic accents as if he was just dying to set off metal detectors all over town. She'd assured him it was a "sexy blend of punk and sophistication," but Sin was pretty sure he was the only fucking moron in Mexico who'd failed to discover linen clothing.

His shirt was damp with sweat and sticking to his back, and he'd had to resist the urge to shove his hand down the front of his pants and move around the hardware on more than one occasion. The combination of heat, sweat, and tight denim led to serious concern about the continued functioning of his testicles.

Sin turned in a slow circle and squinted at the buildings and establishments surrounding the wide, green space. There were museums and government buildings sitting alongside restaurants and nightclubs; it was clearly one of the trendier parts of the city.

He'd already reached out to the government facilities and large corporations so he knew there were no opportunities there, but it was probably time to start widening his search.

Muttering, and not bothering to hide his annoyance, Sin set out again. A foot-dragging meander through the next few blocks further convinced him to end the search for the day and go home, but something caught his eye. A woman was tacking up a sign on the window of a place called Noctis.

Help Wanted: Security for Evening Shifts

The establishment could have been anything from a fancy restaurant to a nightclub, and it wasn't the type of place Sin had intended to apply, but at this point it was better than nothing.

He watched the woman struggle to get the sign straight and waited for an opportunity to speak. She had short strips of tape stuck to her fingers and was scowling in frustration when she noticed him looming behind her.

"What the—" She spun around and stepped back, glaring. "You nearly gave me a heart attack! Make some noise or something."

Sin forced his scowl to remain at bay. "I didn't want to interrupt."

The woman's frown faded a bit when she gave him a brief once-over. Her brows rose over light brown eyes, and she fidgeted with the strips of tape as if wanting to remove them now that he was towering over her.

"Well, can I help you?" she asked when he said nothing further. "Or did you just want to ogle my ass?"

The question took Sin aback. All of his pre-planned civilian pleasantries went up in smoke. How was he supposed to respond to that? She was tall, attractive, and wearing shorts that left little to the imagination, but he'd barely registered this information before she'd brought it to his attention. His father would have jumped on the opportunity to talk about just how nice her ass was, but Sin was convinced that wasn't the best way to go about getting a job. Maybe.

He ignored the question and jerked his thumb at the sign.

"Actually I want a job."

"Of course you do." The tape was plucked from each finger although she stuck a couple strips to the sign so it wouldn't fall. "Do you have experience?"

"Yes." The woman made a "go on" gesture, and he frowned. "I've had various jobs in security for the past ten years."

"I see."

Sin didn't like the way she kept examining him, but there was nothing he could do about it so he just stood there with his arms dangling harmlessly at his sides and let her look.

At least she wasn't running in fear.

"Well," she said after a pause. "Come in, and we'll talk. But just so you know, we do a background check and call references. If you're some insane killer from the States thinking you're going to come

down here and start over, think again. We also do a drug test before anyone gets hired. Still interested?"

Sin wondered if this was her usual approach. "Yes."

"Good. I'm Jessica Meza."

"Jason Alvarez."

Jessica nodded and turned to push open the door to Noctis. The strong waft of cold air coming from the interior would have probably prompted Sin to sign up for a janitor position if it meant a break from the heat.

He was pathetic. Years of living on the compound had clearly turned him into a climate-controlled field agent. Shaking his head at his own failed heat tolerance, Sin followed Jessica inside.

Noctis was indeed a nightclub and seemed to be an upscale one if he judged by the decor. The bar extended through the full length of an expansive room that was split into a large dance floor and a lounge area. A spiral staircase led to at least two upper levels.

He surveyed the club, noted all exits, and additional rooms. There were a handful of patrons at the bar, but the club was largely empty. There were two men behind the bar but both were relatively relaxed; Sin could not imagine one of them was security for the day shift. Even if business was slow, it would take very little effort for someone to enter the club and slink up the spiral staircase without being seen.

Sin had no idea whether that was a concern for the staff, but it seemed like common sense to be aware of the comings and goings of customers at all times.

Jessica led him to the far side of the bar and keyed in an access code for a door that simply read 'Staff'. It opened up to a series of rooms—a break room, a locker room, and a bathroom—before she keyed in yet another code for a door opening to a large office.

"Do you have a résumé or cv? And on a drive, I hope. I hate people who still carry around paper copies." Jessica flopped down behind a large metal desk and fanned herself.

Sin extracted a USB drive from his pocket and slid it across the desk. She plugged it somewhere behind the desk and turned on a screen inset on the surface. While she thumbed at the touchscreen and examined his fake credentials, Sin checked out her office.

One wall was dominated by a large panel of screens displaying different areas of the club. Four of the screens remained on the exits

while two other screens cycled between different areas on the three floors. From what he could see, each floor had a theme, and there were private areas on the upper levels.

The security system was pretty dated compared to what Sin was used to at the Agency. There were also several flaws in the layout of the club that could easily lead to breaches.

“Don’t talk much?”

“Not really.”

Sin dragged his focus away from the crappy screens and regarded Jessica again. She was paying more attention to him than his stupid résumé. Even when he frowned in consternation she kept eyeballing him. It went on for a moment before she grinned.

“Are you Mexican?”

“Yes.”

“Fully?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting.”

He didn’t care why she found it so interesting. It was usually Americans and Europeans who did the “you look so exotic” thing, but that was typically because they didn’t realize Latin Americans came in all shades and with varying physical characteristics—including light eyes or a slight epicanthic fold. He knew that, and Cynthia had condescendingly stressed it when discussing his cover. As if he’d been planning to randomly make Jason half Chinese. Idiot.

“So, your résumé is also extremely interesting,” Jessica said. “Bodyguard for two senators, security for several major corporations in America—even a brief stint at a government compound.” She looked at him dubiously. “You realize we can in no way compete with what you probably had for a salary in the past? This would be a huge step down for you, Jason.”

He shrugged. “That’s fine.”

“Why is that fine?”

“Because I need a job and no one else is hiring.”

Jessica smirked. “The brutally honest type too, I take it.”

Sin said nothing, and the corners of her mouth tipped up higher as if she found this whole encounter to be hilarious. What a freak.

“It’s hard to get a job because a lot of people move down here and not very many leave. But you realize this isn’t going to be the type of

thing you're used to. You will be pulling apart drunks, kicking people out of the club when necessary, and sometimes working the door."

Sin started to repeat that it was fine but decided against sounding like a broken record. "Doesn't matter."

"Well, you certainly have the intimidating silence down. I'll give you that."

How the hell was that intimidating? He did not understand civilians. Not one bit. If grunted out words and monosyllabic responses were intimidating, he didn't want to know how they'd react to an actual threat.

"Sorry."

Jessica sat back in her chair and laughed. "Don't be sorry. I'm just teasing. I like the silent broody type. You'd be surprised with how many of my former security staff were more interested in chatting with the customers instead of doing their jobs. The less you talk the better."

That was a fucking relief.

She appeared to read the thought on his face and laughed again. "So this is how it goes, Alvarez. I'll do a background check and call your references. If everything checks out, I'll get back to you. Be warned though, I check all of your references. Far too many people expect to get by with putting down their mom or girlfriend. I want to talk to actual supervisors and coworkers. A lot of people think they can come down here and start over after screwing up phenomenally in the States, and you might be surprised with how many criminals and sex offenders try to score a job at a nightclub."

"It makes sense, actually. Easy access to prey." She tilted her head to the side, and Sin decided it was a lot better when he stuck to monosyllables. "That's what I assume, anyway," he muttered.

"Well, you assume right. So I go the whole nine yards, as time-consuming and expensive as it is. After the references check out, you do a drug test, and then start some training, but I assume the training would be small potatoes for you. It's more to get the hang of my outdated security system and learn the layout of the club."

"You're making it sound like I'll have the job if my background check proves I'm not insane."

"Well..." Jessica rubbed her chin and gave him a slower once-over. "You're overqualified. Which tells me you will be out of here as soon

as you find something better, but I could do with someone who can show the rest of my security staff how it's done. I can tell you would take the job seriously."

"I see."

Jessica flicked her hand across the screen to save the document and reached down to remove the drive. "And you're gorgeous, so you might draw in customers just based on me stationing you at the door early in the night."

Again, Sin had no idea how to respond. When led him back to the entrance, he was nearly relieved. She lapsed into an explanation of the club and her own history, and he paid attention only out of an absent if dubious habit of gathering intel. Apparently, she was only a couple of years older than him and from a relatively wealthy family of entrepreneurs and activists. Her family had emigrated from Mexico to the United States before she was born, but had always maintained close ties to the place. After the war, several of them had returned to Monterrey to help build up the city again using their resources.

None of it was particularly interesting, but Sin nodded when appropriate and tried to force himself to look less like he'd rather be on his way home than hear her do-gooder life story.

"I hope you don't turn out to be a criminal," she said when they got to the door. "It'd be fun trying to get you to relax."

"I never relax."

Jessica smiled again and reached up to adjust his collar. She seemed immune to his stoicism. "If you end up working here, you will."

"If you say so."

She patted his shoulder. "I'll call if everything checks out. Now, go get a drink or something. Loosen up."

Sin ignored her comment and muttered a goodbye before leaving the club. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder after crossing the street and saw her ripping the help wanted sign down from the window.

BOYD DRAGGED THE folding screens into the apartment and awkwardly shoved the door shut behind him. The sound of running water signaled that Sin was already home from his daily job hunt, which was earlier than usual. At this point in the day Boyd was used to being in the studio alone.

Boyd set up the screens between the beds and the larger part of the studio, and stood back to survey it. He was pretty proud of himself. He was frugal on his own but especially so in Monterrey since he had limited funds. The process of buying things for the studio was tricky, but Boyd found creative ways to procure more expensive items.

He'd broken the city into a grid system and was getting acquainted with each section in order to determine the best locations to gather intel or find informants. While wandering an area largely populated by expats, he'd discovered the screens near a dumpster. They were intact and a little banged up, but there was no way he'd have afforded them otherwise, and they provided a free, partial solution to their privacy issue.

Boyd moved the screens to a different angle and heard the bathroom door open behind him. He turned.

"Hey, how—"

Sin walked out of the bathroom completely naked with the exception of a towel he was using to dry his lower body. Nearly every inch of his bronze skin was bared, and when the towel shifted slightly to the side, Boyd caught a glimpse of the thick length of Sin's dick.

Boyd averted his eyes and carefully studied the whorls of wood against the rice paper. Why did Sin have to do this every time he left the shower? One of these days Boyd was going to embarrass the hell out of himself in response.

"I bought us some stuff. Are you done with the shower? You should put some clothes on."

Sin moved closer to examine the screens. "Why? It's hot. Where'd you find those?"

"Someone tossed them out. You should really... It's just—better. To wear something. More modest."

From Boyd's peripheral vision he saw Sin move to his still-unpacked duffel bag. He grabbed a pair of ragged jeans and stepped into them, but they sagged below his hipbones. It was hardly an improvement, but Boyd would take what he could get.

Sin wrung water out of his hair and threw himself backwards on his bed. "I think I got a job today."

"Really? Where?"

"It's stupid."

"What is it?"

“Security at a nightclub.”

Boyd sat on the edge of his bed. After the initial oddity of imagining Sin in a nightclub setting, he nodded. “Good choice.”

“How is that a good choice?”

“It gives you a good cover. If you don’t want to talk to people or if you accidentally get too rough, it won’t stand out too much for a bouncer. But the nightclub part... Have you ever been to one before?”

Sin extended his arm and reached around on the rickety end table until his fingers clasped a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He popped one in his mouth, flicked his lighter, and responded around an exhale of smoke.

“No. Well... technically, yes. When I used to shadow my father on missions we once went to a club to track a target. But I was hiding in a crawlspace with a sawed off shotgun the whole time.” Sin sucked on the filter of his cigarette and inspected the ceiling. “From what I could see, it was a civilian abomination.”

“Yeah.” Boyd kicked his sandals off and scooted back on his bed. “It isn’t the sort of place I’d opt to go.”

“It mostly seems like crowds of drunken civilians performing bizarre mating rituals. I doubt you’d enjoy it.” Sin considered Boyd. “Although, who knows what you got up to in your youth.”

Boyd snorted. “You got me. Nightclubs were at the top of the list every night. I practically lived there.”

“Well, that’s an embarrassing mental image.”

“You just aren’t imagining it right.”

“Perhaps you can visit me at work and prove me wrong. If I get that stupid job.”

“Maybe I will.” Visiting Sin at work would not have been an option in a different setting, and the opportunity to observe him while undercover could be useful if Sin needed help acclimating to a civilian environment. “Did you have an interview already?”

“Well—” Wisps of smoke drifted in the air between them. Sin reached out to wave the smoke away from Boyd’s side of the small space. “Do you want the balcony open?”

“I’ll do it. Keep talking.” Boyd got up and opened the door. By now he was used to the annoying squeal.

“It’s likely I’ll get it, but only because the owner of the club seemed intrigued by me.”

“What do you mean?”

A warm breeze infiltrated the studio, and the smoke drifted to the now-open doorway.

“She eyeballed me a lot. I’m assuming she finds me attractive.” Sin rolled on his side to see the door and followed Boyd’s movements. “But I am odd looking so maybe it was just that.”

Boyd diverted into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water. “I doubt that. Want some water?” When Sin shook his head, Boyd returned to his bed. “Did she say anything or did she just stare at you a lot?”

“Mostly stared at me. She said I was overqualified and knew I wouldn’t stay there for a long time, but she wants me on board, anyway. I noticed that she took down the help wanted sign, but she hasn’t even done my background check.”

Boyd nodded slowly. “Judging by what you’ve said so far, you should be careful.”

Sin was silent a moment before pushing himself up with the cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth. “This assignment is really frustrating.”

“You seem to be doing pretty well so far, but can I help with anything?”

“I don’t know. You’re better at this, but there is an inherent flaw in me being in a situation in which neither of us has any experience. With nightclubs and beautiful women who might be attracted to me. This is my father’s type of assignment.”

The water bottle crinkled in Boyd’s hand. Keeping his tone casual, he asked, “You think she’s beautiful?”

“She’s okay.” Sin frowned thoughtfully. “Pretty, tall, long dark hair, and she has the type of body the Agency would love to saddle their female valentines with.”

“Oh.” A dozen more question popped into Boyd’s mind, but there was no way to ask them without being obvious. “Well... If you get the feeling she’s expecting too much of you, it might be best to leave the job. I can help you find another one at that point if you need it.”

“I’m sure it will be fine. She wasn’t unprofessional or anything. At least I don’t think so. It’s just...” Sin reached over to stub out his cigarette. “I just don’t know how to act in this situation, and not just her. Being in that environment in general. I’ll probably screw it up.”

“I don’t think you will, Sin. You don’t generally screw anything up,

and that's where the bouncer cover will help." When Sin's doubtful frown did not fade, Boyd added, "If it helps, I used to have a hard time knowing what to do around other people so I watched them and learned to mimic them. If you don't have to be on point, I would interact the minimal amount. If you don't interact at all, people notice and you stand out, and if you're socially awkward and interact too much, people notice that too. But if you speak up now and then in a conversation, or infrequently agree to hang out, people will lose interest. It might be harder for you, but that's one thing that works for me."

"Life was easier when I was just expected to shoot people."

Boyd's lips quirked. "That's definitely something that would make you stand out here."

"Shut up." Sin smirked and lay on his bed again.

THE HEAT AND the occasional groaning of the air conditioner had led to fitful sleeping for the two weeks they'd been living in Monterrey. This time when Boyd jerked awake, he thought it was the usual loud chugging of the A/C. After listening, Boyd realized the quiet sound had come from the other bed.

Boyd peered across the scant amount of space between their beds.

Sin's body was covered in a sheen of sweat, his forehead creased in lines of distress, and chest rising and falling with each labored breath.

Boyd sat up and only hesitated for an instant before moving closer. "Sin."

Sin flinched but otherwise did not react to the sound of his name.

It would have been smarter to back away considering how badly this same situation had played out before, but Boyd knew he would never be able to do that. He steeled himself and brushed his fingers across Sin's cheek in a gentle caress.

"Hsin."

Sin's eyes snapped open. His hand shot out, clamping around Boyd's wrist so tightly the skin pinched and circulation cut off.

Boyd's heart stopped. He froze in place and struggled to find his voice. "Hsin, it's just me. You were having a nightmare."

No recognition flashed in Sin's face, and Boyd's heartbeat sped. He automatically noted the exits in the room and the closest places he could find shelter until Sin came back to himself, but then Sin's hand

loosened. He blinked and sucked in a shaky breath before his pupils focused.

“What are you—Did I hurt you?”

Tension bled from Boyd. “No, you didn’t. It’s okay.”

“You shouldn’t have—I told you—” Sin’s words guttered out thickly.

“It’s okay.” Boyd touched Sin’s shoulder. “Nothing happened.”

A shudder went through Sin’s powerful frame and, instead of answering, his long fingers tightened on Boyd’s wrist again. With only the briefest of motions, he pulled Boyd forward so he was lying next to Sin on the bed.

Boyd’s breath caught and, for just a moment, it seemed like he was in a dream. The press of the bed beneath him, and the weight of Sin’s arm was surreal.

“Please don’t do that again,” Sin whispered.

“I couldn’t ignore you.”

“But I could hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

Sin raised his free hand and covered his face. “You don’t understand. If you wake me up and I’m having one of those goddamn nightmares I could hurt you. I could *kill* you.”

The tension in Sin’s shoulders, and his raw vulnerability, drew Boyd in. He wanted nothing more than to comfort his partner, to touch him, and reassure him that it would be okay. And this time, Boyd didn’t stop himself. Sin *wanted* him here. Even as scared as he was of alternative outcomes... Sin had wanted him close.

“I know there’s risk involved, but I... I trust you.”

“Boyd...”

Sin dropped his hand and rolled onto his side, pushing himself up on his elbow. His lips parted as if to speak, but no words came out.

Boyd was painfully aware of the warmth from Sin’s body bleeding into his own. He closed his hands around the bunched up sheet and tried to ignore the way Sin’s eyes focused on his mouth. He did it often—fixed on Boyd’s lips while they spoke—but the lack of distance between them created an intensity Boyd could not push aside.

“You don’t get it because you’ve never seen me at my worst,” Sin said finally. “You don’t know what could happen.”

Swallowing hard, Boyd shook his head. He’d never admitted to having done so much research on Sin, but now seemed as good a

time as any. "I think I do, though. I saw the videos. I've seen some of the things you've done in the past."

Voices rose from the street outside, high and excited, but not loud enough to cover the sound of Sin's sharp inhalation.

"If you saw the things I did, how could you..."

"Because you aren't the monster others said you are." Boyd touched Sin's jaw. The feel of stubble scratched along his fingertips, and then, feeling too bold, he let his hand fall back to the bed between them. "What I saw in those videos was someone who was threatened or hurt, and reacted. Maybe it was more violent than others, but that's what you were taught, and that's what they expect of you. But you've never done that to me. Even that night in the cabin... you realized I wasn't a threat and you recognized me."

Sin rolled onto his back. "But what if that doesn't happen one day? You shouldn't feel safe based on luck."

"I don't think it's luck. What I've tried so far has worked, and there's no reason to believe it can't continue that way."

Sin had started shaking his head halfway through Boyd speaking. "Boyd, this is the second time. You can't... Just listen to me. I'm not normal, and it's only a matter of time before you do get hurt. Please, just be careful."

Boyd thought Sin wasn't giving himself enough credit but declined to push it further. "Is that what you were dreaming about?"

"No." Sin had released Boyd's wrist, but the tips of his fingers barely grazed the skin just above the thick wristbands Boyd wore. "It was... about my mother."

Boyd shifted his hand so their palms brushed. He remembered Ryan saying Sin's mother had been a prostitute, and that Sin had been abused, possibly sexually, during his time with her. Choosing his words carefully, Boyd said, "I don't know much about her."

"The Agency doesn't know much about her in general. There wouldn't be much in my file."

"That's a little surprising. They've always seemed to know everything."

Sin's tongue darted out to wet his lips. "She was a nobody. Just another girl from mainland China who went to Hong Kong to make money. Her parents sent her with some men who claimed they would help her find work as a maid, but instead they smuggled her in on a boat and turned her into a whore. Her life was as meaningless as her

death. There wouldn't be any decent records on her to dig up except maybe in the city she came from on the mainland."

It made sense. While researching the area for information on Janus nodes, Boyd had learned recruitment in Hong Kong was difficult for insurgent groups due to a high amount of human trafficking arranged by the Triad. Apparently, it was more profitable to force women and children into prostitution than sell them as foot soldiers to Janus.

The topic was sensitive in general, but made even more so due to its connection to Hsin. Boyd chose his next question carefully, "Then what did you dream about?"

"Just... things." Sin sneaked another glance at Boyd. "That happened in Hong Kong."

Boyd ran his thumb along what he could feel of Sin's hand, a gentle touch he hoped was comforting and not invasive.

"You know, I... After some things that happened when I was younger, I had nightmares a lot," Boyd said. "Some of them were... terrible. Sometimes I wished I had someone to talk to about them, and other times I was glad I was alone. So whatever you want or need, I can do. If you want me to stop asking, I can, but if you want to talk, I can also listen."

The words hung in the air, and Boyd did not believe Sin would respond, but he did with a roughness that betrayed the seriousness of the topic.

"The world isn't a safe place for kids, especially not kids living after the war. Or even just... where I grew up with the violent johns and minders. It's not a surprise what happened to me." In very slight movements, Sin's hand turned until their fingers were wound partially together. He spoke slowly, as if he was trying to figure it out for himself. "The worst part of those nightmares is being so helpless. I think that's why I wake up in that insane state. I have nightmares about my father too, but I don't have that same reaction."

The warmth of Sin's hand, pressed against his with their fingers intertwined, was like a secret privilege in the night. Boyd squeezed.

"Does anything similar happen in the nightmares about your father?"

"No, but those are weird. It's like a recurring dream that I can't figure out." Sin frowned. "It's like my brain is trying to make me remember something I've repressed. Even then, it isn't traumatizing

like the shit about my mother. My father wasn't a psycho like her. He didn't intentionally hurt small children."

After all Boyd had heard about Emilio, that was a relief. It was tempting to ask more about Sin's mother, but the full story sounded more horrifying than anything related to Emilio.

"I heard he was a good agent and he trained you, but then at one point you appeared at the Agency instead of him. Is it... Do you dream about something related to that?"

"I don't know. It's all bits and pieces." Sin frowned. "He was killed, but I don't remember how or why it happened. I blacked out. I probably had one of those fits when we were attacked."

"You were attacked?"

"I assume so, but I don't remember anything, really."

Boyd half-turned so he could see more than Sin's profile. "Why did you come in? It sounded like no one in the Agency knew you existed. Why didn't you just... walk away? Live a different life?"

"It was what my father trained me for, and I had nowhere else to go. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I'd never opened that stupid laptop." Sin's mouth crooked in a half-smile. "But even if I wouldn't have been trapped at the Agency, I would have been lost. There was no way I could have functioned on my own, and I would have just wound up locked away for some other reason in some other place. Maybe somewhere worse."

"But how can you be so sure?"

A soft scoff accompanied Sin's smile. "There's a reason why fighting dogs are usually put to sleep. I wasn't much different than that. I'm still not, but I can control myself more than I could as a child."

Boyd didn't think that was a fair description but kept the thought to himself for the time being. "What changed?"

"I didn't have as much impulse control as a child. It was even worse when my father took me from Hong Kong." Sin's gaze skittered away to focus on the shadows again. "Training gave me focus and some kind of discipline at least."

"Hmm." Boyd tracked the planes of Sin's knuckle. His hand twitched, but he didn't pull away. "I was told a little bit about your father."

"By who? Carhart?"

"Yeah. Before we went to France. And I heard a little bit in general when trying to learn more about you."

Sin snorted. "What did the good General have to say?"

"He basically said that Emilio had a lot of issues, but General Carhart liked him anyway. And he didn't know what Emilio had done to get you ready for the Agency."

"That's it? He didn't wax on about their wonderful partnership?"

"Well, he..." Boyd thought back and let out a soft huff as he realized Sin's characterization wasn't far from how Carhart had sounded. "He talked more about them individually, and what Emilio was like. Where he came from. Then he talked about you. He didn't exactly focus on any relationships, but it did imply they got along at some point."

"Uh huh." Reading Sin's tone was impossible without any further information. "Anyway, the training was what you'd expect from someone turning an eight year old into a field agent. He helped improve my English-speaking, taught me Spanish, how to write better, and in between those nice academic studies we worked on hand-to-hand combat in various climates, marksmanship, demolition, and sleep training."

"But..." Boyd turned his head and watched Sin in the contoured shadow and light. He didn't sound or look upset; he didn't appear to feel anything about it at all, which seemed so incongruous to Boyd. "But you were a kid. How bad could you possibly have been to have warranted that extreme of training?"

"He didn't do it because I was bad. He did it because I was fucked up, and he had no idea what to do with me, and I also think he felt guilty for what my mother had done while he was off playing spy games and criminal mastermind?" Sin shrugged and continued to look unmoved by the words. It was a marked difference to how he'd reacted to talk of his mother. "So why not train me to be an agent so I could be strong like him instead of dumping me somewhere? Along the way he realized it helped me to have focus and discipline. Or it did until something set me off, and I had one of my fits."

"But that's what I don't understand. If you were a kid then why didn't he try to get you help, or even just zero in on focus and discipline instead of including combat in the regimen? I mean, how young were you when you started having fits?"

"I had them when he found me," Sin replied before sitting up. "And he did it because that's how he was wired. That's all he knew how

to do, and he saw it as a benefit not a punishment. I don't see it as a punishment either."

Worry prompted Boyd to push himself up. He placed a hand on Sin's shoulder. "Sin... I'm sorry if I said something I shouldn't have. I just worry sometimes that everyone, including you, sees you as some sort of monster. But I don't. You'll always be human to me."

The words drew Sin's attention from where it had dropped to his hands, but he did not speak. When the silence between them grew, Boyd realized he had probably overstepped his bounds, and he shifted to leave.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I'll go back to my bed."

"No." Sin grabbed his arm. "You could—" Sin's fingers dug into Boyd's arm. "You could stay here."

Astonishment preluded a slight smile. "Okay."

Boyd stretched out on the bed and soon felt the warm hardness of Sin's body so near to his own.

THREE

THE BOY APPEARED in an unexpected place for the third time in two weeks.

Boyd rested his sketchbook on his thighs, his sunglasses shading his lingered view of the kid jogging down the sidewalk. His worn sandals clapped against the concrete when he darted into a nearby candy store. Boyd resumed drawing the sharp curve of Cerro de la Silla's peak in the distance, and the way it rose over the low buildings. The warmth of the wall burned against his back.

A man spat, "*Pinche joto*," as he passed. Having no idea what it meant, Boyd ignored it.

Twenty minutes later, the kid reappeared and darted between the adults on the street to disappear behind a building.

Flipping to a new page, Boyd sketched the candy store, and the owner leaning tiredly against the counter. The press of the man's palm against his cheek made his wrinkles more prominent.

The pattern of watching and drawing continued until the sun grew too hot on Boyd's head. It slowed his thoughts and made him hyper-aware of his thirst, and the discomfort of overheated skin.

Pushing himself to a stand, Boyd avoided a car flying down the street and entered the small shop. It was not any cooler than outside, but he still perused the shelves. Behind the shelter of his sunglasses, Boyd searched for clues as to what the kid was doing. He suspected the boy was a courier or informant, but for what? Neither the store nor the owner stood out.

ii. After loitering for a few minutes, Boyd purchased a bottle of water and walked back outside. He settled into the shade and the cycle continued. It was forty minutes before the boy reappeared. This time, he came up behind Boyd, probably hoping to sneak up on him.

Nice try, Boyd thought. The kid was good but not that good. Still, Boyd didn't react. He continued to draw, waiting to see what the kid's play would be.

"¿Qué pedo, cabrón?"

The boy stood behind Boyd. His arms were crossed as he peered down through black hair with just enough curl to fly everywhere. He

was short and skinny with dirty, ragged clothing, and sandals that were falling apart at the sole. Boyd thought the kid was maybe nine years old, but the dark stare blazing out of his face belonged to someone twice his age. Someone who had been through far too much for his lifespan.

"Perdón, pero no hablo español."

The kid's lip lifted on the edge. He gave Boyd a once-over. "American?"

"I can see that makes you real happy with me," Boyd said with a grin.

The kid scoffed and turned his attention to the street. His scrutiny didn't settle for long, but Boyd figured there was someone out there watching. Maybe another courier kid, maybe the person this kid's boss, or maybe someone else.

"Why you watching me?"

"I didn't know I was. What's your name, kid?"

"Vete a la chingada."

"Your name is vete—"

"Whaddo you want?" The kid crouched in front of Boyd. "I don't like people to watch me. You don't say me the truth, I cry and make you look bad. Say you grabbed me—" A sheen of tears swelled seemingly at will. "—down there."

"Oh Jesus. Cut the waterworks, kid. What do you want?"

"I said. I want to know why watch me. Puta madre, escucha, pendejo."

"I was curious. Thought you might be in the market—"

The kid's hot glower froze over in an instant. He shifted away, but Boyd grabbed him by the upper arm.

"Not for that. Jesus Christ, that's disgusting. I meant as an employee." Boyd threw up his hands when the kid's expression hardened further. "Nothing like that! Look, can we start over? My name's Reed. What's yours, for real?"

"What's to you?"

"I'd like to think of you by name instead of 'the kid'."

There was another long moment in which it seemed the kid might run off, but he straightened. "Not here. Give me pesos."

Boyd narrowed his eyes but pulled a bill from his pocket. Satisfied, the kid snatched it and turned away. Under his breath, he asked, *"¿Sabes dónde queda Pío X?"*

"Where it is? Yeah."

“El parque, no la calle.”

The kid disappeared over a fence and around a building before Boyd could respond.

After waiting for a few minutes, Boyd left upon ensuring no one was paying attention. He strolled in a different direction and cycled through the streets until he found Pío X, hooked up with Castelar, and followed it to a small triangular park. He settled on a short retaining wall beneath a tree as a warm breeze rustled the hair against his neck. The kid dropped down beside him within moments.

“What you want?”

“I just want to hear things. Know things. Without others knowing. I can pay.”

“I can do. What else?”

Boyd surveyed the kid. “What else can you do?”

“Hmm.” There was a long pause. *“Nada.”*

Boyd could appreciate a smartass kid who didn’t trust easily.

“Works for me for now.” Boyd leaned back and dug his fingers into the cool grass. “Seriously, what can I call you?”

“Jorge.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you, Jorge. Like I said, I’m Reed. Kadin Reed.”

“Strange name,” Jorge muttered.

Boyd smirked. “Tell my mom that. I didn’t choose it.”

Jorge’s fierce little face settled in a borderline glare.

“So listen, Jorge. I’m pretty new to Monterrey, and I’m trying to get a feel for the place. Any cool areas I should check out? I want to go outside of tourist traps.”

“What are you in?”

“In?” Boyd shot the boy a sidelong glance. “Art, I guess.”

Jorge snorted. The derision the kid managed to get into a wordless response was impressive.

“I’m into abandoned sections of the city as well. Urban exploration and all that—like sneaking into empty places. You know of any good places to go? Houses I can check out and whatever?”

“Every place.” There was another extended silence before one dusty finger pointed South past the library. *“Sur.”* You see up hills? They are empty.”

“All of them?”

“No. Some. You will see. *Pon atención.*”

"Thanks, kid."

"Jorge."

Boyd smiled. "Thanks, Jorge."

He removed additional pesos from his pocket and palmed it to Jorge. He was spending way more on this kid than he had budgeted for the day, but having an informant was worth it. If he didn't attempt to stab Boyd in the back; he didn't know if this would pan out or if Jorge was a honey trap to lure tourists and lead them to a robbery.

Boyd hadn't seen Jorge with anyone else out in the open, but he'd felt occasional watchfulness throughout the day. Once, he'd spotted a dirty little girl lurking at a corner. She was riveted on Boyd's every move, but she disappeared almost as soon as he noticed her.

He wondered how many street kids were in whatever crew Jorge was part of, but he wasn't about to ask those sorts of questions now. It was pure luck the kid had given him a chance at all. At the thought, it occurred to Boyd that, for the first time, his appearance worked in his favor. Usually people marked him as weak and dismissed him, but being unassuming likely meant Jorge felt safe enough to approach.

Standing and dusting the back of his shorts, Boyd jerked his chin at Jorge. "How do I find you if I need you again?"

"You do not. I find you."

"But how will you know if I need anything?"

"I find you, *compa*. I know."

Jorge jumped down to the sidewalk with his sandals flipping onto the hot pavement and darted around the corner.

Boyd didn't bother following. A lot of the buildings in Monterrey were built snug up against each other, but Jorge seemed to know all the nooks and crannies the average pedestrian couldn't see. That, or he could turn invisible on a whim because he and his friends were there and gone in seconds.

Following Jorge's suggestion, Boyd turned southward. The hills and mountains that rose and fell even within Monterrey itself continuously amazed him. Houses filled the hillsides like spikes on a porcupine's back; barely any space between and making it seem like entire neighborhoods had influenced the geography instead of the other way around.

The day grew hotter, and Boyd realized he should have found a bus. He still hadn't figured out the metro, but he knew the train lines

didn't go this far south. They were concentrated north of Rio Santa Catarina. Boyd had no idea why this area was void of transportation, but he assumed it was too poor. Most of the tourism and industry was further north while the homes he now passed were rundown, often surrounded by litter, and plastered with graffiti.

He started his trek on Castelar but soon strayed closer to the hills and wound up zigzagging along the streets to continue on the correct path.

"Oye morrito, te equivocaste de ruta?" a man called out as Boyd turned a corner. Boyd said nothing and walked faster. The words did not translate at all. Apparently, the man wasn't any sort of threat because he didn't follow."

On another occasion, he took a detour to avoid a group that watched him a little too keenly. It lengthened the trip, but he did not stop for another hour.

Boyd took a long drink of water and rested in the shade of a tree with brilliant lilac-colored flowers. Sweat soaked his linen shirt, but it was too early to return to the studio since he hadn't yet scouted any potential safehouses.

Thirty minutes later, Boyd ended up on Derecho Sindical. With steep hills surrounding him, Boyd observed the construction occurring on the buildings in the area. Shanties, piles of rubble, and unfinished buildings lined the street, but none made a viable safehouse. The only finished buildings were questionably occupied.

Scowling, Boyd picked his way through the area as sweat dampened every part of his body. He was fairly certain his sunscreen had melted off, and his nose would be burnt by the time he got home. The length of the day and the intensity of the heat soaked into Boyd until he grew wearier with each step. It was a struggle to keep going, but he refused to leave without investigating the area in its entirety. It had taken way too damn long to get here to give up early.

He paced around a patch of half-dead foliage and peered down the hill to get a sense of the streets, but shifting his weight on the gravel-like dirt on the steep incline turned out to be a mistake. Boyd's foot flew out from beneath him, and he slammed onto his back so hard the wind knocked out of him. Before he could fling a hand out, Boyd felt the stomach-dropping sensation of falling. He could not stop himself from rolling down the hill and couldn't get a good view

of what was below, but his mind flashed back to the half-finished buildings beneath him and rebar rising out of cinderblocks that could skewer him whole.

Boyd hit a mound of bushes and dropped past them. When he landed, his back slammed against the edge of an unfinished wall. He snapped his hands out and caught himself before he could fall over the side. Boyd wound up sprawled awkwardly on the precipice with his messenger bag acting as minor padding. He pulled himself back to safety and collapsed against the dirt to stare up at the periwinkle sky.

His back and shoulder screamed in agony, and he could feel a number of cuts and scrapes burning in various spots. Even so, a quick glance up the hill showed how easy he had gotten off. Somehow, he had not slammed into the buildings, and there was rebar not even a few feet away from where he had landed. He shuddered.

The sound of nearby voices prompted Boyd to force himself up. Every movement reverberated down his back, up to his shoulders, and pierced his neck, but he grit his teeth and stood. The trek down the hill was slow. He didn't have the energy to choose a longer route, so he walked close to two men sitting on the front steps of a building. One of them had an unlit cigarette in his mouth and mumbled around it as Boyd approached.

"Hey güero, traes lumbre?"

His friend hit him in the side. *"Mira, guey. Se ve dal nabo. ¿Cuánto dinero crees que trae? Sería fácil de quitárselo. Apuesto a que ni siquiera sabe español."*

The man with the cigarette ignored his friend and laughed at Boyd. "What you do, man? Fall down a hill?"

Boyd resisted the urge to scowl and drew in a breath. He was pretty sure the friend was talking about robbing him, so he let them know he understood Spanish.

"¿Dónde está un taxi?"

The friend sighed and leaned back against the door, appearing to give up on his plans. The man with the cigarette jerked his chin down the hill.

"Sigue adelante. Verás una gran calle, mucho tráfico. No hay como no la veas. Los taxis pasan todo el tiempo allí."

All Boyd managed to translate was to look for a big street, but that

was good enough for him. At least he was headed in the right direction. Boyd nodded his thanks and shuffled along. By the time he limped down the street, it was easier to stand up straight, but he had to dodge several cars and was in a terrible mood. It lifted significantly when he spied a bright green taxi driving along the road beside him.

By some miracle, the taxi stopped when he hailed it. The vehicles around them jerked to a halt and blared their horns, but the driver only raised a brow.

Boyd didn't have the presence of mind to translate the driver's Spanish, but he knew it was along the lines of "Where to?" so he said his address and left it at that. He leaned back as best he could, a sharp pain shrieking up his back, and a headache forming.

He realized there weren't any seatbelts. Great.

When the taxi driver took off, it was with a speed and recklessness that threw Boyd around like a doll in the hands of a child. He grunted in pain, but the driver didn't notice or care as evidenced by the sharp turn he took two seconds later.

They made it to the apartment in record time, and the driver demanded a fare that was twice what Boyd had expected. He forgotten to check if the meter had already been running upon entering the cab, but was so exhausted that he paid the huge fee and a small tip just to get the guy to leave.

So much for the damn daily budget.

Boyd felt like he was eighty years old as he walked the flights to their apartment, and he came to hate their sticking front door with more of a passion than ever before. He also hated the air conditioner. The studio was warm and stuffy even though he'd left the A/C on a low setting throughout the day.

Muttering, Boyd tossed down his bag and turned the device onto the strongest setting. Sin was nowhere to be seen but that wasn't a surprise.

Boyd limped to the bathroom and took an embarrassing length of time to remove his clothes; they were as filthy and beat-up as he was.

Their narrow shower was an oasis in comparison to the day. The strong spray of hot water helped as much as it hurt, and Boyd stayed beneath it longer than he'd expected but at least, once clean, he felt human again.

Thirty minutes were spent dragging on clothes, drinking two bottles

of water, filling a bag with ice and wrapping it in a towel, and settling onto their couch. Sin had found it while job-hunting the week prior, and Boyd could have kissed the man for the purchase.

By the time he was able to relax, his eyelids grew heavy, and Boyd didn't resist when he dozed into sleep.

THE STAFF AT Noctis was moderately less irritating than Sin had expected. They spent their time talking about worthless civilian things such as relationships, sports, and television, but tuning them out was easy until their attention focused on him. Which, after the first two days, had become a frequent occurrence.

A tour of the club and over a dozen introductions dominated Sin's first day of training. Noctis had three floors and a variety of private or VIP areas, but considering the layouts were primarily open spaces with smaller alcoves tucked into the walls, creating a mental schematic did not require more concentration than Sin would use to brush his teeth. The introductions had been a different story. They consisted of lapses in conversation, awkward responses, and Sin willing them to lose interest and leave him the fuck alone.

The curiosity of the staff didn't dissipate, but they caught on to his discomfort and backed off. He'd expected less. In his experience, civilians lacked the wherewithal to leave well enough alone.

Sin was trapped in Jessica's office for half of day two. Her insistence that she train him to use the lame-ass security system resulted in a tedious step-by-step lecture. After fifteen minutes, he tuned her out and memorized the cycle of the screens instead. From what he saw, patrons of Noctis were most unruly at the bar, at the side and back entrances, and in the private alcoves where they either performed illegal activities or had full-on sex.

"I have to kick them out for that?"

Jessica paused with the radio half-raised to her mouth. She scowled at the screens which showed the offending couple before looking at him again. "Well, now I know how *you* party, but we're not that type of club."

"That's not what—"

"Sure."

Jessica smirked and flicked on the radio. It emitted a sharp whine,

static, and then she barked a curt order for Johnny or Aldair to break up the party on third. Once finished, she laughed at Sin's dark glare.

"Relax. It was a joke." She waved the antenna of the radio at him. "You know, one of your references gave me some insight to your character, and you're not living up to the expectations I had."

Sin crossed his arms over his chest and redirected his attention to the monitors. The couple on third were still going at it, and getting more energetic as the seconds ticked by. There was no attempt at discretion even though it was barely eight o'clock in the evening.

"I love the conversations we have, Jase. They leave me feeling so fulfilled."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Just a grunt or nod would be sufficient at this point."

Sin shrugged and peered at the couple. Aldair—one of the other security guards—arrived and aimed the bright beam of a flashlight at them. With a start, Sin realized it was two men. A tall dark-haired man and a waifish guy with long hair that tumbled to the small of his back.

Ripping his attention away from the screen, Sin focused on his new boss and not the array of images scattering across his brain. Like he and Boyd up in that stupid alcove with Boyd riding him the way the waif had ridden his lover.

"What did they say?"

"What did who say?" Jessica touched the antenna to her bottom lip. "Your reference?"

"Yes. You were bitching about me not living up to whatever bullshit they said." She cocked an eyebrow, and Sin scowled. Fuck. Too blunt. Too Sin-like. Civilian fail. "Or whatever."

"If you make it a habit of speaking to me like that, we're going to have a problem."

"Sorry," he grumbled. "Distracted."

"Yeah, I see that." A frown tugged at the corners of her bow-like lips. "The last person I spoke to was Richard Melo. He was ecstatic when I asked about you, and started telling me how amazing you are. He said you're a hardass and a smart aleck, but you know how to party. I'm still waiting to see a sign of that inner party animal... Unless you save it for the alcoves."

"You might be waiting for a while, lady."

"You are cold as ice." Jessica turned back to the monitors. "I think I like it. It will do the club some good to have someone on security who can actually intimidate the customers."

"Aldair and Johnny don't?"

She lifted a shoulder without comment, and Sin frowned. Picking up the slack for others was the last thing he wanted to do on this make-believe job. People could snort coke and screw on top of the bar for all he cared; it didn't affect his life one way or the other. But being raised by Emilio Vega had clearly distorted his perception of appropriate club behavior.

The screens were cycling between different parts of the club, but Sin tracked the couple as Aldair escorted them to the entrance. When they arrived, the long-haired waif leaned against the wall while his lover spoke to the guard. With his loose hair tousled and clothing twisted and partially undone, he bore all the signs of debauchery and recent sex. There was no reason why the sight of him should have reminded Sin of Boyd, but it did.

He remembered waking up with Boyd crushed against his chest over a week ago. The amount of bared skin pressing together had contaminated Sin's thoughts for days after. Forgetting the feel of silky hair against his face, Boyd's smell, and the ache in his gut that had ordered him to grind his morning wood against Boyd's thigh, was impossible. Instead of caving to the desire, Sin had jerked off in the shower while biting his lip so hard it bled.

"—shadow Johnny for the rest of the time you're scheduled."

"Okay."

Her words were lost on him, but it served no purpose to bring attention to that fact. Jessica radioed Johnny with the order of meeting him by the bar, and Sin started for the door before she ended the transmission.

"Jase, wait."

Sin looked over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

Jessica hooked the radio into the band of her pants. It sank and exposed a swath of sandy skin. "I try to be fair with scheduling and cycle everyone between shifts, but you will probably be on the late schedule a lot. The early shift is eleven in the morning to six in the evening, the middle shift is six in the evening to two in the morning,

and the late shift is one in the morning until we shut down around eight a.m.”

Well, that was fucking wonderful. He’d barely get to spend time with Boyd if he was getting home at two or eight in the morning all the time. “Fine.”

“Sometimes after second shift people hang out and have drinks, or we go out for breakfast after third.”

“What’s your point?”

She laughed merrily, and Sin could not help but smirk in response.

“Would you be interested in staying at some point? I know you’re going to give me an automatic no, but just think about it. I know there’s more beneath that cold-as-ice exterior, Jase. We just have to chip away at it little by little, so you should give us a chance.” She chuckled again when he did not respond. “Go meet Johnny. You have two hours left of training today.”

Sin started to open the door but paused with his fingers clasping the handle. After ignoring her for the better part of his training session, those particular words struck him.

“Why do you want to bother chipping away at anything? I haven’t been very nice to you.” Sin tightened his hand on the door. “My intention isn’t to be rude. It just comes out that way.”

“I’ve picked up on that,” she said dryly. “That’s why I’m giving you a way in if you want it.”

“Why bother? Like I said, you don’t even know me.”

“Maybe not, but I can tell there’s something about you worth knowing.” She spread her hands, and her smile became wry. “I know it sounds corny, but you’ll just have to deal with it.”

There was no response in Sin’s repertoire of civilian interactions that allowed him to answer her in an effective way, so he nodded and left the office. He didn’t stop thinking about it, though. Sin didn’t know what her motivation was in wanting to befriend him, yet the way people in Noctis responded to him was oceans apart from the way most people had treated him for the majority of his life.

Lexington civilians appeared to shy away from him, but he’d never had an interest in doing anything other than avoiding them out of fear of recognition. Not only that, but being prohibited from leaving the compound without a chaperone had prevented him from being exposed to anyone besides Agency staff for nearly fifteen years.

Sin wondered how much of his isolation and leeriness of civilians was imposed by the Agency's restrictions and his own paranoia.

"*Tú debes ser Big J,*" Johnny said when Sin approached the bar. "*Español o inglés?*"

"English. And you can call me Jason."

Johnny shook Sin's hand, squeezed, and raised his brows when Sin squeezed a little tighter.

"I heard you're the big man with the big time experience." Johnny flexed his hand. "And you're a tall motherfucker."

"That I am."

Johnny sized him up a bit, and Sin stared with disinterest. The guy was several inches shorter, had shaggy black hair, and the sleeveless "Security" t-shirt he wore showed off a variety of tattoos on his forearms, shoulders, and neck. The most interesting was a crucifix tattooed to wrap around Johnny's wrist several times with the cross inked onto his palm. It reminded Sin of his father.

"Okay, my man. What we're going to do now is take a smoke break and check out the line. It's pretty early, but sometimes tourists come at nine thinking something will be happening."

"When does it get busy?"

"Ehh..." Johnny tilted his head and started to the entrance. "You can get a good crowd going around midnight, but the real party starts around two or three in the morning. We don't close until seven."

Sin didn't flinch when they left the frigid air of the club's interior to step into the sweltering humidity of the outdoors. After three weeks, he was finally accustomed to the heat.

"You ever work at a club before?"

"No. I've mostly done corporate jobs."

Johnny stuck a cigarette between his lips and lit it with his Zippo before offering the flame to Sin. When Sin hesitated, Johnny jerked his head in encouragement. For a second their faces were a little too close for Sin's comfort, but the other man barely seemed to notice. Relaxing, Sin rocked back on his heels with the cherry of his cigarette glowing.

"Okay, let me give you some advice." Johnny tilted his head back and exhaled a stream of smoke into the air. "Jessica fucking hates me so she's going to try to make you big boss in charge. I got no problems with that, but if you don't want it you're going to have to be smart."

This was not the direction Sin had anticipated this conversation going.

"Is this why we came out here despite there being no line?"

"Yup." Johnny patted Sin's arm. "Smart guy. The walls have ears in Noctis, friend. Everyone listens to everyone else's shit and then goes and repeats it to the boss lady. They repeat her shit too so it's all even in the end."

"I see." Sin glimpsed the camera stationed above the door. He knew there was no audio, but he wondered if Jessica was watching and trying to puzzle out their words. "Why does she hate you?"

"Because I fuck a lot of the customers."

"On duty?"

"No! No." Johnny waved his hand. "She'd fire me in a second. But being the door guy gets you perks. We're selective so guests try to flirt to get in faster or they get bored while waiting and start to chat. One thing leads to another, and I get a few numbers a night. It's a sweet position. *Especially* for a guy like you."

Sin leaned against the wall. "Why a guy like me?"

"Oh come on." Johnny snorted a laugh. Smoke filled the air between them like fog. "I'm not bad looking, but you're like bait."

"If you think I'm going to lure women in for you, you're deluded."

"You say that now but wait until you see the people this place attracts. Some of the choicest meat in the city, and we get to take our sweet-ass time picking out the best looking ones."

Johnny sounded like he was discussing livestock rather than people, and again Sin was reminded of his father. Emilio had brought in a new conquest so frequently that Sin had defaulted to hiding in one of the back bedrooms whenever they visited Monterrey. Now Sin knew Emilio had been on downtime from the Agency during those weeks, but he had never understood his father's ability to drink, snort, and fuck without any consequence to his performance as a field agent.

"Sounds like a blast."

"Sure, play it cool now," Johnny said. "But once you have a steady stream of men and women offering some quality time when we close up for the morning, you're going to change your tune. Unless you're holding out for Jess."

Sin exhaled smoke through his nose and waited for Johnny to

explain. The guy cracked easier than an insurgent after a few days on the Fourth, although Johnny seemed more than eager to share.

"She and one of the bartenders are friends outside of work. I heard her talking about you last night after we closed out. Boss lady thinks you're one fine piece of ass."

"So?"

"So she wants to fuck you, Big J."

"If you don't stop calling me that I will create a scenario that allows me to crack your fucking head open and call it an accident."

Unfazed, Johnny bobbed his head. "Fair enough."

Sin sneered and took a deep drag off his cigarette before flicking it towards the gutter. "*No me gustan los chismes.*"

"¿Ni tantito?"

"No."

"Pfft. *Vas a ver.*"

"Whatever." Sin turned to the entrance. "*Vámanos.*"

Johnny mumbled something about Sin already taking charge but didn't seem to actually mind, and joked his way through the next two hours.

Shadowing Johnny turned into Sin enduring innuendo after innuendo until he tuned out Johnny's voice and went into recon-mode. If he viewed the club as a potential enemy base, things were simple. The only difference here was that he was looking for people breaking rules and causing trouble instead of shooting hostiles and blowing things up. But there would be time for that later in the mission.

When the shift ended, Johnny tried to convince Sin to stay longer and have a couple of drinks, and for the second time that evening a Noctis employee informed Sin that they did not plan to give up until he said yes. Sin was mystified by this development.

He made his way back to the studio while the scene in Barrio Antiguo came alive. There were more people on the streets than he had seen all day, and the sound of music and laughter floated out from restaurants and bars. The neighborhood attracted locals and tourists alike, and on more than one occasion Sin felt someone watching him. It was impossible to detect who of the dozens of pedestrians might be looking in his direction so he changed his route twice.

A twenty minute walk turned into forty minutes due to a lifetime of ingrained paranoia, and sweat drenched his clothing by the time Sin

arrived at the studio. The door made the usual racket when it opened, but he kicked it shut more aggressively than usual.

The sound of the slamming door caused Boyd to start from where he was lying propped sidelong on the couch. He yawned, moved to sit up, but then winced and dropped down again.

“Hey.”

Sin ripped off his Noctis t-shirt and flung it onto the bed. “What’s your problem?”

Boyd toyed with a loose thread from the couch. “I... might have fallen down a hill today.”

“¿Cómo?”

“Uhh...” Boyd’s lips pursed, and he fell silent, obviously running through the words in his head. When he spoke, it was with hesitance. “*Cuando caminé, fue un... hill?*”

Sin’s mouth twitched at the side. “*Cerro.*”

“*Cerro. Y cuando miré, el... ¿Cómo se dice ‘dirt’ o ‘ground’?*”

The half-smile grew, and Sin crossed the room to sit on the arm of the sofa. “*Dirt es tierra y ground es suelo.*”

Boyd smiled. “Thanks. I mean—*gracias*. Uhh... so, *la tierra... ¿cayó? Debajo de mí. Y pues,*” he brought his hands up and then rolled them downward. “*Yo choco con una casa.*”

“I see.” Nodding, Sin tried to make sense of Boyd’s words, and wound up with a series of bizarre mental images. “You’re pretty cute when butchering the language of the land.”

Boyd laughed and punched Sin’s arm. “Shut up. If this were French I’d be talking circles around you.”

“That’s a useless language.”

“It sounds a hell of a lot sexier. Even taking into account your accent.”

“Shut your mouth.” Sin fought another grin and nudged his foot against Boyd’s leg. “Why the hell were you throwing yourself down hills?”

“What, you didn’t understand what I said?” A chuckle accompanied Boyd’s smile. “I didn’t throw myself down a hill on purpose. I slipped and fell, but part of it was under construction, and I hit a wall at the bottom. So now I’m trying not to move too much because I hurt my back.” Boyd arched his back as if to demonstrate the pain it would cause. “I didn’t get that far in the story, thank God. I don’t know how to translate most of that.”

“Did you at least find anything useful during this debacle?”

“There’s a kid I might be able to use as a CI. And I think that hill might have some potential for safehouses, assuming I don’t kill myself trying to get to them. I’ll have to check it out another day when I don’t have to walk like an octogenarian.”

Sin took in the length of Boyd and spied several raw scrapes and bruises that were vivid against his tanned skin. “How bad is your back?”

“I’m not sure. I tried to ice it earlier and that helped a little. It hurts to bend too much so I can’t see if I pulled something or if it’s just a really bad bruise.”

“I can—” Sin rubbed his palms against his knees and shifted his gaze to the loudly-humming air conditioner. “I could look at it. If you want.”

The silence following Sin’s words was so long it seemed Boyd might not answer. The only indication he’d heard was the way his fingertips fidgeted with the hem of his shirt.

Sin regretted asking the question. Feeling like an idiot, he started to get off the couch when Boyd spoke.

“I could... I could lie down so it’s just my back?” The words were lost somewhere between a statement and a question due to the hesitance staining Boyd’s voice.

“Whatever works for you. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

There was another hesitation before a murmured, “Okay.”

Sin stood and tried to think of something encouraging to say but failed in the attempt. All he could do was nod, and wait for Boyd to do something without giving away the fact that his stomach felt hollow all of a sudden. It was so pathetic that Sin didn’t even know what the fuck to do with himself.

Boyd grunted and pushed himself up with continued glances in Sin’s direction. He held himself still while shuffling to the bed, but paused after stopping at the end of it. Boyd flicked another look at Sin, frowned slightly, and pulled a pillow lengthwise in the middle of the mattress. He only settled onto his stomach when the pillow was snug beneath his torso.

“I don’t know if I can...” Boyd paused, his voice muffled and quiet, before continuing at a normal level. “I might need help with my shirt.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There was a lull after Sin spoke. He cleared his throat, ran a hand through his hair, and crossed the space between the sofa and bed. It was difficult to not ogle the swell of Boyd's ass beneath his thin black boxers.

"Lift up a bit," Sin said, voice coming out low.

Boyd's hips rose enough to clear the top of the pillow.

Sin ripped his eyes away from Boyd's ass and tried to focus on the matter at hand. He curled his fingers around the bottom of Boyd's shirt and pulled up. The fabric skimmed along Boyd's back and, inch-by-inch, revealed a long swath of his pale skin. The process dragged out due to Sin's fear of startling Boyd, which made it seem more like an unveiling than the simple action of checking his partner's injuries.

"Arms."

Boyd extended his arms, and Sin pulled the shirt off. He dropped it on the bed in grabbing distance of Boyd's hands.

"Okay?"

Boyd held the pillow flush against him. Tension was visible in the lines of his body, and his voice wavered when he replied. "Yeah. It's a little... disconcerting, but it's okay."

Sin nodded even though Boyd couldn't see him. He cleared his throat again and allowed himself to examine Boyd's bared back.

Lean muscle stretched out beneath smooth, pale skin except for the areas marred by bruises. There were also tattoos on the backs of his shoulders—Latin words that did not automatically translate for Sin. *Mea maxima culpa* and *Corpus vile*.

He brushed his fingers against the tattoos before he could stop himself but then guided his fingers down to drag along a vivid black and purple bruise spanning from Boyd's neck to the rhomboid muscle. There was also a rose-colored splotch that started on the left side of his spine and extended down to the tailbone. Darker contusions were sprinkled along that bruise.

Sin frowned and pressed his finger against one of the darker areas. "Scale of one to ten?"

"Three."

He traced the muscle with his finger before moving to the other side. "Same?" he asked, pressing down again.

"Two."

"No throwing up?"

“No, none.”

Sin gave Boyd’s side a light smack. “So no fucked up kidneys, but your upper back is pretty bad.” He ran his finger along the rhomboid muscle and pressed down. When Boyd hissed, Sin retracted his hand. “Well, I have to say I am impressed.”

“With how much I managed to screw myself up in one afternoon?”

“Yeah. I’m pretty sure you haven’t even been this fucked up on a storm.”

“Well, at least I avoided the rebar.” Boyd sighed and thudded his head against the mattress. “What an idiot. Waiting for it to heal enough to get back to my routine is going to be a pain.”

Again, Sin could not help but notice the smooth skin along Boyd’s spine and the curve of his ass. “It might not be that bad. Just cut back on working out until it feels better, and I can ice it and massage it for you or something.”

Boyd drew in a sharp breath. “Now? You would... You want to massage me now?”

“I—” Sin faltered. “I’ll do it if you want me to.”

“I... wouldn’t mind.”

“Okay.” It was the worst idea Sin had ever accidentally suggested, but pointed at Boyd’s arms instead of changing his mind. “As long as you don’t freak out on me. I’d rather you live your life in excruciating pain.”

Boyd laughed and some of his tension eased. “I’m okay as long as you stay away from my chest, and I know you will. I trust you.”

Sin found himself nodding again, stopped, and said, “Just tell me if you start to feel anxious.”

Boyd agreed.

Sin rubbed his hands together and surveyed the full length of Boyd’s body displayed beneath him. He had never given anyone a massage before, and although he technically knew how to tend to the area in order to achieve the desired effect, Sin had no clue how to handle touching another person. Especially a person he fantasized about on a regular basis.

He exhaled and leaned over Boyd from the side of the bed before pressing his open palms against the discolored skin. Boyd jumped slightly but settled back down; it seemed the touch itself startled him more than anything. Keeping the applied pressure light at first,

Sin watched for any indication that he was bringing excessive pain. Staying focused wasn't so much of a challenge if he concentrated on the sight of ruptured blood vessels and broken skin, and stopped admiring the results of Boyd's workout regime.

Sin craned his neck in an attempt to see Boyd's profile, and he deepened the pressure with long strokes of his fingertips. The position was awkward with him looming four feet over the bed, but he didn't pause in his gentle, measured movements until Boyd was relaxed against the bed.

"I have to get... lower." Sin kept a hand at the small of Boyd's back and brushed his thumb against Boyd's spine.

Dark blue filtered through Boyd's eyelashes and then away. Sin could feel Boyd shiver faintly beneath his fingertips. "Okay."

The tenuous grasp on his focus diminished when Sin straddled the back of Boyd's thighs. He ignored the burn of his hamstrings and tried to keep a scant amount of space between his crotch and Boyd's ass, but he was so aware of their proximity that his gut tightened in response.

Sin took another deep breath and pressed his palms against Boyd again. He rubbed with more pressure and kneaded the traps with circular motions of his thumbs.

"Tell me if it hurts," he said softly. "This should help with the swelling and blood flow, but I don't want to cause more pain."

"It's—Ahh!" Boyd squirmed, his back arching and ass bumping up into Sin's groin.

Sin bit his lip and leaned away from the contact. His fingers stilled.

Boyd rolled his shoulders, hissed, and was prone again. "Sorry," he muttered.

"Did I hurt you?"

"It didn't hurt; it was just a—strange sensation. I've never had a massage before so it caught me by surprise." Boyd took a deep breath and seemed to be trying to force himself to relax.

"I've never given one so I may be fucking it up."

"No. This is good, it's just... different. If you want to keep going, I'd like it. I mean. It's okay if you do."

The smart thing would be to back off now, but Sin was never smart when it came to Boyd.

He worked on Boyd's upper back with a focus on the strained

muscle, and was unsure of whether Boyd's complete silence was a positive or negative until it was shattered by a low moan. The sound increased the slow burn of Sin's arousal, but he kept working even when the breathless sounds became intermittent.

Sin pressed his fingers together and dragged them down along both sides of Boyd's spine in a smooth press before digging them into the plum and rose colored bruises on his lower back. Sin moved his thumbs in circular motions and kept his hands steady despite the way his breath caught every time Boyd's voice went low and husky.

"That feels so good," Boyd whispered.

A shaky breath left Sin's mouth before he could swallow it. Focus slipped away, and the rush of arousal roared in his ears. He pressed down harder, dragged his fingers lower, and found himself exploring the smooth skin while his breathing got raspier.

Boyd gripped the sheets. His back arched again and pressed up against Sin's hand. "Don't stop—please don't stop," he whispered.

It was so easy for those words to activate thoughts Sin usually saved for the middle of the night, and it was even easier for him to picture himself taking this massage in another direction. Like licking down Boyd's back, yanking the boxers down, and then dragging his tongue between the firm globes of Boyd's ass.

Sin shuddered.

He stroked his way to Boyd's hips and, without hesitation, tugged the boxers down just enough to reveal Boyd's tailbone and the upper half of his buttocks. Deep, targeted movements devolved into an unfocused caress with Sin's thumbs teasing the cleft of Boyd's ass.

Boyd's hips rose, harder, and more insistently, until his ass aligned with Sin's crotch and the thick length of Sin's erection trapped beneath thin denim. A truncated groan slipped from Boyd's lips, and it acted as a trigger.

Sin's fingers dug in, and he canted his hips forward to press harder against Boyd's ass. The pressure sent explosions of heat coursing through his body.

"Sin," Boyd gasped.

The sound of his name acted as a bucket of cold water, and Sin froze. He blinked away the haze of lust, looked down at where they were joined, and the way his fingers were clutching at Boyd hard enough to inflict more bruises. He dropped his hands.

“Fuck,” Sin hissed.

He backed away and got off the bed with a thump of his boots against the floor. The racing of his heart was a constant rhythm in his ears, and Sin could not keep his hands steady when he turned away from Boyd to adjust the aching erection trapped in his jeans. The fleeting pressure was enough to make him explode, but Sin shook his head and tried to catch his breath.

“I’m sorry, I uh—guess it’s been a while,” Sin muttered. Yeah, it had been maybe fifteen hours since he’d last gotten off in the confines of the shower. “I hope it helped your back some. I have to go back out.”

He could hear fabric shift and the bed creak. When the movement stilled, Sin peeked at Boyd in his peripheral vision. Boyd’s tank top was back on, his arms were crossed over his stomach, and his skin flushed.

“You—You don’t have to...” Boyd trailed off with obvious uncertainty.

Sin grabbed a different, cleaner t-shirt from the chest of drawers. “I promised some people from the club I’d go back,” he lied. “Another security guy and Jessica.”

“Oh... When will you be back?”

“Probably in the morning after they close unless someone pisses me off.”

Sin could hear Boyd start to speak again, but the words cut off when Sin jerked the door open with its usual clatter. He didn’t pause before stepping out into the humid hallway, and he did not look back into the room after jerking the door shut. The sound of the slamming door, and his quick, booted footsteps, echoed in the otherwise silent building.

He didn’t stop moving until he was down three flights and enclosed by the stillness of the stairwell. With no one to watch or stumble upon him, Sin sat on one of the steps and put his face into his hands.

“Shit.”

When had he become so focused on sex? When had he lost so much self-control? So much could go wrong if they ended up reliving the drama that had occurred between them after France, and Sin did not think he could handle it again. The silence, the feeling of bitterness and rejection, and then of course the reality of fucking up the mission and those repercussions.

It wasn’t a good idea. No matter how much he wanted Boyd.

Sin combed a hand through his hair and stood.

He would focus on the mission, on his Jason persona, and undercover skills. He would avoid the studio as much as possible now that his coworkers had given him an alternative.

With that in mind, Sin descended the rest of the stairs and left the building.

FOUR

THE KITCHEN WAS a mess and showed all the signs of an explosion.

Cascabel sauce dripped on the counter, flour liberally coated the floor, the surfaces, and especially Boyd himself. His hands were covered in sauce and pieces of meat, and Boyd was so frustrated with the entire situation he didn't even know what to do with himself. He rubbed his temple against his shoulder to keep the hair from catching on his eyelashes, but it was futile and only sparked a sharp twinge in his back.

Boyd sighed in irritation. This was not going according to plan at all. It was supposed to have been easy. A nice, simple gesture; he would make some food for Sin to try to lessen some of the awkwardness between them, and maybe even regain some self-confidence in the process.

It had been two uncertain weeks since he'd hurt his back, the ill-fated massage, and Sin's escape from the studio. Boyd had hardly seen Sin since, and he didn't know how much of that had to do with Sin's schedule and how much of it was Sin actively avoiding him.

And if Sin was avoiding him, why? Was he just scared? Did he not actually want Boyd and he was just horny? Was the massage a mistake entirely or had Sin panicked?

Boyd didn't know the answers, and he wanted a way to engage in a comfortable and organically initiated conversation; dinner had seemed like an easy option.

But no.

Kitchens weren't like rebel bases and enemy manifestos had nothing on cookbooks.

It looked simple at first glance, and he'd found all the necessary items at the store. Boyd went in with so much confidence that it hadn't occurred to him to do research, and he was already in the midst of everything by the time he realized the cookbook was written with some kind of code.

Boyd considered and then decided against checking online for clearer directions. He didn't need help for this. If he could plan a mission, he could make some goddamn chile con carne.

However, that determination made it very clear how little he knew. Having grown up alone, he'd never needed to know how to do anything other than turn on the microwave or use the stove for heating water.

The recipe called for the use of a pan, but he had trouble distinguishing between a pot and pan. Boyd only knew there was a difference because it was always said together—pots and pans—and it wouldn't be such a common phrase if they were the same, right?

The recipe also had phrases such as 'preheat oven to 149°C', but how did that work? He found the dial to set the temperature but couldn't figure out when it had 'preheated' enough. Would it overheat if he left it too long or did a failsafe prevent fires? Was he about to burn the building down?

And then there was the obnoxious: 'Heat oil in an ovenproof Dutch Oven over medium high heat.' An ovenproof Dutch Oven? How could it be ovenproof if it *was* an oven? What the hell were they doing, making meta kitchenware now? And he was supposed to put it on the stove and not in the oven? What hell was a Dutch Oven anyway? Boyd grew so indignant that he nearly looked for a proper explanation instead of this vague insider terminology about Dutch Ovens and bringing things to a fucking simmer.

In the end, Boyd gave up trying to understand the thought process of the clearly drunken person who had written the recipe and just put the oil in a pot. Or pan. Or... whatever.

He was also increasingly annoyed with the complete disregard of the domestic craftsmen in not leaving behind manuals for how to use the kitchen, and even angrier when he almost pulled his rhomboid again trying to reach for a fallen plate.

By the time the door opened, the beef was simmered, or baked or whatever the hell, and he had the plates ready with tortillas. Shaking hair out of the way, Boyd held his messy hands away from his body and turned to the door.

Sin stood just inside the studio with a look of confusion and a half-smile. When Boyd opened his mouth to speak, Sin burst out laughing. They'd met over a year ago, but Boyd had never seen Sin's face light up with such a genuine smile, or heard him release such an unrestrained laugh. It was momentarily stunning.

"What? Do I look that stupid?"

Sin dropped his keys on the small coffee table and approached the kitchen bar. "Stupid wasn't the word that came to mind."

"Oh really? Then what?"

Sin ran a finger along Boyd's forehead and collected a large amount of flour. "I'm afraid I can't share that information with you. It's confidential. But it wasn't bad."

"I'll have to take your word for it." Red sauce covered Boyd's hands like blood and prevented him from doing anything to fix himself. "I didn't mean to make such a mess, but now I'm covered in cascabel sauce." Boyd held his hands out.

"Cascabel? What's in it?"

Without waiting for an answer, Sin dipped his head down and sucked one of Boyd's fingers into his mouth. Boyd's heart nearly stopped.

Sin's tongue was a wet heat along his skin, and the lip ring dug into the underside of Boyd's knuckle. He'd been hoping to break the ice but this was working out way better than anticipated. Although now, all Boyd could think about was Sin's body pressed against his own, a rough grip on his body, and the undeniable desire to feel Sin's cock driving into him.

Sin's heavy-lidded gaze rose to meet Boyd's, and his cheeks hollowed as he sucked and pulled away slowly. "Tastes good." They stared at each other and, while Boyd floundered for a response, Sin walked around the bar to peer at the stove. "What are you making?"

Boyd could not form words as his brain waffled with the give and take of attention. Sometimes Sin wanted him but then he avoided him; he laughed and sucked his finger, and then pretended nothing had happened. Was Sin purposefully giving him such mixed messages? Boyd had no idea, but the last thing he needed was to backslide on the progress they'd already made.

"Chile con carne."

"Is it almost done?"

"I think it said another twenty minutes..."

Sin nodded and shed his Noctis t-shirt, flinging it over a broad shoulder. "You made a huge mess in here."

"I've never really tried making anything before. It turns out I'm more awkward at it than I anticipated."

The smile made another appearance although this time Sin turned

to the refrigerator in an attempt to hide it. He removed a cold bottle of water. "Well, I guess I can clean up. Maybe."

"You make it sound like it's part of a bargain."

Sin took a swig from the bottle and leaned against the refrigerator door. "Do you want it to be?"

"Maybe." Boyd drawled the word. "Depends on what I have to do in return."

There was a mere four feet of space between them, but it felt like four miles. Sin screwed the cap back onto his bottle.

"You can give me food. I'm starving."

Slightly disappointed but unsurprised, Boyd nodded and pushed away from the island. "Once it's ready my part is done, then. I'm going to go clean up, but if you're really hungry, you could start with some of the tortillas. I tested one already; it isn't bad on its own."

Sin snorted. "I'll wait. I'm going to go get some beer to celebrate the miraculous occasion of this home-cooked meal."

Boyd chuckled. "Okay."

Knowing Sin would be gone for a short time, Boyd grabbed what he needed and showered. The heat felt good on his back. Most of the bruises had faded, but he was still careful not to move in certain directions to prevent bright bursts of pain. Once clean and dry, Boyd tried his best to rub grape seed oil on the injured part of his back, but was only marginally successful. He couldn't get the right angle to reach his rhomboid, and he refused to request assistance after the last encounter.

He gave up on the oil, dressed, and walked out of the bathroom drying his hair with a towel. Sin was at the counter distributing food onto the plates. A cold pack of beer accumulated condensation next to him.

"I make no guarantees for how good that will taste."

"I already tried some." Sin nudged a plate at Boyd. "The meat's good."

"Good."

Boyd looped the towel over his neck, accepted the plate, stopped for a bottle of water, and sat down on the couch. Sin followed with the neck of a beer clasped in one hand and his plate in the other. He'd changed into a pair of black shorts that sagged so low his hipbones jutted out from the top. Boyd was convinced Sin did it on purpose—that somehow, at some point, Sin became aware of the way Boyd's

eyes lingered on the V of his torso and the tempting lines where it ended.

They ate in silence for a while with ambient noise filling the gap; the air conditioner sounding perpetually on the verge of catastrophic failure, the muffled clack of silverware on their plates, and the clink of their drinks touching the coffee table filled the space where words should have been.

Boyd kept a subtle eye on Sin from the periphery. There was nothing discernible in the pleasing lines of his shoulders and profile, and Boyd eventually determined Sin was not ready to flee if they just talked, even if Boyd did not ask the questions he truly wanted to ask. Such as, are you fucking with me on purpose or do you just not realize how confusing your behavior is?

"How's work been?" he asked instead.

Sin set his half-empty beer on the table and shrugged. "The people turned out to be okay once I started spending more time with them. It's not as awkward now even though I never know what to say."

Boyd didn't know if that was good or bad. For the mission, it was good that Sin was settling into the civilian cover, but on the other hand Boyd suspected Sin was using the cover as an excuse to stay away.

"Even your boss? You seemed to be suspicious of her motives before."

"Hmm." Sin didn't turn from his now-empty plate. "I know she likes looking at me, but most of them do. It's a lot different here..."

"Do you still get nervous about it the way you did back in Lexington?"

"Not as much," Sin admitted with a frown. "It's weird. At first I was afraid I would screw everything up because I have no idea what the hell I'm doing, but they don't seem to be easily intimidated and they don't give up. I also realized that it's easier to socialize if I drink."

"You probably aren't alone in that."

"If I was, that stupid club wouldn't get any business." Sin's frown deepened. "Unfortunately, I have to go back in a few hours. Working one to eight because Aldair is sick."

"Oh."

The casual words scraped at the feelings of exclusion that had plagued Boyd for the past two weeks. Not only did Sin appear to be avoiding him while spending every night at the club with his coworkers, but now he was assimilating without any help from Boyd. It was

typical of Sin's ability to learn quickly when he put in actual effort, but it was just another facet of the situation which was preventing them from spending time together.

Was this what Sin wanted? Did he enjoy being with the people at Noctis rather than him? Apparently, Sin did not even mind that his boss, and others, found him so attractive. Maybe he liked the attention now that he was adapting to civilian life.

Boyd reminded himself he had no right to feel left out, and it was good that Sin had the opportunity to be around people who appreciated him for the first time in his life. If it hadn't been for that damn massage and the feeling of Sin hot and hard behind him, this wouldn't be such a big deal, but it bothered Boyd nonetheless. He wanted Sin to run to him. Not others.

Boyd clenched his jaw but kept his expression neutral. There was no point in bringing up his insecurities. It was better for Sin to be closer to other people in the long-run, anyway. Boyd knew what tended to happen to people close to him.

"I'll stay out all day tomorrow so you can get some sleep, then."

"Why?" Sin looked up from his plate. "You don't have to do that."

"It's fine. I need to find Jorge anyway."

"For what?"

Boyd was surprised the information hadn't made its way to the club yet. Then again, it hadn't happened anywhere near Zona Rosa, and it hadn't even been a day since it occurred. "A body was found today. He'd been killed pretty brutally. I saw it."

"So what?" Sin asked around a mouthful of tortilla.

"He was a kid. Fourteen, fifteen at best. Decapitated and strung up in a park by one of the universities. His head was beneath his body, and a smiley face was carved across it. There was... a lot of blood."

Boyd refrained from mentioning how the gore had ignited flashbacks of another slaughtered teenager. But although Lou's throat had been viciously severed, his head had remained attached to his body. After a minute of blank staring, Boyd had been able to identify those key differences and disassociate the crime scene from his memories.

Sin dropped his plate on the coffee table and released a sigh of disgust. "I suppose not much has changed here."

"Did the same thing happen when you were here before?"

"The cartels and gangs have always been fond of beheadings. It

sends a nice message.” Sin sunk down on the couch. “I hate when they attack and recruit children. That’s why the Vegas are so messed up. And partially why I’m so messed up.”

“What do you mean?”

Sin crumpled a napkin in his fist. “My father was born into that kind of violence. By the time I was born, he was thirteen or fourteen and already immersed in that life. His father was the same. I bet they both killed before they were ten.”

The idea would have been unfathomable to Boyd in the past, but now he knew child killers were common. It was no wonder Sin had a completely different view of life. “What about you?”

“I was young.”

The vagueness was a clear sign to leave the topic alone. “If your father was in the cartel and your mother was in Hong Kong, how did they meet?”

“My father was ambitious.” Sin’s voice was much quieter than it had been only minutes ago. “And very smart. By the time he was a teenager, he was tired of his father’s gang and saw ways to expand. So, when his people had issues with the Triad in California, my father saw it as a way to make a business connection instead of a war.”

Crossing his arms over his chest, Sin kept his gaze turn upward. “From what he told me, this eventually led to him breaking off from his father’s organization to have his own gang—Mara Tres. Instead of focusing on drugs, he dealt blackmarket goods, and he worked closely with the Triad which took him to Hong Kong. That’s how he met my mother.”

It was both disturbing and impressive that Emilio Vega had accomplished such a feat by the time he was fourteen. It was no wonder the Agency had noticed and zeroed in on him.

“What kind of blackmarket goods?”

“I’m not sure. I know there were weapons involved, but I don’t know what else.”

“How long was he in Hong Kong?”

“He was back-and-forth in Hong Kong a couple times a year,” Sin said. “He had more Triad contacts there than mainland China. That’s why when we first met, he spoke more Cantonese and I spoke more Mandarin. My mother was born and raised on mainland China before being smuggled into Hong Kong as a young girl.”

Boyd wondered if Sin knew any Cantonese now, or how hard it had been for the two of them to understand each other at first, but didn't want to shift from the topic of Sin's childhood. He, and it seemed many others, knew so little about Sin's origins that Boyd could not help but poke at the Pandora's Box of information from time to time.

"So, how did you end up with your father? Did someone track him down after your mom died?"

"Yeah. She... She worked at an illegal brothel. Prostitution isn't illegal there, but brothels are because of their association with the Triad. And—" Sin sat up and tossed the wad of paper onto the coffee table. "The brothel's minder knew my father was affiliated with the Triad. So when my mother died, she found a way to contact him. She was afraid to get rid of me, but she didn't want to keep me. She thought I was bad luck."

It seemed like there was more, or that he was close to saying more, but Sin stood before Boyd could encourage him. There was tension in his body Boyd hadn't seen for weeks.

"I'm going to try to get some sleep before I have to go back to work."

Boyd began to rise, thought better of it, and sat back down. "Okay." He hesitated. "I'm sorry if I said something I shouldn't have. I ask too many questions."

"No, no it's not you." Sin shook his head but the movement was stiff. "It's me. It's my fucked up head. It's fine. I'll just try to sleep."

"Okay." It was only seven-thirty, and too early for Boyd to sleep, but he was guided to the other side of the room by the desire to give Sin space. "I'll lie down and read or draw so you can sleep. I'll be quiet."

Sin nodded but instead of heading to his bed, he retreated a step, paused, and cleared his throat. "Do you think... Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing. I sound like an idiot."

Boyd tilted his head in confusion, but realization hit him at the sight of Sin fidgeting in front of the narrow bed. "No, you don't." He faltered, wondering if he was reading too much into the situation, but forged on. "If you want... If it would help, I could lay next to you. To make it easier for you to sleep."

"Really?" Sin stopped fidgeting. "It's not too strange?"

"Not at all." Boyd picked up their plates, balancing them atop each other. "Do you want to sleep now?"

“I should.”

Sin turned to their beds and undid his shorts so they dropped to reveal black boxer briefs. By the time Boyd put the dishes into the sink and flicked off the lamp, Sin had already stretched out in the corner next to the window.

The apartment was quiet as Boyd changed his clothes and approached Sin's bed. Though they'd shared the small space before, it had happened at the spur of the moment. This felt different. Ignoring the butterflies in his stomach, Boyd didn't allow himself to pause before sliding onto the bed next to Sin. After some awkward shifting of weight, he settled on his side with his back to Sin.

“Is this okay with your claustrophobia, or would you rather I lay next to the wall?”

“It's okay,” Sin said quietly. “I know this is stupid. I just... I don't know. Thanks.”

“It isn't stupid, Sin. I understand. There were times when I'd wished I had someone nearby, too.”

Sin didn't say anything, but his hand rose to cover Boyd's, and squeezed. Eventually, his hand fell away but it was with a lingering slide of fingertips against Boyd's skin.

In the stillness of the room with Sin's breath on his neck and nothing to focus on but the specks of dust floating in the deep, golden rays of the late evening sun, Boyd was lulled into lethargy. Behind him, Sin's breathing evened and he shifted closer. The combination of warmth, silence, and the drone of the air conditioner drew Boyd into a doze before he realized it was happening. When his eyes opened again, the sun had set, and the room was swathed in darkness and moonlight.

Sluggishness prevented Boyd from identifying what had awoken him, but the feel of a body pressed against his own provided a clue. Blinking slowly, the haze of sleep parted, and Boyd realized something else—Sin's body was not only crushed against him, but his dick was hard and snugged against Boyd's ass. A low sound tumbled from Sin's mouth, low and husky in Boyd's ear, and he rocked against Boyd.

He was yanked out of the last vestiges of sleep by the feel of Sin hard and ready behind him, but before he could respond, Sin inched away. Without thinking, Boyd wound his arm back to press against Sin's ass; he guided Sin toward him again. Their bodies aligned so

perfectly that it left Boyd breathless, and he ground back against Sin's dick in a near daze.

There was no resistance, and Sin melted against him. He slid his fingers up the thigh of Boyd's boxers and swore in a voice still thick with sleep.

Breath hitching, Boyd gripped Sin's ass harder. He rocked back, pulling Sin against him in tandem to build the pressure. His back ached because of the angle, but Boyd ignored it. It didn't matter for now.

One of Sin's knees slid between Boyd's thighs, his fingers digging in harder, as they moved together in earnest. In the humid darkness of the studio, the only sounds were hitched breaths and the rustle of fabric as Boyd lost himself in the fevered delirium encompassing him. The luxury of Sin wanting him, and the sensation of sweat-damp limbs sliding together while Sin humped his ass, was almost too much to comprehend. The sensory overload coaxed Boyd's hand away from Sin to skim beneath his own boxers. He palmed his erection, but soon that wasn't enough pressure.

Boyd shoved his boxers down enough to free his cock and hissed when it met the open air. Fisting it, Boyd ground his hips down on Sin's thigh to build pressure against his balls. He moaned and thrust into the tight confines of his fist while losing himself in the feel of Sin's touch.

Sin jerked him back, squeezed his thigh, and then after a hitched breath and a growl, he tore Boyd's boxers further down until most of his ass was bared.

Boyd cried out when Sin pulled his cheeks apart, and shuddered when Sin's cock nestled between them. Just the feel of that cock sliding along his crack made Boyd grip himself tighter, and his hand flew with more intent.

They rutted together with such urgency that the bed rocked, the mattress groaned beneath them, and the sweaty sheets caught on legs and thighs. The need to come overwhelmed Boyd; it built in his gut, the heat coiling and turning him into a gasping mess.

The bed creaked again, and Sin pushed himself up to drag the damp head of his cock along Boyd's hole.

"Fuck," Boyd gasped.

He half-turned and found Sin only inches away. Their noses

brushed, both of their faces dripping sweat. When their eyes locked, Boyd nearly lost it. He pressed his forehead against Sin's, his hand racing over his cock while Sin jerked off against his hole. They panted against each other, lips grazing but never fully touching, until Boyd peaked.

Heat shot through him as he came, and his mind went blank. He couldn't stop himself from rocking mindlessly against Sin, couldn't stop the wordless sounds tumbling from his mouth.

Sin was close—Boyd could feel it in the urgent motions of Sin's hand and the low, jumbled swears hissed into his ear, but Boyd was too dazed to react. He sucked in breaths, still moaning, until the splatter of semen against his ass jolted him back to reality.

Boyd collapsed against the bed. His heart hammered in his chest and turned his fingertips shaky. He was caught between descending from his high and wanting to keep riding it. An additional white-hot thrill was brought by Sin's fingers clenching against him and the feel of come on his skin.

"Fuck," Sin whispered.

Boyd half-turned his face and saw a glimmer of green in the darkness; he half-smiled.

Panting breath filled the quiet studio until a loud buzzing noise interrupted. Boyd jumped and looked in the direction of the sound. Sin's phone lit up, marking the time as midnight. Boyd jerked his hand out to turn the alarm off and pulled his strained muscle in the process. He hissed.

Sin sat up and was reduced to a silhouette. "I have to go."

The blanket of dazed satisfaction vanished. "Right now? It's only twenty minutes away, and you don't have to be there for an hour."

"I have to shower and get dressed." The sheet crumpled in Sin's hand before he released it and slid to the bottom of the bed.

Boyd sat up, incredulous, but Sin walked into the bathroom, shut the door, and seconds later the pipes sputtered to life.

"You've got to be kidding me," Boyd muttered in disbelief. He shoved his boxers off as an uncomfortable pit grew in his stomach, and the burn of humiliation replaced the heat of arousal. It was difficult not to let his mind race down routes of increasingly insulting motives Sin might have for, once again, running away.

It felt deliberate, but Boyd tried to tell himself it wasn't true; maybe Sin was just worried about getting to work on time.

Yeah right.

By the time the bathroom door opened, Boyd had cleaned up and pulled on a new pair of boxers. He gave Sin an expectant look, but Sin pulled open the chest of drawers and rooted around for clothing in the darkness.

Although Boyd knew he could speak first, he refused to do so on principle. Instead, he waited for a cue to speak or an indication of Sin's thought process, but it never came. Sin slid into a pair of slim-cut jeans, yanked a clean work t-shirt on, and nodded at Boyd.

"I'll see you later."

Boyd didn't answer. The only sound was the door shutting behind Sin.

FIVE

THE NEXT MORNING, Sin returned to the studio at nearly nine o'clock. He did not spare a glance in Boyd's direction before ripping off his t-shirt, climbing onto his bed, and dropping onto the mattress face-down with his boots and jeans still on.

Boyd looked up from his breakfast and was met with the sound of deep and even breathing. With an incredulous sigh, Boyd shoved his plate away. He knew without a doubt that Sin had been drinking; it was the only time he collapsed in a heap. Maybe he'd made it a point to have a few shots before coming home just to ensure they could not speak.

Frustrated beyond belief, Boyd abandoned his breakfast and left the apartment quickly but quietly.

Once he was outside, his strides were long and movements sharpened by irritation. He had no idea what to think about Sin, and it was clear Sin wasn't going to bother to explain himself, so Boyd needed a distraction. Something that would help him forget the night before.

With that in mind, he took a bus down to where the teenager had been slain. Something about the killing struck him, and it wasn't only the brutality. Boyd wanted to know which of the city's many gangs would be so bold, and whether they would pose a problem for them later in the mission.

Unsurprisingly, the shock of the murder had not yet worn off for the people in the area.

Boyd spent some time around Tec, and gleaned what he could from overheard conversations and carefully asked questions. He posed as a university student to the few people who asked, and although his understanding of Spanish had improved since the start of the mission, Boyd's speaking was limited by his vocabulary. He found an English-speaking student, but she didn't know much about the murder.

What he did learn was that security was even tighter at Tec de Monterrey than ever before, the students didn't have a clue as to who the murderer was, and everyone was terrified. When Boyd asked a security guard for more information, all he got in return was disinterest, a non-answer, and an urge to move along.

He stopped for a guava shake at a trendy coffee shop near the campus and felt sick to his stomach minutes later. Four bottles of water and a stop by a restroom balanced him out, but didn't put him in any better of a mood. By the time he arrived at the Pío X park an hour later, Boyd was overheated and ready to deal with the confusion back in the studio rather than continue his investigation.

He rested in the shade of a tree, watching the occasional kid dart across the grass while playing soccer, and nursed his fifth bottle of water. The warmth lulled him into a more receptive state and took the edge off his bad mood.

Jorge appeared in front of him, and Boyd shifted to give the kid some space against the tree. He offered Jorge his last bottle of water and watched suspicion roll over the kid's face like a dark cloud before he accepted. Even then, Jorge set it in the space between his crossed legs.

"Glad you showed, Jorge." Boyd finished his water and crinkled the bottle. "I got a question to ask."

"What?" Jorge's precise blend of distrust and knowing was as apparent as ever. Boyd smiled inwardly. At least *this* was predictable.

"I saw a body yesterday, and—"

Jorge shut down and inched away.

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "And... I'm guessing you know something about it."

"I know nothing."

"How do you—"

"*Ni madres*. I know nothing," Jorge repeated firmly.

"Sure seems like you do, though."

Boyd pulled a thick wad of money from his pocket and palmed it. He held it where Jorge could see, but it was hidden from anyone else in their proximity. Jorge's attention zeroed in on the money and did not waver.

"If I could know even a little about it, I'll give you half of this. But if you tell me what you know, you get it all."

Jorge's expression didn't change, but from the slight wavering of his body, the twitching of his fingers on the water bottle, and his eyes sliding away from the money, Boyd could tell Jorge was considering the prospect. A long moment passed before Jorge shrugged.

"La Rana."

"That's the kid's name, or the killer's name?"

"*El muertito*. The one died. He was bad. *Halcón*."

"How so?"

Jorge ran his palm along the tips of the grass. "Mean. Hurt us. *Nos violaba. Se madreaba a la raza. Pendejo*."

"¿*Violaba*?"

Jorge's eyebrows pushed together. "¿*No entiendes? Nos cogía a fuerzas y sin pagar*."

After weeks of spending time amongst the locals, Boyd caught onto the slang. "He raped the street kids? And earlier, you said he—¿*madreaba*?"

"Beat." Jorge popped open the water bottle. "*No vale verga*. It is good he dies."

"Did someone kill him for what he was doing?"

"¿*Sabe*?"

"Come on, Jorge. Give me something else. This was the street kids going after him?"

"We are not stupid! *No nos metemos con Santiago*."

"Who's Santiago?"

Jorge speared Boyd with a disgusted look. "You know nothing, *pendejo*! Santiago, Juárez, El JP, others, they own all. There are rules—you learn them or die."

"Even La Rana?"

"*Ese puto se metió con Lo Más Chingón*," Jorge spat. "La Rana sold drugs and got caught *con las manos en la masa*. Only *el puto maldito idiota* sell that shit, especially in *Territorio Ching*—"

Jorge's words seemed to catch up to him. He paled and horror blanketed his face; a haunted stare darted around the park.

"So, Lo más—"

"¿*Cierra el pinche hocico! ¡Chingada madre!*" Jorge sounded genuinely distressed, and couldn't seem to scramble to his feet fast enough. He threw the water bottle at Boyd's feet and spit in the grass next to him. "I go before you make me killed. Give my money." He held out a hand.

Boyd handed him the money, and it was deposited so swiftly and efficiently that Boyd didn't even see where it went. Jorge started to turn, but then paused to dial up the intensity of his glower.

"I tell you nothing. Anyone asks, I say nothing."

Boyd held his hands up in surrender. “Got it. Lips.” He mimed zipping them closed. “Sealed.”

Whatever Jorge found with his ensuing scrutiny must have satisfied him because he nodded and ran off. Boyd didn’t bother tracking his route.

Lo Más Chingón.

If his budding understanding of the slang wasn’t failing him, Boyd thought that meant something to do with the most fucking or the biggest fucker. He’d have to ask Sin.

The mere thought of his partner brought Boyd right back to where he’d started that morning.

With an aggravated sigh, Boyd set out to learn which person, or cartel, might have been involved in the murder. He wanted to know the competing cartels in the city and the territories they claimed. Even with that goal, Boyd made less progress with that endeavor than he’d made in his investigation of the dead kid. The second anything even close to Santiago or Lo Más Chingón was mentioned, people shut down faster than a field agent being questioned about the Johnson’s compound.

To make matters more frustrating, Sin had already gone to work by the time Boyd returned to the studio. He sat on the balcony and watched the sun fade behind Cerro de la Silla. The pale blue sky burned orange and red in Monterrey; a far cry from the smoggy sky in Lexington, but the view was far from relaxing.

He was aggravated by the idea of waiting around the studio all night. At this rate, they wouldn’t exchange a word until the next time Sin decided to block their escalating flirtation from his mind. If it could even be called a mere flirtation anymore.

Sin would probably find some excuse to stay late after work, and then two weeks from now there would be another incident that would result in Sin bolting out of the apartment like a startled gazelle.

Resolve narrowed Boyd’s eyes; he wasn’t ready to let that happen.

Dressing in a nice enough outfit to hopefully get him into the club, Boyd was out of the studio in moments, and by nine-thirty he was heading to Noctis.

The streets were awash in a golden glow that slowed Boyd’s steps. For the past month he had explored the city without truly stopping to take it in, but now he looked around and admired the beauty of

dusk, the streets coming alive with activity, and an energy of building excitement that was absent from the hot, languid days.

Was this what Sin felt when he left the studio to walk to Noctis? Did this buzz of nightlife sink into Sin and unlock parts of him that had been dormant after so many years of being imprisoned within the walls of the compound?

Without ever having seen Sin at work, it was impossible to tell how fully he'd immersed into his cover and whether he enjoyed being Jason Alvarez. It seemed like Sin must enjoy it a great deal if he consistently chose the civilians and alcohol over Boyd, but he would never know until they spoke.

The shadows grew longer as Boyd made his way to Noctis, and by the time he arrived, a line had already formed outside the establishment. Sin had claimed Noctis didn't hit its stride until midnight, but the people standing along the wall were clearly ready to start the party now.

The line was diverse, but their expressions were similar in that they reflected variations of hopefulness and feigned neutrality. There were sophisticated men and women that had obviously just come from work or dinner; women in clothing better classified as lingerie, people wearing metal hardware and leather despite the heat, and a peculiar man wearing a large cowboy hat and sunglasses. Noctis apparently attracted people from all walks of life.

Boyd started for the bouncer but paused when he saw a familiar, rangy figure standing in the shadows alongside the wall while smoking a cigarette. Even with the uncertainty, Boyd's gut clenched at the sight of his partner, and he took in every irresistible inch. This time, he also saw Sin with the eye of an artist. Boyd could not help noticing the elegant curve of Sin's wrist, the shadows cast by his tousled hair, and the shade of green that Boyd would never tire of seeing.

It was irritating. Of course Sin had to look gorgeous while Boyd's mood was constantly hammered by brewing discontent.

Boyd was always careful to maintain his Kadin mannerisms when leaving the studio, but he was particularly meticulous about it now. He bypassed the line and approached Sin, ignoring everyone else. The ability to walk right up to someone so uniquely beautiful was almost empowering. Or it would have been if Sin's pensive expression had been a little more welcoming.

"Hey," Boyd said, stopping in front of his partner.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was in the area and wanted to see the digs." Boyd shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Can you show me around or do I have to get in line with the rest of the plebs?"

Sin's gaze slid up and down Boyd's body. "If you stay, these people are going to be all over you."

Boyd smirked and nodded at the door. "You headed in soon or should I hang here with you for a bit?"

"Do you actually plan to go in?"

"Yeah. If I can."

The line in front of the club grew longer with every word they exchanged, and several people were looking in their direction; particularly the bouncer and a group of young women.

"Fine. Let's go," Sin said gruffly. He dropped his cigarette and crushed it beneath his shoe before striding to the door.

The bouncer looked between Boyd and Sin with a blossoming leer. "Finally got something sweet?"

"Shut up and put Kadin R. on the blacklist."

"Ooh, the black list." The bouncer raised an eyebrow, and he stared Boyd down once again. "I guess it makes sense with that face."

"Really? Just the face?" Boyd shifted his weight to showcase his tight jeans and flashed roguish smile. "You don't like anything else?"

"I can make a better judgment with no clothes on."

Sin snorted. "Just put him on the list, Johnny."

"Come on, Big J. Don't you want to share?"

"Shut the fuck up." Sin snagged Boyd's arm and tugged him to the door.

Entering the club brought about a severe case of sensory overload.

Music exploded from the open door of the club and boomed so loud the walls shook. Translucent cloth rolled in undulating waves from the ceiling, caught the light and fractured it to shine above the writhing crowd of dancers. There were people everywhere; dancing, standing at the bar, and lounging in low-backed couches with bottles and glasses littering the tables scattered between.

Sin wove through the crowd and led Boyd to a spiral staircase to the right of the entrance. There appeared to be three floors, but Sin stopped on the second. He walked down a corridor with an

industrial-style metal floor and more undulating installations along the wall and ceiling.

The area they entered was not very populated, and Boyd wondered if it was exclusive to people on the list Sin and Johnny mentioned at the door. The area was darker than the rest of the club and had a much smaller bar in the center of a circular room. There were curtained booths dotted around, but Sin led him to an alcove that was tucked away in a small nook and faced a balcony overlooking the first floor. The music was a thumping undertone although the volume was lower than it had been downstairs.

Boyd leaned against the balcony with his hands on the railing. "Well. It's definitely a night club."

"That's what you wanted to say?"

"What are you expecting me to say?"

Sin crossed his arms over his chest, blocking the letters that read 'Security.' "I have no idea; you're the one that showed up here. I assumed it was for a reason."

"Wanting to see you and where you work isn't enough?"

"I guess." Sin sucked his lip ring into his mouth.

"Did you want to talk to me about anything?" Boyd asked.

"Like what?"

"Last night."

Nothing could have hidden Sin's scowl, even when he sidestepped Boyd to stare over the side of the balcony. "I was half-asleep."

"So?" Boyd asked, maintaining a calm tone. "You seemed to like it, and you weren't half-asleep when you gave me that massage, but both times I got the impression you wanted to ignore what happened."

Sin's jaw clenched. He kept his face turned away. "Can we just not make a big deal about it?"

"I'm not making a big deal about it; I'm just trying to figure out what's happening." It was only sheer determination that kept Boyd talking—Sin's stubbornness and dismissive attitude would have normally driven him to silence by now. It felt too close to rejection. "Why do you keep running away? I don't understand. Are you ashamed or something? We can talk about it."

"There's nothing to be ashamed about." Sin's voice was so quiet it was barely audible over the music. "We're stuck in that ridiculous

studio, it's hot, and... and things just happen. We don't have to talk about it."

"So you're saying you're horny, I'm easy, and that's it." An edge crept into Boyd's voice.

Sin looked at Boyd incredulously. "Who the fuck said that?"

"Well if you aren't saying that, then what are you saying? Shit happens and who cares?"

"I'm saying you're making a big deal out of us being half-asleep and horny because we're always locked in the same fucking room with each other," Sin snapped. He pushed away from the railing. "Stop being so goddamn dramatic all the time. You always look for a reason to feel insulted about something."

Boyd's back straightened in anger. "I wasn't feeling insulted until just now. The fact that I'm just trying to figure out where we stand doesn't make me fucking dramatic. It makes me normal."

"And it's a news flash that I'm not normal?" Sin demanded. "I don't know what you're expecting from me, but it's obviously not going to happen at the moment."

"I just want you to be honest—"

The radio hanging from Sin's belt crackled to life. "Jase, *ven aca. Hay una tiendita en la terraza.*"

"Goddamnit." Sin yanked the radio from his belt and snarled, "*Ahorita voy.*" He exhaled with obvious impatience. "I have to go."

Disgusted with the situation, Boyd did not ask when they could resume the discussion, and he stormed away.

FOR THE REST of his shift, Sin was rougher than usual with the drunken patrons. There was a feeling building inside of him—a roiling, burning ache that wasn't satisfied no matter what he tried, and it upped the level of his aggression with each passing hour.

He knew it was because of Boyd, and not just because of the stupid fight they'd had hours ago. Sin knew he was completely losing control of the situation, and he was pissing Boyd off in the process.

Every time he watched Boyd sleeping so close to him, when their arms grazed or a look lingered too long, the flirting and special smiles—it culminated and formed a searing need Sin was desperate to satisfy. Their frantic jerkoff session that morning had barely taken the edge off his desire. He hadn't even gotten to touch Boyd.

Now, things were going downhill once again, and Sin knew it was his own fault. He was the one who kept running away because of stubbornness and fear; because he would rather never touch Boyd again than ruin things the way they had after France. The fact that any tense conversation descended so easily into accusations and arguments was a testament to how fast this could all go wrong.

But that didn't make his resolution to keep his hands off Boyd any easier to stick to.

Frustration turned into impatience until Sin was ready to crack someone's head into a wall. He was grateful when he was able to storm into the break room and punch out, and even gladder when Johnny and Estrella beckoned him for shots since they were done for the night as well. Out of all the employees at Noctis, Estrella, Johnny, and Jessica were the people he spoke to the most which was likely because they rarely pissed him off. Unless he was enraged about something else.

Four shots in and the tequila hit Sin fast. He chased it with a beer before throwing back a couple more.

"You stressed out, Big J? You never drink this much."

Sin flicked the shot glass across the table and tried not to dwell on how unfocused he was, and how much of a problem this would be in a fight.

"Stop calling me that, you idiot."

"He's not the only one," Estrella sang out.

Sin's gaze jerked to the bartender. She was going through the cabinets in the break room in search of snacks, and she was coming up empty.

"Why would such a stupid name catch on?" Sin frowned at the sound of his own slurred voice.

"A couple of your fans were talking about you at the bar earlier tonight," Estrella said, voice muffled until she leaned away from the cabinet. "*¡Chale... tengo hambre!*"

"*Vamos a mi casa,*" Johnny drawled.

"Ha!" Estrella cast a baleful look over her shoulder before turning and hopping off the cabinet. "No."

Sin snorted at the exchange. Over the past few weeks, he had noticed Johnny's obsession with the bartender, and the man's constant

complaints about being unable to get close to her were a source of silent commiseration.

"In any case," she said. "They were talking about your dick. Said it was really big."

"How the hell would they know?" Johnny demanded. He gaped at Sin. "You fucked one of them and didn't tell me!"

"I haven't fucked anyone at this club," Sin growled. "One of those women grabbed me when I was taking her friend to the door."

"Ohh, the one who fell down the stairs?" Estrella asked.

Sin nodded. The motion felt more difficult than usual. Everything was heavy and slow.

"Damn... No wonder they follow!" Johnny crowed. "Well, whip it out, Big J. Let's see that cock."

Estrella smacked him in the head. "Sicko!"

"I'm waiting, *cabrón*."

"You'll keep waiting then," Sin said flatly. He turned away from Johnny's darting tongue and leer. The guy screwed anyone—men, women, old people.

"Saving it for that piece of twink ass? Kadin?"

"Maybe." The word was out of Sin's mouth before he could put a stop to it, and he cursed himself.

Johnny slammed his palms against the table in triumph. "I knew it. No wonder you're not interested in boss lady even though she wants that big co—"

Estrella smacked him again. "*¡Cállate, cabrón!*"

"You know it's true." Johnny evaded another swat. "*¡Quiere chupársela!*"

Their radios crackled to life just as Estrella pressed her hand over his mouth.

"Anyone have a visual on Jase?"

Hearing Jessica's voice so soon after Johnny's vulgar claims threw Sin further off balance. He stood up, blinked when the world tilted, and brought the radio to his mouth.

"What?"

"Come to my office before you leave."

Johnny pointed at the radio with a 'see?' gesture, and Sin shook his head at the two. They acted like children but were only a couple of

years older than Boyd. He left the break room, slammed his shoulder into the side of the door, and concentrated on walking.

How had his father managed to drink and do drugs before a mission when Sin could barely see straight? He had stumbled upon his father in a multitude of compromising positions, and he'd expected the vices to slow Emilio down, but they hadn't, and he'd never put the Agency before his own needs.

So, where the hell did Sin get the habit from? Was Connors' brainwashing that fucking strong? He had already succeeded in ostracizing Sin from the entire compound, but had Sin unknowingly bought into it? For years, Sin had prided himself on understanding the Agency's games. He knew why Connors refused to tell the truth about Lydia and the others, and he knew why Connors let the staff mistreat him as long as they didn't go too far—it was all about control. Sin's own father had tried the same methods to keep Sin focused on training, but he'd almost always caved before going to the maximum extreme.

So, why? Why was Sin isolating himself even now? Even when he was finally away from Connors' all-seeing eyes?

Even if he considered Boyd off limits because of his own insane paranoia, there were other options. Why was he the only one playing the perfect, celibate soldier? Why did he have to stay untouched forever?

The question echoed in Sin's ears, demanded an answer and, in his drunken state, Sin could not find one. Maybe the senior Vega had had the right idea; drown out real life with alcohol, stay away from the one you really want in order to avoid losing them, and ease the sexual frustration by fucking people who didn't matter.

"Staying late again?" Jessica asked when he entered her office.

"No." Sin jerked at the collar of his t-shirt and dropped into the chair next to her desk. The alcohol weighed him down until he slouched with his legs sprawled and his head tilted to the side. "I drank too much already."

"I see that," she said with a hint of amusement in her voice. "Everything okay?"

"Uh huh."

Jessica's heels clacked against the floor and drew Sin's attention up. She was wearing a skirt today and some kind of shirt that was almost

see-through. It was distracting. Especially with Johnny's words trapped in his ears.

One of her eyebrows rose, and Sin realized he was staring. He forced himself to stop. "What did you want?"

"I received a complaint about you."

"What for?"

"You fractured that guy's arm."

Sin scoffed. "He was trying to set up shop on the patio. He's lucky I didn't rip his fucking arm off."

"Maybe so, but you can't use force to that extent."

"Maybe he fought back."

"Jase, I know he didn't. You nearly ripped his arm out of the socket—I watched the tape. You're too aggres—"

"Well fucking let Johnny watch the floor then," he growled and got to his feet. "Don't tell me to handle these scumbag drug dealers and then bitch at me—"

"You need to calm down and adjust your tone."

Sin swallowed the rest of his rant and gritted his teeth. "Fine. Whatever."

"Jason," she said evenly. "I'm not criticizing your performance. You're the best I've had in years, but you can't go around breaking arms. If he's trying to set up a *tiendita* in my fucking club, there is a good chance that someone gave him the idea to do it. We can kick them out, but you hurting them like that can bring a whole world of trouble down on us. We have no idea who he's connected with."

It was true. He was so focused on his own drama that the thought hadn't even occurred to him.

"Fine. Whatever."

Jessica's brows creased. "Why are you being so—"

"Because I'm fucking sick of everything."

It wouldn't make any sense to her, but nothing was coming out right, and Sin didn't even know why he was saying anything to her at all. He turned away, but Jessica grabbed his arm.

"Don't walk out of this office," she snapped. "I try to give you a lot of slack because I know there's more to your story than what was on your résumé, but when I tell you to do something I expect you to listen."

"Who the fuck are you to tell me anything?"

He hadn't meant to shout but that was what happened. And he hadn't meant to spin on his heel and react so aggressively, but that happened too. She backed away and bumped into the desk.

"Can you stop?" she demanded. "You're drunk and completely out of control."

"So fire me."

"I don't want to fire you."

"Why the fuck not?"

Jessica glared up at him, and he was struck by her total lack of fear.

"Jason, what's going on with you? You're acting insane."

"Maybe I am insane."

"No, you're not." She took a deep breath. "Did you—was it that red-haired bo—" Jessica faltered and reworded whatever she had been about to say. "Listen, this is obviously about something other than a punk drug dealer. How can I help?"

"I don't know."

Her imploring concern made him want to bolt from the room. He had no idea how to respond to her worry, and any attempt to try would end with fumbled words that caught in his throat. Things were easier when he could use pre-planned lines.

"Jason... What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just fucked up, okay? I'm not a normal person so quit trying to figure me out."

"Why are you saying that?" Her hand rose with hesitance before she rested it on his shoulder. Sin tensed, but didn't push her away. "Did something happen before work?"

Sin shook his head and, when he refused to speak again, she dropped her hand. Just like Boyd, she was frustrated with him.

"Listen, do you want to go... out somewhere later to talk? Maybe it would help if you talk to someone. If we weren't here."

A voice in the back of Sin's head hissed at him to say yes. Accept the invitation. Follow Johnny's advice. Maybe if he spent time with someone else—touched someone else—he would be able to turn off all of these feelings for Boyd.

But as soon as the thought crossed Sin's mind, he knew it wasn't going to happen. As attractive as she was, and as curious as he was sometimes, there was barely a spark of interest at the idea. There was no substitute for Boyd.

"Maybe another time," he muttered.

Jessica watched him intently. "Are you with someone?"

"I don't know."

A look of understanding spread over her, but Sin had no idea how she could understand when he had no idea what was going on himself.

"I'm going," he repeated. "Sorry."

"Do you even know what you're sorry for?"

Yes. Sorry for being hung up on someone he wouldn't allow himself to have. Sorry for taking it out on her when she was always so nice and never freaked out by him at all. Sorry for being so weird and a failure at interacting with real people.

But instead of saying those things, Sin backed towards the door, and again everything felt like it was in slow motion.

"Maybe one day you'll take me up on that offer and we can have a real conversation," she said.

"Maybe."

Sin hurried from the office without looking back.

WHEN THE DOOR wrenched open, Boyd was finishing a sketch he'd begun earlier in the day. The sight of Sin stalking in with the kind of bad attitude that typically led to trouble prompted Boyd to drop his sketchbook on the coffee table.

Sin turned to the chest of drawers and yanked it open with so much force that the drawer pulled out fully and dropped on the floor. A slew of Spanish curses filled the air, and Sin kicked the drawer instead of picking it up.

Boyd was almost afraid to ask. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Sin growled. "I'm just an idiot. I knew this wouldn't fucking work."

"What?"

"Everything." Sin shoved the drawer against the chest of drawers and ripped his shirt over his head. "Me. This mission. Pretending to be a real person."

Boyd straightened and scenarios hurtled through his mind. "Did something happen?"

"No." Sin sat down on the couch and yanked at his shoelaces. "I didn't kill anyone. I didn't freak out and have a fit. I didn't do anything but prove that I'm an idiot, and that I'll never be able to function with

normal people.” He kicked off one sneaker and focused on the other. His hands were unsteady. “I’m not Kassian fucking Trovosky. I can’t do this undercover crap. I don’t know what to say to anyone even when they’re kind to me.” Sin kicked off his other shoe and leaned back against the couch with a sigh.

This close, Boyd could smell the alcohol on Sin. “So, what upset you? Did someone say something nice and you didn’t know how to respond?”

“More or less. And as usual I acted like a freak because I don’t know how to treat... normal people.”

“It might not matter. Depending on the situation, they probably assumed you were just caught off-guard. What exactly happened?”

“It doesn’t matter. Next time I’m just going to go with her.”

“Go with who?”

“Jessica.”

Boyd frowned. “Where was she trying to get you to go?”

“I have no idea. Just somewhere to be alone.”

Ice formed in Boyd’s stomach and a steady clamor of thoughts galloped through his mind. “What were you doing before she suggested that?”

Sin offered only a minute shrug and studied the ceiling.

The silence confirmed Boyd’s every insecurity. He had to look away, the pain and frustration hitting him even harder than he’d anticipated. Without comment, Boyd grabbed his sketchbook and got up to stand next to his bed. He wanted to focus on his art, but the words precluded any attempt. He could not think of anything but the metaphorical slap he’d just received from Sin. It was almost a betrayal of something unspoken, and Boyd’s anger turned on himself—he’d been stupid for daring to expect anything more.

He changed in the bathroom and gripped the edge of the sink with his head bowed. The need to run was powerful; to get the hell away from this place, his partner, and all the things that were digging up anxiety best left untouched—all the ways he was being reminded of not being good enough. Never being good enough.

Boyd grit his teeth. Part of him wanted to storm out of the bathroom and say, “Fuck you, asshole!” to Sin. He wanted to demand why Sin had ever shown interest if he just wanted to run to someone else. Why was it fine to go somewhere with Jessica, to contemplate

fucking Jessica—this meaningless woman Sin hadn't even known a month ago—why she was such a goddamn prize, when Boyd wasn't?

Boyd's anger bordered on hatred, but he knew the source was hurt and fear.

Boyd left the bathroom after taking deep, calming breaths until his quaking anger was replaced with bitter resignation. He settled onto his bed without speaking and, true to form, Sin was just as silent.

Boyd faced the window and the night sky beyond. He imagined Sin and Jessica. Locked together, kissing, touching... Sin accepting her advances when he kept shunning Boyd's.

His fingers curled into a fist, and he cursed himself for ever believing he had been a desirable option for Sin; that he would ever be good enough for Sin. Sin had noticed him because he was the only available option; the only person Sin had the opportunity to release pent up sexual energy with. The second Sin had a better choice, there would be no reason for him to want Boyd.

Boyd knew how undesirable he was, but he did not know why he had ever fooled himself into believing otherwise. He closed his eyes and tried to force himself to sleep, but mental images of Sin with Jessica chased him through his dreamscape and dragged him back to reality with a punishing consistency. Sleep seemed unattainable, but it crept in on him unexpectedly even if it did not last.

When Boyd's eyelids slid open, he was confused by his change in position. At some point, he'd rolled onto his stomach and was facing the rest of the studio. It felt like he had only dozed for a few minutes, but the clock showed it had actually been an hour.

Still peering through his lashes, Boyd sought out Sin in the dimness of the studio. He was angled toward Boyd's bed with a cigarette in his mouth, one knee drawn up, and the other leg hanging off the side of the couch. The cherry glowed bright when he sucked on the filter, smoke drifting through the air in lazy waves. The moonlight filtering in from the balcony illuminated Sin's body; he wore only a pair of underwear.

The sight of his long limbs draped over the couch was so effortlessly stunning that Boyd had to envision something else just to banish the image. Looking at Sin would make it more difficult to sleep, but Boyd could not keep his eyes shut entirely. Especially when Sin's moody

gaze fell on Boyd. But not at his face—those green eyes were doing a slow circuit of Boyd's body before focusing on his ass.

Heat coiled in Boyd's stomach, but he remained prone to keep the illusion of sleep.

Sin ran his tongue over his lower lip and dragged his gaze away, but it slid back almost instantly. It was a slow drift over Boyd's legs and thighs, paused on his ass, and traveled up again. After taking one last drag, Sin extended his arm to stub out the cigarette on a small plate. He started to retract his arm but paused and grabbed one of Boyd's t-shirt from where it had fallen in a heap earlier in the day.

He brought the shirt up to his nose and inhaled, and Boyd nearly forgot to keep his eyes slit. He watched Sin drop his free hand to his lap and squeeze the forming bulge in his boxers. His breath guttered out, and Sin slouched down lower on the couch with his thighs spread further apart.

After all of the confusion and doubts, all of the incomplete conversations, Sin was inhaling the scent of his musk and sweat, and so obviously aroused that Boyd swore he could smell it.

Confused indignation muddled Boyd's sense of victory; after avoiding the issue and outright denying their shared attraction, it was now undeniable that Sin wanted him. The earlier drama and anxiety; the feelings of resentment and rejection... it had all been for nothing. What a damn waste of time.

Perverse fascination overcame all else. The part of Boyd that had suffered for the past few weeks did not allow him to interrupt the moment.

Sin palmed his straining cock through the flimsy fabric of his underwear, and a moan filtered through the cotton of Boyd's shirt. Sin's hand moved faster, his breath hitched louder, and then things escalated. He ripped his underwear down and shoved it to the side while his hand flew over the engorged length of his cock. It was so hard that it shone in the darkness, the fat head glistening and veins protruding.

Boyd's mouth watered. His blood rushed and boiled with an intensity that made him shudder. He was so hard that it hurt—his balls drawing up tight and tingles flooding every inch of his body.

"Boyd..."

Panic ratcheted Boyd's heart, but Sin had uttered the words in

response to a fantasy playing out in his mind; he had no idea he was being watched.

The t-shirt fell to the floor again, and another ragged moan filled the air. Sin reached down to clutch his balls while his other hand went to work on his dick, jerking it so fast that his hand was a blur.

Boyd's cock became a maddening tease. He wanted to shove his hips against the mattress, to rut down in time to Sin's strokes. He wanted to demand to be flipped over and drilled with that thick cock; Boyd wanted Sin to fuck him until he screamed. No more teasing, no more jerking off—just fill him in every way. Fuck him deep. Unload in his clenching hole.

It took everything Boyd had to stay silent and still.

"Mmm, yeah..."

Sin's words were hoarse, and they faded into breathless gasping and harsh panting. He tilted his head back with his brows twisted together, mouth vulnerable and gaping.

Moisture gathered at the tip of Boyd's dick. He pressed his hips against the bed harder and swallowed a whimper. The sound of Sin's hand sliding up and down his cock sent fire rushing through his veins, but Boyd didn't break his silence. He needed to see... needed to know...

Sin groaned and bit down on his lip with savage force to silence the sound. It came out anyway, muffled, and then he tilted his head forward with black hair hanging everywhere. Faint sounds escaped Sin when he started thrusting into his hand while still holding onto his balls. Every muscle in his hard body flexed and stood out in perfectly cut lines.

"Oh fuck, Boyd—*yeah*."

Ropes of semen erupted from Sin's cock, splattering his chest, his chin, and his cheek. He kept pumping his dick, no longer attempting to muffle the sounds. By the time his hand stilled, Sin was gasping and still squeezing his sac.

He stayed that way for several seconds before sliding his hand away to reach up and wipe at his chest. A shuddering sigh filled the air. Sin unfolded himself from the couch and stood to go to the bathroom.

As soon as the door shut, Boyd shifted his hips and squeezed himself through his boxers. Even that brief amount of pressure caused

relief, and Boyd's breath hissed out. It was tempting to get off fast and dirty just to alleviate the throbbing, but he didn't.

Boyd wanted to let the pressure build because tomorrow he wasn't going to let Sin run away again.

A LOUD WHINING sound jolted Boyd awake.

He was greeted with the sight of a shirtless Sin crouched by the door and holding a drill. The heat of the hallway added a sheen of sweat to his body and dampened the dark strands of his hair.

Sin didn't glance in Boyd's direction when he got out of bed and went into the bathroom, and the whine of the drill emanated clearly through the door. Sin was still crouched there when Boyd finished washing up, but the drill was unplugged and set to the side. The taut lines of tension were absent from Sin's frame—an observation that fueled Boyd's plan to turn the tables.

"Thanks for fixing the door."

"I should have asked about it when we first got here." Sin straightened and tested the door. It swung shut smoothly without even the slightest creak. "Better."

"Maybe we can get an upgrade on the air conditioner next."

"Heh. Don't count on it." Sin locked the door and put the drill into a case that was shoved against the wall. "If you want me to, I'll ask Jose when I see him."

Boyd sat on the couch and pulled up his leg. "If you teach me the necessary vocab, I could try asking him while you stand in the background and laugh."

Sin cracked a smile for the first time in what seemed like days. "*Suena bien pero practica más.*"

Boyd frowned. "*Estoy tratando.*"

"You could try harder." Sin wiped a forearm across his face and sat on the end of the couch furthest from Boyd. He sucked his lip ring into his mouth. "Are you still pissed off at me?"

"No." Boyd relaxed against the couch with one arm across the back. "You had a point about us being stuck in the room together."

"You seemed angry. I don't explain things the right way," Sin said with a frown. "But I wasn't trying to start a fight."

"I *was* angry." Boyd shrugged. "But this morning while I was watching you, I started thinking about the situation."

"Watching me?"

“Yes.” The barest of hesitations wormed its way into Boyd’s bravado before he finished, “I realized you had a good point when I once again woke up to the sight of you half-naked.”

“What?” Sin squinted at Boyd. “What point was I making about that?”

“You said it wasn’t a big deal. That we were horny and things just happen, and I think you’re right. I’m sexually frustrated and constantly seeing you stripped down is only making it worse.”

“I see.” Again, the silver loop disappeared into Sin’s mouth before sliding back out. “So, you’re saying that’s why you’ve been acting different here.”

Boyd inclined his head. “It’s the same for you, isn’t it? I didn’t think about the implications when we got this assignment.”

“I always walk around naked in front of you,” Sin said slowly. The same skeptical expression washed across his face; as if he thought he was being drawn into a trap. “It never bothered you before.”

“Oh, no. It bothered me.” Boyd went full throttle into the next part of the plan; his own confession. “Not when we first met, but even before this mission, I noticed. But at that point, I could go home and deal with things. Here, we have no privacy, and I’m not used to that.”

“Wait, what?” Sin turned fully on the couch so he was facing Boyd. He was still staring with narrowed eyes, and looked so caught off guard that Boyd fought a wider smile. “You’re saying—what? You used to go home and jerk off?”

“Of course I did. Have you seen yourself naked? Who wouldn’t be turned on by you?”

“People with an aversion to psychos.” Sin started to speak and stopped himself twice before finally saying, “Boyd, are you fucking with me?”

“No, I just never talked about this before because we’re terrible at communication.” It was true, but that had nothing to do with Boyd’s failure to discuss the issue. He’d just wanted to act instead of discuss for the past few weeks. “And when you brought up the topic yesterday, I realized how long it’s been.”

“Since what?”

“Since I’ve had sex. The other night was the closest I’ve had in months.”

Sin sat up straighter, and his hands dropped into his lap. "But I didn't even get—" He faltered. "I didn't even touch you."

"I know." Boyd didn't look away from Sin's rising flush or his intense scrutiny. "My sex life has been undeniably sad; a massage and a rutting session from someone with morning wood."

"And..." Sin cleared his throat. "And what would make it less sad?"

"A lot of things. Some done to me, some done to others." Boyd felt Sin shift minutely on the couch. "It's been on my mind for a while."

"Has it?"

"Yeah..." Boyd's voice hushed, but that hadn't been part of the plan. He was supposed to play it cool, but those heavy-lidded bedroom eyes were drawing him in.

"What do you want to do to others?" Sin asked softly.

"Well..." He was getting hard—too hard to hide if Sin looked down, but Boyd didn't care. He didn't care about anything except for undoing Sin completely; making him lose control. "I can't stop thinking about sucking dick. The taste and pressure against my tongue; looking up at someone as they watch me take it in, and hands gripping my hair. All of it."

Sin's lips parted but no sound came out, and his hand dropped to his lap again. When he swallowed, Boyd could hear the click of his throat. "What else?"

Boyd tipped his head back, eyes flicking down to Sin's crotch, and the view of his erection trapped in the thigh of his pants. "I want to feel a man lose control because of me. I want to be pushed forward, and have him grip me and pound my ass because he can't stop himself. Because he needs me that much."

Without the slightest attempt to hide it, Sin reached down to adjust his dick. But he never stopped staring at Boyd, and when he spoke, it was in a hoarse rasp. "You need to be fucked that bad, Boyd?"

"Yes," Boyd whispered. "Repeatedly. I need it right now like I need air. And I want it so fucking hard that I lose my mind the way I always do—trying so hard to keep quiet... but I always get loud."

Sin's tongue swept over his bottom lip and this time, he squeezed himself through his jeans. But when he didn't respond, Boyd forced himself to stand, to get some space so he could regain control of his own trembling body. He walked into the kitchen and opened the

refrigerator, but the sound of Sin's approaching footsteps were only seconds behind him.

Sin slammed the refrigerator shut and planted his hand against the door. He was so close that Boyd could feel the heat from his body.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

The brush of Sin's lips against his ear sent a tingle down Boyd's spine. He turned just enough for his hair to catch on Sin's lips. "Doing what?"

Sin's arm slid around Boyd's waist, hand clasping his hip on the opposite side. Their bodies sealed together, and a breath escaped Boyd when Sin's erection pressed against his ass.

"Showing off for me."

"Because you keep running away, and I want more."

Sin wrenched Boyd around and shoved him against the door. "I'm not trying to run away. You just don't get it."

"What don't I get? Talk to me." Boyd put his hands on Sin's hips and pulled him close; too close to do anything other than align their cocks. "Please."

Boyd didn't know if it was the physical contact or the word dripping from his lips, but for the first time since France, Sin reacted without a shred of control. He crushed Boyd against the door with his whole body, and his lips descended on Boyd. The kiss was so hot and familiar and needy that Boyd was drawn to Sin like he was his own gravitational field. Only his sliding grip on Sin's damp skin tethered him to solid ground.

Sin cupped his ass and squeezed, guiding their hips together. Boyd moaned and it muffled against Sin's lips, as did the noises that followed in an increased tempo of their dry humping. The kiss devolved into sloppy licking and the occasional click of teeth as they pawed at each other, but it wasn't enough. Boyd needed more. He needed to explore every inch of Sin's skin, to fulfill every fantasy he'd had since Sin had reawakened his ability to feel.

His hands dropped between them and latched onto Sin's zipper, but the stray from the trajectory caused Sin to freeze up.

"Wait," he panted. "I don't think—"

"Fuck that." Boyd arched his back, pressing his shoulders to the refrigerator and ignoring the strain in his back. He rolled his hips against Sin's. "I want this and so do you. Please just—just let it happen."

Sin sucked in a breath, then another, and took a step away from Boyd. Undaunted, Boyd followed.

"Everything got fucked up before," Sin gritted out. "That's why I keep trying not to start this. I don't want—"

"Do you want me or not?" Boyd interrupted. He advanced on Sin until Sin's back hit the counter. His hands curled around the edge.

"I don't want to ruin things again."

Boyd mimicked Sin's earlier action and trapped Sin against the counter with a full body press. "Do you want me or not?" he repeated, slower this time.

"Boyd—"

Boyd touched Sin's chest and slid his palms over the slick, sculpted muscle. He pressed upward, drunk on the feel of Sin's bare skin, and skimmed his hands up to lock behind Sin's neck.

"Okay. Then tell me you don't want me." He veered his gaze away and latched his mouth onto the side of Sin's neck. His breath hissed out when Boyd sucked lightly and followed it up with a nip.

"Tell me to stop," Boyd whispered against the damp skin. "If you don't, I'll keep going."

"Goddamnit, Boyd, please..."

"Please what?"

Boyd dipped his head and dragged his tongue down the bronze column of Sin's neck to the hollow at his throat, and then further. Wet swipes traced the front of Sin's torso until Boyd fastened his mouth around a nipple. It earned him a sharp moan, and then a louder one after he bit down.

"Say it, and I'll leave you alone."

His only answer was labored breathing, and a fine tremor that intensified when Boyd sank to his knees and brought his face level with Sin's crotch.

Sin stared down with open lust. His flushed skin, expanded pupils, and the bulge between his thighs could mean nothing else, but he still didn't speak, not even when Boyd unfastened his jeans and let them pool on the floor. Sin was left in nothing but his tight, cotton briefs—the front stretched out by his cock.

"Tell me," Boyd whispered. "And I'll stop."

Sin's mouth dropped open, and he hunched forward. His fingers tightened around the edge of the counter. It emitted a cracking sound.

The corner of Boyd's mouth curled up in a smile. He dragged the heel of his hand along the iron length of Sin's cock, relishing in the hoarse sound that followed. His own body was on fire, alternating between a hollow ache in his gut, and a hungry need to taste Sin. The feeling only increased after tugging the band of Sin's briefs down and watching Sin's long, thick cock spring back to slap against his stomach.

For the first time, Boyd didn't force himself to look away. He feasted on the sight of that dick, and again, his mouth watered, and his hands trembled with anticipation. Unable to stop himself, Boyd wrapped his fingers around the base before casting another hungry glance up at Sin.

"Tell me."

"Please don't fucking stop."

Boyd could have blown his load just from those strained, pleading words. He leaned in to inhale Sin's musky scent, and his lips brushed the head of Sin's cock.

"I won't."

He ran his tongue along the length of Sin's dick, and watched Sin's stomach spasm in response. Their eyes locked when he tongued at the slit, teasing out another drop of pre-come, and shuddering at the salty taste.

"Suck it," Sin pleaded. He swallowed convulsively. "Boyd, *please*."

The words stripped away Boyd's patience, and he wrapped his lips around the swollen head. Long fingers slid into Boyd's hair, and he responded by pushing forward to take the entire length into his mouth. He relaxed his throat and worked it in until his lips met Sin's sac.

"Oh, fuck yes," Sin moaned.

Boyd needed more of those sounds, and he needed them louder. He bobbed his head up and down, cheeks hollowing as he sucked on the thick cock. Even while deep-throating, he remained riveted on Sin; hungrily watching every shift of emotion, and waiting for every bit of control to fall away until Sin was raw with need. Sin clutched Boyd's hair and guided him down faster; fucking Boyd's mouth while his breath staggered out loud enough to rival the whir of the air conditioner.

Sin's movements quickened, grew more demanding, and Boyd took it all. He reached down to massage Sin's balls, and Sin's hips lurched

forward, dick slamming deeper into Boyd's throat. He gagged and backed off with a slow drag of his tongue against the underside of Sin's cock before lapping at the head again. The fingers in his hair didn't loosen. If anything, Sin's gasps grew louder.

Boyd reveled in the taste, the touch, the quivering *need* emanating from Sin, and couldn't stop himself from taking it down his throat again. It tasted so good, felt so good, that his own breath came in harsh bursts. Dizziness overcame him, but Boyd didn't stop even when Sin humped his face harder.

Sin's hands were vices, his hips were pistons, and his balls slapped against Boyd's chin from the force of each thrust. The smell of him, the roughness—all of it undid Boyd until he fumbled with his shorts and underwear in order to grab his own erection. It pulsed in his hand as Sin's dick began to strain in his mouth.

"Shit," Sin whispered. "Jesus Christ, Boyd."

Boyd jerked himself faster and, as he watched, Sin's brows wound together before he released a hoarse shout and burst. Stream after stream of hot come shot down Boyd's throat, and he swallowed the load; Boyd did not pull away until Sin went slack against the counter.

Boyd licked his lips and got to his feet, one hand still gripping his cock. He was unsteady due to the intensity of his arousal, and it increased when Sin snagged the collar of his shirt and pulled him in for another kiss. This time, Sin was anything but hesitant.

He cupped the back of Boyd's head and worshiped his mouth, tongue searing into him as if Sin was trying to memorize his taste and absorb his very soul. It was so all-consuming that Boyd's knees weakened. He lost himself in the feel, smell, and taste of his partner. It was everything he had thought about for the past few months; everything he had always imagined it would be.

Their lips parted only when Sin's hands closed around Boyd's waist and lifted, effortlessly hauling Boyd up so he was sitting on the counter with his thighs spread apart. He pulled Boyd's shorts and underwear the rest of the way down and exposed him fully. The feel of Sin's hand wrapped around his dick jumpstarted Boyd's heart, and it galloped so fast he thought it might burst out of his chest.

The sureness that Boyd had felt at the start of this faded and was lost in a storm of months' worth of fascination and raw need finally unleashing between them. Sin's warm, wet mouth, his questing

tongue, the feel of the lip ring pressing against Boyd when they engaged in another greedy kiss—it was a sensory overload that made Boyd come close to exploding. It only heightened when Sin started jerking him off.

Boyd groaned loudly and sloppily returned the kiss. So often, he had watched those powerful hands, had fantasized about how they would feel on him, but the reality was exponentially better. Callouses, tempered strength, and friction made everything unbearably hot.

Moans tumbled from Boyd's lips, building and changing, and forming words.

"Faster," he panted against Sin's mouth. "Make me come. Please..."

Sin's grip tightened, the tempo of his fist increasing. "Like that?"

"Yeah," Boyd moaned. His voice went higher with each tug of Sin's hand. "Uhh... just like... Just like that. *Fuck.*"

Sin swiped his tongue against Boyd's lips and kissed down. He sucked on the side of Boyd's jaw and left a trail of fire in his wake. "You're so gorgeous," he uttered.

The words lit additional flames under the inferno blazing inside of Boyd. The entirety of his existence became the pressure of Sin's hand and his own approaching orgasm. It was in the rush of his blood and the building of air in his throat. He needed release. He needed everything.

Boyd barely had the presence of mind to notice Sin bending down, but the moist heat of Sin's lips engulfing the head of his cock prompted an abrupt explosion. He came so hard that the rush in his ears muffled the scream torn out of him. The release was staggering, and it catapulted his heartbeat. Boyd's breath guttered out in loud, broken gasps that did nothing to help him recover. Every coherent thought was destroyed.

He was vaguely aware of Sin's lips sliding off, of the feel of his dick so damp and sensitive in the warm air, and then of Sin kissing him before moving away. There was a rustle of clothing that prompted Boyd to blindly pull up his boxers. By the time he got them on, Sin was fully dressed and standing with his back pressed against the counter on the opposite side of the kitchen.

Boyd inhaled deeply and debated whether dropping down from the counter was worth the risk of weak knees. He did it slowly, and realized Sin was completely silent.

"Are you okay?"

Sin gave a jerky nod.

"Oh. Okay, good."

Boyd tried to get a read on Sin's mood and failed. Nervousness shredded the pleasant flutter in Boyd's stomach, but he tried to push it aside. He awkwardly grabbed his shorts and tossed them out of the kitchen, but was keenly aware of Sin's silent, and awkward, presence nearby.

"I'm glad you let me touch you. I was worried you would change your mind."

Sin shook his head and stood rigidly against the counter as if he was under attack.

"What's wrong?" Boyd stared in confusion. "Are you always like this after a blowjob?"

"No." Sin frowned. "I've never gotten a blowjob before."

The words did not compute at first. "Really? Never?"

"Yeah," Sin said, an edge in his tone. "Never."

"Oh." Boyd tried, and failed, to wrap his mind around that fact. Blowjobs were one of the first things he'd ever done. "Well, what did you do the other times?"

Sin's eyes narrowed, and he turned his head slightly to the side. "Other times?"

"Yeah. With other people. What did you do if no one ever blew you?"

Sin huffed out an incredulous laugh. "Boyd, you're insane. I've never even kissed anyone besides you."

"What?" Boyd's confidence was thrown asunder. He stumbled through his memories of their conversations. "You're a— But... You... *Really?*"

"What, were you counting Harry?" Sin recoiled. "That's disgusting."

"What? *No*. Jesus." Boyd could have gagged at the thought. "I just meant that you were so casual about the topic of sex, and you always seemed to know what you were doing with me, and—well—*look* at you. I thought for sure you'd already been with several others. I thought that's what you meant when we talked about it in the diner that one time; the night I told you I was gay."

"No..." Sin crossed his arms over his chest. "I was just making conversation because I was curious about the type of people you were

attracted to. I've never been with anyone. Ever. No one thinks of me that way at the Agency, and I want them all to die in a fire."

"But what about the years when you were allowed to go out on your own—before any of the major incidents? You were never tempted?"

Sin squinted at Boyd with the same incredulous skepticism he typically reserved for Owen's tangents. "Are you forgetting that I'm a reject of humanity and had to study before making small talk?"

"No, but you made casual sex sound like something that happens every day."

"Well, how the hell should I know what normal people do?" Sin demanded. "I was raised initially by a hooker and then by my father, who probably had more sex than a hooker. Based on what I saw while living with him, it seemed like a fair amount of people have casual sex."

Boyd held his hands up. "I'm not insulting you; I'm just explaining why I was surprised."

The realization brought a new light to their interactions as well as a sense of possessiveness. Boyd grinned.

"Don't make fun of me," Sin growled. "It's not cute."

"I'm not making fun of you. I'm just happy I got to be your first."

"You've pretty much been my first everything, Boyd."

It was true. He was the only one to have slept in the same bed as Sin, and who'd woken up to Sin's lean body crushing against his own. He was the only one to have kissed those lips; to have run his hands over Sin's muscular, scarred body, and sucked Sin's dick while watching him fall apart.

Only him. Those people at Noctis didn't matter. Sin only wanted him.

"If you keep saying things like that, you'll make it hard for me to keep my hands off you."

"Like that's a bad thing?" Sin pushed away from the counter and walked around the kitchen island. "Besides, I didn't see the point in telling you how inept at life I am at every possible avenue."

Boyd snorted. "You aren't inept. The way things started in France, and the way you were with me now, gave every impression that you know what you're doing."

Sin flopped down onto the couch with his legs extended in front of him. His head lolled to the side. "Well..."

Boyd followed Sin and raised an expectant eyebrow.

"Never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing. I said never mind." Sin's eyes fell on a crumpled pack of cigarettes, but he didn't rise to get them.

"Do you think I'm going to judge you for whatever you want to say?"

"You ask a lot of questions." Sin started to fidget with his raggedy jeans, fingering a hole in the thigh. "But maybe it seems like I know what I'm doing because I've been thinking about it for a long time."

"How long?"

"Eight months. Give or take a massacre or assassination."

Taken aback, Boyd could only stare at his partner and wonder how that was possible. Eight months ago they had only just begun to speak on civilized terms, and he had still been three quarters of the way inside of his reclusive shell.

"Is that when we started eating together after missions?"

"Earlier."

Boyd's initial surprise faded, and he remembered the evening of their argument in New York, and the way Sin had pressed him against the wall. "Was it... that night we argued? The time I walked into your apartment?"

Sin's attention swung back to Boyd. "Yeah. I'd noticed you were attractive prior to that, but that night was the first time I reacted in such a way."

"Reacted how?"

"I kept thinking about it after you left, and then those thoughts never stopped." Sin searched his face before confessing further, and even then, showed some reluctance to exposing every detail. "After that, all of these stupid, minor things would build on to the thoughts I was having. Anytime we were close, I remembered that night and wondered what would have happened if I'd kept you pressed up against the door."

The revelation was astonishing, but Boyd had always known things had changed after that night. The proximity of their faces, Sin's body pressed so close, and the buildup of tension from the mission had tipped the scale from objectively noticing Sin's beauty to Boyd's body becoming enflamed by his touch.

"There were times I wondered the same."

Sin brushed hair away from Boyd's temple. "Maybe I should have told you about all of the dirty shit I'd been thinking, and we could have figured this out a lot sooner."

"Oh?" Boyd moved closer until he felt the heat from Sin's body. "Well, it's never too late to start."

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes. I've spent a lot of time wondering whether you actually want me." Boyd traced Sin's profile with his finger and shivered when Sin kissed the side of his hand. "I worried for a while that I was reading into it; seeing something only in my mind. I never expected..." Boyd trailed off as Sin's words from nearly a year ago reverberated in his ears. "I didn't expect this to work."

"I didn't either. It probably won't." Sin shrugged, and he looked away to focus on the sunlight streaming in through the balcony. "I'll fuck up at some point."

"No, you won't. You never give yourself credit even though you've come so far. Even in the time we've known each other, you've..." Boyd gestured wordlessly. "If anyone screws up, it will be me."

At that, Sin scowled. Boyd half-expected a sarcastic comment or a dismissive snort, but instead Sin pulled him up to straddle his lap. Boyd slid forward until his knees dug into the back of the couch, and his crotch aligned with Sin's.

He could get used to this kind of treatment.

"Forget I said anything about that," Sin said. "But me wanting you was never just in your mind. I was just too afraid to ruin things after what happened in France, and I didn't know what to do except fantasize about you. For months."

"What did you fantasize about?"

"Everything. Touching you." Sin ran his hands up the sides of Boyd's shirt. "I fantasized about your taste. How you would look when you came..."

Boyd's heart skipped a beat. "What else?"

"I thought about exploring your body until I learned every part of it. Licking every inch of you, fucking you or you doing me..." Sin's dick stirred against Boyd and his grip tightened. "Coming inside of you. Or all over you. Fucking until we got messy and tired."

Boyd's cock jumped at the words. He ran his hands down Sin's shoulders, reveling in the feel of his bare skin.

"I wish I'd known," he murmured and trailed kisses up Sin's jaw before sucking on his earlobe. Sin gasped, and Boyd sucked harder, lathing the skin with his tongue, and pulling away with a light nip.

Sin wrenched Boyd closer and rutted up against Boyd slowly. It wasn't enough friction, but it still drove Boyd insane. He clutched Sin's shoulders and tilted his head down to run his tongue over Sin's full lips. Large hands slid around his waist before dipping down the back of his boxers, grabbing at his ass and teasing the cleft with fingertips. When one pressed against his hole, Boyd shuddered.

"Ah..."

"Do you like that?" Sin looked up at Boyd through a tumble of black hair.

"Yes," Boyd breathed.

Sin withdrew his hand and licked his fingers before sliding them down the seam of Boyd's ass again. He pressed the damp digits inward, teasing Boyd's entrance in a way that made him ache.

"Sin..." Boyd rocked back against the maddening touch. "Don't tease me unless you're going to follow through."

"I used to think about this every night." Sin's fingers rubbed the ring of muscles, the tips just barely going inside. A hiss guttered out of Boyd and his hips jerked back. "I thought about what I would do to you if you let me. If I let myself."

"You thought about it?" Boyd pressed their foreheads together and rolled his hard cock up against Sin's stomach. "You thought about how it would feel to fuck my ass?"

"All the time." Sin's free hand slid up Boyd's back and tangled in the short hair at the nape of his neck. "I've wanted you so bad, Boyd. You have no idea..."

"Then do it." Boyd sounded desperate even to his own ears, but he was beyond caring. With their chests pressed together, he felt the thrum of Sin's heartbeat increase. "I want it. I want you."

"Then take your boxers off."

Boyd slid off Sin's lap and pulled his boxers down, yanking so fast that he heard fabric tear. He watched Sin arch up and shimmy out of his jeans, managing to look like a goddamn porn star in the process. With his stomach clenching in anticipation, Boyd gave the studio a cursory glance. He jerked open one of the drawers in the chest, and rooted through his undershirts and boxers with unsteady hands.

Boyd located the bottle of oil he'd used for his injured back, and returned to the couch.

"Use this," he said, climbing back onto Sin's lap.

"What is it?"

"Grape seed oil." Boyd nearly laughed at Sin's uneasy expression. "I got it to massage my back, but it was more difficult than I anticipated without your assistance."

When Sin only eyeballed the narrow bottle, Boyd uncapped it himself. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he grasped the base of Sin's dick and drizzled the oil on it.

"It won't hurt you."

"Better not."

Boyd allowed the smile to spread. He slid his hand up and down. Oil smoothed over the thick column of flesh, and Sin sighed.

"Does that feel good?"

Sin dragged his teeth over his lower lip. "Really fucking good."

He was so sexy, so beautiful, that Boyd's hand stilled, and he could only stare. Even with their bodies crushed together, and with the taste of Sin in his mouth, Boyd could not believe this was happening. The sight of Sin's green eyes fastening on him, and only him, took Boyd's breath away. After a year of pushing each other away; a year of nothing but missions, fighting, and blood; of constant tension, fleeting looks, and never believing they would be this close... They finally were.

Boyd rose just enough to aim the slicked tip of Sin's cock against his entrance, and sank down until it was fully sheathed. The girth stretched him wide open in a way that burned, but it was Sin who whimpered before biting savagely on his lip.

Boyd's breath eased out in a slow exhale, and they remained still while he adjusted to the pressure. It burned, but it burned in a way that made him want to bounce up and down and take more despite the pain. It was worth it to feel this full.

He heard another muffled moan drip from Sin's wide mouth; felt Sin's body primed beneath him, and was stunned by the surreal quality of their clutching hands and joined bodies. All of it was too good to be true, and Boyd absurdly wondered if this was a vivid dream. But the trembling of Sin's thighs beneath him, and the grip of Sin's hands on his hips, was all too real.

Boyd undulated his hips, eyes nearly shutting, and whispered, “I want to hear you.”

Sin’s brows knotted together and his jaw clenched, but he still didn’t let a sound slip past his mouth. Boyd moved faster, rolled his hips, and clenched around Sin’s thick cock.

“Oh *fuck*,” Sin cried.

“That’s right.” Boyd flexed his hips faster. “Let me hear you, Hsin.”

Sin’s hands dug into him so hard that Boyd knew there would be bruises, but the thought of being marked by Sin, of being wanted this intensely, only made him hotter. Breath catching and volleying with moans, Boyd rode Sin hard. Everything darkened into a faded oblivion until nothing mattered but the feel of Sin’s cock spearing into him, faster and faster, and bringing the heat and intimacy of Monterrey deeper into Boyd’s body.

He’d wanted to hear Sin cry out, but soon it was Boyd’s own that rose; sounds tumbled from his lips in wordless supplication.

“You’re so tight,” Sin panted. He slammed Boyd down onto his dick, increasing the speed and force. “Feels so good...”

Boyd cried out and spread his legs wider. He clung to the couch, fucking himself onto Sin frantically, and willed the feeling of the steadily plunging cock to imprint on his mind forever. His eyes fluttered, but he didn’t let them close; Boyd refused to miss a second of this encounter. It was too perfect, too incredible, and he felt like he was going insane.

“More,” he pleaded. “Fuck me harder.”

Sin slunk down lower on the couch and bucked his hips up with more force, spearing his dick into Boyd. “Like that?” he growled.

“Yes! Yes, like that, *please*—”

The pace built until Sin’s cock stabbed into Boyd at an angle that made him wail. Lights burst behind his eyes, fire streaked through his nerves, and his breath was suddenly restricted.

“S-Sin—”

Sin grabbed the back of Boyd’s neck and yanked his face down again. Sin watched, appearing transfixed, as Boyd lost his mind—panting and moaning and rolling his hips in a circle as if it would somehow get Sin in even deeper. But then Sin surged up and flipped them over so Boyd was on his back with Sin kneeling above him. One of Sin’s feet braced against the floor and the other dug into the side

of the couch. Pushing Boyd's thighs open wider, Sin began to pound him so thoroughly that he nailed the brilliant spot deep inside Boyd with each flex of his hips.

Boyd's eyes rolled back in his head as he arched his back and reached up to brace himself against the side of the couch. Words tumbled out of his mouth in a disjointed garble of shouts and pleading; a nonstop chant of *fuck me, there, right there, make me come, please, please*, until his throat was raw. Explosions of pleasure rocketed through him with such intensity that it rode the razor's edge of pain. It was almost too much, too good, and that feeling tripled when Sin twisted Boyd in a way that really did let him sink in deeper. Their bodies contorted, slicked with sweat, and slapped together so loudly that it rivaled Boyd's cries.

When he could barely breathe, barely see, Boyd shot one hand down to clasp his dick. He burst instantly, shooting semen all over himself with a shout that resounded in his chest. Electricity hummed through him, sensitizing every inch of his body to Sin's touch.

Sin's hands were unsteady, and there was a tremor in his frame indicating how close he was, but Boyd could only hold on for the rest of the ride. He was dazed and turned inside out with pleasure, and mouthed at the rough line of Sin's jaw; he was too incoherent to do anything else while being fucked into delirium with furious strokes.

Their limbs twined together in a sticky press, Sin's torso sliding against Boyd's sweat-damp shirt, and his movements became more urgent. Boyd watched his partner fall apart and lose control before one last violent thrust unraveled him. The sound that ripped from Sin's mouth was loud enough to penetrate the walls, but he did nothing to muffle the helpless desperation of it, or the wrecked gasp of Boyd's name when he came. Boyd was flooded with Sin's come while those strong, powerful fingers trembled against his skin.

Sin crumpled on top of Boyd with his fingers and toes clenched up. He buried his face in Boyd's neck and sucked in gasps of air; he was a complete shuddering mess. Boyd smoothed his hand up Sin's sweaty back with a sluggish smile.

They stayed that way until the warmth of the studio and their tangled limbs turned Boyd languid. With Sin so close and his breath slowly steadying, all tension drained away, and Boyd fell into a contented silence.

SEVEN

WITH JUNE CAME a shortening of tempers in Monterrey. Fighting grew more common as the heat increased, and violence in the city skyrocketed in a way that put almost everyone on edge once darkness fell.

As a result, working at Noctis became problematic.

The presence of drug dealers and gang members tripled in Barrio Antiguo as well as in the club. Johnny, Aldair, and Jessica tolerated them as long as they didn't try to push their product too obviously, but Sin didn't take to their strategy of appeasement. When the dealers and bangers got out of line, he put them back in their place just like he would have done with anyone else. And that made his co-workers nervous.

Jessica called Sin into her office three times in the space of a month to lecture him about the potential outcomes of him slamming a thug's head through the wall, and how he was going to end up on the shitlist of some *sicario*. It would have been funny if it wasn't so fucking absurd, but he knew she had a point. Catching the attention of one of Monterrey's rivaling criminal organizations would complicate life to an extreme degree, and that would be a shame given how nice life was at the moment.

The studio had transformed.

They'd pushed the beds together, bought fans instead of relying only on the ancient A/C, and spent more than fifty percent of their time in bed, increasing the humidity level in the cramped space. It had only been a month, but they'd used that month to get to know each other's bodies.

Now, Sin had a firm awareness of how much Boyd could take, and for how long, until he begged and wailed loud enough for their neighbors to undoubtedly know the new nature of their relationship. Sin knew that Boyd liked it hard and fast; that he got off on rough sex.

It was a surprise. A nice one. Especially because Sin tended to forget to temper the strength in his hands once he was several inches deep in Boyd's ass.

The situation was surreal, and lethargy caused by a ceaseless

heatwave only added to the dreamlike state. Even a month ago, Sin would have never expected to wake up with Boyd's limbs tangled with his, to be able to kiss Boyd whenever he wanted, and for random middle-of-the-night sex to become a regular occurrence. Although, middle-of-the-day sex was now just as common.

Six weeks from the day Sin had started at Noctis, he called out from work for the first time.

At first, the concept of calling out had confused him. Sin didn't understand how people were allowed to take days off at random—most of the time without even having a valid reason—but apparently in the civilian world, employees didn't have to worry about being red-flagged and tortured for infractions.

It was a fascinating development.

When the alarm woke Sin for the early shift, it took only one look at the temperature, and a lingering glance at Boyd's sleeping form to decide to take advantage of the strange civilian privilege. Within ten minutes, Sin had texted Jessica and returned to the bed where he skinned down Boyd's briefs. Occasions when Boyd was still half-asleep and brought to wakefulness with ragged gasps turned Sin on like nothing else. The raw desire, unfocused pleas, and high keens emanating from Boyd's throat were hot enough to ignite flames or cause spontaneous combustion.

The half-hour after calling out was dedicated to fingering and tonguing Boyd's ass to the tune of his moans.

Jessica tried to call him twice, but Sin didn't consider picking up the phone. He was too focused on jabbing three fingers into Boyd and watching a rosy flush sweep over his skin while he spread his thighs open and groaned.

Boyd dug his heels into the bed and rocked his hips into Sin's hand. His expression fluctuated between open pleasure and near-grimaces. A steady stream of, *"uh, uh, uh"* and *"oh god, don't stop, keep going, keep going, please,"* rose and fell in varying volumes from his lips; sometimes it was a shout and sometimes it sounded like a whispered prayer.

The t-shirt he wore was crumpled at the base of his hips, providing glimpses of paler skin when Boyd rutted down. Sin's mouth curved into a filthy smile as he crooked his fingers and rubbed them faster against Boyd's prostate.

"Fuck!"

Boyd's hands grasped at the bed, scrabbling for a purchase he couldn't seem to find, and his feet slipped in the soaked sheets before catching. Blindly, he threw one hand away from the bed and reached for his straining erection.

"Not yet." Sin's voice was so husky it barely sounded like him. He worked his fingers in faster, massaging Boyd's sweet spot, and watched with fascination as pre-come oozed from the tip of Boyd's cock. It was tempting to lick it, but he restrained himself. "I want to see if you can come without touching it."

Boyd's moan rose in pitch, staggering out as if he was in pain. He clenched the sheets like it was his only lifeline and shook his head, eyes squeezed shut and mouth gaping.

"Please," he gasped. "Please, please, I want to—"

A strangled moan replaced the words when semen erupted from the slit of his cock. It leaked down the sides, sliding down his balls, and got all over Sin's hand.

Boyd went slack against the bed and sucked in deep breaths. "Goddamn..."

Sin pulled his fingers out and sat up straighter. The sight of Boyd splayed out and boneless was satisfying. "Calling out was a good idea."

Boyd huffed out a laugh that dwindled into a moan. He writhed on the bed, a languid slide of skin on sheets with his hands now lying curled beside him. "That felt so fucking good." Boyd jerked his chin at the erection straining between Sin's legs. "Do you want me to do anything about that?"

Sin was already stroking his dick with the hand covered in Boyd's jizz, but he reached out with the other and fisted a handful of red hair. He pulled and Boyd complied easily, sitting up with his face level to Sin's crotch.

"I want to come in your mouth."

"Go ahead," Boyd said with slow smile. "I want to taste you." He opened his mouth, curling his tongue outward to catch stray drops.

"I'm close," Sin panted, pumping faster, and returning the wicked smile. He angled the head of his dick towards Boyd's lips, brushing the tip against them with each violent tug. "I've been close for thirty fucking minutes."

With his hand moving so fast it blurred, it didn't take long for him

to release his load into that waiting mouth. He hunched over, panting, and Boyd licked his lips with a contented hum after swallowing it all.

The studio filled with the low sound of Sin's deep breaths, the oscillation of the fan, and then a protesting squeal when Sin threw himself down onto the mattress. He grabbed the sheet and wiped his hand on it, too lazy to clean up properly.

"This is what my plan is for the day," he said when Boyd stretched out beside him. "Sex. Food. Not see irritating and drunken civilians that I want to slaughter."

Boyd rolled onto his side and slid his leg between Sin's. "I like this plan. You should call out more often."

"Not going to happen."

"What a shame." Boyd pillowed his head with an arm and stretched out the other to caress Sin's bare, sweaty arm. "It really turns you on to watch me get off, doesn't it?"

"It's good entertainment." Sin propped his head up on the pillow and met Boyd's eyes. Boyd still looked half-asleep and that, combined with his messy hair and damp, flushed skin, made for a gorgeous picture. "And after months of you barely having an expression, I like watching you lose control. You look... really good when you let go."

"You've definitely become an expert at making *that* happen." Boyd traced up Sin's bicep and down to his chest, pausing to circle one dark nipple. The delicate touch sent goosebumps rippling along Sin's skin. "I like it, though," Boyd murmured. "It's the only time I feel safe letting go."

"Good. You'll always be safe with me. Unless I have a psycho fit and rip your head off."

Boyd snorted. "I'll take my chances."

His fingertips glided over Sin's chest and ran along the old scar that slashed halfway across his throat. After ghosting over it, Boyd pushed himself up on his elbow and surveyed each of Sin's scars. It was almost as if he'd never seen them before, but Sin realized it had always been from a distance.

Boyd rubbed his thumb over the thick scar tissue that arced up just under Sin's scrotum and ended at his left hip.

"What happened here?"

"Do you really want to know?" Sin raised an eyebrow. "It's a Harry story."

Boyd's mouth curled down. "Even more now."

The memory of the day was a blur to Sin, but Harry repeating the story to him for the past few years made the details crystal clear.

"It happened after I hurt Lydia. Back then there was no box, but they always kept me confined, and I was generally sedated even when I was not in trouble. They put me on drugs to allegedly keep me calm; not unconscious but doped up enough to be a worthless human being."

The disgust on Boyd's face was clear, and he shook his head. "That's so ridiculous. Was it a different cell than the one where the box is now?"

"No. They had me in that cell in the Maximum Security wing even when I wasn't actually red flagged for something. They just didn't have the box installed, and there was no window like there is now. I was locked in and nobody could see what was happening inside." He paused and tried to reorder his thoughts, but attempting to explain his sordid and convoluted history with Harry was as confusing as it was disturbing.

"When I started seeing Lydia—before the attack—Harry had just been assigned to the Fourth. He was first given the grand tour, and the guard captain brought Harry to my cell to give him a rundown of the Monster. As soon as he saw me, I could tell something was off. He started coming back and talking to me even though I could barely respond. He ended up on most night shifts, brought my meals when he could, and managed to end up being my escort every time I was taken to another part of the compound, but he didn't show his true colors until after I got that scar."

Boyd's hand tightened on Sin's hip. "What happened?"

"Lydia was popular around the compound because she and her sister grew up here. Lydia in particular was popular with the men, and the guards on the Fourth were no exception. They saw her not infrequently because she would go up there to make house calls to inmates." Sin had met her long before that, but discussing Lydia *and* Ann's relationship with his father was not something he relished. "A rumor went around that I'd raped her. It was a lie, but no one cared. A couple of the guards on the Fourth decided to do some kind of ritualistic honor castration to avenge her." Sin tapped the scar. "They nearly finished, but my hero Harry came in and saved my balls."

Boyd's eyebrows shot up. "What the hell—could they have actually gotten away with that?"

"I don't think Connors would care about the state of my scrotum if I can still function as an agent. He has threatened to do it himself if he ever finds out I'm sexually active."

"*Why?*" Boyd demanded. "Why does that matter to him?"

"Because he wants me to be alone. I'm sure you've realized it by now, Boyd." Sin closed his eyes, and let the continuous strokes of Boyd's hand soothe him. "The Agency doesn't care about any of us. We're tools for them to use, and they will do the minimum to keep us functional and loyal. Connors learned long ago that he could do whatever he wanted to me, and I would still be his perfect little soldier. He never had any incentive to do anything else until Carhart convinced him to try this past year. And it's worked a little, so they gave me an apartment and a decent partner, but as soon as I piss him off, it will be back to the box."

"I just don't understand," Boyd insisted. "I don't see him treating others this poorly. At least, not out in the open. I have realized that he intentionally ostracizes you, but I don't see why you of all people deserve this treatment. It doesn't make any sense."

"That's because I never told you how much he hated my father." Sin opened his eyes and smiled humorlessly. "Connors despised him, and he disliked me as soon as he saw my face. I'm just material that he can't pass up."

"That's absurd."

"Well, he is an irrational, and sadistic, piece of shit."

Boyd nodded in agreement, and pressed a kiss to Sin's chest. "So that day how did Harry get involved?"

"He showed up in my cell to carry out his self-imposed duty of making sure I actually ate or drank something for the day, and there they were. Had me half-naked and tied down with the knife ready to slice." Sin cupped his balls protectively. "Harry went insane. Slammed one of their heads into the wall so hard the guy's skull cracked, and the other got so scared that he yanked the knife up from my groin, but still wound up cutting me pretty deep."

Boyd's hand slid down to cover Sin's. "That may have been the only useful thing he ever did. He was still a sick person."

"They should have never brought him in," Sin said. "There was

something wrong with him. Something worse than whatever is wrong with me. He really thought we had a connection. He would tell me all of these strange things and had invented an entire relationship in his head. It just got worse after he protected me.”

The memory of waking up to find Harry looming, or crouching, beside him was etched into Sin’s brain; a visual he could call forth with disturbing ease. The feel of Harry’s hands on him, his muttered insistence that Sin needed him; that without him, Sin would have been passed around and tortured in ways that other inmates—inmates without “protection”—were subjected to in Maximum Security.

And maybe that was true. The nature of Maximum Security and the constant dehumanization of the inmates turned some of the guards into monsters. Harry hadn’t been the only sicko on the Fourth, but Sin was still glad the bastard was dead. Especially after what he had tried to do to Boyd.

The craving for a cigarette grew, but Sin squeezed Boyd’s shoulder instead of rising from the bed.

“So that’s the end of that story.”

Boyd laid his head on Sin’s shoulder and rested a palm against a discolored stretch of skin on his side. “I want to ask about the others, but will hearing the stories make me want to kill everyone involved?”

“Maybe just one of them.” Sin ran his fingers through Boyd’s hair. He still wasn’t used to the red. “But I’ll keep it a surprise.”

Boyd gave a soft, humorless laugh, and prodded the discolored patch. “Then what about this one?”

“Courtesy of Perfect Agent Trovosky. The other rank 10 agent.”

“Oh... I’ve overheard agents talking about him. Apparently, they believe he should have been given the position in General Carhart’s unit instead of you. That if he had, the Marshal wouldn’t have had to bring in a piece of shit like me to be your partner. They said other things, but I got the overall impression of him being well-regarded on compound.”

“He is.” Sin’s lip curled. “Kassian is the complete opposite of me. All-American with blond hair and blue eyes, follows every command, and always says sir and ma’am. People are so far up his ass I’m surprised they shipped him off to Siberia for so long, but I suppose there was no one else with the clearance.”

"So then, what happened? If he's so well liked and follows the Agency's lead, did he hurt you knowing no one would stop him?"

"No. He is a douchebag with a superiority complex, but that bleeding heart wouldn't hurt me just for spite." Explaining why he despised Kassian would take longer than Sin was willing to spend on the topic. "When they hold rank 10 trainings they use me as a model of their ideal fighter. When Kassian was doing it, they made me spar with him. I heckled him until he lost his temper and tackled me into a weapons rack. Something sliced off a good chunk of skin on my side."

Boyd winced. "Ow."

"I still beat the shit out of him."

"What about the other ones?"

"These are from missions," Sin said, indicating his neck and the bullet wound in his shoulder. "The burn—" He twisted his forearm to show a stretch of curdled skin to Boyd. "—is from my father's friend. He did it with a lighter when I was a ten. He was a fucking idiot and thought it was a good way to test my pain tolerance."

"Wow. How'd that work out for him?"

A shred of unease cut through the pleasure of having Boyd so near, and Sin answered with care. "My father was angrier than I was when it was said and done."

Boyd nodded and watched as Sin grabbed a pack of cigarettes that had tumbled to the floor the night before. He lit one and blew a cloud of smoke into the air. When Boyd did not reply, Sin wondered if Boyd somehow saw through his vague answers; whether he sensed Sin's childhood had been almost as violent as his adulthood.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Boyd sat up with his back against the head of the bed. "Just, you don't seem to mind scars even when they signify a horrible incident. Do you think..." Boyd trailed off; he was clearly uncertain.

"Do I think what?"

Boyd picked at the edges of his leather wristbands. "I don't know. I feel stupid bringing it up."

Sin took a slow drag from his cigarette and pressed his back against the wall closest to the window. "You don't have to talk about anything if you don't want to."

"No... I want to. But I worry." He hazarded a glance at Sin. "You might not want me anymore if I tell you, and that would be unfortunate."

"I don't see how that's even a remotely reasonable assumption," Sin said around a mouthful of smoke.

"I don't know." Boyd continued to examine his leather cuffs. "I'm ashamed of a lot of it, and you're... you're so much stronger in comparison. Nothing seems to bother you. If you knew why I am the way I am, you might not respect me anymore. You might think I'm weak and pathetic, and lose interest."

Several responses cycled through Sin's mind; examples of occasions when he truly could have lost interest in Boyd because of their fighting and the problems resulting from it—but rehashing their drama was not likely to encourage Boyd.

"I don't see why, after everything, you even think that is a possibility. Whatever you think about yourself and what happened to your friend has been put in your head by someone that isn't me."

"Maybe." Boyd smoothed out the sheets next to him. It seemed, for a time, that he might leave it at that, but before the silence grew too taut he drew in a deep breath. "Do you want to know? Why—" Boyd gestured to the shirt he wore even though the heat index was over a hundred. "Why I always wear this?"

"Of course I do. I've always wanted to know."

"Before, you said you knew my friend died. That you read my file. What all did you see?"

An image of blood splattering the filthy concrete infiltrated the warm haze of the room. Sin blinked, banishing the memory. "Everything about the attack and some things relating to your hospitalizations, but there were no details."

"So I won't have to rehash... that day." Boyd's shoulders slumped, and he nodded in relief. "And Lou? Did it say much about him?"

"Yeah, he has a file at the Agency. There's information about his parents, their deaths, and some about him after they died." Sin studied the cherry of his cigarette. There were more cons than pros when it came to being honest about everything the Agency had, but withholding the information was setting Boyd up for an uglier surprise down the road. "There's a video of the attack."

"A video?" Boyd frowned uncertainly. "Like what, a news story about it?"

"No." Sin sucked on the cigarette once more before stubbing it out on the window sill. He tucked it into the wedge between it and the

screen. “Boyd, there’s a full video of the murder. One of the kids involved recorded it.”

The uncertainty faded until there was nothing left, and Boyd resembled the blank-faced boy Sin had met over a year ago. Silence filled the space between them until Sin searched his brain for a way to reverse what he’d said and get them back to where they had been, but it was too late. The damage was done, and he knew Boyd deserved to know.

“I see,” Boyd said flatly. “And... the Agency just happens to have this in my files even though the police allegedly never had enough evidence.”

“The police had the evidence but failed to present it for an indictment. They were crooked.”

“Well, that’s just fucking wonderful.” Anger broke through Boyd’s neutrality and darkened his tone. “Now I’m even happier you made Jared pay.”

“From what I could see, he was behind a lot of murders and rapes in that area in that time period. He kept trophies of his kills.”

Boyd shuddered and rubbed a hand over his wrist again. “I can’t talk more about Jared if I’m going to tell you anything. I’ll... It throws me off too much. But—No, I can’t even say I’m glad to know about the video. But it’s probably a good thing.”

Sin grabbed Boyd’s hand and folded it in his own to keep it from scraping at the cuff. “It’s best if you’re aware of it.”

“Yeah.” Boyd drew in a breath, let it out, and then nodded. He still wouldn’t look at Sin.

“You don’t have to tell me anything, Boyd.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m being stupid.” He squeezed Sin’s hand. “I won’t tell you anything you already know, but whatever they have in my files probably can’t do justice to why Lou was so important to me, and without that information nothing afterward will make sense.”

“If you’re sure...”

“I am.” Boyd sat up straighter and stopped inspecting his wrists. “It probably isn’t a surprise, but people have always treated me the way they do at the Agency. In school I was quiet, and I was bullied because of that, my appearance, and just... everything. At home, my parents forgot I existed half the time. I learned early on how to disappear even if others were in the room so I wouldn’t bother them.

It's part of the reason why I began drawing. When my father wasn't busy, he seemed to care for me, but he died when I was seven. My mother..." Boyd shot Sin a wry look. "Well, you know how she is. The only person who ever cared, whoever stood up for me and acted like I meant something, was Lou. He was the only one who made me feel like it was okay to be me, and who wanted me."

Boyd's feelings about Lou mirrored Sin's own thoughts about Boyd; he had been the only one to stand up for Sin; the only one to show interest or care. "I can understand that."

Boyd nodded absently. "I don't know what it says in the files, but Lou was everything to me. My best friend, like a brother, and when we grew older we were also lovers. I thought he would always be in my life. We even got these stupid tattoos together." He touched the left side of his stomach. "Mine says *Ad Vitam Paramus*, we are preparing for life, and his was *Luctor et Emergo*, I struggle and survive. But he didn't. A few months later, Jared killed him."

"What does the other tattoo mean? You have two."

"I have three. One on my stomach, one on each shoulder. I got the shoulder tattoos later. They mean 'through my greatest fault' and 'worthless body.'"

Sin could almost guess what had happened next. "So, you got those after he died."

"Yes. I was really fucked up. After leaving the tattoo parlor... it was all too much. I wanted to destroy the other tattoo—the one I'd gotten with Lou. So, I took a knife from the kitchen and planned to cut off the skin, but I kept stabbing until the handle was so bloody I couldn't hold it anymore. I wanted to die the way he did because it was my fault; because I couldn't save him."

Recalling the video was easy—Sin had replayed it in his mind on his way to Jared's squat in the Industrial District so many months ago. He remembered watching Boyd struggle on the ground as Lou died, and the sound of Jared's voice mocking his helplessness. More than before, Sin was glad to have murdered Jared. Glad to have made him suffer.

"How did you survive?"

"My mother found me and took me to the hospital before I lost too much blood. They said I was lucky I didn't die or do permanent damage, but I didn't feel that way." Boyd touched the cuffs covering his

wrists again. "My mother convinced them it wasn't self-inflicted, or at least not to officially record it that way, and she made them release me, but it only made things worse because I still wanted to die. The second her back was turned, I went into the bathroom and slit my wrists. She found me again because I was too foolish to wait until she inevitably left me again."

The information filled in the blanks of the Agency's file, and it explained the multiple hospital visits. Sin wondered what Vivienne had said or done to the hospital staff to keep Boyd out of the psychiatric ward when he had clearly been a threat to himself.

"I'm surprised she didn't put you in Willowbrook Home." Where Lydia is, Sin added silently. "Your mother doesn't seem like the kind of person to spend her time tending to another."

"Putting me in a home would have made it known that her child was defective and weak. But you're right; she didn't waste time watching me." Boyd's hands drifted from the cuffs only to fold over his stomach, pressing down. "I don't know if she drugged me or if I blocked things out, but sometime later I woke up tied to my bed. Alone. She left me in the house and returned to... wherever she lives."

"Your mother is a fucking bitch," Sin said flatly. "Not that I'm surprised, considering she made Harry test out my collar the first time we met, but she is actually worse than I thought."

Boyd smiled faintly. "It's true. She left me that way for... a long time. I screamed until my voice was gone, and the horror of being unable to move has always stayed with me. At the time, I didn't know if I wanted to be released or if I wanted someone to kill me."

The words hit home like a missile strike, and Sin recalled the first time Harry had dragged him to the box. The rising sense of panic, screaming, crying, clawing at the walls, and begging for someone to just incinerate him. After that, Connors had allowed the doctors to administer sedatives. The box was supposed to be a punishment, but it wasn't supposed to make him completely lose his mind. If it did, he'd be worthless.

"I understand more than you think. If I'm conscious when in the box that's how it is for me."

"I figured it might be. That's why it bothers me so much when you're in there, why it's so important to me you get out right away. I know how it feels to have your greatest fears used against you." Boyd sighed

and slouched forward, burying his face in his hands. He massaged his temples. “Anyway, after my first mission she called me in and implied she’d have me restrained if I failed again. The possibility... It terrifies me. I would break for good, and it would be at someone else’s mercy. I’d go insane waiting for someone to help me but knowing no one ever would because she would leave me like that forever.”

Outside, the deafening impact of a jackhammer breaking into concrete broke the stillness of the stifling room. Sin hadn’t noticed how much hotter it was with his mind riveted on different methods of torturing Vivienne.

When he didn’t speak, Boyd looked up and pressed a hand over his diaphragm.

“Some of the scars are here. They’re worse in some places than others. And,” he tipped his covered wrists toward Sin. “Here, they’re jagged. I avoid looking at them, so the thought of anyone else seeing them is horrifying. It brings back too much. Makes it all too real.”

“Will you ever show me?”

“Yeah. I just—” Boyd clenched the fabric of his tank top and then slowly released. “I can’t yet. I know it’s stupid, but I don’t want to risk freaking out. I’ve never told anyone any of this. The only people who ever saw it were the doctors and my mother, and I don’t know what I’d do.”

“It’s okay. I understand.” Sin stood and unpeeled the damp sheet from the back of his thighs, tossing it on the mattress in a heap. The bed reeked of sweat, fucking, and them. At one time, such a thing would have seemed unimaginable. “But, I won’t let her hurt you again.”

“Thank you.” Boyd followed Sin with his eyes before quickly dropping his own. “You really don’t think less of me?”

Sin walked around the other side of the bed and grabbed hold of Boyd’s arm, pulling him to the edge. He touched Boyd’s chin and forced him to look up. Three months in Monterrey and a smoldering, new confidence when it came to getting Sin off had clearly not replaced Boyd’s low sense of self-worth. Apparently that had just been set aside to lay dormant.

Sin brushed his thumb against Boyd’s cheek, and he wondered how much things would change when this mission was done; when they were forced to return to Lexington and life went back to normal.

Sin's chest tightened at the thought, but he exhaled and ignored the stricken feeling.

This fucking mission was making him weak.

"Don't ask me dumb questions."

A small smile filtered through the darkness. Boyd placed his hand over Sin's, keeping it there as he turned his cheek into Sin's palm. "I always thought anyone who knew would think I was weak. Pathetic. Why wouldn't they, if my own mother does?"

"Your mother is a piece of shit, Boyd. Let's not forget that key detail." Sin pressed a kiss to Boyd's forehead, and smirked when Boyd's arms encircled him. One tug and Sin was sprawled on top of Boyd in the bed. "Ready for round two?"

"Shut up." Boyd laughed, and most of the tension bled out of him. "I do wonder what she would think if she knew about this, though. What anyone back at the Agency would think if they saw us now."

"Carhart would wonder why we're lying in bed wasting time instead of working on our mission."

Boyd wrapped his legs around Sin's as if to keep him from leaving. "Carhart would have to accept that we deserve some rest. You're integrating better at Noctis than anyone expected, and I've made some headway on that dead kid."

"Godamnit, Boyd." Sometimes, Sin wondered if the luck of success—for both of them—had made Boyd cocky. If adrenaline had become a drug for him like so many other field agents; so intoxicating that he was capable of forgetting there was still such a thing as real danger. "You don't fucking listen, do you?"

"Don't act like you don't like it sometimes."

"Sometimes, but not when you're investigating cartel shit. It's not a good plan." Sin shook his head, but didn't make an effort to escape Boyd's loose hold. He exhaled. "What did you find out?"

"The kid was known as La Rana, and he ran with Santiago's crew." The emotional disposition of mere minutes ago disappeared as Boyd's professional mien took over. "Santiago controls a decent-sized territory and people are wary of him, but I got the impression that he isn't much of a threat. It seems La Rana encroached on the territory of another cartel while selling drugs, and offending that particular group was the worst move he could make. Jorge said *no one* touches this guy, and getting in his way is what got La Rana killed."

“So, who’s the guy?”

“Someone named Lo Más Chingón. What does that mean, by the way?”

“The baddest motherfucker.” Sin pried Boyd’s legs from around his waist and sat up on the edge of the bed. A hint of apprehension lowered his voice. “And?”

Boyd propped himself up on his elbows. “People are terrified of him. Jorge freaked out after accidentally saying his name. I’ve developed rapport with some other people in the city—people I trust not to spread questions I ask—and every single one of them shut down the second I said asked about him. Even days later, they appeared wary.”

The apprehension, if anything, spread further. Sin was convinced that murder was written into his DNA, and that was in large part because of his family’s long history with the cartels. “Do you think this has any bearing on our mission? An actual direct connection, not just a possible one.”

“I don’t know yet,” Boyd admitted. “I need to do more research. One reason I’m interested is because I need to determine the boundaries of their territories and their characteristics. The last thing we need is to draw the wrong attention if I pick a safehouse in the wrong location.”

“But going around asking questions about people like this can also bring the wrong kind of attention to our doorstep,” Sin countered. “And I don’t look forward to having to shoot my way out of this fucking city one drug dealer at a time. I’m good, but I’m not a miracle worker. These cartels are more sophisticated and dangerous than some of the insurgent groups the Agency sends us after.”

“I know. That’s why I only asked people I already have a relationship with. At this point, I can’t inquire directly about Lo Más Chingón for a while without drawing too much attention to myself.”

Sin nodded, but an ominous feeling formed in the pit of his gut even though he could not explain why. Boyd’s interactions with the shadier locals hadn’t triggered this kind of foreboding until the dead boy’s body had been found.

“Just be careful,” he said quietly. “If either of us makes a wrong move on this mission I can tell you without a single doubt... We’re both done.”

EIGHT

THE WAREHOUSE ATTACHED to the restaurant was unusually tall for an area dominated by low-rise buildings. The streets were skinny and crowded with stripped, abandoned vehicles and overgrown trees. Hidden in a recess in an empty auto shop beside the warehouse, Boyd watched the dim play of light on the compacted dirt.

Nearly a month earlier, he had stopped at the restaurant for lunch while scoping out the neighborhood. It was a local spot, and he had received a few odd looks upon entering, but their attention faded after he ordered in Spanish and proceeded to sit quietly while drawing.

Nothing about the business had stood out until he noticed the warehouse in the back. There had been nothing out of the ordinary aside from its height, and the fact that it appeared unused.

The next time Boyd was in the area, he ate at the restaurant again and tried to figure out why the towering structure had caught his eye. There was nothing suspicious about the restaurant itself but what he realized, after analyzing his surroundings throughout lunch, was that Julieta's red flag was its very averageness.

The food was okay, but there was no extra effort or flare put into the plates; the pricing was standard if a little low; and the staff's clothing, mannerisms, and hairstyles allowed them to blend in with each other and make them unmemorable. The décor was plain, and the menus were unimaginative. The hours were within the average range, and there were always empty tables but never so many to make the restaurant appear unfrequented. Everything combined to make the place entirely forgettable in a way that reminded Boyd of tactics he used during missions when he needed to blend.

The same day, Boyd snuck to the back of the warehouse. It was in good condition; there were no broken windows, rusted locks, or graffiti on the walls; it was definitely not abandoned. One side of the warehouse was blocked by a broken fence with boxes and garbage piled precariously against it, and the other side was separated from Julieta's by a dirt driveway.

There were few ways to get close to the warehouse without drawing notice. The only doors were locked or could not be accessed without

exposing his position, and the windows were locked on the lower level as well. The windows in the upper floors did not seem as secure, but he could not think of a way to reach them without making a spectacle of himself.

Boyd stuck to the exterior and spotted thick tire tracks around the building. They were old, but it was clear that at some point, multiple trucks had gone through the driveway and parked in front of the warehouse. More intrigued than ever, Boyd began staking out the mysterious building to gather more information.

The staff of Julieta's did not use the driveway or the warehouse to receive deliveries; they met with vendors and mail carriers from the front road which blocked it for the entire duration of the unloading period. The employees and truck drivers acted as though the warehouse did not exist. It was entirely possible that the owner of Julieta's had just failed to lease or buy the warehouse despite its close proximity, but Boyd strongly suspected the restaurant was a front not unlike the way the Johnson's Pharmaceuticals compound served as a front for the Agency.

Jorge claimed to know nothing, but Boyd did not give up on his hunch.

After weeks of surveilling, Boyd began staking out the place later and later, and he used an abandoned autoshop, which neighbored the warehouse, for cover. It sat in the looming shadow of a taller building, and was boarded up with scraps of wood and stucco. Boyd found a single spot with a view of the warehouse's driveway and crouched there for nearly an hour before the still scene changed.

Two trucks trundled down the narrow street and pulled up next to the warehouse. Men jumped from the vehicles but did not turn the engines off. One of them smacked the back of the truck he'd been driving and trilled something so fast in Spanish that Boyd couldn't catch a word. More men appeared from the back of the truck while the driver loped up to the warehouse door and unlocked it.

Boyd strained his neck to see, but he could only catch the tiniest glimpse of crates stacked in a dark corner. Returning his attention to the truck, Boyd watched the men unload crates and containers emblazoned with the phrase "4FF." It meant nothing to Boyd, and he had never heard of a cartel or gang with that name.

Based on the size and heft of the crates, and the clandestine nature

of the operation, Boyd wondered if they were dealing arms. There was no way to confirm the theory. He had no choice but to wait until the man left to break in, even if it meant damaging the lock.

Boyd started to retreat further into the darkness, but a knife pressed against his throat.

"Hola, chico."

Boyd froze, and a man pressed against his back.

"¿Qué chingados haces aquí, pinche maricón?" the man murmured in Boyd's ear as the knife dragged back and forth across his neck. Even without seeing him, Boyd could tell the man was strong, stealthy, adept with a blade, and judging by the way he accounted for minute movements, he was a professional. Had to be cartel.

Great.

"No hablo español," Boyd replied on reflex. He put his hands up and scanned the area for make-shift weapons and cursed himself for not bringing his own.

There was a soft snort against his ear and lips brushed Boyd's skin. "I asked what the fuck you're doing here, faggot?"

Boyd's heart pounded, but he redirected to de-escalation while attempting to gather as many clues as possible. Although the man spoke fluent Spanish, he had an American drawl when speaking English. "Please don't hurt me, man. I got lost."

"You've been casing this place for weeks, pendejito."

Boyd's heart nearly stopped. He had not seen anyone around the warehouse, but apparently this man had seen him. How was it possible? Did the group know more about his activity elsewhere even though he'd never noticed a tail?

"I did, but I didn't mean to be a problem, I swear. I'm an urban explorer and there are some great buildings in Monterrey. I found this one first," he pointed to the auto shop without lowering his hands, "but then I thought the warehouse was cool and wanted to look inside. Only, I couldn't tell if it was in use or not. I didn't want to trespass so I've been keeping an eye out. If it belongs to you, I'll leave. I promise."

The man wrapped an arm around Boyd and dragged him further into the shadows. The scale of the building cut off the view of the sky and the ambient light. Sounds were conversely muffled and more prominent; the men talking at the warehouse became a distant

susurrations while the occasional loud laughter from a busier street blocks away sounded unattainable.

Boyd twisted his head to see his captor, but it didn't help. All he could tell was that the man was a couple of inches taller than him and wore long-sleeved, dark clothing.

"Urban explorer?" The words rolled off his tongue sarcastically, and Boyd felt a slight tremor in the man's frame which indicated laughter. "*No me chingues.*"

They stopped moving at the dead end where the shadows fell like a second night. Before Boyd's eyes adjusted to the new layer of darkness, he was flung around and his chest was crushed against the wall with his legs shoved apart. The knife returned to his throat while the man's other arm snaked around Boyd's lower body to grip his balls. Boyd inhaled sharply.

"Do something stupid and you become a eunuch. I doubt your boy toy would be thrilled with that."

In spite of the casual tone, there was an undercurrent of danger in his captor's voice. Boyd focused on the feel of the cinder block digging into his cheek, and his trapped helplessness or the blade biting into the base of his throat.

This was fine, Boyd told himself. He was okay. He could get out of this. He just had to keep being Kadin. Kadin wasn't afraid of knives. Kadin didn't have merinthophobia. Kadin would be calm.

Boyd repeated the mantra in the hopes that the words would drown out the thundering of his heart. "What do you want?" he asked quietly.

"*You didn't catch me peeping into your house, pendejito.*" The man lightly squeezed Boyd's scrotum. "*¿Qué quieres?*"

"I told you," Boyd hissed. It took every ounce of his self-control to not struggle against the threatening grip on his testicles. "I just wanted to look around. I'm an artist. I draw the insides of these places, and I sell them back home for high dollar to the people too scared to leave the country. I could show you some samples. I'll even give you some to sell if you don't hurt me."

"You have some *huevos, chico.*" Boyd could feel the man's soft lips forming a smile against his ear. "But keep fucking around and you won't have any left." The hand became a fist, and Boyd could not contain a whimper. "Are you alone?"

“Yes.”

“Hmm. I see.” Boyd couldn’t decide if the man sounded disappointed or pleased. “¿*Dónde está su novio?*”

If the man knew enough about Sin, or Jason, to realize they were lovers, he had been watching for a while. Boyd cursed himself and wondered how long it had been since this guy had followed him back to the studio. It should have been impossible—he’d never seen a soul.

“He isn’t my boyfriend.”

“I thought you didn’t speak Spanish.”

Boyd grit his teeth. “Are you going to tell me what you want or pin me against the wall all night?”

“I thought you liked it against the wall, *chico*.”

“Why would you say that?” Boyd demanded

The man crushed his body against Boyd’s harder and kneaded his sac in a way that was more suggestive than threatening. Boyd recoiled and felt a huff of air when the man laughed and canted his hips forward harder.

“I know you’re a nasty slut who begs for it when you’re pinned against a wall just like this one.”

Boyd’s mind flooded with memories from a month prior. After a night of drinking, Sin had demanded Boyd meet him halfway between Noctis and the studio. Boyd had rushed over thinking Sin was too wasted to make it back without drawing notice, but his partner had just been impatient and horny. They’d stumbled down a dark side road, found a space where no one would see or overhear them, and Sin had fucked him ruthlessly against the wall. He’d managed to stay relatively quiet—and had savaged his lower lip in the process—so anyone following them would have had to have been very close to see or hear what they were doing. A chill went down Boyd’s spine. How had neither of them known?

Yeah, well,” he said, gathering his thoughts. “Remove the knife and maybe we can talk.”

“You’ll talk regardless. Why are you spying?”

Losing patience, Boyd tried a new approach. “I want to know what’s in the crates.”

“Why are you interested in the crates?” came the fast retort. “Why would an unemployed artist care about my warehouse?”

“You answered your own question. I’m broke, and I can’t keep

relying on my roommate. Finding work here is almost impossible for someone with no trade skills or experience, so I needed to get creative.” The man applied more pressure, and Boyd’s cheek scraped against the wall harder. He winced and added, “I’m trying to find an in with one of the blackmarket groups, and I wondered if maybe that was your kind of thing. Maybe that’s what’s in the boxes.”

Finally, Boyd was spun around so his back slammed against the wall, and he stood face-to-face with his attacker. A hood draped low over the man’s face; all Boyd could see was a faded scar going through the left side of a generous mouth.

“There’s bread in the boxes,” he drawled. “And I’m the baker. I get very touchy—” The blade rose to Boyd’s throat again. “—When people touch my bread. So don’t be a constipator. Don’t fuck with my shit, and I won’t be an unhappy baker.”

“Okay, okay.” Boyd lifted his hands. “I won’t touch your bread. Sorry. I already know a good place on Modesto, anyway.”

“Uh huh.” His captor didn’t sound convinced but, again, there was a hint of amusement. “If I catch you sneaking around here again I really will cut your prick off. Got it, *cabrón*?”

Boyd dropped a hand to cover his crotch and nodded. “Got it.”

The man snorted and shoved Boyd toward the warehouse. “Enough. *Vete*.”

Boyd stumbled into the driveway, but he turned and squinted into the darkness. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Lo Más Chingón.”

Boyd’s eyes widened but, before he could react, someone shouted from the front of the warehouse. He whipped his head to the side, but no one approached and when Boyd turned to Chingón again, he was gone.

Where the hell had he gone? Boyd hadn’t heard even a whisper of movement and trying to vault up one of the walls should have loosened the stones.

What the hell was he, the Mexican Batman?

Regardless of the mystery, Boyd hurried away before Chingón changed his mind. He used a circuitous route to return to the studio. His caution was worthless if he hadn’t detected someone following him for months but, even so, Boyd continued his habit of blending in with others on the sidewalk and changing direction multiple times.

Still buzzing with the aftereffects of adrenaline, Boyd entered the studio awhile later, and paused with his back against the closed door. Sin looked up from his position on the couch, and Boyd exhaled slowly.

Sin was going to be pissed.

"Hey." Boyd hesitantly crossed the small room and sat on the arm of the couch. "So, uh. I know you told me to stop looking into the cartels... But do you remember that place I told you about? Julieta's?"

Sin dropped the book he'd been reading. "What did you do?"

"I was trying to verify whether it belonged to a cartel or a Janus front, or whether it was nothing at all. Some trucks pulled in, and their leader caught me spying." Boyd wet his lips and dug his fingers into the fabric beneath him. "Turns out it was Lo Más Chingón."

Exasperation turned to alarm, and Sin sat up straight. "How did you escape? Do we need to leave?"

"That's the strange thing—he let me go. He also made it clear he's been following us."

Sin was on his feet so quickly that he nearly overturned the coffee table. "What the fuck do you mean? No one has followed me."

"He did. He knew about us. He knew about that time you fucked me in that alley, and I didn't sense him at all when he came up behind me. He was just... there. And then he wasn't."

With quick, jerky motions, Sin turned to the closet and ripped it open with so much force Boyd half-expected it to come off the hinges. "Goddamnit," he seethed. "That should not be possible. For someone to follow me undetected? I don't get it."

Boyd stood. "He told me not to come back. He said he'd castrate me if I did."

"So sit back down." Sin removed his Ruger from the hidden compartment in the closet. "I'll go on my own."

"You aren't going alone now that we know who he is." Boyd grabbed Sin's arm and squeezed. "You're the one who told me not to pick a fight with the cartels and you were right. Going to one of his drop houses with guns blazing would bring all the wrong attention and just make everything worse. He had a sense of humor when I talked to him; seemed in a relatively good mood. Let's not change that."

"Who the fuck said I was going in guns blazing?" Sin shrugged off

Boyd's hand and put the gun on the chest of drawers. He pulled one open and removed a black t-shirt.

"Then what's your plan, grabbing a gun and ready to go alone when you're so angry?"

Sin changed his shirt and glowered at Boyd through a halo of messy, black hair. "I'm going to look around for myself. But if this Chingón person wants to fight, I'll give him a fight. Don't try to act like I'm being reckless when you are the one who started this whole thing."

"I'm not saying you're reckless, I'm saying we both need to be careful. He specifically asked about you, and he can clearly get the drop on both of us. I don't know what his game is, so if you're going, I'm going with you."

"He can get the drop on me when I'm drunk and distracted maybe," Sin snapped. "But that won't be happening again."

Boyd shook his head but got his gun and lockpicks from the closet. Going back armed seemed like a terrible idea after he'd just been warned off, but he wasn't going to go back empty-handed with Sin potentially walking into a fight.

"Why are you taking this so personally? He followed both of us. And between the two of us, I'm the one he held at knifepoint and fondled."

Sin hurtled an incredulous glare in his direction. "The length of your training is not comparable to mine. That I have gotten careless enough to let some piece of shit drug dealer follow me around is pathetic. And someone spying on us is a threat. I don't care how good his sense of humor was." His anger was nearly palpable as he stormed to the front door. "I'm not going to sit around and wait for him to make a move if I know where to find him."

"Fine, Hsin, just—" Boyd grabbed Sin's arm again. "I'm not defending him. It's not like I liked the guy. I'm just saying he seemed mercurial and had a warehouse filled with God knows what, and a group of men at his disposal. If we're going, we need our heads on straight and right now you're angrier than I've seen you in a long time. Please just try to calm down on our way there."

Sin's stony expression did not budge. "Let's go."

THE STREET LEADING to Julieta's was quiet, unusually so, and all activity had ceased. Although Boyd had not been gone for more than an hour, the front and back of the warehouse and restaurant were empty.

As glad as Boyd was to not run into Chingón, the hair on the back of his neck was at attention. Every shift of a tree branch and quiet rustle of the wind spiked his adrenaline. He expected the man to appear, yank him back, and slice him open before they had a chance to react.

"Let's go in."

Boyd nodded in agreement, but the possibility of walking into a trap nagged at him.

Sin paced the driveway until he zeroed in on the wide windows on the upper levels of the warehouse. The nearest one was several feet above his head, but Sin jumped and caught one of the slim sills with his fingertips. He dragged himself up and peered inside.

After a couple of minutes, Sin maneuvered to another window. He climbed higher and higher, peering into the warehouse at different heights and angles, before glancing down at Boyd with a frown. Without a word, Sin scaled the wall about halfway before gracefully dropping to the ground.

"Looks empty. Pick the lock."

"On it."

Boyd crouched by the door and worked for a moment before the tumblers shifted and the lock clicked. Half-expecting a trap, Boyd turned the knob with a cautious twist of his wrist, and the door fell open before them.

"Wow," Boyd said in disbelief. "When you said 'empty' I thought you meant of people, not that there was literally nothing left inside."

Brushing by Boyd, Sin stalked into the warehouse and swept his arms out. "I thought you said they were unloading a bunch of shit?"

"They were." Boyd turned in a circle. "And I saw crates inside already when they started. I couldn't tell how many but judging by what I've heard of Lo Más Chingón, I can't imagine the operation was small. To clear it all out so fast..." Boyd shook his head, grudgingly impressed. "They must be extremely efficient."

"How do yo—" Sin broke off, and his attention skewed to the wall above Boyd's head. Boyd followed his gaze.

A ghastly smiley leered down at them in red.

Boyd jolted, flashing back to La Rana's carved face, and his dismembered head on the ground. For the barest of moments, the blood

from that corpse overlaid with a memory: Lou's blank eyes staring straight at Boyd and his face streaked with blood.

Boyd's heart rate skyrocketed in the seconds before he realized the consistency wasn't right. Forcing himself to move, Boyd pressed his finger to the wet red sheen.

Paint. It dripped slowly down the wall, signifying that 4FF couldn't have been gone for long.

Releasing a low, shaky breath, Boyd retreated a step. He forcefully banished the memories from his mind.

"He's fucking with us." Sin examined the warehouse, the windows, and his expression grew grim. "He knew you would come back."

"Seems so."

"I suppose I won't get to confront him."

Boyd wondered if Sin was serious, but Sin only glared viciously at the empty room and gave nothing else away. "It's probably better that way. If he'd been here and followed through on making me a eunuch, it would've been a problem for us both."

"I wouldn't let him get close enough. Although..." Sin considered him. "If he is dead set on it, you make good bait."

Boyd snorted. "He seemed like he wanted to fuck me as much as he wanted to castrate me, so you never know. You might get more of a show than you bargained for."

"It's fine. I'll slit his throat before he can get your pants down." Sin shot Boyd a withering look and headed to the door of the warehouse. "Your lack of faith in my skills is starting to be insulting. Maybe you think your drug dealer boyfriend is better."

Boyd laughed and Sin shoved lightly. "You're an idiot."

His only response was a quiet scoff as they returned to the street.

NINE

SIN'S DAYS AS a drinker came to an abrupt end following the situation with Lo Más Chingón. He tripled his training—until Boyd forced him to stop working out midday when the heat index was highest—and kept a sharper eye on his surroundings.

Chingón never reappeared.

Weeks passed and the edge on Sin's paranoia dulled, but the humiliation of being followed did not. After twenty years of training and fifteen of being a full-fledged agent... it was unthinkable. The temporary obsession with sex and pretending he was just another security guard with a thirst for alcohol became a thing of the past, and Sin merged the two sides of himself with less trouble than he had expected.

He was shocked to discover that he could continue functioning at the club without being under the influence. Previously, the unfamiliar burn of alcohol had smoothed the rough edges and anxiety that dogged his interactions with civilians. Apparently, working at Noctis for over three months had changed Sin in ways the Agency's deportment training never could.

Over the course of the spring and summer, the subtle alterations in his demeanor mounted until he was able to transition seamlessly between Hsin Liu Vega and Jason Alvarez. Now, they were almost the same. Sin could survey the security cameras with the eyes of an agent, move through the dim club with the prowess of a killer; trade barbs with Estrella, exchange innuendos with Johnny, and respond appropriately to unwanted flirtations and grabbing without ripping someone's arm off.

Sin also knew to switch to beer instead of shots so he could avoid getting hammered without sticking out as a sudden non-drinker with his coworkers. He also had the recent awareness to realize that a sizeable knot of people had become regulars at Noctis only after he'd joined the staff; a group of young women who were barely old enough to drink in the United States, and a group of gay men about the same age who were not discouraged by his snarls. At some point in the past few months, the little idiosyncrasies of the customers and

the staff had stopped being a source of aggravation and had become amusing. Sometimes even endearing.

Like everything else to do with the mission, it was an oddity.

How Sin had evolved from a person who could barely speak to people without pulling down his hood in paranoia, to a man who could smile, laugh, drink, and fuck like any other civilian, was a mystery to him. The differences had cropped up subtly over time, and Sin had not noticed how much he'd changed until the nightmares returned.

The closer he came to his transition from Noctis to the jks, the nightmares became more frequent. He reared out of dreams where he was locked in the box, strapped down, electrocuted and sliced with knives, ordered to assassinate innocent people—Sin woke up panting and gasping nightly.

Chingón was only the tip of the iceberg, and it was becoming more and more difficult to allow himself to get lost in the soporiferous daily routine of heat, alcohol, and hours spent wrapped up in Boyd's arms.

They could finally be together chest-to-chest, bare skin flush together, and it would soon be taken away.

After returning to Lexington, there would be no more sleeping in the same bed. No more tracing Boyd's scars with his fingers and tongue, or crying out until his throat turned raw during sex. Sin wouldn't have any friendly acquaintances. The days of feeling like a normal man would fade away and vanish from his memory.

Sin was jolted out of his moody reverie by a smack on his ass. He pinned Johnny with a withering stare. "What?"

"You look fucking miserable for a man in your position."

Sin turned on the barstool and propped his elbows up on the bar. Johnny crowded him and did a festive shimmy to music that was blaring loud enough to deafen Sin.

"It's a party," Johnny crowed. "She shut the club down early to give your sorry ass a going away party even though you're running off to work somewhere more high class. Be thankful. For the party and because she will suck that big cock now that you're not a—"

Sin smirked when Johnny dodged a wet towel that Estrella whipped at him from behind the bar.

"¡Deja de decir pendejadas!"

"Es la verdad," Johnny replied, ducking and weaving out of the way.

"Why are you always so concerned with who is sucking Jason's dick? Do you want to watch or something?"

"Maybe he wishes he could suck it," Sin drawled.

"I think you're onto something, Jason. That's why he is always fantasizing about how big it is."

"I've had the same thought."

Estrella looked Johnny up and down. "All that talking about Jess and it's *him* who is—"

"Okay, okay," Johnny yelled. "Enough already! Me and Jason are platonic friends only, okay? I would have maybe sucked it before, but now he is like my hot teacher who taught me Krav Maga moves. I won't blow *mi maestro*."

Sin rubbed the neck of his beer between his hands and regarded Johnny. "Denial."

Johnny threw his hands up in the air and backed away to join a cluster of their coworkers by the other side of the bar. "The arrogance... it kills me."

Sin's mouth curved up and he twisted on the stool to face the bar. Estrella winked, but before he could comment, Jessica appeared at his side. She slid her arm around his waist and pulled him into a half-hug. Unsurprisingly, Estrella found something to do and wandered away.

"Are you having fun?"

"Not really."

Jessica forced him to rotate on the seat so he was facing her. She raised an eyebrow. "Not really? I closed the club four hours early so we could send you off, and all you've done is sit here and brood."

"I'm a brooding guy."

"Don't I know it?" Jessica's gaze swept over his work t-shirt and the threadbare jeans he'd worn for his last day. She closed the slight distance between them. "I was hoping to make you happier, not to upset you. I thought going to work at the convention center was what you wanted."

Sin shrugged and avoided her intense stare. His gaze fell on the deep V of her dress and lingered briefly. Her picking up on his mood and reluctance to leave was not on his agenda of things to deal with tonight. His priority had been figuring out how to fake gratitude for a party he did not want.

“Are you going to respond or just enjoy the view of my tits?”

“I wasn’t—”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Right. That’s what you always say.”

She had a point. Sin hid a smile by draining the rest of his beer and placing it on the bar top.

“You could at least say thank you.”

“Thank you for my unwanted party, Jessica.”

“And give me a hug.”

Sin shot her an offended look. “I don’t hug.”

“So, make an exception.” Jessica slid her arms around him and leaned in. Her hands fanned out over his back before digging into his shirt, shaking him a bit to prompt him. Sighing, Sin reached up to awkwardly return the embrace.

“This is horrible,” he said into her hair.

“Don’t be such a dick.”

Despite the words, Sin could feel her shoulders shaking with laughter. He sighed, sagged against the side of the bar, and gave her a squeeze. It was brief enough for him to feel the press of her breasts against his chest, and to inhale her scent. She smelled vaguely of coconuts.

The hug was not so bad after all. In a way, the feel of someone pulling him close for no reason other than to show affection was comforting. Months ago, he would have never expected anyone to touch him in such a manner. More recently, it would have only been Boyd. For a civilian to want to be so close was just another one of those Noctis oddities.

And Sin would be lying if he said he wouldn’t miss them.

His arms tightened around Jessica before he had realized it, and he buried his face in her hair. The sense of loss for this feeling of acceptance from her, Johnny, Estrella, and the rest of the staff, blindsided him. It was impossible to bury it beneath his Jason facade.

Soon, it would be back to the Agency. Back to the guards. The threat of the Fourth and his dog cage. Back to the collar. Back to hell.

“Jason, are you okay?”

“I don’t know.”

Jessica drew back with a furrowed brow. She reached up to place a palm against the scruff on his cheek and smoothed it up until her fingers combed through his hair.

"Jase, this doesn't have to be an end, you know? You can come back to see all of us. To see me."

"I know."

She tilted his chin up further. "Will you come back?"

"I don't—" Sin bit the words off and rephrased. "I'm not sure. Maybe."

"Just say yes."

Sin sighed but didn't back away when she kissed his cheek.

"Please?"

"Jessica..."

She kissed his other cheek and when Sin still did not concede, she added, "Johnny will be lost without you."

Over her shoulder, Johnny gave Sin a thumbs up. Mouth twitching, Sin could barely contain a laugh. He would definitely miss some things about Noctis.

A MAN SEVERAL years older than Boyd stood at the entrance to Noctis. Tall, thin, and sporting spiky hair, the man's appearance matched a description Sin had given of another security guard named Aldair; the one who called out a lot and caused Sin to cover his shifts.

Aldair barely made eye contact when he asked, "*¿Nombre?*"

"Kadin Reed."

A grunt and a nod was his only answer. Boyd hesitated, but Aldair's eyes had already drifted away, so Boyd entered the club. It was three in the morning and later than he'd been up in a while, but he'd taken Sin's invitation, or demand, to attend mostly because the idea of anyone throwing a party for Sin was bizarre. He had no idea how Sin would handle so much attention, and planned to at least stay long enough to ensure Sin had things well in hand.

Upon walking into the dimly lit room, Boyd quickly realized his help was not needed. Sin was at the bar with his arms wrapped around a woman, and his face was buried in her hair.

Boyd slowed to a stop and could only watch as the moment stretched. When the woman pulled away, Sin didn't recoil from her touch. Not even when she kissed his cheeks. If anything, judging by his relaxed posture, Sin appeared accustomed to the attention.

A sudden urge to leave was overwhelming, and Boyd started to succumb to the instinct. He retreated the few steps to the door, but

two women entered and collided with his back. One shot him a dirty look while the other smiled apologetically.

Years of trying to blend in prompted Boyd to force a smile. "Sorry, I didn't realize I was blocking the door. I've never been here when it's this empty, and it threw me off."

The nicer of the two women smiled and patted him on the arm even as her friend turned up her nose. "It's okay."

They walked away, and Boyd stared after them, realizing how difficult it would be to explain why he'd barely made it past the entrance when multiple people had already encountered him. Aldair's list alone would verify his initial attendance.

Even with discomfort settled in his stomach like a stone, Boyd adopted a nonchalant stroll and moved closer to the bar. The woman moved away, and Boyd gave her a brief assessing once-over. She was pretty, had long dark hair, and a shapely body. She had to be Jessica. The boss who had made her attraction clear from day one. The woman Sin admitted he would go home with if asked in the future.

The discomfort swelled, and the desire to flee strengthened. It felt too much like he was encroaching on the territory of the staff. Maybe the invitation had been more out of politeness than anything else. It was clear that Sin was different at Noctis, and it was clear that he did not need Boyd.

Even so, Sin stood once he noticed Boyd and his mouth inched up in a half-smile. "I thought you would have come earlier."

"I didn't want to distract you on your last day."

"It would have been fine. Do you want me to introduce you to people? I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Don't worry about it. All you're supposed to do is try to relax and have fun." Boyd scanned the area and estimated there were more than twenty people milling around the bar. "Do you know all these people?"

"Most of them." Sin admitted jerked his chin at the girls who had entered behind Boyd. They were now standing with Johnny. "A few of them are friends of my coworkers. I don't know why the fuck randoms are here when it's allegedly a party for me, though."

Johnny cupped his mouth and projected his voice. "The more the merrier, Mr. Exclusive."

Sin flipped him off and looked down at Boyd again. "He tries to sleep with the customers a lot."

"Ah," Boyd considered Johnny. "That isn't a surprise considering the conversation when I met him."

"He advises me to fuck at least three people per night. Those two women are actually—"

"Big J," Johnny called over. "Get your ass over here. The ladies want an introduction."

Sin and Johnny exchanged glares until Sin sneered and caved to the request. He glanced down at Boyd. "Do you want me to go to them or him to bring those people here?"

"It's easier if you go over there so they don't all have to relocate."

"I couldn't give less of a fuck about them walking twenty feet, but fine. I'll be back. Ask Estrella if you want a drink." Sin slid his hands into his pockets and walked away. Despite his reluctance, it did not take long for Johnny to coax a quiet laugh out of him.

Boyd's gaze drifted from Sin and settled on the other party goers. With the exception of interacting with the civilians, Sin was acting no differently, so why was Boyd still so upset?

This was Sin's party, and one of the few opportunities he had to experience something normal before they returned to Lexington. It was good for him to spend time with others. His willingness to meet new people was a drastic change from how Sin had been in the past, but Boyd could not shake the restless, dismal feeling.

The sound of laughter drew Boyd's attention again, and he saw Johnny and the two women smiling up at Sin. Something clicked, and a pervasive feeling of alienation cemented Boyd's desire to leave.

This was not his place. These were Sin's friends and co-workers, and while they were trying hard to make a place for Sin in their circle, they had little interest in Boyd.

It wasn't anything new; Boyd had spent most of his childhood and adolescence on the sidelines, but since coming to the Agency, Sin had been there with him. Now, there was distance between them as well. Sin had other people to spend time with, and he'd made those connections without help from Boyd. Once again, Sin was flawlessly accomplishing a task he'd lacked confidence in possessing. Something that was supposed to be Boyd's forte. Something that, just this once, should have required Sin to need his help.

But he didn't need Boyd to find a place in this new environment. He'd probably never needed Boyd for anything; he'd only needed to believe in himself. The trajectory of their partnership was clear, and Boyd needed a drink.

Turning away from Sin and Johnny, Boyd approached the bar and sat a few stools down from Jessica and the bartender. Estrella was wiping the bar as Jessica sat with a phone to one ear and her hand pressed against the other. The music in the background seemed to be impeding her call.

Boyd caught Estrella's eye. "Can I get a whiskey sour when you get the chance?"

"Sure." Estrella stopped what she was doing and flashed him a sunny smile. Her curly hair was pulled back but tendrils spilled down from the precarious knot. Like the rest of the staff at Noctis, she was extremely attractive.

She made the drink with fast efficiency, and he gave her a slight smile after it was set in front of him.

"Don't worry about pay," she said. "Open bar until the party is over."

"Oh. Thank you." He pulled out a few bills and slid it across the bar. "Then this is for tip."

"*Gracias.*" Estrella dimpled and slid the cash into her pocket. "Let me know if you need a refill!"

Estrella returned to cleaning, and the ambient music filled in the gap of conversation. For several minutes, Boyd nursed his drink and watched the others. Three songs had played by the time Jessica dropped her phone to the bar top with a clatter.

"Did you get through?" Estrella braced her elbows on the bar and peered over the side.

"No. He told me to hold on for the past twenty minutes so I hung up." Jessica's voice was tight. "I just had one question for him. He used to call me every day, and now I'm lucky if we speak once a month."

"Your uncle is so busy, though. Especially now!"

"I know, but it bothers me. I only moved down here because he said he would support me and—"

"Jessica," Estrella interrupted.

Boyd observed from his peripheral vision and saw Jessica sag against the bar.

"You don't need his support now, and that's why he has pulled back."

And,” Estrella stressed with a knowing smile. “You are only calling him now for a favor. Admit it!”

Jessica’s mouth twitched. “Well...”

“Mmhmm.” Estrella gave her friend an arch look. “Don’t worry about that now. You allowed for open bar just to throw this party for Jason. Focus on *him*.”

“He doesn’t even want the party,” Jessica said dryly. “He made sure to tell me.”

“*Ay dios...* Jessica, do you know how many people in this club would kill to have those arms wrapped around them? And for a hug. I nearly died from the shock.”

“And he said he never hugs.” There was a hint of a smile in Jessica’s voice; she was clearly proud of the accomplishment.

Boyd’s fingers twitched on the glass, and a thread of jealousy wormed into his heart.

“You need to make a move,” Estrella advised. “You know he likes you.”

“Do I?” Jessica sounded coy to Boyd’s ear, and the sight of her widening grin confirmed it. “You can never tell. He’s so stoic.”

“He has never let anyone else hug him,” Estrella insisted. “And he goes to your office before leaving even if you don’t summon him—”

“To go over the night!” Jessica interrupted. “He’s professional. It’s one of the reasons I find him so fucking attractive.”

“That and he’s gorgeous. Those eyes. And that mouth!”

“The arms,” Jessica added. “The whole package ruined me, but he is so reserved and mysterious. Being able to make him smile on a regular basis has become one of my greatest achievements.”

“It’s not an achievement. It’s because he likes you.”

Jealousy festered inside Boyd, and now it burned with bitterness. How long had it taken him to get to that point with Sin? How was it so hard for him and so easy for her?

She clearly thought she was special, and the aggravating fact of the matter was that it could be true. Sin voluntarily spent more time alone with her than was necessary even after claiming he didn’t want to be around civilians.

Something about Jessica had evidently drawn Sin out of his shell, just as something about Boyd had prompted Sin to give their partnership a chance. But Sin had wanted to go home with her. Boyd

didn't know why Sin had changed his mind, but there was little room for denial about Sin finding her attractive. Perhaps even as attractive as he found Boyd. Did that mean Sin saw Jessica as equal to him?

"I feel like he's sad tonight," Jessica said after a pause. "When he hugged me... I don't know. There was just something about the way he held me. I got the feeling he doesn't actually want to leave."

"I don't know why he *is* leaving."

"Because the money and prestige from working the Convention is beyond all this," Jessica said. "He's too good for this. I knew it from the start. But I think he feels a connection to it. Or to us. I can tell."

Estrella jerked her head in Sin's direction. "You spend your time analyzing him, and I would have been too focused on that mouth of his. Mmm. I bet he wouldn't have minded if you'd kissed him."

"I don't think he would have either, but I'd rather wait until we're alone."

"Smart. Practical. No wonder he picks you over every other person shoving their tail in his face. Ugh. Johnny and those girls... *Las putas*." Estrella's expression turned baleful. "At least Johnny keeps his hands off. Not that Jason would be interested."

"He could be. I think he's bisexual."

"¿Qué? ¿Me estás jodiendo?"

"I think he is." Jessica spread her hands. "But I think he prefers women so maybe he is experimenting or curious. I don't know, but I'd be surprised if he ended up with a man."

The words were like a nail in Boyd's chest. He could do nothing but stare into the remnants of his drink.

She was right. Sin had been a virgin, and Boyd had made himself available. Perhaps that was the only reason they were sleeping together... Even if the attraction had started months ago, the possibility of it blossoming only because Boyd had been the only one to give Sin a chance was too real to ignore.

Boyd drained his glass and stood. He slipped through the crowd and climbed the spiral staircase to reach the private area Sin had taken him to on his first visit to Noctis. Distance from the crowd should have made him feel better, but Boyd grew more resigned as he looked down at the others.

Jessica had stolen important pieces of Sin and was completely unaware of how monumental those tiny moments had been for Boyd.

Every word from her lips had served only to underscore his own worthlessness, and undermined his confidence in the relationship he'd formed with Sin. He didn't want to doubt Sin's intentions, or doubt what could happen next between them, but it was difficult not to when Boyd always expected people to walk away from him in the end.

Again, her words ricocheted in his mind. How easily Sin had fallen in with her, how much he seemed to like her, and how much he enjoyed being at Noctis.

What did Boyd have to compare to outgoing and charming people who had managed to draw Sin into a social world of partying and fun? Nothing. He was scarred in more ways than one, maladjusted, prone to fatalism, and the only people close to him had died tragically.

What person in their right mind would ever choose him over someone experienced and confident like Jessica or even Johnny?

The doubts circled Boyd's mind like hungry sharks waiting to gnaw on any remaining bits of hope. Irritated, Boyd ordered himself to get over it. He was lending weight to the words of a woman who did not even know Sin's true identity.

"Bored already?"

Boyd jumped, and was caught off guard by Sin's unexpected appearance. The ability to respond briefly failed him, but he regained control and forced a smile. "Just wanted to get away for a second. What are you doing up here? They're probably looking for you."

"They can entertain each other." Sin leaned against the wall. "Do you want to get a drink? I limit myself to one or two now."

Boyd shook his head. He was not about to go down there to witness Jessica flirting with Sin again. "I had one already, thanks. I'm good. But if you want to get one, I won't stop you."

"Well, do you want to go do something else? You could meet people other than Johnny."

"Maybe in a bit. How are you doing with all this?"

Sin's broad shoulders rose in a brief shrug, but the motion was stiff. "We'll be back at the Agency in a few months."

We will," Boyd agreed somberly. "I wish there was a way for you to stay here."

"Because you're dying to go back?"

"No. But I think this place means more to you than it does to me."

"Yeah. I don't get locked in a box and shocked with electricity when I misbehave here."

"Exactly. But also, what about the people?" Boyd waved a hand to the balcony. "Will you miss them?"

"I think so. They were kind to me. Well, they tried to be when I let them. Even when I ignored them and acted the way... I usually act to everyone, they still accepted me." Sin looked over the railing to the floor below. "It won't happen again, and everything will be the way it was before. I didn't think it bothered me until I was around people who weren't afraid of me."

"Because they saw you for you. That's the way it should have been for you all along, even back home."

Sin released a humorless bark of a laugh. "It will never be like this at the Agency or even in Lexington. The only people who show me any semblance of kindness are the people in our unit, and that's because they have to. Ryan has some idealized version of me in his head, and Carhart just sees me as a way of clinging to my father." He shrugged, a sharp, tense movement, before thudding his head against the wall. "I could be wrong, but every relationship I have with those people comes with the Agency baggage. The only person I truly trust is you, and I just wish we could stay here forever."

The first genuine smile of the night slid across Boyd's mouth. He pushed away from the railing and wanted, just briefly, to hug Sin, but he didn't make a move. Sin's mood had sunk in the past hour, and if he didn't return the embrace, Boyd knew he would read it as rejection. It was safer not to initiate anything at all. So, instead, he stood close to Sin.

"I would stay here with you if we could." Boyd tilted his head and added lightly, "I think we just need to change the focus of our mission. We might be able to stay indefinitely if we found a way to delay the conference for a few months at a time."

Sin's mouth twitched, and he snagged the collar of Boyd's shirt. Sin drew him closer and didn't stop until their chests bumped together.

"I could vandalize the convention center. Start with the plumbing. That will slow them down."

"Just when they get that fixed, I'll take out the A/C in the entire building."

"And then I'll demo the whole fucking thing so they have to find a new location."

"We'll deploy the same tactics once they pick a new place."

Sin slid his hands up to grip Boyd's shoulders. "You're pretty smart, Kadin."

"Thanks. By the way, Kadin is my middle name."

"Really?" Sin raised an eyebrow. "That's random."

"Yeah, I thought so too. It isn't a very common name." Boyd ran his thumbs along the hem of Sin's shirt. "My dad told me a story about it once. I don't remember the specifics of how it happened, but I was supposed to be named Camille after a journalist in the French Revolution, and I was named Kadin by mistake."

"I'm sure your mother was crushed."

Boyd snorted. "I think it did make her mad, actually. She used Camille for a long time when I was in trouble, but at some point it tapered away. After my dad died or maybe earlier."

"Your father—"

"Jason!" The voice emanated from the speakers. "Get down here for the toast!"

"Toast," Sin repeated dully.

Boyd patted Sin on the upper arm and stepped back. "Come on. You've stormed bases single-handedly; you can handle a toast. I'll be there with you."

"Don't disappear again." Sin's tone was a warning. "Or you'll pay for it later."

"Is this a pay-for-it thing where I'll ultimately like it?"

"Maybe." Sin turned Boyd forcibly and guided him to the stairs.

"Well, then," Boyd said with a laugh. "If you don't see me after the speech it's because I'm at home waiting for my punishment."

"Just don't go or you get nothing."

"Fine, fine..."

Boyd followed Sin downstairs, and his insecurities did not resurface. Whatever Jessica did would not matter in the long run. After tonight, she would never see Sin again.

FOR THE SECOND time during the course of the mission, Sin ruminated on the sheer absurdity of a trained assassin applying for a job like an average civilian.

It was not enough that the Human Resources department of the Joel K. Solar Convention Center had completed a thorough background and reference check on Jason Alvarez. No. He also had to apply for a license to work as an armed guard in the city of Monterrey, and complete weeks of “training” with a large pool of candidates before the final team was selected.

Sin did not understand why there were so many steps in the process. It wasn’t exactly a position with Homeland Security; it was a fucking convention center.

There was a written portion of the application process that served as a personality assessment, and Sin assumed it was used to single out imbeciles and psychopaths. He wasn’t entirely sure if that left him out, but the answers were obvious if one used common sense.

The next segment was a complete physical.

The doctor asked him a variety of questions about his medical history even though a copy of it had been included in his application.

“Those are some wounds you have there,” Dr. Adler noted as her gaze drifted from scar to scar.

“Rough childhood.”

“I see.”

The doctor did not look convinced, but she gestured to the scale instead of prying further. Once he was standing with his feet planted evenly apart, she eyeballed the numbers and frowned.

“6’4” and 170 pounds. You’re very close to being underweight.”

“I see.”

“How often do you work out?”

“Every day.”

“How many calories do you consume a day?”

Sin could not have come up with a number if he tried. His diet consisted of carbs and sugar in random amounts.

“I have no idea.”

“You might want to consider keeping a food diary to ensure you’re getting enough calories and protein.”

He fought the urge to sneer. Food diary.

“I’ll get right on that.”

She sighed.

After passing the initial screenings, Sin spent the first few weeks of training cursing everyone involved with the planning of the mission. Since Carhart had failed to warn Sin about this three-ring circus, he bore the biggest brunt of the mental berating. Perhaps he’d been amused by the mental image of Sin being trained to use weapons he’d been handling for almost two decades.

Shooting practice was a case in point.

“We’ll start here and adjust the distance as needed.” The trainer indicated the paper target that hung from a hook seven yards away. “It’s unlikely you will have to use your weapon on a job like this. The presence of armed guards is primarily to appease the artists and celebrity guests at the Expo. This is merely a precaution, but it’s still one of the most challenging parts of training because it requires some finesse.”

Sin raised an eyebrow.

“What you have to do is—”

Shoot you in the fucking head with your own gun because it would be painfully easy to disarm you.

“Understand?”

Sin did not bother to respond. He raised the pistol and unloaded the entire clip into the paper target. The trainer was aghast.

“What?” Sin demanded.

The target slid closer to them with a whooshing sound, and the obliterated head came into clearer view. The trainer removed the paper gingerly.

“You killed it.”

“Yes.”

“You were only supposed to immobilize it...”

“Oh.”

Fucking civilians.

Notwithstanding Sin’s ineptitude at immobilizing targets, he was allowed to move forward in the trial, and endured additional training after being officially hired. The fuse on his temper extinguished once he learned this bout of training was actually useful for the mission.

Instead of obstacle courses and handling Glocks at the shooting range, Sin was finally able to explore the convention center and learn the various emergency protocols used by staff. Although the Global Arts Exhibition would be confined to one wing of the enormous center, Sin was given free range to roam each wing to familiarize himself with the breadth of the property. He made careful note of all exits, staircases, and vents, and took pictures with a covert camera to aid their planning of the assassinations.

By late September, he had constructed a detailed map of the center, and had identified potential egress points for the night of the Expo. A few weeks later, Sin determined that Janus would inhabit the east wing of the JKS while all attention was focused on the art show across the facility. The east wing was suddenly off-limits due to “construction,” but there were no visible signs of construction other than the appearance of cars and visitors in that section. Questions about the strange activity led to vague answers, and even Sin’s managers expressed confusion about what was happening.

The suspicion cemented into certainty, and Sin patted himself on the back for a job well done. All things considered, he had navigated each bend of a relatively convoluted mission with success. The job searches, cover immersion, and reconnaissance were complete.

After all they had accomplished in the past six months, carrying out the assassinations would be the easy part.

THE WALL WAS hot enough to burn Boyd’s back through his linen shirt, but he stayed seated and did not stop surveilling the building across the street. There were several other people resting in the orange haze of the sun while sounds of the marketplace drifted down the block.

After several minutes of roasting against the concrete, Boyd spotted Jorge. He darted out of the building and trotted to Boyd’s side.

“Found them.”

“Eso fue rápido. Thanks, Jorge.”

Boyd flashed a lopsided smile and held out his hand, but Jorge only flashed a look of open distrust.

“Where is it, *güero*?”

“We’ve already been over this; one more stop and then you’re done.

¿*Te acuerdas*? And would you lay off the death glare? You keep acting like I'm going to kill you any second."

Jorge only grew more intense before he turned down a side street. Boyd followed at a sedate pace until they were out of view of any onlookers. Once they were away from the crowd, Jorge paused and crossed his arms.

A battle of wills stretched out between heavy stares made darker by the heat and the sweat trickling down their skin. Finally, Jorge scoffed and pulled two small black boxes from his pocket. He dropped them in Boyd's hand.

After stashing the boxes, Boyd resumed his stroll with Jorge beside him. When they rounded a corner and the bustle of the main streets died out, the boy spoke.

"I want more money."

"Okay."

Boyd did not hesitate to fork out more money to Jorge; he knew the kid was worth his weight in gold for the intel and inroads he could provide. And even without the unexpected perks, Boyd felt bad for Jorge. He'd grown up in a city that should have been prosperous but was controlled by cartels. More often than not, Boyd wondered if the kid was hoarding the money to find a way out. Or to become the next cartel boss.

Either way, he budgeted to pay double or triple the agreed upon price when they made a deal. It kept Jorge loyal, and made him protective of Boyd. He wouldn't want anyone taking out the idiot willing to triple his wages for each minor job. Regardless of a Jorge's reasoning, Boyd wanted to do as much as he could to give the kid more opportunities to get out if that was what he wanted.

Boyd held the money just out of Jorge's reach. "You'll still help me like you said you would, right?"

Jorge scowled, but he nodded. The second the bills were in reach, Jorge snatched them and buried the wad somewhere in the folds of his clothing.

"You learn more faster than others, *güero*."

"Thanks. I think."

"This job dangerous. That's why you pay more."

"*Entiendo*. Thanks for the help, but I just need one other thing."

Boyd cast a furtive look around. “*Vámanos*. I don’t exactly feel like waiting around where we can be jumped.”

Jorge didn’t argue with that.

They walked to a squat, pale building with a faded sign that simply read *Farmácia*. Boyd hesitated, but Jorge motioned for him to follow.

“They give me it only if they see you.”

Interesting. Boyd knew the Snakes rarely saw anyone in person.

A small bell rang on the door as they entered. Boyd blinked several times to adjust his vision. The interior was narrow and dark, and the aisles were almost smoky in the gloom. A quick glance showed shelves caked in dust and footprints crossing the floor, but it looked like it had once been a family business. Yellowing sheets of paper with old, faded art drifted from the walls by the register. All of them had a child’s handwriting carefully spelling ISA at the bottom.

This place had become yet another graveyard co-opted by smugglers of the new era.

Jorge’s sandals scuffed against the floor, and the noise was loud in the cramped space. The walls seemed to close in on them, and the anxious feeling heightened as Jorge led Boyd down a flight of stairs. His tension was inversely proportionate to the amount of muted sunlight he could still see.

Every instinct told him to return to the upper level where he had an advantage but, after his interaction with Chingón, Boyd needed a potential ally. An ally who was not easily intimidated by 4FF, and the mysterious man controlling the organization.

“*Quédate ahí, guey*.” It was a warning, not an insult, and that gave Boyd pause. Jorge jerked his chin forward. “I go first. Wait until I say.”

Jorge disappeared around a corner and shortly thereafter, faint voices drifted through the darkness. Although Boyd understood Spanish well by now, the words were unintelligible due to a combination of heavy accents, quick speech, and blurring echoes. Straining his ears and catching an infrequent spare word shed no light on the discussion, so Boyd switched gears and focused on what he knew about the Snakes.

They were rumored to work as couriers who procured hard-to-find items, and were sometimes called pirates, smugglers, or black market traffickers. It was also said that their name derived from their matching snake tattoos, and they were independent but capricious. He had

no description, no indication of how large the organization was, and no idea what their help would cost him.

Jorge reappeared and signaled for Boyd to approach. Boyd tried to loosen the tension in his shoulders as they walked, but the room he entered was darker than it had been upstairs and two-thirds the size of the studio. It was an ideal location for an ambush.

With his mind scrambling over potential egress and defense plans, Boyd turned to the Snakes. They were women.

The rumors were accurate in that they had matching snake tattoos, but the similarities ended there.

The more welcoming-looking of the two was Asian. She had intense, dark eyes and thick black hair pulled back in a knot. A gold necklace and rectangular pendant adorned her neck, and the infamous snake tattoo wrapped around her left arm like a red serpent before disappearing beneath her tank top.

The second woman was white, and had dark, choppy hair streaked liberally with blue. Unlike her partner, everything about this woman stood out; her outfit was all dark layers, plaid patterns, buckles, and chains. Three belts encircled her waist: one adorned with skull and crossbones, and the other two carrying sheaths for a pistol and set of knives. Her snake tattoo was inked blue and slithered up her right arm to lick out at her collarbone.

She whistled slowly and flashed her teeth in a smile. When she spoke, her accent was vaguely Australian. "Well, well. We found ourselves a fox."

"Is that good or bad?" Boyd asked.

"American," the woman with the red tattoo noted.

The punk woman smirked. "Butchering the English language since 1776."

Boyd had no idea how this introduction was going so far, and Jorge was inscrutable. Real helpful. After looking between the two women, he pointed to the empty chair by the desk. "Should I sit?"

The lift of the punk's lip left it unclear whether she was amused or menacing. She gestured grandly at the chair. "By all means. Be our guest."

Boyd sat down, and three sets of eyes drilled into him without a single emotion shared between them. An urge to escape the room flared up, but he casually draped an arm across the back of the chair.

"Nice place. A little cloak and dagger, but then..." Boyd gestured at the punk's belt.

"Like them?" She reverently touched the knives. "About drove me around the bend, getting 'em. I had to give up some wicked togs for it."

The Asian woman quirked an eyebrow at her companion and received a slight, chagrined smirk in return. Boyd had no idea what was happening or even what the punk was talking about, but whatever it was apparently tipped the scales, and the quieter of the two women took over.

"Why are you here?"

"I have a problem, and I was told you two might be able to help."

"What is the problem?" Boyd hesitated, and the woman spoke again as if hearing his doubts. "You do not trust us."

He shrugged. "No offense."

"Yet you agreed to meet us."

"I was told I had to."

"We were the ones who had to meet you."

Boyd nodded. "I understand you have to be careful. I appreciate that you gave me this much of a chance already, but at this rate we'll be here forever. I'm sure you're busy so why don't we make it easier? What do you need to know about me to decide if you want to work with me or not? I can't answer everything, but if there's something important I can try."

"Hmm." The Snakes considered him equally before the Asian woman continued. "What do you know of us?"

"Not much. But if you want to know what I *think*..." They did not encourage him to continue, but the lack of interruption implied interest. "I think you wanted to see what kind of person I was before deciding whether you would help me, and I think you only met me face-to-face because I really lucked out with Jorge and you actually like him."

Neither woman spoke, so he continued.

"I think you can both fight, but I suspect people underestimate you in particular because people do the same to me." He directed the comment at the Asian woman. "I also think the punk's had a gun on me the whole time, and Jorge brought me here on a winding route so there wouldn't be witnesses in case I failed. I bet this is a burner place as a precaution. Once I leave, I'll never see you here again. And if I

had to guess, I'd say you're more than just business partners, which is cool with me."

Another silent communication passed between the two women before the punk's lips twitched.

"You've been calling me 'the punk' all this time in your head?"

"I didn't know what else to call you. Red Snake, Blue Snake?"

She laughed and dropped forward in a languid slouch. "I'm Tayla, and this is Liani. Don't let her poker face fool you; she's actually an emotional mess inside."

Liani's eyebrows twitched. "That is a lie, but he will do."

With that simple line, the mood lightened. Liani looked at Jorge. "Keep watch, please."

Jorge nodded and left. Boyd felt like he'd lost his backup, and in a way he had. Jorge was just a little kid in stature, but he was strong in personality and influence.

Tayla yanked a wrinkled piece of paper from one of her many pockets and stuck the corner in her mouth before patting her pockets again. "Reed, right?" she asked, voice muffled.

"Yeah."

"Jorge says you're an artist."

"I am."

Tayla pulled out a pen while Liani slid a slim black case across the table.

"Jorge told us of your need already," Liani said. "These will allow you to track someone through a GPS. The transmitters are hidden in the earrings, and the receivers are disguised as two different types of wristwatches. The instructions are inside."

Boyd swiped the box from the table. "What's the range?"

"This is low-functioning so..." Tayla tapped the pen against the table. "The battery in the watch will last you a good ten, twelve hours after you activate the GPS, and the range... It will pick up the signal from the receiver anywhere, but the location can only be narrowed down to a range of one or two city blocks. When you get there, it'll be up to you to find it. Still, that's sweet-as, considering the size and price."

"They are civilian-grade but dual frequency," Liani added. "They are unlikely to be tracked or intercepted by government agencies. You can install a password for additional security."

"Thank you. That's perfect. What do I owe you?"

"We'll get to that." Tayla waved a hand as if to brush away the topic. "First, I have a game."

"A game?" Boyd examined the paper she was smoothing across the table. "What kind?"

"The kind where I test you and, if you pass, something good happens."

"And if I don't?"

Tayla flashed her teeth again. "Isn't not knowing part of the fun?"

Boyd snorted and crossed his arms. "Okay. I'm in."

"Brilliant! I wouldn't have offered if you seemed like a piker. Now, I'm going to draw something. You get two tries to guess what it is."

This was a bizarre test, but Boyd couldn't deny that he was intrigued. Maybe all of the biggest names in Monterrey's underground were eccentrics.

Tayla began drawing random dots scattered across the sheet of paper, but Boyd could not discern a pattern. Her serious expression only made the game more perplexing. He didn't know what the dots meant, and he considered everything from a connect-the-dots picture, to a code, or even something related to Braille.

It was only when Boyd's eyes unfocused did the pattern burn into his brain. It was the same way he visualized blueprints in 3D and rotated them in his head; an image took place if he imagined the dots turned in another direction.

"Monterrey's secret passageways."

Tayla's hand stilled. "That's your answer, eh?"

"Yes."

In his peripheral vision, Boyd saw Liani hide her hands beneath the table. He knew she had some sort of weapon but had no idea what it was.

Tayla clucked her tongue. "Sure you don't want to change it at all? I said you'd get two tries."

"I'm sure."

The room pressed in around him. The pause that followed was heavy with unspoken words and, when Tayla and Liani exchanged a look, Boyd subtly shifted his weight as the fight-or-flight instinct kicked in.

Tayla slammed her palm on the table and disrupted the burn of his adrenaline with a sharp grin. "Been wanting to do that one a long time and no one would play. Here."

She sketched in additional lines and marked major roads and landmarks to put the dots into perspective. Tayla circled some, crossed out others, and gave the paper a thorough examination before sliding it across the table to Boyd.

"I marked them based on who's in charge of the passage right now. Crosses are real dodgy. Not worth it, mate. Circles, I'd give it a go. The rest, you can figure out yourself. Keep in mind these aren't obvious tunnels. Not many are, in fact. You have to know the routes, but this'll get you in the right place, and you can find the rest from there."

Boyd stared at the map in disbelief. Her "game" turned out to be an invaluable piece of intel. Some of the routes were familiar, but she'd also marked passages he had never found. "Thank you."

"Mi información, su información. At a price. You know how it is."

"Any questions?" Liani asked.

Boyd inclined his head.

They discussed specifics for another ten minutes before Boyd pulled out a thick wad of bills to pay for their service. Once he was at the doorway, Tayla saluted.

"See you later."

Boyd looked over his shoulder. "Don't people only come to you when they're desperate?"

"Usually, yeah."

"So what makes you think I'll see you again?"

Tayla dropped the heels of her heavy boots on the table. "You got a real desperate sort of look."

"People like you always come back," Liani informed him.

The certainty in their faces made him believe, but Boyd knew once they were back in Lexington, he would never see them again. Instead of correcting them, he smiled.

"Hope it's as nice the second time around."

Tayla leered. "Oh, don't worry. We'll make sure it is."

Liani stifled silence a laugh as the door shut behind him.

In the time he'd spent in the store, the humidity had swelled to a breathless level. Despite the stifling air, Jorge had waited. Together, they walked away from the building and bypassed a group of men who pointed at them.

"Hey, *gringuito!* *Unos chingazos a ver si se te quita lo marica!*" one of the men yelled and spat next to him.

Jorge sneered. "*Vete a la mierda, él está bien.*"

The men scoffed but lost interest when it was clear Jorge wasn't in danger.

"People really like to call me faggot here," Boyd observed. "But at least the insults are more creative than at home."

"You stand out. Stupid red hair— *el más güero que conozco.*"

Boyd laughed. "Thanks."

Jorge didn't answer, but Boyd caught a glimpse of a smirk. They walked without speaking until Jorge spotted the paper partially peeking out of Boyd's bag.

"*Tienes suerte.* The Snakes are only ones not afraid of—"

Boyd knew who Jorge meant without the name being verbalized. Lo Más Chingón.

He had told Jorge about his encounter with 4FF's leader so the boy had a heads up, and the opportunity to walk away from the potential threat. After a couple of weeks' worth of avoidance, Jorge had returned with the explanation that if Boyd could survive an encounter with Chingón he was either incredibly lucky or so pathetic Chingón had not perceived him as a threat. Since then, Jorge looked at Boyd with a grudging kind of respect.

"I was surprised they met me," Boyd said. "*Gracias por tu ayuda.*"

"*No hice nada.* They study before they plan to meet so they know you are *neto, no chota, ni cartel, ni malandro, o tiendero...* And when they meet, they do not like many. But if they like you, it is good."

"How is it that they aren't afraid of Chingón? *¿Entonces no todos temen?*"

Jorge gave a rolling shrug. "*No sé.* They not live here. They leave, they return, it is when they want. Maybe that is why. They are strong, too. I do not cross."

"Do they deal in different items on the market, too? *¿Drogas, lana, armas...?*"

The street they walked along was removed from the vehicles that careened down the roads and the buses that unloaded scores of people. Here, there was a semblance of privacy that loosened Jorge's tongue and reminded Boyd that they were in independent territory.

"*A lo mejor, pero no es normal,*" Jorge said at length. "They can get anything, *pero normalmente trafican.*"

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "They traffick people?"

Jorge scoffed. “No, *pendejo*, ¡escúchame! Trafican. Que dan paso. They help people get what they want. Anything. Sometimes, they bring you. *Dicen que* sometimes they help *gente maltratada en sus casas* escape bad place. Not often. *A veces* you have enough *lana*, you pay to go. But they no always do this. And they no help many, and not around always. *Así que*, you are lucky.”

Boyd nodded, mulling that over. He’d have to let R&D know about the Snakes. If their informants weren’t aware of the women, they could be a good potential contact for international help.

“Well. Now that that’s over...” Boyd reached into his bag, and Jorge instantly went on the defensive. Boyd raised his free hand in a calming gesture.

“Jorge, *calmate*. *Está bien*. *No es un arma*. I would never hurt you.”

Jorge fixated on the position of Boyd’s hand; his small body taut and ready to flee. When he relaxed, Boyd slowly removed the item.

“*Has sido muy valiosa*. More helpful than I can say. I wouldn’t betray you, Jorge, come on. *Puedes confiar en mí*.”

Boyd held a small box between them, but Jorge didn’t reach for it. He eyed it like it was a bomb. “¿*Qué es eso?*”

“I got you something. *Un regalo*.”

Jorge cycled through a number of expressions and landed on distrustful. He inched closer to the box but still refused to touch it. “¿*Pa’ mí?*”

Boyd smiled. “*Sí, pa’ ti*. Who else would I have gotten it for?”

Small, dirty fingers started to reach for the box but then froze. “What you want for it? ¿*Qué quieres a cambio?*”

“Nothing,” Boyd said in exasperation. He shoved the box into Jorge’s chest. “*Tómalo ya, chamaco*. I’ve told you before all I want is information. *No soy uno de aquellos, deja de tratarme así*. Come on. Take it, already.”

With obvious reluctance, Jorge accepted the box. He switched it from hand to hand before opening it with widened eyes. He pulled out a small bracelet with a *Cruz de San Benito* amulet woven into the thread. *Escapularios*. They symbolized blessings to come and protection, while the *Cruz de San Benito* was supposed to protect the owner from any sort of harm.

It had seemed like an appropriate gift, and based on the way

Jorge's fingertips carefully edged along the amulet, Boyd had chosen correctly.

"I couldn't decide on an *escapulario* or *Cruz de San Benito* so when I found one that had both I thought it was best. *¿Qué, a poco ya tienes uno?*"

Jorge quietly said, "No. I do not have yet. This is first."

"Okay. Good."

Boyd expected Jorge to transition into another glare, but he was obviously perplexed by the gift. "*¿Por qué?*"

"Why what?"

"Why you give me this?" Jorge clutched the *escapulario* and backed up a few steps.

"Because I like you, Jorge." At Jorge's disbelieving expression, Boyd smiled. "*¿No es razón suficiente para ti?* It's enough for me. I wanted to thank you, and you seem like you could use the protection."

"*¿Qué tipo de gringo cree en este?*" Jorge snapped, shaking the *escapulario* at Boyd. "You mock me! Think I am stupid kid, believe in *milagros!*"

Boyd held up his hands. "*No me estoy burlando de ti*, Jorge, I promise. It doesn't matter what I believe. What you believe is all that matters." He saw the wavering distrust and confusion in Jorge and reached out to scruff the kid's hair. "*Ya estuvo, chamaco. No estoy jugando contigo.* Just take the gift and stop being a pain, already. Sometimes people do nice things just to be nice. It doesn't always have to come with strings attached."

Grudgingly, Jorge relented. He fitted the bracelet onto his wrist and triple-checked to make sure it was secure.

"I wanted to ask a few more questions. *Sobre Chingón.*"

"*Lo sabía, pendejo.* You always have question." Jorge's fingers ran along the edges of the *escapulario*. "*Apúrate.* What you want?"

"What does he deal? *¿Armas?*"

"Yes, weapons and anything. He have many connections. He get what he want."

"Does he work with any bigger groups?"

"No. *Él no depende de nadie.* But he sell for the best price."

"Would he sell to the big rebel groups if they offered the most?"

"In past maybe." Jorge rubbed his hands together, and his shoulders

hunched forward. "I want my money." He jerked up the *escapulario*. "This pay for nothing. *No puedo comprar nada con esto.*"

"I know." Boyd once again gave Jorge twice what they'd discussed. "Thanks, Jorge."

Jorge stashed his money. "You should not ask those questions. He is too strong, *demasiado poderoso*, even if the Snakes help you. And there are others who are not him. *Esos no te dan chances*. It is dangerous—*muy riesgoso*. And," he frowned, "I will not find another *gringo* stupid enough to pay me so much if you die. Careful, *vato*."

Boyd smiled. "I will. You, too. *Ten cuidado*. I've liked you from the start, even if you didn't like me."

Jorge adopted his typical glare but the heat was absent from it. He muttered something in rapid Spanish and jogged down the street. Once he disappeared into one of the many nooks and crannies of the city, Boyd found a shop to get his ear pierced and headed home.

The studio felt like a godsend after being in the heat all day even as muggy as it was inside. He stripped to his boxers and a tank top, and sat on the bed near one of the fans. When Sin returned, Boyd had still not moved.

"I got us something today."

"Yeah?" Sin yanked at the tie he was forced to wear during training. "What?"

"Well, first of all, this." Boyd pushed his hair back to display the small silver post in his upper ear.

"Congratulations. You've achieved looking-like-an-idiot status."

"Ha. Ha. You should be a little more enthusiastic." Boyd tossed a box to Sin. "You're going to have to wear one too."

"What are we, going steady? I don't think I'm ready for such a commitment."

"Are you ready for a GPS commitment instead?" Boyd teased.

Sin shrugged off his jacket and undid the pearly buttons of his shirt. It was damp with sweat and stretched taut across his shoulders. "I guess I have to be. Where'd you find that?"

"I made a black market contact. I'll give you detailed specs later, but with these we can track each other without detection."

"Will the average Janus flunky figure out how to access the GPS function or should we smash it if apprehended?"

"I've set passwords for us, but the battery on the GPS is limited. We need a plan with solid timing in case we're separated."

"Who's your contact?" Sin finished unbuttoning his shirt and let it hang open. "Your new drug-dealing boyfriend?"

"Hey now, be fair." Boyd smirked. "He doesn't deal drugs."

At Sin's scoff, Boyd chuckled and rose from the bed. His bare feet padded across the floor as he walked to the couch and dropped down onto one end.

"They're women and only interested in each other so, no. Jorge arranged it. They're called the Snakes. Apparently they're some of the very few people who aren't afraid of Chingón."

Sin scrutinized Boyd for a long moment before he pulled the shirt off entirely. Boyd admired the sculpted planes of his partner's body. In the past couple of months, Sin's muscle mass had increased and the result was a constant distraction. Even now, Boyd's fingers twitched with the urge to feel every inch of him.

"You're sure these people are clean?" Sin asked.

"They're definitely not related to Janus."

"Did you dig up anything new on your boyfriend?"

"Would you shut up about that?" Boyd said with a laugh. "I said one thing about the guy, and you harp on it for months. And, no. Not really. Jorge said he deals mostly in weapons and isn't affiliated with anyone, but would probably sell to Janus or others like them for the right price."

Sin grunted and sprawled onto the sofa, his long legs stretching out to brace against the coffee table. "I'd like to know more about him, but there's no point if it isn't going to interfere with the mission."

"It's unlikely unless he randomly joins forces with Janus."

"Knowing our luck, that is exactly what will happen." Sin smirked. "Regardless of all that, I'm positive Janus is going to throw their shin-dig in the east wing of the center. And lower management has no clue. Whoever gave Janus the go ahead to have their conference in the JKS must be high up in administration."

"I know the idea is to get all the leaders at once, but if a lot of the staff is entirely unaware of the situation..." Boyd's lips thinned. "How many civilians will be present?"

"It seems that the preliminary amount of guests per night including artists and JKS staff will be around five hundred. Of course we want

to minimize civilian casualties, but we also have to make sure the rear exits and all exits leading to the east wing are blocked off, so it may not be possible to completely avoid collateral damage.” Sin spread his hands. “The Expo will be in *Sala de Baile Sur*—the main ballroom in the south wing. The southeast corridor will be a problem area. Exits 4 and 5 need to be blocked off on the southeast corridor, and so do 7 and 8 in the northeast corridor. Staff located in the southeast section may have difficulty escaping if they’re too stupid to make their way to the main exits in the south wing.”

As Sin spoke, Boyd had recovered his tablet from the coffee table and flicked it on to access the blueprint Sin had constructed over the past month.

“I’ll be in the Janus convention for a lot of this, but I can take the northeast corridor if you take southeast. We can communicate with short distance radios I got hold of.”

“More goodies?”

Boyd smiled faintly. “Yes, but they will be useless out of range. If we are separated at the event, I suggest we adhere to the decision to wait two weeks before meeting so the heat can die down, and hold off on utilizing our phones or the GPS until we go to the meeting spot. That way, we can preserve the batteries in the watches and our phones. A lot of the safehouses I found won’t have working outlets or electricity.”

“We need to brainstorm some meeting places,” Sin said.

“Yeah. I have some ideas.”

Sin nodded and studied the radio. When he didn’t look up again, Boyd crossed his legs on the couch and leaned back as he assessed their plan so far.

The possibility of them being split up was high. After the bombs were in place, Sin would take his position in the mezzanine of the east wing and wait for word from Boyd—who would be working the Janus convention in his Kadin guise—to begin the stream of head shots that would eliminate the Janus leaders before the bombs finished the rabble.

If Sin’s position was spotted, it would be too risky for them to meet unless Boyd broke cover. That was a last resort. The last thing he wanted was to put the real Kadin Reed in danger, and to have any potential Janus survivors believing 53 had betrayed the cause.

After the assassinations were complete, Sin would escape from the

south exit while detonating the bombs, and Boyd would escape from the north as he did the same. If Sin had a pursuit, they would alter the plan and meet two weeks later. It was a last resort, and one Boyd did not relish. Being unable to contact Sin during an emergency after months of constantly being in his presence would be tortuous.

"Are you looking forward to going back?"

Boyd could only blink at Sin. "What?"

"I asked if you want to go back to Lexington. Do you miss any of those people?"

"Oh." Boyd considered the question. "I would like to see Ryan."

"For what?"

"He's my friend." Boyd gave Sin a sideways look. "He'd be yours too if you let him."

Sin made a sound at the back of his throat, and lifted his hips to undo his pants. "I barely know what it means to have a friend."

"We're friends."

"That's different," Sin replied. "We were partners first. I trusted you. Also, if that is the standard definition of friendship, Ryan can keep being my non-friend. I'm not fucking him."

A surprised laugh escaped Boyd. "Sex isn't typical in a friendship. Not always, anyway."

"When is sex okay with a friend and when isn't it?"

"That's a more complicated answer and depends a lot on the people." Boyd watched Sin shimmy out of his pants and kick them onto the floor. "What brought up all these questions?"

"I don't know." Sin shrugged. "I just feel like an idiot for not understanding basic things, and you're the only person I can ask."

"You shouldn't feel like an idiot. It's not as though you've had many social interactions until recently."

"I guess." Still looking unconvinced, Sin collapsed against the couch. "I don't feel ready to go back, Boyd."

Boyd pressed his hand to the top of Sin's and smiled sadly. "I know."

ELEVEN

SALA DE BAILE SUR could easily accommodate two thousand people, but the guest list for the art Expo only topped four hundred. The cavernous space was full of gallery exhibitions instead of people, which made the room easier to secure but more obnoxious to navigate.

The overall theme of the Expo was hope and recovery from the scars of war, but most of the art was more depressing than hopeful. The allegedly world-renowned artists seemed more like the kids who hung around Lincoln Square and thrived on being miserable. Sin had lapped the room twice before a painting caught his eye.

An acid rain sky, missiles like falling stars, and a lone figure standing in the middle of a bombed-out city. It was a young boy wearing army fatigues. He clutched a military helmet in one hand, and a rifle lay discarded at his feet. The boy was covered with blood and soot. However, it was the look on his face, the eerily vacant stare, that made Sin take a step back.

"Do you like?"

The artist, a woman named Yara, appeared from behind one of the displays. Sin barely spared her a glance before looking at the painting again.

"I guess."

"It's called Atonement."

"He doesn't seem to be atoning for anything there."

Yara's head cocked to the side. "It's interesting that you see it that way. If I may ask, how would you have interpreted the painting if you saw the title without my explanation?"

Sin debated walking away without comment, but her doe-eyed gaze encouraged him to grudgingly respond. "Sometimes fighters, or soldiers, think they need to atone for the things they did in battle. I'd probably think the kid was looking for a way to atone for the lives he took."

Yara pursed her lips. "A valid conclusion. However, I was thinking about the world needing to atone for creating a generation of child killers. Boys who did not have the chance to live before the world

armed them, and who don't know how to live now that the fighting is over."

Silence fell between them and Sin wanted to walk away, but something about her words, and her painting, unearthed memories better left forgotten.

"A lot of people would think you're insane for believing that," he said. "Especially the activists and pseudo-revolutionaries who run around screaming about the government. They view that generation of soldiers as mindless drones; puppets of the government who killed without question. Some people think soldiers from that time are monsters. Especially the kids."

"You are not wrong." Yara crossed her arms over the pale fabric of her dress and studied her art. "But even if many people see soldiers as nothing more than missile launchers and civilian killers, there are people out there who think they, too, were victims of the war." When he failed to react, the artist smiled. "I apologize. I usually don't do this, but when I saw you looking at my young man, I could not help but think you reminded me of him."

This time, Sin did react. "I don't know about that."

She smiled without further explanation, and Sin took that as his cue to move away. With one final glance at the painting, he resumed his trek around the perimeter of the room.

"If I stay here any longer I'm going to hurt myself," he muttered, confident Boyd had heard the entire exchange through the microphone.

"If you do in that room, I guarantee you'll be the subject of about a dozen works of art within the week."

Sin snorted softly. He barely moved his lips when he responded. "How are things on your end?"

There was an extended pause in which Sin could overhear several muted conversations in the background although none of them were clear enough to be understood.

"No one yet," Boyd said. "Maybe it's too early."

Sin looked down at his watch. "Probably."

For the most part, they kept their interaction to a minimum. Giving an abbreviated version of events was annoying, but the short-range radio was so unreliable that Sin tried to avoid using it. The range between his position in the southern wing and Boyd's station in *Teatro 3* of the northeast wing was apparently too far to pick up a

strong signal. Their correspondence was often interrupted by sharp bursts of static or the signal faded completely. It wasn't a big deal and wouldn't affect their plan once they escaped the center, but it was another minor annoyance that heightened Sin's impatience.

He didn't want to go back to Lexington, but the sluggish pace of the mission only worsened his anxiety about the return. With real life looming just over the horizon, Sin was ready to deal with it. He was also ready to figure out where he and Boyd would stand once they were back to their respective homes. If Sin's apartment could be called a home.

Peering at his watch again, Sin wondered what the hell was taking so long. The explosives were planted around the northeast wing, his sniper rifle was hidden in the mezzanine above *Teatro 3*... All he needed were the goddamn Janus leaders to arrive.

"Good evening."

The speaker's voice jerked Sin's attention to the stage.

"Welcome to the 5th Annual Global Arts Exposition! I'd like to thank everyone for coming on this night, the 21st anniversary of the start of the war, to honor our fallen loved—"

Sin promptly tuned the woman out and slipped out a side door that led to the corridor just outside the ballroom. There were various doors on either side of the hall which led to maintenance closets and staff areas.

"I can't wait until this is over."

"Won't be long," Boyd said.

Sin surveyed the area and considered their plan for the explosives. Bombing a building full of civilians was more nerve-racking when the civilians were all around him. Even if they were bleeding heart artists.

There were enough exits in the actual ballroom and the surrounding rooms to ensure the majority of them would be able to escape unscathed if they followed safety procedures, and if security actually did their fucking jobs. The probability of either of those things happening was up in the air.

Sin half-turned to the corridor branching off to the other wing but paused when a familiar voice called out to him.

Jessica.

Irritation surged, but the sight of her winning smile pushed some of his annoyance aside. Sin released a long-suffering sigh.

"What are you doing here, Jessica?"

"You look so handsome in a suit," she said in lieu of answering. "It's so good to see you!"

"It's just clothes. And I repeat—what are you doing here?"

"My uncle is involved with the Expo, and I came over to help him out when one of the planners had an emergency. It's just staff management from behind the scenes. Making sure everyone is in their places."

Sin's lips pressed together, and he didn't react when Jessica reached up to run her fingers through his hair.

"I see they made you cut your hair and take out the lip ring. Too bad."

"How long are you staying here?" he demanded. "For the entire show?"

Jessica nodded. "My uncle said I didn't have to once everything was running smoothly, but the art is beautiful so I may as well. Did you see the sculptor's gallery?"

"Yes." Sin's gaze flicked around the corridor before moving back to the exit. "Where are you going to be?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean where the hell are you going to be in an hour or so? In an employee staging area or in the ballroom?"

Jessica studied him. A smile tipped up the corners of her mouth. "I'll be moving around from place to place. Why? Do you want to do something later?"

Another of the JKS guards left the ballroom and shot Sin an impressed smirk after getting an eyeful of Jessica. Sin ignored the man.

"Now that I'm not your boss," she continued, "and I won't be sued for sexual harassment, I was wondering if we could get together after you're done for the night."

His automatic response was "absolutely not" since he was going to bomb the goddamn Expo and flee the country, but saying no would draw out their exchange. "We'll see."

Her face lit up. "Great. We could get something to eat, and my apartment isn't too far from here."

"Fine. We'll see what happens." Sin backed away from her. "Be careful."

Jessica's brow furrowed, but he turned away before she could say anything more.

THE JANUS CONFERENCE was full of representatives from smaller insurgent groups worldwide, and Boyd learned nothing that was not already included in the Agency's intel. The only present members of Janus were lower-level lackeys who did little more than spout the typical Janus rhetoric.

Not the leaders. Not their targets.

He thought listening to their stunted worldview and hypocritical proclamations would be the worst part of the night until Jessica's throaty voice came through his ear piece. Irritation turned into outright anger once the flirting began. When she propositioned Sin, Boyd barely stopped himself from saying coldly, "Tell her to fuck off."

It didn't help when Sin agreed.

Boyd knew, logically, that Sin wouldn't be able to go home with her, but his refusal to shut her down like he had done so many other people in the past was a source of frustration.

Why did Sin constantly make exceptions for her? Why was she allowed to touch and kiss him? Why did he try so hard to be nice when he knew he would never even see her again? All of it lent weight to the possibility that this woman was somehow special and that triggered Boyd's irrational hatred for her all over again.

"It pisses you off too, huh?"

Startled, Boyd glanced to his side. Rick, a low-ranking Janus operative, had silently approached.

They'd met earlier in the week while Boyd had been making the rounds in an effort to gather additional information from the Janus representatives. It was the first time he'd conversed with anyone from the organization and listened to their viewpoint without the Agency's bias, and it had initially proven to be intriguing.

He'd spent an afternoon with Rick and his colleague Dana playing card games while discussing the state of the world and the changes Janus could make. It had not taken long to pick up on the fact that the two operatives were more than friends, but Dana shied away from any public displays and seemed steadfast about keeping up the right appearances because she was ranked above Rick.

They made a somewhat odd couple. Rick was tall and pale-skinned,

and tempered his size with a generally unassuming nature. Dana, on the other hand, was a petite Indian woman with sharp eyes, a long braid of black hair, and a thin form built entirely of muscle. Where Rick tended to be gentle, she was strict and unforgiving.

Unfortunately, the personal information was all Boyd gathered; neither had anything valuable to offer in terms of intel, and spending so much time with people he had been sent to kill was disturbing. Although the Agency trained their agents to believe Janus was full of domestic terrorists, the propaganda did nothing to quell the discomfort in the pit of Boyd's stomach at the thought of how the night would end.

"What do you mean?" Boyd asked.

"The flag." Rick nodded at the wall. "The way you were glaring at it just now—I could tell it made you angry."

In his anger over Jessica, Boyd had not even noticed the flag in front of him. The realization was alarming. Over the years he had mastered the art of remaining stolid no matter the upheaval in his mind. That default stoicism had protected him more than once. Why was it slipping away now, and on a mission no less? Had Monterrey and Sin changed him that much?

"Heh," Boyd uttered. "I'm that obvious?"

"No, not at all." Rick squeezed his shoulder. "But when we see these symbols of nationalism, we all get pissed. It's natural. That's why Janus does what it does. The founders were sick of the injustice and propaganda. That's why I love meeting people like you. People who saw what was going on and tried to affect change after our country started that goddamn war."

Boyd didn't personally didn't think the war was a result of solely the American government so much as it was the inevitability of human nature, but he was not going to argue the point.

"It's great being here with others like myself," he said instead. "I can't wait until the conference starts. You must be anxious about it, though. I bet security is a nightmare when everyone comes together like this."

"Definitely." Rick skimmed the crowd. "I wouldn't have picked such a public location, but I'm not in charge. Apparently there's a connection with the guy who owns this place."

"I saw his name on a plaque," Boyd said. "Hale Clemons, right? He

must be someone very dedicated to the revolution if he has personal knowledge of Janus' leaders."

"Whoa! Don't give him too much credit." Rick's incredulous laugh boomed across the din of noise in the room. "The core won't be here. They have more important things to do than welcome a bunch of new cells."

Boyd looked at him sharply, but before Rick could say anything else, Dana called to him from across the room.

"I need to get going," Rick said, sobering up. "I'll see you later, Kadin. I hope everything works out with your group joining us. Change will only come through solidarity."

Boyd could only nod as Rick hurried to join Dana. When he was out of earshot, Boyd transmitted to Sin immediately. "Something's wrong. They're not here. This seems like an orientation."

"What do you mean orientation?"

"New cells being brought in. Not one leader present. One of my contacts said the core doesn't attend meetings like this."

There was a breath of silence before Sin growled, "Proceed regardless."

"Copy."

"ET?"

A few people, including Rick and Dana, had congregated at the front of the room.

"Ten."

DURING SIN'S TRAINING at the JKS he had familiarized himself with every hole in their security system. He knew the placement of every camera, and he knew the surveillance room was not monitored around the clock. Not even on the night of a major Exposition when there should have been higher security than ever. The logic was faulty, and shady, but it worked to Sin's advantage.

Mind-numbing speeches were still going on when he caught the eye of his supervisor, Pyanin, and headed for one of the exits.

"I'm going to take my break."

"That's a meal violation."

"I was distracted by the speeches. Sorry."

Pyanin gave him a skeptical once-over. "Right. I've never been so

bored in my life, but then again I didn't expect this evening to be packed with action."

Just wait thirty more minutes and you'll get more action than you need, Sin thought. "Should I take a forty-five to cover the break I didn't take?"

Pyanin nodded. "Just clock back in after thirty."

Too bad the break room would most likely be in flames after thirty. "No problem."

Sin slipped out of the ballroom and headed down the southwest corridor towards the staff lounge. He shrugged off his suit jacket, loosened his tie, and left the jacket lying on the table before punching out and leaving the building through one of the back exits. It led to a diamond-shaped courtyard which sat in the center of all four wings.

He paused outside the door and made a production out of finding and lighting a cigarette with his body angled towards one of the stationary cameras. He slipped his phone out of his pocket, fiddled with it, and held it up in the guise of seeking better reception. After a moment of muttering and scowling, Sin wandered away from the exterior exit and moved into one of the courtyard's blind spots.

Once the center was rocked with explosions it would be no surprise that Jason Alvarez did not return, and Sin's cover would be preserved.

Sin strode along the perimeter of the courtyard, just outside the camera's range, and dropped the cigarette. He stripped off his white button-down to expose a black, fitted shirt beneath. After removing a folded-up ski mask from his pocket, he stashed the shirt in the bushes. With the moon shielded by the trees, Sin's form blended completely with the darkness.

With the exception of quiet laughter from an unseen couple across the courtyard, nothing hindered Sin from moving undetected to the eastern side of the convention center. It took him less than two minutes to slink through the trees, approach an exterior access staircase leading to the upper mezzanine in the east wing, and sprint up the stairs.

The mezzanine was made of stone and wound around and above *Teatro 3* like an indoor balcony. The multitude of archways along the structure created a series of surveillance blind spots that Sin had used to his advantage. He ducked below the low wall and belly-crawled to

the spot where he had stashed his rifle in a shallow cavern behind loose stones in the wall.

Sliding into position, Sin peered into the theater through the scope of his rifle. He scanned the sea of faces, but none of them were familiar.

“Status?”

“Nothing,” Boyd muttered.

Scowling, Sin shifted his focus to the people on the small stage. Their faces had not even been included on the list of Janus targets which meant they were nobodies in the grand scheme of things. It was just like Boyd had said; the entire gathering was an orientation for new inductees into Janus. Another step in their ongoing venture to swallow every insurgent group with ideals similar to their own. To create an army.

The speaker droned on about geopolitics and the fascist state of the globe, but it was nothing more than their typical propaganda. He was essentially rallying the troops before a battle; inciting them against the international bad guys and reiterating the fact that every person in the room was courageous for taking part in the war for a new world order. It was not unlike the speeches the Agency gave during agent initiation and deportment training.

After fifteen minutes of listening to the guy speak, Sin was ready to blow his fucking brains out. Thankfully, the speaker gave the microphone to a woman he introduced as Dana. She was just as unfamiliar as the man; Sin did not recall seeing a picture of an Indian woman anywhere on the hit list.

“What the hell is this,” Sin muttered.

Dana gave an overview of the purpose of the orientation and stated that once the inductees joined Janus, their individual groups would be dissolved as they became part of the collective. She emphasized loyalty, respect, dedication, and stressed that traitors would be punished swiftly. Her eyes scanned the room; clearly seeking signs of weakness or indecisiveness among the inductees.

Sin had no doubts that anyone who hesitated would be silenced before they left the JKS. But as interesting as it was to see Janus in their true colors, it had nothing to do with the information Thierry had encrypted.

“This is wrong.”

“Mm,” Boyd agreed, barely a breath of a sound in Sin’s ear.

“I have no one to fucking shoot.”

Sin couldn’t wrap his mind around the situation. They had spent nearly a year preparing for something that was not going to happen. The Agency had spent months decoding information that should have led to them finally decapitating Janus, but that wouldn’t be happening. Not today.

“The information was wrong,” Sin said flatly. “Thierry was wrong.” He shoved the rifle back into the cavern he had created. It was useless to him now. “Fuck this. I say we proceed with stage 2.”

Boyd made another soft sound, this one of agreement.

“B12 first.” An explosion in that area would compromise the entire structure of the northeast wing and both connecting corridors. “Do the next five in five second intervals,” Sin continued, naming the exits they’d previously discussed.

The explosions would turn *Teatro 3* into an inescapable inferno until it collapsed in on itself and caused severe damage to both corridors, essentially obstructing accessible means of egress in the entire building. He and Boyd would destroy their assigned exits after escaping.

“Regroup at the designated point unless otherwise stated.”

Sin doubled back the way he’d come and re-entered the southeast corridor. He sealed himself inside the recess of a doorway and slid his hand into his pocket, thumb poised on the detonator.

“Go.”

“Kay,” Boyd said.

Sin pressed down, and the explosion rocked the entire complex.

The jks shook as its foundation quaked and roiled, and the sounds of panic filtered through the shut door of the ballroom. The noise exploded out into the corridor in a mix of screaming and running feet. No one was calm, no one was directing—the goddamn civilians were turning their emergency egress into chaos.

Sin tried to block out the sounds of terror. Tried not to think about how easily this could turn into a bloodbath...

The next explosion cut through the screams with a resounding boom. Five seconds went by, and then there was another. By now, all exits leading into the north wing and *Teatro 3* were destroyed.

The last round of explosives would block the exits leading into the corridors.

Slipping out of the recess, Sin spun on his heel and sprinted to his egress point without removing his mask. The last of the bombs detonated in quick succession, and Sin heard no distant sounds of panicking from the northern parts of the center. The Janus reps and inductees were likely injured, trapped, or dead.

A quick glance at his watch indicated they were making good time, but local law enforcement would arrive within minutes. They had to disappear. Vivienne would have their asses if the authorities noticed them; it would be as bad as failing the mission.

Sin's footfalls pounded against the floor, but his heartbeat was steady. There was no surge of adrenaline. No coil of fear. The mission was so anticlimactic that Sin felt nothing about its completion at all until a soft moan rang out a couple of feet away. He skidded to a halt and sought out the source.

Jessica.

She was sprawled on the floor and pinned by two ceiling panels. She was unconscious, and her hair was damp with blood.

"Fuck," Sin hissed.

Smoke uncurled from beneath doorways and around the other corridors, making a sluggish escape from the red and orange flames that licked just behind them. The roar of the fire came as a hot whoosh of air flooded the area, but Jessica did not react.

"What's wrong?" Boyd's voice exploded in his ear, mingled with the sounds of shouting and groaning metal.

"Jessica. She's injured."

The door was only a few feet away, and Sin's finger was already poised on the detonator. Two seconds and he was out. Free of the JKS, the mission, and able to go back to Lexington and deal with the consequences of Thierry's faulty intel. Only a few seconds and a few feet, but he was frozen with Jessica just within his reach.

"Just fucking leave her. The cops are on their way."

Sin's eyes narrowed.

Somewhere within the bowels of the building a woman screamed for help, a smaller explosion shook the structure further, and the smoke filled the corridor with aggressive speed. Jessica did not so much as twitch.

Sin ripped his hand out of his jacket and crossed the distance between them. He grabbed the ceiling panels and heaved them away.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Boyd's voice rose. "Get out of there!"

"I'm not going to detonate explosives that will kill her!"

Sin hoisted Jessica's slender frame up and threw her over one shoulder. She was dead weight, but he could make it. He could still get out.

"I'm bringing her with me."

"You idiot!"

"I can still get out," Sin grunted as he barreled out the exit.

The sound of shouting faded on Boyd's end, but it was replaced by the increasing screech of static. Through it, the disgust in his tone was still clear. "Well, that's great for you and her, but I won't be able to make it back. Forget it. Switch to Plan B." Boyd paused and then added coldly, "If this gets you caught, you fucking deserve it."

Anger erupted in Sin's chest with enough force to rival the C4 they'd planted in the convention center. It burned hotter when the static increased and signaled Boyd's decision to flee the center without waiting for him.

Why did Boyd think he could leave her to die? She was innocent, and the sinking feeling in Sin's gut told him that Jessica had only stayed behind to search for him. Because he'd made her believe they would leave together.

It was his fault.

Why didn't Boyd understand? Why did Boyd want him to murder her?

"Fuck you," Sin growled as the channel was overcome by static.

The night air washed over him even as he detonated the last bomb. The explosion knocked Sin off his feet, and the flames burst out of all seams of the northeast wing; illuminating the night sky in embers and an orange glow. The heat was so intense, the smoke so pervasive, that lightheadedness poked holes in Sin's stamina. His head swam, and his balance wavered, but he didn't fall. He didn't let go of Jessica.

Sin disappeared into the darkness while the Joel K. Solar Convention Center burned.

TWELVE

HEAVY THUMPS OVERHEAD caused dust to rain down on Boyd's hair. The footsteps were weighty and ponderous. Judging by the sounds when the man kicked things, he wore steel-toed boots.

"Nos nos haga daño, por favor, señor, por favor," a woman moaned.

Boyd knew her as María. She was currently cowering in the room at the top of the stairs. Even pressed into a crawl space in the wall, Boyd clearly heard what was going on above him.

A child's voice drifted down; muffled snuffles and the occasional fearful cry.

"Cállate," the man ordered.

Boyd heard more items being knocked around. He knew there were two men in the room above; two Federals that were attempting to intimidate the house's inhabitants.

"No," María pleaded, tears in her voice. *"No nos mate, no nos dispare, por favor, somos inocentes, por favor..."*

One of the men scoffed. His footsteps paused, and he spoke too fast and low for Boyd to translate. Soon after, two sets of footsteps descended the steps toward him.

Boyd tensed. He was coiled for a fight and prepared to strike ruthlessly if they approached his hiding place, but in lieu of searching for hidden compartments, the two men murmured to each other until a radio crackled.

A button clicked and one of the Federals answered sharply, *"No está aquí."*

There was white noise before a response came through: *"Sigán buscando. El capitán cree que está en el área."*

"¿No tenemos información más certera?"

The men spoke in rapid-fire Spanish until the Federal snapped, *"¿Seguro que está aquí? Tenemos días buscando."*

"No, pero ya revisamos los otros barrios y nada." A low snort punctuated the words. *"Independencia es el mejor escondite pero pura madre un gringo sobrevive ahí."*

"Ni madres."

"Por eso hay que concentrarse en el Barrio Antiguo." There was a

brief pause, and the voice on the other end of the radio grew faint. When it returned, the man ended the conversation. *“Pues, apúrense. Vayan a todas las casas que sea necesario. El capitán quiere que arrestemos e interroguemos al sospechoso antes del fin de semana.”*

Once the radio was off, the two men quietly conversed. From the bits Boyd could hear and translate, it seemed that they were tired of the monotonous search but had to move to the next location if they were to find the perpetrator—him—by the weekend.

After several long minutes, their footsteps retreated and they exited the home. Boyd forced himself to count out nearly ten minutes even though his entire body thrummed with the need to escape. If the Federals were concentrating on this neighborhood, he only had a small window to escape notice and flee to his next safehouse.

Boyd grabbed his bag and crawled out of the hiding spot. He was filthy. His clothes were darker due to layers of dirt and grime, and the hair he had hastily dyed was nearly black from dust. He could do nothing about his altered eye color, but mousey brown hair brought him considerably less attention than Kadin Reed’s red coloring.

In the days he’d spent evading authorities and hiding in decrepit safehouses, there had been no time to clean. And in some instances, looking like a vagrant was beneficial. Especially now that the mission had gone to shit in every possible way.

The worst part—and the part Boyd could not explain once he returned to the Agency—was how he had been seen during egress. Newspaper headlines and reports claimed there had been a witness; a woman watching from a nearby building saw a pale, red-haired man escape the JKS alive.

The authorities quickly deemed the lone survivor a suspect, and the Federals were brought in to hunt down any foreigners of Boyd’s height, weight, and with light-colored hair. It led to them hauling in any white male foreigner, and rumors claimed they were interrogated under harsh conditions.

Vivienne would be incensed. At this point, Boyd did know what would be worse—facing her or the Federals. And of course there was Janus.

The organization was undoubtedly accounting for their people and the invited inductees, and they would suspect Kadin Reed when he

came up missing instead of hospitalized or dead; especially once they heard the description of the lone suspect.

Even worse was the possibility of Janus having connections with the Federals. And that was a very real likelihood. Fuck his life.

Light, quick footsteps approached the stairs, and Jorge came into view.

“Go,” he hissed. “They are gone.”

“Thanks, Jorge.” Boyd slipped a few bills out of his pocket and pressed them into Jorge’s hand. “For María, *dale las gracias*. She sounded very convincing.”

Jorge pocketed the money with his usual haste. “She knows.” He jerked his head.

When Boyd opened his mouth to say goodbye, Jorge shoved him to the door and hissed, “¡Ándale, ya vete! I don’t want to stay here *pa’ verlos* beat you down *en mi cara, ni tampoco* let them kill me *por ti*. You are no worth it!”

The boy ordered Boyd to leave, glaring, but when Jorge turned back to the house, his shoulders hunched and he touched the *escapulario*.

Boyd smiled sadly. “Thanks for giving me a change, Jorge.”

With no time to thank Maria or say a proper farewell to Jorge, he slipped into the stifling night air.

The city was still in lockdown even two weeks after the bombing of the JKS and the Expo. Every way in or out was heavily monitored, and the streets were dotted with checkpoints. Getting from one neighborhood to the other was difficult, and Boyd prayed the tunnel he’d scouted in the weeks prior would still be available by the time he met Sin.

Keeping to the shadows, Boyd dashed from street to street to make his way to the next squat. Many of his planned safehouses were compromised or inaccessible, but the apartment building on Nueva Amsterdam remained secure. Even so, Boyd analyzed the perimeter before moving inside, and still did not enter the chosen unit until he ensured the security tests were intact.

The only furniture in the apartment was a lone mattress and a heavy table he’d shoved close to the door. It barely gave him enough space to slide into the room but, once inside, he pushed the table flush against the door for additional security.

Exhaustion suffocated Boyd. He stumbled to the mattress before

dropping down onto it. It was the eleventh day since the attack at the JKS, and three days until he met with Sin. After days of adrenaline highs and stolen minutes of rest, he was asleep instantly.

REM had just set in when a sound at the window jolted him awake. He leapt out of the bed, scrambling for a weapon even as his heart crashed in his chest. A charged second passed with him crouched in a fighting stance, wild gaze scouring the room, before he realized it had only been the wind.

Boyd sighed and returned to the mattress. It felt like he'd barely dozed, but the sky outside was lighter. Numbly, he switched on his phone. He'd been unable to charge it for days, but there were no missed messages or calls. After setting it to the side, he looked down at the GPS watch. The urge to check Sin's location re-emerged, but Boyd batted it down. The intensity of his rage at Sin had faded in the past week, but the feeling was not entirely gone.

Jessica.

She always had to get in the way. She always had to distract Sin.

If they'd followed the plan, all of these days of little-to-no sleep wouldn't have been necessary. They could have taken turns being lookout and watched each other's backs. But no. Sin had changed the course of their escape plan because Jessica was so inexplicably important to him. Sin had zero problems potentially killing scores of civilians, people he had trained with as a guard, artists he'd spoken to, but God forbid anyone endanger Jessica with her huge breasts and invasive expectations.

While Boyd was running around to the point of exhaustion and ducking federal police, was Sin hiding in Jessica's apartment? Were they sharing her bed while Boyd hid in cellars and inside of walls? Because of one woman's presence, they had lost contact with each other.

They'd agreed upon radio silence for two weeks, and Boyd had stuck to that decision, but the not knowing nagged at him every day. Not knowing where Sin was after months of being within arm's length of each other hollowed out his chest even with the possibility of Sin being with Jessica.

But it was only for three more days. Three days, and then he would use the watch, or his phone, to contact Sin. The thought was only

minimally comforting. Once they returned to the Agency, there would be hell to pay.

He'd gone into Monterrey hoping to be redeemed for what had happened with Thierry and his valentine designation, but now he'd been humiliated by Thierry twice. First, the manipulation to get him in bed, and now with the faulty intel. Even if it turned out Thierry had deliberately been given misinformation, it didn't matter anymore. Everything had gone to shit.

Worry dragged at Boyd in an ever-increasing tide. Soon, it seeped away the little energy he'd gathered, and he drifted back into a light sleep. The next time he woke, it was due to the vibration of his phone against the floor.

Boyd's hand shot out to grab it, and his heart burst into a gallop at the sight of an unknown number. No one knew the number except Sin and the Agency. Sin would never call from a different number and expect an answer, and neither would Carhart.

He ran through different scenarios, decided to be poised to run if he needed, and ultimately accepting the call. There was a pause punctuated by a low whirring sound. A man's voice asked, "Is Mr. Gray available?"

Boyd didn't recognize the voice, but it was definitely Agency code. He deflated.

"Yes, this is Terrence speaking."

"Is your position secure, agent?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps you can explain why Agent Vega is deceased."

The words made so little sense that all Boyd could do was peer quizzically at the ceiling. "What?"

"Deceased, agent. As in dead. No longer with us. Departed from this Earth. How did he come to be that way?"

"He's not—What?" Boyd's irritation rose to eclipse the confusion. What was this idiot talking about? Sin wasn't dead. There was no way he hadn't made it out of the building. Sin would probably survive the apocalypse. "I don't know what you're talking about, but we aren't supposed to meet for another three days."

"I see." There was a pause. "As of November 12th at approximately 0300, the chip in Agent Vega's throat, the one which monitored his vitals, flat-lined before it stopped responding entirely."

Boyd could not reply.

It wasn't possible. 0300 hours? That was several hours after the explosion. Had Sin been hurt in the blast? It didn't make sense. Sin would have never detonated the bombs if his own proximity was too close. Even with Jessica, Sin should have been able to escape. He'd escaped worse.

This couldn't be right. Their intel was off.

"A team has been dispatched to search Agent Vega's last known position as well as to recover you, agent. We have obtained the coordinates from your tracker and should arrive in approximately five hours. It would be in your best interest to remain where you are until that time."

The connection abruptly ended.

After several seconds, Boyd lowered the phone to his lap. Distantly, he noted the battery was half-full. It would last until the team arrived.

The team.

Last known whereabouts.

Flat-lined.

The words echoed in his mind, interrupting any other flow of thought.

Dead.

The very concept was absurd. It had to be the Agency's equipment. A glitch.

Boyd pressed the contact log, and Sin's shone brightly in the dim light. He could call now. Sin would answer and be pissed that Boyd had left him behind, and Boyd would say of course he'd left—Sin had acted like a fool.

It would be so easy. Just a few numbers.

But the agent who had called would also have Sin's phone number. Surely, they already tried. But maybe Sin had lost the phone. It was entirely possible it had fallen out at the convention center. Or maybe he'd been captured. Maybe someone had taken or destroyed the phone.

Boyd's finger hovered near the button to activate the GPS on the wristwatch, but he stopped himself.

The watch would only last for ten to twelve hours and that was only if Tayla's estimate was correct. Activating the GPS now would waste

the battery, and he would be unable to find Sin if... if he truly was injured.

He had to wait. It would only be a few hours, and then he would show the Agency how wrong they were. Sin wasn't dead. Nobody in the world was strong enough to kill him. In a few hours, the team would see that. He would see how wrong he was about Sin.

Unless it was true.

Boyd's throat closed up. The room blurred.

If this gets you caught, you fucking deserve it.

The tightening in his chest signaled a flood of panic. Boyd inhaled and fought the overwhelming horror washing over him at the reality that he had potentially abandoned Sin to be captured, injured, and possibly killed.

After everything. After all the times Sin had come for him.

As much as Boyd had rationalized his decision, there was no denying the harsh reality: Sin had trusted him, and Boyd had left him at the convention center.

He felt sick.

APPROXIMATELY FIVE HOURS later, there was a knock on the door. Three short raps of a fist against the wood and then silence.

Before opening, Boyd peered through a crack in the side of the door. Four men and one woman stood in the hall. They wore civilian clothing, but each of them held a large duffel bag that Boyd recognized as Agency-issued.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Terrence Gray."

Boyd opened the door without another word.

The five agents filed into the room and spread out as if checking its security. No one looked at Boyd until the tallest man flipped the deadbolt, and the others halted at points around the room.

The agent appeared to be in his early thirties. He was nearly as tall as Sin and had a fit, muscular build. His close-cropped blond hair and intense blue eyes reminded Boyd of General Carhart.

"Agent Beaulieu," the man greeted in a voice Boyd recognized from the short call. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Who are you?"

The man dropped his duffel bag to the floor by his boots. "I'm Senior Agent Kassian Trovosky, and this is my team."

Boyd's expression remained impassive, but surprise prompted him to look at Kassian more closely. He was just as Sin had described, although Boyd had thought Kassian was on an extended mission in Russia.

Kassian nodded at the others agents, but did not shift his steady gaze from Boyd.

"The two gentlemen to your left are Rank 9 Field Agents Casey Archer and Jonathan Jones—they go by Archer and Blair." Both men were white, but Archer had buzzed hair and a wide, muscular build while Blair was dark-haired and rangy. Kassian jutted his chin at the fourth agent. "Babyface over there is Rank 9 Field Agent Michael Alvarado."

Michael scoffed and nudged the female agent with his hand. "And this is Harriet Stevens, Rank 9, et cetera. We all call her Harry."

Harriet nailed Michael with a flat look, but he only smiled in response. Her smooth mahogany skin, wide-set brown eyes, and high cheekbones were striking enough to rival Sin's, but Harriet's body was lean and athletic. Her hair was pulled back in a severe knot that gave the immediate impression she was the most serious person in the room other than Archer.

"This isn't an official team," Kassian said. "But I hand-pick my people for high priority missions. Especially missions involving the only other rank 10 agent."

"I see." Now that the other agents were there, Boyd was impatient to leave and find Sin. "I assume I don't have to introduce myself."

"No, we know all about you, Agent Beaulieu," Harriet said.

Kassian's focus snapped to her, but she only shrugged in response.

"We're not here to debrief," Kassian said. "But we need to know the events leading up to you and Agent Vega's separation, and anything pertinent that may have happened after."

"Agent Vega and I were at the JKS Convention Center on November 11th for an assassination mission which included bombing the building. I escaped, but Agent Vega stopped to help a civilian. Law enforcement was in the area, and I wasn't able to return to aid him without risking capture. We had previously agreed upon radio silence

for two weeks if we were separated. I haven't heard from Agent Vega, and our rendezvous isn't for three days."

"So much for not being debriefed," Harriet muttered.

Michael nudged her again. "Shut up, Harry."

"My name is Harriet."

"Like I said. Harry."

"Enough already," Kassian snapped.

Boyd ignored the other two agents. He focused on Kassian and bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself from demanding faster explanations about Sin's status.

"From what we were told in the briefing," Kassian said, "shortly after 0200 hours, the chip tracking Vega reported that his vitals were erratic. The device doesn't tell more than his heart rate, but it indicated he was experiencing some sort of trauma before subsequently flat-lining at approximately 0309. Our mission is to search his last known position for signs of Janus perpetrators. The Agency assumes Janus is responsible for Vega's death although that has obviously not been confirmed."

It was years of practice that kept Boyd's expression from faltering. Kassian spoke of it so casually, as if Sin really was dead.

"Is it possible the equipment malfunctioned?"

Kassian's mouth curled down. "Not unless we decided to collectively believe coincidences are the most likely solution to any situation that is difficult to accept. I find it improbable that after nearly an hour of an increasingly unsteady heartbeat, the device just happened to flat-line because of a malfunction before being destroyed." The senior agent inhaled slowly as if gathering patience. "The belief is that the chip was destroyed in the same manner in which he was killed. A possible gunshot to that area of his neck or any other number of scenarios."

The mental image that came to Boyd's mind was surreal. Blood, gore, and a blank stare aimed straight ahead. Like Lou. Because he'd failed Sin just as he'd failed Lou.

While Boyd's mind reeled, Kassian continued to speak. "We are to infiltrate the location with the utmost caution. My methods are very different from what you're accustomed to with Vega, and I suggest that you accept that now. I don't run into a base with the intention of

killing everyone in the vicinity. I respect the lives of others. Especially the people on my team.”

Cued by the statement, the other agents unzipped their bags and removed their gear. Boyd watched without emotion and only dimly realized he should collect his belongings and prepare.

“You’re not officially part of this team.” Kassian pulled a plated vest out of his bag and tugged it on. “You’re our charge. Part of our mission was to retrieve you, and that is what we have done. You’ll accompany us to the base, but you’re expected to adhere to my command or you’ll be handled appropriately.”

“Which means keep your mouth shut and do what the boss says. Got it?” Michael tossed a bulletproof vest to Boyd.

Boyd caught the vest and put it on without comment. There was a buzzing in his ears that had nothing to do with the room.

Archer buckled his own vest. “Just follow our lead, and you won’t get in the way. Stay in the back and don’t fuck us up.”

Boyd didn’t answer.

“We have little to no information about the building Vega was in, but we do know its location and that it was near the waterfront.” Kassian finished strapping weapons and ammunition onto his body. No one gave Boyd a gun. “It’s entirely possible we will find nothing there but a corpse and if that is the case, I want to be perfectly clear as of now that our orders are explicit in this regard. We are not to recover it.”

“What?” The words yanked Boyd out of the dull haze of shock. “You’re not—”

Did they truly intend to let Sin rot in Monterrey like garbage they didn’t feel like hauling home?

Kassian’s jaw clenched. “It isn’t my choice, and I don’t want to do it, but it’s the orders I was given. If we were to disobey orders and retrieve him, they would only incinerate his body. There would be no memorial. No funeral.” The senior agent’s eyes rose. “So, for your sake and my peace of mind, refrain from making this more difficult than it has to be or I will detain you.”

Boyd had already dismissed Kassian’s words. They could believe what they wanted, but if this horrible version of reality was true, Boyd would stay behind if it meant giving Sin a proper burial. Fuck the

Agency's orders. He was Sin's partner in life or death. He wouldn't abandon him again. But all he said was, "Understood."

"Good." Kassian picked up his bag and gave the room a cursory glance. "Let's move out."

They trooped down the stairs in just as efficient a manner as they'd entered the room; not moving until they were positive every nook and cranny of the building was secure.

The team didn't seem worried about drawing attention from the Federals, but it was likely due to whatever cover had given them clearance to enter the country with an assortment of weapons. Perhaps they were posing as United States federal agents sent to assist with the investigation of the bombing.

They piled into one of the Agency's more discreet armored vans. Kassian drove with Archer riding in the passenger's seat, and the others filed into the back to sit on the two benches that lined each side of the van. "We took a plane to the Mexican border before driving to Monterrey. We'll leave the same way. Getting out won't be a problem even though the city is locked down."

"Our papers make us out to be bounty hunters," Michael interjected. "Usually bounty hunters aren't allowed into Mexico, but they're more lenient if it's an American citizen we're dragging back. Especially a nice white boy like you."

"Ah." Maybe that was why they hadn't given him a weapon. Unless they didn't trust him. "What's my crime?"

"Grand larceny," Harriet said. "And tax evasion. White collar crime for a white collar boy."

"I must be a dangerous rich boy if it took five of you professionals to take me in."

"Your profile states you have ties with organizations that would provide you with ample protection." Harriet's mouth tightened at the sides and gave him an unimpressed once-over. "Despite what delusions of grandeur your mother's nepotism-fueled promotion allowed you to maintain up until this point, we've been doing this for a long time. We are actual professionals. The cover that our commanding officer devised has given us more leverage than your plans have done for you."

"Oh lay the fuck off already, Harry." Michael swatted at Harriet's shoulder. "We all know you're asshurt about him getting special

treatment, but do we really need to hear about it for the rest of this mission?"

"I concur," Kassian muttered from the driver's seat.

Harriet's only response was another scathing glare before she turned to the window.

Boyd did the same. After being at the Agency for over a year, he was accustomed to people with similar attitudes. He had expected nothing less from a team run by Kassian—the Agency's golden agent. At least he, for the most part, appeared diplomatic.

"Hey, you know David?"

Boyd realized Blair was addressing him. "What?"

"David Nakamura. He was your trainer, wasn't he? Doug was out of the country back then."

"Yes... Why?"

"He's good people. We trained together." Blair pursed his lips in serious consideration. "You know how he names his moves sometimes? There's one called the helicopter."

Boyd's brow furrowed. The man was strange. "I don't recall that move."

"Oh." Blair slumped in disappointment. "Well. I named it."

"Ah." The silence that followed was awkward, so Boyd added, "Maybe he hasn't had the chance to teach it to me yet."

"Maybe," Blair said, seeming mollified by the explanation.

The van rumbled through the streets, and the target area came upon them faster than Boyd expected. The scenery changed from increasingly poor residential homes to large blocks of concrete buildings rising above them in an industrial grid. Boyd placed the neighborhood and realized they were not far from the JKS.

Kassian parked the van next to an outcropped wall that kept them from view, and the agents silently exited the vehicle. No signal was needed before the team spread out and approached a neighboring building. When Boyd attempted to follow their lead, Archer shoved him back with a sharp look.

Gritting his teeth, Boyd fell behind.

Their target was a squat clinic in a state of disrepair. There was a faded sign in front of the building, and it was covered in copious amounts of graffiti, but the door appeared to be new.

Once the perimeter was secured, they approached the entrance.

The calm apathy Boyd had tried to adopt quailed. His first instinct was to shove through the team and run ahead, but instead he clenched his fingers and tried not to imagine Sin's corpse lying inside.

Archer approached the door and exchanged glances with Kassian. After a measured pause, he kicked the door in before ducking out of the way again. Archer pinned himself against the side of the building and crouched down with his gun raised.

Nothing happened. There was not even a slight shuffle of feet inside. From Boyd's angle, all he could see was darkness beyond the doorway.

One-by-one the agents filed inside. Kassian stayed by the door. Neither of them moved.

"It's empty!" Harriet called out.

Kassian finally nodded at Boyd. They entered together.

The interior of the clinic was filthy, but a closer inspection showed the thick layer of dust was disturbed on some surfaces and cushions. Ghostly footprints led into the building, fading in and out of view.

Three doorways branched off from the narrow lobby, but the other agents were focused on only one of the rooms. Boyd froze, his alarm rising, but he burst into motion after seeing Michael wince at the scene, and rushed into the room.

Sin wasn't there, but the place was covered in blood.

Blood splattered against the grime on the walls, and a surgeon's table sat in the middle like something out of a horror film. It shone dully in the places where it was not streaked with dried blood. Small pools of coagulated blood had gathered on either side of the table as if something had steadily dripped in those spots.

There were also drag marks.

Blood streaked across the floor behind the table and led to the back door. A smeared handprint was visible on one side of the marks. Boyd's imagination gave him a ghostly flash of Sin being dragged out the door while screaming. Drugged. Helpless.

The urge to vomit was overwhelming. Boyd swallowed bile and pressed a hand against his stomach. He forced himself to shove his hand back down to his side, to not show weakness, and to not sprint to the back door where the drag marks disappeared.

He knew he would find nothing. They'd already checked outside.

"They took him," Boyd managed. "Do you know how to find him?"

No one responded. Michael and Blair opened the back door and examined the ground more closely with their flashlights. Harriet took out a tiny camera and began snapping pictures of the scene.

"It looks like they did him here," she said, gesturing to the surgeon table. "Dragged the body outside."

Michael reappeared in the doorway, nodding as if confirming the theory. "There's some blood and tire marks in the back. They probably took it elsewhere to discard."

"Do you know how to find him?" Boyd repeated through his clenched jaw. "Because I do."

Kassian didn't seem to hear, and he replied to the rest of his team. "Since we have no data on their actual base of operations, let's spread out and find any information before we leave." He crouched down and picked at the pile of discarded sheets and cloth before extracting a torn, bloodstained, white shirt. Sin's shirt.

The room swayed around Boyd. He sucked in deep breaths, counted, and then turned away from the nightmarish room. Even if Sin was dead, Boyd would find his body.

He activated the GPS in his watch in seconds and watched the face of the watch shift. Green lines spread across the screen, and a small dot languidly blinked up at him to indicate Sin's location.

Without waiting for permission, Boyd headed for the lobby, and Kassian was right behind him.

"I told you not to go anywhere unless I said so."

"You weren't listening to me," Boyd snapped. He held up the watch. "He's only fifteen minutes away if we take the right streets. There's no point in staying here any longer."

Kassian's grabbed the watch and examined the GPS. Harriet and Archer re-entered the lobby.

"It's a GPS receiver," Kassian said aloud. "How is it tracking him? Not through the chip."

"I got us each a receiver and transmitter. It won't pinpoint him directly. It'll only give us a one to two block radius to check, but it gives us a goddamn better idea than just wandering around looking at bloodstains, and hoping the bad guys were nice enough to give us tire tracks all the way to their home base."

Kassian's face was stone, and his blue eyes were piercing. "Does that answer my question? No. I asked how it is tracking him. What

is the device that was used? I am aware of what the chip does, and I could personally care less about your feelings on the current situation. If you don't like how things are done you can be easily detained and kept out of the operation until we return to the States. I am only allowing you to be here out of the kindness of my heart." Kassian held the watch up. "Now answer the fucking question."

Anger swept through Boyd, hot like fire and burning all the patience out of him, but he reined it in as hard as he could. He wanted to punch Kassian and steal their damn van, but he forced himself instead to turn his head and indicate his ear.

"An earring. Like this one."

Kassian nodded. The tautness had already receded from his shoulders. "While I have to admit that your method is clever, let's take the facts into consideration. It's doubtful the perpetrators thought to remove his earring, but that doesn't mean Vega is alive. It's entirely possible that we could follow this tracker and find nothing but a decaying corpse."

"I don't care," Boyd said flatly. "He's my partner. I want to find him or his corpse. I need to know what happened. You need to confirm it for your mission as well, right? If he's dead then I can't do anything about it, but if he's still alive then we could save his life instead of abandoning him."

Kassian slipped the watch into his pocket. "I didn't say I wasn't going to look into it. I just want you to be aware of the possible outcome." He turned away from Boyd and called out to the rest of the team. "We have a new objective. It appears that Agent Beaulieu and Vega set up a tracking system."

The senior agent explained the situation, and they were on the move again in a handful of minutes. Kassian drove while Archer sat in the passenger's seat and guided Kassian with the GPS.

Sin's position was in a rundown district with high crime; one of Monterrey's oldest neighborhoods, and one Jorge referred to as the place of bad omens.

"Wait." Boyd sat up and squinted out the window. "Go straight and take a right on the third street down." He saw Kassian glance at him in the rearview mirror. "I know where we're going, and the GPS would be correct, but they started construction down there last month."

Even at this time, we'll get stuck in traffic. If we go straight, we can take the side streets instead."

Kassian nodded shortly, and followed the route.

They rolled to a stop on a block Boyd had recently scouted. Several buildings crowded against each other like dirty, desolate children, and there was a stench of hopelessness and death in the air. A dog lay in the middle of the street, the carcass half-eaten by insects and probably other dogs.

"I've researched this area recently," Boyd said. He pointed at the houses. "There are only three viable options because the other houses are occupied or collapsed. Of them, the blue building has a good view of the surrounding street and multiple escape routes; the white has electricity but the squatters died and are rotting inside; and the pale yellow house is well-fortified with heavy locks and a room that could make a good holding cell."

Kassian dispatched the agents into groups of two, and stayed with Boyd. Just before they split up, Blair stopped Boyd and pressed a semi-automatic into his hand. "What if Kassian needs backup?"

Boyd nodded gratefully, checked the magazine, and followed Kassian to the blue house. It was the same as he remembered it; abandoned, forlorn, filled with dust, and the haunted memories of those who had lived there before.

They secured the perimeter first, entering the building in much the same way as they had the clinic. Kassian went first, his gun drawn as he slipped through the house, with Boyd following.

They checked the first floor before moving to the second. At the top of the stairs, Kassian kicked open a door and entered in a quick, well-practiced manner, but Boyd was not surprised when their search yielded nothing. For some reason, Boyd knew the house was empty. If Sin was there, even dead, he would feel it. Somehow, he would know.

Out the window, Boyd saw overgrown grass, discarded toys, and wild vegetation mixed with broken concrete. The place showed no sign of recent use. It looked as though it had been untouched for years.

Boyd turned to Kassian to suggest they join the others, but his throat went dry before he spoke. Kassian had reached up reflexively to touch his ear—a habitual motion Boyd also did sometimes when

a voice came through on a comm unit. He could not hear the transmission, but the color drained from Kassian's face.

"Copy."

"What?" Boyd demanded, his voice going high and strained. "What did they say?"

"They found the body."

THIRTEEN

THE STENCH OF death was powerful. The two corpses lay forgotten and decaying in the front room just as they had been last time Boyd stepped into the house.

The lower level was small, dank, and light shone from flickering bulbs strung along the ceiling. They made buzzing noises like insects being killed by bug-zappers, and the inconsistent light threw the house into darkness enhanced by the smell of decay.

Boyd followed Kassian to a downstairs hallway and approached the room, but a strong hand yanked him back. In the alternating darkness with Boyd's fears staining reality, the merinthophobia nearly choked him.

But it was only Blair.

"Wait," he muttered into Boyd's ear.

Kassian stepped into the room, and all Boyd could see was the angle of the door and a swaying source of light. It threw Kassian's aghast expression into relief.

Boyd ripped away from Blair and ran forward. Reality subsided. The only sound became the panicked rise and fall of his breath. The light was inconsistent. Ghostly yellow lines spread across the floor and bled, flickering, into the shadows. He shoved by Kassian in slow motion; time crawled and stretched thin like a rubber band that refused to break.

Once Boyd broke into the room, he barely saw Michael standing to the side, barely saw the blood staining the walls and concrete like paint. Boyd couldn't interpret any of the sounds or voices around him; it was as if they were too far away to be understood.

All he saw was Sin strapped to another surgeon's table. Not moving.

It took a portion of forever to get to Sin. Even though Boyd was running, his steps were too slow, and his breath was too fast. He almost crashed into the table, not thinking to stop in time, and braced his hands against the metal to keep from falling.

Something slid beneath his palms, cool and thick and coagulated. It was blood. Sin's blood.

Sin's eyes were closed, his skin chalky in a way that shouldn't be

possible with his bronze complexion, and his lips—those full lips Boyd had kissed and laughed against—were parted and still.

With shocked desperation, Boyd tried to understand what he was seeing, but he could not see anything beneath the blood. It was like a second skin; dark, rusty, and dried. Stitches were roughly sewn into the side of Sin's neck where the GPS chip must have been taken out, and dried blood coated his throat.

Boyd brought a shaking hand up, muscles stiff and unyielding. He touched Sin's cheek, but it was cold. His chest was still, and the sight of it unmoving caused the world tilt around Boyd.

It wasn't moving. He wasn't fucking moving, his chest didn't look like it was moving, his skin was cold and Sin wasn't fucking breathing, he was dead, he was dead—

Someone yanked him back. Boyd's fingers slid along Sin's cheek and passed over his cold lips where the ring had once curled. Where Sin used to smirk and sometimes even laugh.

"Wait!" Boyd lunged forward to reach Sin, but another hand gripped him tightly. He was dragged away, and his struggles grew more frantic.

"Wait, no! Let me go! *Let me fucking go!*"

Boyd was desperate to touch Sin's body one last time before they left him to rot like the bodies upstairs.

Oh God, oh God, he was really dead, he was actually dead. Kassian was right, the earring was there, but it didn't mean Sin's heart was beating. It didn't mean he could be saved.

It didn't mean he hadn't died because of Boyd.

Archer trapped Boyd against his barrel-like chest. Boyd's scrambled thoughts prevented him from feeling the usual terror of restriction clawing through him; there was only the hollowing of his insides caused by the death knell of Sin's corpse.

The others gaped at Sin's body with expressions ranging from alarm to dismay. Although they had all seemed so sure, although they had been so matter-of-fact about his death, it seemed that none of them had actually expected the carnage. None of them appeared to have actually expected Sin, invincible, indestructible Sin, to be tortured to death on a makeshift table inside an abandoned, filthy house.

"Check his pulse," Kassian barked, seeming to snap out of his momentary reverie.

Nobody moved, and he gestured sharply at Harriet. She jumped and hurried over to Sin's side. She hesitated before touching him, but then her fingers groped through the stiff layer of blood on Sin's neck, searching for a sign of life.

"I can't find—"

Kassian grunted and stepped forward, pushing Harriet out of the way. He grabbed Sin's hair and yanked his head back. Sin didn't so much as twitch, and Boyd's breath caught. It was wrong, this was wrong—Sin would never let Kassian touch him that way.

Brow furrowed, Kassian pawed at Sin's neck and wrist for several damning seconds before looking up. He met Boyd's terrified gaze.

"He's alive."

The words filtered through Boyd's frantic mind inefficiently and took several seconds to register. When they did, he sagged and was dead weight in Archer's arms.

"Barely alive," Kassian amended. "We need to get him out of here now or he won't be for long. Get the medical kit." When nobody moved, his eyes froze into chips of ice. "Now!"

Michael and Blair sprang into action and rushed up the stairs.

Kassian gingerly turned Sin's face to the side and examined the sloppy stitches in his neck. "It seems they operated on his neck to remove the transmitter; they probably did a scan and found it there. The trauma of their hack job and loss of blood probably caused him to temporarily flat-line before they crushed the chip."

Harriet nodded and did a quick examination of the rest of Sin's body. He was naked except for a pair of black shorts. Her hands ghosted over his torso, arms, and legs before ripping strips of cloth from her own shirt. She used the material to tie off the open wounds while Kassian unstrapped Sin's limbs.

Even with the proclamation that he had a pulse, Sin didn't look anything close to living; his eyelashes did not give the faintest of flutters. When he was unstrapped, Sin's long limbs hung off the table awkwardly.

The bile rose in Boyd's throat again. He tried to move closer, but Archer's arms held him in place. "What the fuck?" Boyd shouted. "Just let me go!"

"Stop moving," Archer ordered. "I told you to stay out of the fucking way but that's all you're trying to do. Let Senior Agent Trovosky do

his job. If you keep this shit up, I'll hog tie you and throw you in the van."

Boyd grit his teeth.

"His arms and legs are broken," Harriet said. "His shoulders also appear to be dislocated and, I believe, his left hip. We'll need splints. We don't know how long he's been here, and if they heal improperly, he's fucked. The Agency won't keep a gimp."

Boyd's panic rose again. His mind tripped over the possibility. No... No, if Sin survived he would be okay. Sin was always okay. He would survive. Sin wouldn't die. The Agency would never let him go. They would never let him die.

Michael and Blair charged down the stairs carrying two duffel bags. They went to work unloading kits and a deployable, nylon stretcher.

"It seems as though they left him here to die. Which either means they got the information they needed out of him or they couldn't get any at all. Knowing Vega, I'd guess it was the latter."

Harriet poured generous amounts of water on Sin's neck and chest to better locate the source of the bleeding. His entire body was covered in bruises, burns, and gashes.

"I don't think we have much time."

Kassian's hands stilled on the compact c-collar he was strapping to Sin's neck. He and Harriet looked at each other, seemed to communicate something silently, and then set to work at double the speed. With Michael and Blair's help, they hastily bandaged the major and most obvious wounds, cuffed Sin's limbs with splint straps, and had Sin wrapped in the nylon stretcher before Boyd had even caught his breath.

Through the entire efficient process, Boyd had only stared at the evidence of the torture—the blood, the bruises, the limp and awkward tilt of Sin's limbs. The agony he must have been in, the helplessness he must have felt... The very idea weakened Boyd's knees. And the hated words went through his head again. The last words he'd said to Sin.

Had Sin remembered? Had he thought about it while he was cut and burned and broken by Janus operatives? Had he believed Boyd meant it?

"Oh God."

Boyd trembled, but Archer's arms tightened around him. There

was a buzzing in his ears that would not desist, and Boyd felt like he was losing his mind.

The four agents moved Sin upstairs, and Archer released his hold on Boyd. As soon as he was free, Boyd broke into a run to stay as close to Sin as possible.

They slid the spread-out stretcher onto the floor between the benches. Kassian and Michael sat by Sin's head while Harriet crouched at his side. She had already removed one of the tied-off cravat bandages to stitch one of the deeper wounds.

There was enough room for another person, but Archer hauled Boyd to the front of the van, and Blair slipped into the back instead.

"What are you doing? I've had my med training; I can help!"

Archer shoved Boyd into the passenger's seat unceremoniously. He yanked Boyd forward and, with practiced movements, cuffed Boyd's wrists to the strap above the door.

Boyd nearly screamed in fury. "Archer, what the hell are you doing?" "I have plenty of tape for a gag."

The door shut, and Boyd's anger magnified. He threw himself away from the door, trying to break the restraints, but it only made the plastic cuff dig into his wrist. A desire to rip the strap off the door was nearly overwhelming. Boyd seethed even as the van roared to life, but he swallowed his rage and twisted in the seat to see Sin.

His legs were slightly elevated and his head was flat against the floor as the others worked on him.

"—trip is eight hours," Harriet murmured. "I don't think he'll last that long. His pulse is rapid but it's weak, and his blood pressure is extremely low. And the condition he was left in, and in that filthy place? Who knows what infections he has beyond the internal injuries and blood loss."

"What can we do?" Kassian demanded. "There has to be something."

Harriet waved a hand helplessly. "We can keep stitching the obvious wounds and start an IV. We need to get some meds and isotonic fluids in him ASAP. But there's nothing we can do about the blood loss until he can get a transfusion. At this rate, I'm amazed he hasn't gone into hypovolemic shock."

Kassian rubbed his chin, expression dark and worried. "He isn't at all responsive. It's possible he isn't even mentally efficient anymore depending on the level of head trauma." He pointed at the black

bruises that stained the otherwise pale skin of Sin's temple. "And we won't know how bad any of it is until we have access to an X-Ray."

"Can we take him to a hospital?" Michael ventured.

Boyd silently ran through every medical facility he could think of in the city, but he knew there was nowhere secure.

"No. They'll ask questions that we can't answer. We'll have to wait until we're with our people." Kassian exhaled loudly. "Blair, start the IV. Michael—help him, and get that fucking look off your face."

"But what if he actually *does* wake up?" Michael insisted.

Kassian's forehead wrinkled with confusion. "Then we know he isn't brain damaged."

Michael glanced at Boyd before saying in a rush, "But shouldn't we restrain him in case that happens?"

Kassian and Harriet paused in their actions to give their teammate incredulous looks.

"*What?*"

Michael swiped his hands over his thighs. "I know he's in bad shape right now, but does that really mean we should forget who we're dealing with? This guy is insane. We call him the Monster for fuck's sake. Who knows what will happen when he wakes up and is delirious? He'll probably kill us all!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Boyd could see Archer nodding in agreement, but Kassian's expression was stormy.

"The man can't fucking move. How the hell do you expect he'll manage to kill us all?"

"How does he manage to do anything they say he does?" Michael countered stubbornly. "How does he manage to wipe out entire bases and make it out alive? How did he manage to take out all of those guards when he was surrounded by them and being sent to the Fourth? Everyone says his father had him modded back when people first got into that shit—splicing his genes to make him a super-agent. I'm not trying to be a jerk here, but I don't think we should forget what Vega is all about just because he's injured."

Harriet shook her head in disgust and started her methodical stitching again.

"You are an idiot." Kassian shifted his position to gain access to another gash in Sin's side. It was just as deep as the one Harriet worked on, and in exactly the same place on the opposite of Sin's torso. "I

don't care what 'they' say he does. He's still a man, and he's still an agent, and I'm not going to treat him like a wild dog just because you think he's the boogeyman."

"He is not modified," Boyd added tightly. The thought of people spreading rumors about Sin being genetically altered by some black market gene splicing, that they would go that far to further dehumanize him, had Boyd's blood boiling. "And he's not a mass-murdering psychopath. He'll recognize Kassian—"

"Senior Agent Trovosky," Archer corrected without looking away from the road.

"And if you'd just fucking let me back there, he'll recognize me too."

Kassian didn't respond to Boyd's rant, and he did not look up from his work.

"I am very aware of the threat Vega can pose if he is provoked, but that is if he is provoked. One, it is highly doubtful that he is going to wake up any time soon, if at all. Two, he would be more likely to regale us with examples of his stunning sense of sarcasm than attack us. However, if he does wake up and is in a violent, delirious rage, we will restrain him further to prevent him from injuring himself and us." Kassian's glare drilled into Michael. "Feel better now?"

Michael shrugged but said nothing. Boyd couldn't stop himself from glaring at the man. Even Harriet, who had been so scathing, dropped her superior attitude to focus solely on Sin. Boyd highly doubted the woman cared for Sin, but at least she and Kassian were professional. At least they were concerned with his survival.

Harriet sat up and wiped an arm across her sweaty forehead before surveying Sin's body. The majority of his wounds were tied off and covered, but it was obvious he needed additional care they could not provide.

The sight of the iv running to his wrist and the others working so diligently gave Boyd a spark of hope, but it was flimsy. He wanted to be close to Sin. To help in some way. The sense of impotence turned him inside out.

"You know," Harriet said. "I'd never seen him in person before. He's not what I expected."

"And what did you expect?" Kassian asked dryly.

"I don't know." Harriet studied Sin, but her clinical detachment had faded. "Maybe for him not to look so young and attractive? From all

the stories, I thought he'd be older and hard-looking. They kept him locked up so often that I never got a look at him."

"He does look mean," Michael said. "His eyes are freakish."

"Can we stop making Vega out to be some mythical creature already?" Kassian bit out. "He's a man just like you and me. Now change the subject or shut up."

The conversation ended, and Boyd faced the front again. He was weary of Michael's behavior and the way only Kassian shut him down. All of it combined to weigh heavier on Boyd until he wanted nothing more than to be back at the Agency where he could sit by Sin's side in the medical wing.

He examined the buildings around them and realized they were only a few blocks from a number of recently established checkpoints.

"Take a right here."

Archer ignored him and bypassed the road.

Twisting in his seat, Boyd scanned the area and spotted another route.

"Then take the next right!"

Again, Archer seemed intent on ignoring him, and Boyd's patience ran thin.

"Archer, fucking turn right! I've been here for eight months and you people won't listen to anything. You're going to take us past a fucking checkpoint, and I guarantee they'll notice us. So just *listen* and—"

Archer calmly turned right at the street Boyd had indicated without replying or looking in his direction.

Boyd dropped his head against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut. "Do you people even know how you're getting out of Monterrey?"

"Who hired this child?" Harriet's voice drifted from the back.

"The Inspector," Archer said.

"Ah."

Boyd's temper flared, but he swallowed the string of scathing retorts he wanted to unleash on them. Judging by Archer's seeming lack of direction, Boyd really didn't think they had any idea as to how they were going to escape Monterrey. He had to draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly before he could even approximate a respectful tone.

"Senior Agent Trovosky, do you have a plan for how to leave the city?"

"I have no idea why you would assume we came here with no

knowledge of how to get out,” Kassian replied. “There was no need to plan an ‘escape’ since we also have documentation for you. Your condescending sense of self-importance will get you nowhere. If you want Agent Archer to turn in a specific direction, don’t bark orders at him. Remember, everyone in this vehicle is technically your superior. Just because they gave you a rank doesn’t mean it matters when you take tenure into consideration.”

Kassian’s voice lacked the scorn of Harriet and Archer, and again Boyd was reminded of General Carhart. “Now, that being said, we do have a problem.”

Boyd turned to the back of the van again. “Even with documentation for me, you don’t have any for Sin or an explanation for his condition.”

“Exactly.” Kassian’s mouth flattened into a line as he eyed Boyd askance. “I’ll be perfectly honest. We were told specifically to not search for Vega. They were positive that he was deceased, and with good reason. Due to that, they gave us no documentation for him, and trying to bribe Border Patrol is asking for trouble because it can go wrong. The only options we have are to somehow obtain forged documents so we can take him to a hospital, which I highly doubt will happen in the span of time needed to get him medical assistance; leave him here to die; or for us to sneak out of the city and have a helivac pick him up somewhere close so he can get a transfusion. Without it, he’s dead. I’m surprised he lasted this long.”

Kassian peered at Boyd in the dim lighting filtering in from the street. “I assume you have more knowledge on our chances in two out of three of those options.”

Boyd exhaled slowly and nodded. “You’re right that there’s no time. The only forger I know of is forty-five minutes in the wrong direction, and I can’t guarantee what he’d do under these circumstances. But there are secret passageways in and out of the city. They’re all under the jurisdiction of the different cartels or smuggling groups. I don’t know which route you had planned, but I could navigate us to the safest passageway closest to your egress point.”

For once, no one had any sarcastic comments for him.

“Getting out of Mexico won’t be the problem. Once we’re out of Monterrey I can arrange the helivac to pick Vega up somewhere out in the desert. As long as it flies below radar, there should be no issues

getting back into the States. However, the helicopter with the highest success rate for remaining unnoticed is not designed to hold seven people, especially not including one who is stretched out on a gurney. Vega will be airlifted accompanied by Harriet and Archer, who is my second-in-command, and the rest of us will follow the original route and head to Laredo.”

“Understood.” As much as Boyd would have preferred to be on the helicopter with Sin, he wasn’t about to argue the point. The plan made sense. All he cared about was getting Sin to that helicopter as soon as possible. “If we’re headed to Laredo, I’m assuming we’ll ultimately be taking Federal Highway 85. Do we need to exit somewhere in the northeast section of the city?”

“It depends on the coordinates I get for where they’ll be making the pickup.” Kassian wiped his hands on his shirt and slid a phone from his pocket. “I’ll call Wanda and get the info. She’s the R&D agent coordinating with the team.”

The words drew Harriet’s attention. “Tell her not to bullshit you when arranging the helivac. I don’t care who she has to call to get on top of this or what time it is. He needs a blood transfusion ASAP. Tell them to bring some O negative units, platelets, plasma, the whole nine. If she fucks around—”

“I’ll call it in if she gives you a problem,” Blair piped up. “I know all the pilots.”

Harriet was visibly relieved. Although she wasn’t officially a medic, she had a depth of knowledge higher than the average field agent. It was comforting that she, at least, would be accompanying Sin. Even so, her intensity prompted Boyd to look at Sin again. The sight hit Boyd as violently as it had when they’d first entered the tiny room in the basement, and another crack shot through his heart.

Sin was so vulnerable. So lifeless. And the possibility of brain damage, or his body never recovering properly, and the Agency deciding he was no longer viable material for them to use...

What would happen then? Would they kill him? That was what Janus had done. Discarded him when he failed to give them information, and left him to bleed out in obscurity.

So much blood and pain, for what? Nothing at all. Janus was just as cold as the people who ran the Agency. With that thought in mind, it was easier to appreciate the people in the van. Even if they were

difficult, even if Michael was irrational, they were not cruel, and Boyd had no idea what he would have done if he'd followed the GPS three days from now and found Sin dead.

No. No, he knew. He probably never would have made it back to the Agency alive.

Kassian cleared his throat, and Boyd snapped out of the raw, painful thoughts filling his head.

"The pickup will be between 85D and 54 in the desert, forty miles northeast of Monterrey. The meeting time is at approximately 0330 hours and that gives us," Kassian looked at his watch, "sixty-five minutes."

Boyd gave a jerky nod and returned to mission mode. He visualized the map Tayla had given him.

"I'll explain the route as we go, but there's a tunnel in that area. It's run by a man named Santiago. He barely watches his territory so the odds are high in our favor of passing through without incident. Even if his people happen to be there, they're easily bribed."

Boyd paused for question before continuing.

"That passage will take us out between 85 and 54 so we won't even have to cut over any major roads. Even with the JKS aftermath, the authorities barely have a presence in that area. There's primarily desert in that direction so it isn't a high priority. Getting out of Monterrey would take us..." Boyd frowned, thinking. "About twelve to eighteen minutes if we allow travel time, and possibly having to deal with Santiago."

"Gotcha."

Kassian nodded and sent a sidelong glance at Archer. When they stopped at the next intersection, Archer leaned over and cut the plastic cuff from Boyd's wrist. The older agent slipped a switchblade back into his belt without a word.

The freedom to use both hands was such a relief, it allowed Boyd's focus to sharpen. He threw himself into visualizing the map, identifying the best routes, and giving Archer urgent directions when they had to make a quick adjustment in the plan.

It was hard to evade notice in a dark van with blacked out windows, but Boyd's directions led them away from the more populated neighborhoods. The sky and the occasional lamp from a house were the

only things illuminating several of the roads. It remained that way for most of the ride.

When they drew closer to the tunnel, Boyd instructed Archer to turn off the headlights. A serpentine route took them through various narrow side streets until they wound up at the base of a large, crumbling wall.

“I’ll be right back.”

Boyd slipped out of the van, dropped to the ground, and hurried to the side of the wall. After rooting around in the near pitch-blackness, he found the lever to release the latch on the gate. It opened with only the faintest of squeals, and Boyd returned with haste to the van.

The van’s tires made soft noises as they rolled across the pavement and into the tunnel until they were encased by blackness. Archer flipped the headlights on and inched the van along so slow they barely seemed to be moving.

The walls rose around them; stone blocks that didn’t quite match up. Vines hung from the low, arched ceiling, appearing from the gloom like pale green tendrils of spider webs trailing along the windows and making soft sliding sounds along the roof. Other than that, it was utterly silent, as if the shadows were eating away at sound itself.

Blair peered out the back doors. “This place is creepy.”

“Let’s just—”

Before Kassian could finish the sentence, a high-pitched gasp interrupted him. Everyone’s attention snapped down to Sin.

At first, it wasn’t clear what was wrong. It was difficult to see him in the gloom, but wheezing sounds and strangled gasps filled the van. Kassian flicked on the dome light, and flooded the interior of the vehicle with sudden brightness.

Sin was pastier than he had been less than thirty minutes ago. The gasps increased in a raspy sound that wrenched out of his throat. Boyd twisted in his seat in horror and watched as Sin’s body jolted. His limbs twitched and jerked wildly.

Boyd surged forward, but Archer grabbed one of his arms just in time to keep him from diving into the back. The van rocked to an abrupt stop.

“What’s wrong with him?” Boyd demanded.

“He’s having a seizure,” Harriet shouted. Her expression tightened as she moved to cradle Sin’s head; even with the c-collar, the erratic

movements were causing his entire body to shudder and reel. A sheen of sweat dampened his forehead. "He's lost too much blood. His blood pressure—"

"Can't you do something?" Michael cried. Behind him, Blair had frozen.

"No." Harriet shook her head, looking helpless. "We just have to wait until the seizing—"

Sin's movements grew more intense and chaotic, and it seemed he would rip his arms out of the splints; that the movements were so uncontrollable he'd injure his tentatively set bones. Kassian and Harriet tried to hold him still, but with one final wheezing gasp, all motion stopped.

Sin collapsed against the floor.

This time it was wrong. The stillness was unnatural and when Sin's head lolled to the side, he looked like a broken ragdoll.

Everyone stared.

"Fuck."

Kassian shoved Harriet out of the way. He grabbed Sin's wrist and frantically searched for a pulse. "His—" Panic shadowed Kassian's face. "He's not breathing, his heart stopped."

"What the fuck!" Boyd shouted. "Help him!"

"Begin CPR!" Kassian shot Michael a frantic look. He had the best vantage point, but the younger agent hesitated. His dark eyes fixed on the blood that stained Sin's lips.

"Now!"

When Michael failed to move, Kassian growled and jumped up. He shoved Michael out of the way and began attempting to resuscitate Sin on his own. He pinched Sin's nose between his fingers and breathed air into his mouth before pressing down on his chest in a desperate attempt to get the oxygen flowing again.

Nothing happened, and Kassian swore softly. He tilted Sin's head back and held it in place with one hand as he moved to seal their mouths together once more. Kassian breathed out, checked Sin's chest, and then breathed again before sitting up to do another hurried set of compressions.

Once again, nothing happened.

"Come on, you fucking punk," Kassian snapped before beginning mouth-to-mouth for the third time.

No one moved. No one spoke. Boyd's fingers dug into Archer's arm. He didn't dare to breathe, as if somehow the air in his lungs would be transferred to Sin's.

When Kassian finished the fifth cycle and started on the sixth, Harriet put a hand on his shoulder. "Kassian, he's dead. Just stop."

Boyd could not contain the broken sound that escaped his mouth. He couldn't look away. He thought, in distant frantic fear, that looking away would mean he'd abandoned Sin again.

"He's too stupid to die," Kassian snapped. He breathed into Sin's mouth once more, then again, before sitting up and doing a violent set of compressions. "Come on," he hissed, his voice coming out almost angrily. He pressed down on the center of Sin's chest with more pressure. "Come the fuck on, Vega. How am I ever going to kick your ass if you just fucking die?"

Nothing happened, and it really did begin to look hopeless, but Kassian refused to give up. His teammates shot each other mildly concerned looks as if they worried about their team leader's state of mind.

Harriet scooted forward again, hands outstretched, just as Kassian punched Sin in the middle of his chest. There was a sudden, hoarse gasp, and Sin began breathing once again.

Boyd slumped against the seat, his hands gripping Archer as if he was an anchor. "Jesus fucking Christ," he breathed.

Panting, Kassian sat up. "We need to get the fu—"

White light flooded the tunnel and infiltrated the interior of the van.

Everyone's heads snapped up, but Kassian looked at Archer instead of trying to see out the windows in the back. Archer released Boyd and squinted into the bright light bathing their vehicle.

Three trucks blocked their way, their headlights set to bright. Dark figures were silhouetted against the light. Their shadows were long and cast blind spots across the ground as they stood aiming assault rifles at the van.

This made no sense. Santiago wouldn't have this many people with him, and they certainly would not be so aggressive. They would look for a hand-out instead of starting a conversation with a gun.

"We have company." Archer slid one hand to his waist to clear his gun from the holster. "Ten men with M4s and three trucks. The first

one is empty except for two men, but the others are full. Probably thirty men in total.”

“I thought you said this tunnel belonged to some pushover?” For the first time, Kassian sounded strained. In the bright lights of the truck, his bloodshot eyes became visible.

“That’s not—” The words died in Boyd’s throat when he saw the side of one of the trucks. 4FF was painted in bright yellow letters along the doors. “*Fuck!*”

He threw himself from the van and held his hands high, palms facing out.

The men aimed their guns and appeared fully prepared to shoot, but a man’s voice casually called out, “*Detente.*”

The men didn’t fire, but they did not lower their rifles. Boyd stood still, his hands in the air.

The passenger side of the truck flew open, and a tall, muscular figure jumped out. The man sauntered over, thumbs hooked into the loops of his pants. There was no doubt in Boyd’s mind as to his identity.

Lo Más Chingón’s form appeared more clearly than it had in the shadows behind the warehouse, but he was still mostly cloaked in shadow due to the lights of the truck. He wore a wide-brimmed hat pulled down so low it hid his eyes, and a black and gold scarf pulled over the lower half of his face like a shemagh, but there were weapons visible all over his body. Twin guns sat on either side of his hips in a wide, leather holster, and a large knife was strapped to his belt.

Attempting to gain as much detail as possible, Boyd took in everything about the man. His tall boots, close-fitting black pants, and the complex design of a sprawling tattoo that peeked out from under the sloppy, rolled up sleeves of Chingón’s shirt.

Boyd kept his hands up when Chingón stopped in front of him. He did not move even when the smuggler grabbed his chin and turned it from side-to-side.

“Aww, *qué lindo*. What happened to all of your pretty red hair?” He clucked his tongue as if he were trying to get the attention of a stubborn pet and continued to examine Boyd.

“I was tired of it.”

“Too bad.” His grip tightened, and Boyd could practically feel the

glare radiating from under the brim of Chingón's hat. "Now tell me what the fuck you're doing in my tunnel."

"I didn't know it was your tunnel. It was Santiago's two weeks ago."

If it weren't for the scarf covering his face, Boyd would have been sure Chingón's mouth had curled into a roguish smile. "A lot changes in two weeks, *chico*. I made Santiago the nonfactor he always was."

"I can see that." Boyd shifted his weight. "I'm sorry we inadvertently entered your territory, but we have an injured colleague, and he needs immediate medical assistance. We're on our way out to save him. Would you please give us passage?"

Chingón released Boyd's chin. He scanned the surrounding area as though he was waiting for someone else to appear. When he did not find whatever he was looking for, Chingón shouted at his men, "*¡Pásame una lamparita!*"

The closest one tossed him a flashlight, and Chingón caught it without looking back. He walked around Boyd, shoulder brushing against him.

"Well, what do we have here?" Chingón spoke loud enough for everyone in the van to hear. "A van full of unemployed artists in SWAT gear, perhaps? Or is this a kinky *maricón* costume party?" He stopped in front of the open van and shone the flashlight at Archer. There was a long pause, longer than felt necessary, before Chingón drawled, "*Hola.*"

Archer kept his hand near his gun and said nothing. The smuggler scoffed.

"Your friends are pretty aggressive, *chico*. Perhaps you should teach them some manners before I begin to feel offended."

Chingón tsked at Archer and shone the flashlight at Harriet and Kassian through the space between the front seats. The beam of light stayed on Kassian's unflinching face before finally sliding away to hover on Harriet.

"Mmm. Who knew there would be such an attractive woman with this group of *gringos*. You should come be in my gang. *Puedes ser mi zorra.*"

Harriet sneered. "I know enough Spanish to tell you quite confidently that I'll never be anything of yours."

"I love a woman with spirit. What fun are they if they don't put up

a fight?" Chingón switched the flashlight to the narrow view of the back. "Now why do I think I'm not seeing everyone?"

Boyd moved closer to the door. "I already told you we have an injured colleague."

Chingón jerked open the back door. Blair, Michael, and Sin's prone body came into full view before Boyd slid in front of the open door.

"Move," Chingón said.

When Boyd didn't so much as shift, a pistol appeared in Chingón's hand a portion of a second before he pressed it against Boyd's head. Chingón's joking tone vanished, and his accent took on the loose, slangy syllables of an American drawl. "I said to fuckin' move."

"I heard you the first time."

Chingón tilted his head to the side and slid the muzzle of the gun along Boyd's cheek like a caress. "How very brave," he said sarcastically. "Are you brave enough to die protecting your... colleague?"

"Pull the trigger and find out."

"Aww, so touching. Lucky for you, I'm not a scavenger." Chingón pressed the gun against Boyd with more force. "I don't attack the weak or the dying. Now move out of the way before I make this situation a major fucking problem."

Boyd hesitated. It was the second time Chingón could have killed him, probably more, but instead he was giving them a chance. It only took a heartbeat to decide between death, probably for them all, and stepping aside. Boyd moved.

Chingón shone the flashlight into the van and illuminated Michael and Blair's deer-in-the-headlights stares. However, the beam didn't stay on them for long. Instead, it trained on Sin. Chingón kept the light on Sin's pale, slack face before guiding it along the length of his body. The beam focused on every major wound and on each of Sin's broken limbs before returning it to his face.

Kassian shifted his weight and partially blocked Sin from view. "I think we're done here."

Chingón didn't respond, didn't even seem to register that Kassian had spoken. There was a delay between the words and him reacting, but when he did turn away, he spoke directly to Boyd. "You should take better care of your toys, *chico*."

"He's not my toy," Boyd said.

"Whatever you say." Chingón tucked his gun away and hooked his

thumbs in the loops of his belt again. "One more strike and you're out. *¿Comprende?*"

"I won't get in your way again, trust me."

Nodding curtly, Chingón took one last look inside the van before striding away.

"Lo Más Chingón," Boyd called out before the man cleared the front of the van. Chingón paused, and Boyd let out a low breath. "Thank you."

The man looked back, but between the darkness and his hood, Boyd couldn't make out the smuggler's expression. Chingón's weight shifted, and then he was walking away with a muttered, "*Baboso.*"

He gestured at his men, and they lowered their weapons. He yanked open the passenger door of the truck and slammed it shut behind him. Leaning out the window, he pounded his hand against the door. "*¡Vámanos muchachos!*"

The men returned to their trucks and engines revved moments later. Each one drove by the Agency van in a single file.

Boyd squinted at Chingón in the front truck. Just as it started to pass, it slowed down, and Chingón leaned out the window. He jerked his thumb towards the south.

"Beware Laguna de Sánchez, boy. Some people there wouldn't be too fond of the company you keep."

The truck took off before Boyd had a chance to reply. He watched the taillights disappear down the tunnel. There were a number of things that caught Boyd's attention about Chingón, but he was too exhausted to attempt to decipher any of it now.

He returned to the van and slumped against the passenger's seat. Archer started the truck, and they were once again in motion.

"What in the hell was that?" Kassian demanded. "Wha—Boyd. Who the hell was that?"

"Leader of a powerful smuggling organization," Boyd explained tiredly. "He's untouchable. Everyone's afraid of him."

"How did you come to know this man?"

"He caught me staking out one of his bases."

"And why did he seem completely unsurprised to see... everything he saw inside of this van?"

"I don't know," Boyd admitted. "He knows Sin exists but just as Jason Alvarez. I came off as interested in shady deals so he may have

assumed you were an underground group I was working with, but that doesn't make sense either. He would have gotten territorial. I honestly have no idea. He's strange and not very predictable."

"Strange is right," Michael muttered.

Kassian's eyes slid over to Michael, and his expression was anything but pleasant. "Let's just get the hell out of here." He pressed his back against the side of the van with his arms crossed over his chest.

The van fell silent, and Archer accelerated faster to get out of the tunnel.

FOURTEEN

THE MEETING SPOT was nondescript. It stood out only due to the sleek helicopter waiting on the ground.

The van barely came to a full stop before Blair and Kassian jumped out and pushed the doors open. Kassian grabbed one end of the stretcher, and Michael took the front by Sin's head. They carried Sin's prone body to the helicopter while Harriet hurried alongside to ensure they did not jostle him too much.

Boyd started to follow but halted a few feet away as the rotors of the helicopter kicked up sand and blew his hair into disarray. He knew there was medical staff waiting inside to do a transfusion and hovering around them would only hinder the process, but even so, Boyd couldn't quell the feeling of loss when Sin disappeared from view.

The pilot leaned out and jeered at them in a loud, nasal voice, "Hey, glad you girls finally joined the party! Don't worry, I've only burned five minutes of fuel; that'll only cost a few thousand bucks."

Blair and Kassian left the helicopter almost as soon as they dropped Sin off, and Archer climbed up in their place.

"Hey Blair," the pilot shouted over the rotating blades. "You couldn't tell them to make the meeting point more interesting?"

"You should bring the interesting with you, Jim," Blair called back.

Jim snorted. "I did bring something interesting—my complete lack of fucking patience. I was in the middle of one of those hoagies from Brownie's, you know, where they actually heat it up," he said with pointed anger. "Then I'm told to come 'vac that crazy Vega bastard. Then I get here, and I gotta wait anyway! You know, five minutes would've given me plenty of time to finish. Instead, I had to sit here staring at this wasteland."

Blair seemed to consider that before changing the topic entirely. "You beat me on the last test."

"Barely." Jim waved the comment off. "Hey, go tell them to hurry the fuck up. We don't have time to wait for Kelly to take for-fucking-ever putting a single man into a pre-prepped area! She can get that blood running while I fly!" His voice rose by the end, loud enough for everyone in back to hear. He received no answer and scowled before

turning back to Blair. “Not like she’d fucking listen. She was bitching the whole time over ‘cause I played my music too loud. Some people take their jobs way too seriously.”

“Oh, you got the radio working? Is it as good as the boomcopter?” Blair asked just as Kelly shouted, “Jim, we’re green—Go!”

“I’ll fucking go when I want!” Jim shouted back, but he sighed and gave Blair a look.

Blair’s face lapsed into lines of disappointment. “I’ll never see it in action. Tammy keeps stealing the boomcop when I’m around.”

“Well, this ain’t near that level yet.”

Boyd could hear Kelly slam on the wall. “Jesus Christ, Jim, go already! If the Agency’s super-agent dies on my watch, you’re getting incinerated with me, motherfucker!”

To Boyd’s relief, Jim saluted Blair instead of arguing. Blair backed away, and they squinted through the sand and dust thrown around in the powerful winds created by the rotor blades. The helicopter rose into the air, turned north, and melded into the darkness of the sky.

Boyd’s arms tightened across his stomach, and it took him a few seconds to notice that everyone else was in the van.

“Hey, Boyd,” a voice behind him called. “We’re leaving.”

Boyd returned without speaking.

The ride was a blur. Boyd stared into the bleak darkness of their surroundings until his attention was drawn towards the weight of someone watching him. Kassian stared at him throughout the ride, and he did not avert his eyes even when Boyd caught him. Uninterested in conversation, Boyd did not bother to inquire about what the senior agent wanted.

They made it across the border with no difficulty due to their documentation, and it seemed like no time before they boarded a small Agency jet that was waiting for them in Texas. There was dead silence until the jet was in the air. At that point, Kassian turned to Michael.

“Who gave you medic training, Alvarado?”

Michael’s head snapped up. “What?”

Kassian gave him a hard look. “I asked who gave you medical training?”

“Wh—” Michael hesitated, chewed his lower lip, and hesitantly said, “Becker. Franklin Becker”

“Franklin Becker,” Kassian repeated. “And did Becker train you to

let men die because of your personal feelings about them or is that something you just made up on the fly?"

"What—I didn't—What are you—" Michael broke off, currents of indignation and confusion evident in his voice. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

Kassian's patience appeared to fray. "Are you senile and stupid or just plain stupid?" he nearly shouted. "I gave you an order and you ignored it! You looked at me like I was speaking a foreign fucking language when I told you to give Vega CPR. Do you think that's the kind of man General Carhart wants for a rank 9? The kind of man who would let an ally die?"

"I—I—I— It's not that I didn't want to, it's just—"

"You—you—you," Kassian mocked. "You what?"

"He had blood in his mouth!" Michael blurted.

Kassian stared in obvious confusion. "And you're... afraid of blood? And you've randomly turned into an eight-year-old girl?" His voice rose again. "And what, Alvarado? Please enlighten me as to what the hell that has to do with anything. The man was covered in blood the whole time he was in our care."

"Well, excuse me if I didn't want his blood in my mouth!" Michael yelled. "You know what they say—I mean..." He faltered. "You know what they say about the two of them."

Boyd blinked, stunned, but didn't otherwise react.

There was a long, incredulous silence before understanding dawned on Kassian's face. "Do you mean to tell me that you didn't give Agent Vega CPR because of the ridiculous rumors that circulate the Agency about them being gay? You thought you'd get HIV? Are you kidding me?"

Michael shuffled his boots. "Well, I guess the Agency does check us every couple of months... They're probably clean."

Kassian sliced the air with his hand. "Just stop speaking now." He shook his head in disbelief. "I hesitated to bring you with me because of your inexperience, but I gave you a chance. If you disappoint me again, don't expect to be treated with respect. And don't expect your application for rank 10 to go well. Got it?"

Michael nodded stiffly. "Yes, Senior Agent Trovosky."

"Now go away. And you too, Blair. Go harass the pilot."

Blair nodded. He waited for Michael to stand and move ahead before trailing along.

Boyd turned Michael's words over in his mind, and self-loathing crept up to consume him. Not only had he abandoned Sin, but Boyd's status as a valentine had apparently dubbed him as a possibly diseased, deviant homosexual. And now that label was also being applied to Sin.

It never should have come to this. Boyd knew his own track record. He should have warned Sin off from the start.

The weight of the last few weeks, and the night, pressed down on him. He wanted nothing more than to be alone where he could hate himself in peace.

When the others weren't there to see, Kassian collapsed against the seat and, for the first time, weariness overcame him. He undid his vest and removed it along with his outer shirt. He was left in a black sleeveless t-shirt that fit like a second skin.

Rubbing his temples, Kassian spoke. "How are you feeling?"
"Fine."

"Liar." Kassian dropped his hand. "You've had a rough night, probably a rough few weeks. I apologize if I inadvertently made the situation any worse for you."

"It's fine."

"Well, it's good to know I won't have to overextend myself with apologies around you."

"Not usually, no." Boyd peered up the narrow aisle. Blair had disappeared into the cockpit, but Michael was sitting in one of the single, forward-facing seats towards the front of the jet. He was far enough away to not overhear their words. "Why did you make them leave?"

"Because when I'm around most people I feel like I have to continue being Senior Agent Trovosky, and I don't think I can handle that at the moment." Kassian's broad shoulders lifted. "I just came from an extended undercover mission and was released from re-integration before being sent on this mission. I almost refused to go, but I changed my mind when I learned about Vega. But I haven't slept in days, and I'm just cranky enough to shoot Michael in the head if he makes any other stupid comments. And I wanted to speak to you alone."

"Why?"

"I'm curious. About you."

"What is there to be curious about?"

"What's there not to be curious about?" Kassian countered. "At first I thought you were unprofessional, impatient, childish, and a bad agent. As the night progressed, I realized that my initial assessment wasn't entirely correct. Now I'm curious as to whether my new assessment is."

"I don't know what you think of me now so I don't see how I can be of any help," Boyd said tiredly.

"Well, let me help you to see." Kassian smiled for the first time since they'd met. "Explaining your actions can dramatically change first impressions. But in this case I think I'll just come right out and say what I've deduced." He tapped his fingers against the plush, gray armrests. "I think you're impatient and very unprofessional, probably because you've only been exposed to Vega's skewed way of operating. However, the childishness manifested due to the fact that you're in love with Vega, and he is about two steps away from dying."

"What? I don't..."

"You don't what? You don't love him?"

Boyd wanted nothing more than to disappear. "We've been working this mission for nearly a year and suddenly you appeared and told me that he's dead." His jaw clenched, and he had to reorganize his thoughts to continue speaking. "If I... acted out of line, it's because you're right. I haven't had as much training as any of you, and every mission has been with someone who generally makes his own rules. Your team is well-versed and completely different. I probably overreacted in general."

Kassian processed the words with a slow nod. "Look kid, I'm not trying to mock you. I can't tell you how many times I've seen a friend on the verge of death. Archer in particular has scared the shit out of me on more than one occasion, but never once did I look at him how you were looking at Vega." Kassian held up his hand to halt any protests. "You can say I don't know what I'm talking about, but I know what I saw. I guess I'm just a little curious as to how Vega can inspire that kind of emotion in a person. The guy is a dick."

"He seems to inspire some sort of emotion in you," Boyd returned. "As I understand it you have a history of hostility, but you seemed

frantic in your attempts to resuscitate him. Almost like his life matters to you.”

Kassian arched a quizzical brow. “Is that what he told you? Hostility?”

“Not in those words. How would you categorize it?”

“Well, I would categorize it as our employers being idiotic and him being an asshole.”

A desire to end the conversation morphed into a reluctant curiosity to learn more. As tired as Boyd was, he realized the image of Kassian that had formed in his mind over the past year did not fit the person sitting in front of him.

“How so?”

“First, let me explain a little about myself...” Kassian rubbed the scruff on his jaw, and slumped further in the comfortable seat. He hadn’t put on his seatbelt. “The Agency vetted me in 2008. I was young—only twenty—but they wanted me because I’d finished SEAL training at eighteen and participated in successful operations in Russia during the last two years of the war. One of those operations is what prompted the first call for a ceasefire.”

Boyd’s eyebrows lifted. “Impressive.”

“I guess.” This time, Kassian’s smile was self-deprecating. “I got some shiny medals, a little recognition, and then the Agency came calling. When I got to Lexington, I moved up quickly, and studied all of the previous rank 10 agents when I decided that was my goal. I was goddamn shocked to see that the only living agent to achieve rank 10, and not die within a year or two, was a seventeen-year-old kid with an attitude problem—your partner.”

Boyd’s mouth twitched slightly.

“He was amazing, Boyd. The things he could do were incredible. He seemed barely human. However, I felt bad for him because he was the compound whipping boy, not that he wanted my compassion. He knew I wanted to be rank 10 and made sure I knew I would never beat him, so I pushed myself harder to catch up. I don’t know if I was trying to prove that I could achieve what he had because I’m good at my job, and that it was possible even though the Agency had drilled all of that into him since he was a child...”

Kassian broke off and waved his hand in annoyance. “Long story short, I worked my ass off to achieve the things that he has, but I

could never reach the bar he set when he was only a kid. So, they give him the spot in Carhart's elite unit, and I got sent on a long-term undercover assignment in Siberia. It doesn't help that he enjoys making a fool of me when we spar. He doesn't even try to hurt me. He spends the whole time commenting on my lack of skill while dodging and evading until I get worn out. Dick."

Boyd didn't hide a rueful smile. "I know what you mean, actually. At first, he treated me the way he apparently treats you. I got frustrated by the way I would prepare for hours while he runs in and completes the assignment in minutes without even adhering to the plan. We've gotten into a number of arguments over that. Eventually, I determined that I had to stop comparing myself to him. There's no one like him, and that doesn't make you or me incompetent. It's just the way things are."

The events of the past several hours flit through Boyd's mind; Kassian's harshness, but the way he could temper it, and how he had tried to understand Boyd's motivations. Mostly everyone else at the Agency made assumptions and never bothered to learn more, but Kassian was different.

"But for what it's worth," Boyd added. "I personally think that a person who is fair and who, regardless of personal opinions, protects the lives of allies is a good choice for a leader."

"Thanks." The word drifted into a yawn as Kassian rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck. "I apologize if you think I was being an asshole earlier. I was on edge, easily aggravated, and expecting the worst. However, I have to say, you impressed me. Especially with that smuggler."

"Thank you." It was a nice sentiment, but Boyd couldn't feel any pleasure at Kassian's words. In Boyd's eyes, he had screwed up the mission to an irredeemable degree.

"That man gave me a weird feeling," Kassian admitted. "It was almost like he knew what to expect from the moment he opened the van. The only time he dropped the game was when he saw Vega. The whole thing was bizarre. He could have ended us all right there. He certainly had the manpower."

"It was the second time he caught me on his turf and didn't kill me. Earlier in the summer, I saw the remains of a kid his people slaughtered for selling drugs in his area. Why he let me go and not that kid,

I couldn't say. He must have some system of infractions in his head that I haven't met."

"Well, you did an excellent job of handling the situation. I'm going to give you all the credit in my report."

Again, Boyd was startled by the unexpected kindness and fairness. As the Agency's golden boy, Kassian could take credit for everything and no one would question it. That he was willing to officially commend Boyd's role in the extraction was more than an offhanded compliment; it would bring validity to Boyd's status as an agent after such a massive failure of a mission.

Kassian's willingness to treat him with respect stole the breath from Boyd's lungs. There was no reason for Kassian to help him, but yet there was no doubt that it was his intention to do so. With everything else falling apart around Boyd, the small token was monumental. He did not know how to respond.

"Not to go back to the other topic," Kassian said. "But just be careful. Don't let people see that side of yourself. Don't let them know how you feel about him. They'll use it against you."

"I won't." Boyd added quietly, "Thank you."

And he wouldn't let them see. Never again.

WHEN THEY ENTERED the receiving area of the Agency's compound, Boyd felt as if the paltry amount of sleep he'd attained on the flight had done more harm than good. The van that had picked them up at the airport rocked to a stop, and the agents unloaded.

With great effort, Boyd pushed through a hypnogogic daze and started for the Med Wing. He did not get far.

A group of guards stepped into their path.

"Trovosky. You and your team are with us," one of them said, jerking his thumb behind him. "You're to debrief immediately. And you." The guard's eyes settled on Boyd, instantly unfriendly. "You're with Randazzo. You have a separate meeting."

Boyd nodded and resisted the urge to yawn. It made sense. He had to debrief on eight months' worth of mission time while Kassian only had the previous night. Boyd sluggishly followed Randazzo, a guard Boyd recognized as a friend of Luke's, but Kassian grabbed his arm and said with a voice full of foreboding, "Good luck."

Boyd nodded, but he was so exhausted that he couldn't work through the reason for the comment.

His escort did not lead him to the conference room where the unit typically debriefed. Instead, Boyd was taken to the administrative level. To Connors' office.

Boyd's heart stuttered. Adrenaline sent a shock of wakefulness through him just in time for fear to settle in his stomach like a stone. He slowed at the doorway but could no more avoid walking inside than he could go back in time and help Sin.

Connors and Vivienne were both seated in the room. Their twin gazes fixed on him.

"Sit down, Boyd," Connors said.

Boyd obeyed without hesitation and could not help but stare at Jacob Connors. It was the first time he sat face-to-face with the man who'd had such an effect on his, and Sin's, lives in the past year. The man he had disobeyed, and potentially humiliated, in the beginning of the year so he could release Sin early from the Fourth.

The Marshal was not what he had expected.

He wore a dark suit that offset shark-like gray eyes and hair that had once been sandy but was now liberally shot through with silver. There were crevices in Connors' forehead, but he was handsome, and Boyd guessed him to be in his late fifties.

"You're here to be debriefed," Connors said. "I'm sure you expected to breeze in here and deal with General Carhart, but due to the inestimable damage that has been caused, I will be dealing with you directly. Your mission was a colossal failure and, in detail, you will explain why that is."

Boyd chanced a glimpse of his mother, but her expression gave nothing away.

"Well, sir," he started haltingly. "The preparations went well and there were no troubles with our covers. At the convention center, I learned that Janus is starting to work on building support in Eastern Europe, South America, Australia, and New Zealand. Even though I gathered some useful intel, I observed that the Janus representatives appeared to be recruiters primarily explaining the propaganda to new inductees from recently accrued cells. The convention was an orientation. None of our targets arrived, so we proceeded with the second stage of the plan."

"I see." Connors' lips pursed. "So what you're saying is the information you got in return for fucking Thierry was a waste."

It was difficult not to look away. "Yes, sir."

"And on top of that, you were seen."

"With a rather incriminating description," Vivienne added. "With the sole information being a white male with light-colored hair, you can imagine they naturally assumed it may have something to do with the United States given Monterrey's proximity to the border. The tentative partnership we have had with the Mexican government is now exceedingly strained. They are distrustful of what we say, and there are any number of innocent foreigners who have been detained and interrogated with little to no mercy." She favored him with a scathing look. "This is not to mention the reaction of their home countries. The media has had a field day, and we have nothing to show for any of it."

Boyd had no defense. He wanted to lapse into a shamed silence, to disappear and blend in with the wall, but he knew his mother expected a response. "I'm sorry."

Connors' finger tapped against the glass table. His body was rigid against the high-backed chair. Like so many others at the Agency, he was impossible to read. Dispassionate and iron-hearted in a pitch black suit.

"Let's analyze the chain of events."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"You provided services to an informant in exchange for information which proceeded to lead us on a very expensive and time-consuming wild goose chase that resulted only in the murder of low-ranking operatives from low-ranking Janus cells. In addition to this phenomenal waste of time, your complete lack of awareness and stealth has led several countries on an international witch hunt to figure out which organization was responsible for the mess that has been made in Monterrey. Have I left anything out?"

Everything was true. The information was bad, people died because of it, innocents were harmed, and it was all his fault.

"No," Boyd said softly.

"Oh, but I have." Connors' tone dropped several degrees. "Let's not forget the loss of Agent Vega."

Boyd's stomach twisted.

“How precisely did Agent Vega get captured? What was your plan and, once again, why did it go wrong?”

“I—I don’t know exactly how it happened, sir. In order to cut off any exit points for the Janus cells, we had to split up as we detonated the bombs. We used short range radios to communicate our status. We’d intended to meet at a designated point and go into hiding together until we could leave Monterrey. However...”

Boyd looked between Connors and his mother. The rest of the story implicated them both, but he couldn’t hide what had happened in those fateful moments.

“On the way out, Agent Vega reported a delay. He’d come upon a wounded civilian and wanted to assist her. I had already left the building and instructed him to desist because the authorities were coming, and I felt it was too dangerous. But he thought he had the time so he stopped to help. I didn’t think I could return without jeopardizing both of our positions, so we decided to switch to the contingency plan. We were to observe radio silence and meet at a designated point two weeks later. The length was chosen to give time for the immediate search to die down. We were to rendezvous three days after the time I received word from Senior Agent Trovosky that his team was en route. At that time, I learned that something had gone wrong.”

“And who was this wounded civilian?”

“His previous employer for the cover job. She happened to be at the convention center and was wounded during the detonations.”

“I see.” Connors began tapping his finger again. Beside him, Vivienne’s face was stone. “And whose decision was it to switch to this contingency plan upon his decision to assist her?”

“It was mine, sir.”

Tap. Tap. Tap.

“And what was Agent Vega’s response to your decision?”

Boyd could still remember Sin’s furiously snapped “*Fuck you.*”

“He was angry, sir.”

“I see.” Connors leaned forward. “Tell me, Agent Beaulieu, what is your job here?”

“To... To be a field agent, sir.”

Connors eyebrows shot up. “Oh really? Because I was under the impression that you were hired first and foremost to be Agent Vega’s

partner. To ensure that he does not do the idiotic things that he is prone to do because of his specific peculiarities. Along with that job description obviously comes the job of being a field agent, but that is not why we hired you. If we simply wanted a new field agent we wouldn't have spent time on a scrawny child with no fighting skills or experience. We chose you because you were the most compatible match with Agent Vega, and because I was under the impression that you had a shred of intelligence. Did you somehow misunderstand?"

"I..."

Vivienne's stare intensified. Like Kassian, there was something foreboding in her expression. It was almost a warning; as if she wanted him to stop taking the bait Connors was feeding him, but Boyd felt trapped by his own incompetence and his complete lack of defense for any of his actions.

"No, sir."

"And were you not also informed of the fact that although the common belief is that Agent Vega is a savage murderer, he actually has a weakness for innocents? Were you not aware that he has strayed from mission parameters on more than one occasion because of this preoccupation and subsequently endangered his own life, the success of the mission, and got himself locked in the Detainment Center after an incident in the city limits?" Disgust replaced the cold neutrality in Connors' voice. "Perhaps General Carhart should be reprimanded for his failure to inform you of these pertinent bits of information."

"No, sir," Boyd said hastily. "He informed me."

"So then please, Agent Beaulieu, enlighten me as to why you were possessed to abandon your partner. Is it not possible that he could have met you elsewhere in the city, or that you could have waited at your position to see if he really would be hindered? Or was he completely irrational so you took it upon yourself to completely ignore your job description by worrying primarily for your own security? Or perhaps there was another motive behind your reasoning?"

Connors folded his hands again, waiting.

The solutions he had listed were sickeningly simple. So simple that Sin had likely thought of them at the convention center. That was probably why he'd been so frustrated at Boyd's refusal to continue with the plan. In the fury of the moment, and even two weeks later, it had seemed more complicated to Boyd.

But it wasn't. He could have—should have—waited. In retrospect, he knew his position would have remained secure.

"I—"

Better to save himself, leaving Sin there. Better to abandon his partner rather than risk his own position. It wasn't true, but those words—those hated goddamn words—rang through Boyd's mind again.

If you get caught, you fucking deserve it.

Jessica had proven to be more of a hindrance to Boyd than she ever was to Sin.

"The situation was intense, sir," he managed. "I made a decision based upon my training and my understanding of the circumstances. We had the two plans already decided upon; in the chaos of the situation it seemed potentially disastrous to introduce a third scenario. Given the circumstances, and considering that the contingency plan had been created specifically for the type of situation we found ourselves in, it made the most sense to wait the two weeks. I made a decision I thought was right, sir. I see now that it was a poor one."

"A poor one," Connors repeated dryly. "Let's be clear. I don't use Vega for his ability to think straight. I use him for his strength and skill at killing. However, even he isn't a magician. He can still be harmed. I'm going to go out on a limb and assume he was apprehended in two possible ways."

Connors held up a finger. "One—He had a psychotic break which caused him to lose focus." He held up another finger. "Or two—he was caught off guard and outnumbered. Thus, it is entirely possible that he would not have been captured if his partner had been present. But you weren't. Now, we have a crippled agent who is most likely brain dead. Would you like me to read you the extent of his injuries?"

The buzzing in Boyd's ears returned.

He wanted to say no. The details would only haunt him. His imagination would put images and sounds to the words, and he would know Sin suffered because of him, but the words were like dry ice in his throat—burning cold and drifting to smoke when met with the heat of their displeasure.

"Apparently Janus had the mistaken idea that they could extract information from Vega with medieval-style torture. However, what Janus does not know is that he can withstand physical torture. His

weakness is mental torture.” Connors almost sounded smug. “They seemed to have used a method called stretching; a lovely technique developed in the Middle Ages in which the victim’s limbs are pulled away from the body. It causes excruciating pain, dislocates body parts, and destroys tendons and ligaments.”

Boyd’s hands became white-knuckled fists.

Connors continued dispassionately. “In addition to that, he has a number of third degree burns which appear to have been made with a butane torch. There are dozens of broken bones throughout his body, severe internal bleeding, and an extensive loss of blood due to the various twin incisions on his body. I assume the intention was for him to bleed out once they left him to die. He also has a blood infection, massive head trauma, and swelling to his brain.”

Boyd moved his head in a motion that barely passed for a nod. He willed the words to stop. Needed the influx of information to cease. All of it created scenarios so nightmarish that Boyd knew he would see them every night.

“We can repair the damage done to his limbs with extensive surgery, but I don’t know if it’s worth it to try. The head trauma and the fever caused by the blood infection have a high probability of causing lasting brain damage. Until we determine whether or not that will be the case, I do not see the point in wasting more resources on an agent who is most likely unsalvageable. There will be no attempt at resuscitation if his heart stops again.”

“But sir,” Boyd blurted. “He’s an extremely valuable asset to the Agency, and he’s already made it through at least two flat-lines. With those odds, it seems probable he could pull through again.”

“What is the point if he is not functional?” Connors sneered. “Vega has been my material for far longer than he has been your partner. The decision was not made lightly.”

Vivienne shifted on her seat, but Boyd didn’t look in her direction. All he could see was Connors, the cruelty in his eyes, and his lack of care about Sin. Nonfunctional. Connors saw Sin as a broken tool he could discard to buy a new one.

“If he can live through that torture how do you know he won’t have the fortitude to become functional again?” Boyd insisted. “If you give up on him too early, you won’t have a replacement. Sin is the way he

is because he has been trained to kill since he was a small child. What are the chances of finding anyone else with his skill and training?"

"Is your sexual relationship with Agent Vega adding to your motivation to plea for his life?"

In Boyd's peripheral vision he could see his mother's lips tighten, and her scrutiny magnified.

"My—what?"

"Because one would assume," Connors continued as though Boyd had not spoken, "you would have put more effort into playing your role as partner if you were indeed fucking him."

There was certainty in Connors' voice that would not have come from gossip around the compound. He knew. But how? Had Harriet or Archer mentioned his reactions after returning with Sin? Had the Agency spied on them while in Monterrey? It seemed unlikely but paranoia raced through Boyd's veins.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I feel responsible for his condition, and I think he can still come out of this alive. He's a valuable agent."

Connors flicked his hand dismissively. "I'm done with you. Officer Randazzo will escort you to the next stage of debriefing." There was a pause before Connors added, "Happy birthday, by the way."

Boyd did not react to the comment. He was reeling from the conversation.

Randazzo was waiting for him outside. The guard did not make eye contact before turning away. Boyd followed mindlessly.

"Boyd."

Randazzo stopped walking, and Boyd nearly collided with his back. With his throat closed, Boyd looked back at his mother. He expected another verbal slaughter, but she shut Connors' door and speared Randazzo with a glare.

"I will have a word with the child alone."

Randazzo nodded and went to wait at the end of the hall.

"In this profession," Vivienne started in her typical cold tone, "it is imperative that you learn your lessons thoroughly the first time, and that you do not make the same mistake twice. I would have assumed you would understand this, yet I am apparently mistaken."

"Mother, I—"

Vivienne raised a hand in warning, and the words died in his throat.

“Do you not recall the fiasco in Canada? You should understand fully by now that recklessness results in failure. You do not have the luxury to be caught in suspicious circumstances on any of your missions. It infuriates me and endangers the staff when your actions jeopardize the secrecy of this organization.” A measured silence followed the proclamation, and she remained stolid. “Do you find it enjoyable to do so or are you simply that incapable of learning?”

“I... I don’t...” Boyd didn’t know what to say. Nothing would be acceptable. He didn’t know why she had even followed him.

Her lips thinned and, to his surprise, she gripped his upper arm before scanning the corridor around them and moving closer.

“Listen to me clearly for once in your egocentric life,” she hissed. “This organization is not a game. You have proven yourself to be skilled at adapting and acquiring skills, yet you continually disregard those talents at the worst possible times. I have attempted to warn you repeatedly, but you pay me no heed.” She shook him lightly and that same foreboding look filtered across her features. “Do not repeat your mistakes. There is no shelter for those who blatantly disobey, and I am limited in my moves. Do not force me to continually evaluate whether I must make them. I detest the accusations of blind nepotism and if you have any integrity, you should as well.”

A sound down the corridor drew her attention. Her expression returned to one of blank neutrality, but no one appeared.

“The purpose of learning your lessons thoroughly the first time is for everyone’s safety, Boyd. Including your own.”

Her touch was shocking as was the undertone of concern in her words. For the first time, she was showing something besides disgust for him.

Vivienne shook her head, and what little emotion she had shown disappeared beneath a visage of steel. She turned to the corridor leading to her office. “I have been delayed from my work long enough.” Without another word, she strode away with a loud click of her heels.

Randazzo returned, and Boyd followed him without thought. Stricken, confused, and wanting nothing more than to be by Sin’s side, he paid little attention to where the guard led him.

The route to the conference room meandered, but Boyd didn’t give it much thought. It dimly occurred to him that he might be forced to go through reintegration the way Kassian had. Apparently it was

common after long missions. The possibility was unwelcome. It would only prevent him from seeing Sin for days or even weeks.

Boyd started to ask if Randazzo knew where he would be ordered to go after the debriefing, but the question faded as he took in the corridor. Things had changed drastically, and he was surrounded by a maze of white hallways.

Randazzo stopped in front of a nondescript door.

“Where are we?” Boyd asked.

The guard pressed his thumb against a panel beside the door. It read his print and beeped. With a frown that almost seemed apologetic, Randazzo herded Boyd through the door.

The room was like everything else in the maze of hallways—nondescript, all white, and empty except for a single table in the middle. “What...”

“Sorry, man.”

The door slammed shut, and dread washed over Boyd.

The Fourth. He was on the Fourth.

A steady hissing sound filled the room. Turning in a circle, Boyd sought the source of the sound, but only saw incandescent mist coming from the vents.

Gas.

Spinning to the door, Boyd threw himself against it. He jerked the handle, kicked it, and screamed for it to be opened, but no one came.

His breath tore out of him in ragged bursts, and he pressed an arm against his mouth and nose. It was only a temporary solution. There was no way to get out of the room. It was over.

Except, this couldn’t be his end. The Agency terminated people with a bullet in the head, not a room designed to emit gas.

Dizziness swept over Boyd, and he sunk to his knees as his vision blurred. He blinked, trying to fight the feeling, but only made it to the side of the room before collapsing.

“Hello, Boyd.” The voice was unfamiliar, and it boomed out from all directions. “We have never formally met, but then, we’ve never had reason to. My name is Shane. I am the lead practitioner of the Fourth Floor Interrogation and Detainment Facility.”

“What’s...?” Boyd’s words were thick, his tongue cotton-like in his mouth. “What’s happening?”

The walls shifted in Boyd’s peripheral vision like pixelated images,

and the room darkened. He shut his eyes, opened them again, and the room re-solidified.

"The drugs will take full effect soon," Shane said. "Once they do, you will be restrained by the guards."

The lights dimmed lower. Reality was further away.

Boyd could not think. Every time he made a connection, the tide came in and washed it all away; powerful waves sucked his under-standing out to sea where it was lost in the currents.

"Until then, I have something I want to share with you." Shane's voice was sounded distorted, and the lights shone on the walls with an unearthly glow.

A picture displayed across the walls and ceiling. Shades of light and dark spread across the walls in a confusing jumble until something clicked, and Boyd understood that he was seeing a body.

It was an autopsy photo focusing on Lou's head and shoulders. He was lying against a metal table, his head tilted back, and eyes blank and dull. His gaping mouth displayed broken front teeth. Meat peeled away in chunks at Lou's throat from a stab wound that went down nearly to the spine, slicing straight through the larynx.

"Oh God..."

There was another flash, and Boyd couldn't look away. Couldn't stop staring at the carnage Jared had made of Lou.

Neat incisions lined Lou's chest where the skin was not pulled back to display the pale pink layer of flesh and muscles. His organs were in perfect view; his cracked ribs, and the gaping hole in his heart.

"Take it away," Boyd hissed, quietly at first and then escalating into a strangled plea. "Please, *take it away!*"

"I'm afraid that is not possible, Boyd. You must be shown the error—"

Another flash, another image, but this time it was of Sin.

"—of your ways. The way your actions and lack of actions harm the ones you care about the most. In the past you did not have the skills to save the one you loved, but in the present you have the skills and still failed to act."

With the blood cleared away, Sin's wounds were visible. He was lying on his back, arms at his sides, and naked so the extent of his injuries could be seen.

"Oh God," Boyd sobbed.

Tears slicked his face and salted his lips, but he couldn't look away.

Couldn't stop staring at the burn marks and lacerations covering Sin. They scattered across his body mercilessly, but the worst part was his arms and legs. The familiar form of his elegant limbs was lost, twisted. Sin's body was broken, and bone showed through the deep, dual incisions.

Sin's body was pale and lifeless beneath the bruises; the chest and stomach Boyd had run his hands along so many times were now nearly unrecognizable. He looked dead.

"Please... Please stop!"

"I'm afraid that is not possible at the present time," Shane said.

The sound of the door opening was distant. Boyd only registered that someone had entered the room when they grabbed his arms. He told himself to fight them, to break free and sprint out the open door, but all he could do was stare at Sin's body.

The image switched to a close-up of Sin's face; the lovely mouth and long eyelashes unmoving.

Boyd screamed. It was wordless and full of agony, but the men dragging him closer to the table didn't stop. A spark of fight wormed through the thick cocoon of the drugs. Boyd twisted and kicked, but his limbs wouldn't cooperate.

The table came into view, and he saw the straps. Absolute, blind panic took over.

There was no thought to his movements; he had no escape strategy. Boyd bucked and rolled, trying to dislodge himself with sheer desperation. Words from the past flowed from his mouth; the same desperate pleas he had once made to Jared and his friends, to his mother, to the empty house that had swallowed his screams.

"Please, please, no, I'll be good! I'll do what you say! Please don't do this to me, I'll do anything—"

The guards slammed Boyd onto the table. His wrists and ankles were yanked into place and fastened so securely that escape was impossible. He went wild against the cuffs, wrenching his limbs, hitting his head, but the surface was too soft for him to knock himself out.

"As the drugs work through your system, you will briefly fall unconscious, but I'm afraid we are not finished yet, Boyd. When you awake, I have a video I'd like to show you."

"No, no, no, please, not like this..."

Tears burned like acid as his worst nightmare became reality, and

the only person who knew, the only one who would have searched for him, was dying in the Med Wing because of him.

“Do not fret. This is the only time we will use drugs on you, Boyd. After you wake, you will be fully cognizant of everything we discuss.”

Hopelessness crushed him. The weight of the cuffs on his wrists and ankles triggered a hypersensitivity that scurried beneath Boyd’s defenses and burrowed deep into his chest. Despair clenched his throat and tears coursed down his cheeks, but the truth was even harsher than this reality.

He deserved it. After what he’d done to Sin, he deserved this and so much more.

FIFTEEN

SOMETHING WAS BEEPING.

The sound came in measured intervals and unraveled the pall of sleep until Sin broke through it with a jolt.

The beeping sped in tempo.

His eyelids were too heavy. Blood hammered in his ears. Everything was wrong. Or more accurately, everything felt too right and that *had* to be wrong.

There was no more pain screaming across his body in bright, bold bursts. The useless dangle of his limbs was corrected, and the feel of darkness swallowing him up like an endless sea was gone. The internal cataloging of his mounting wounds, and the nonstop drip of blood serving as a timer on his lifespan had stopped.

He wasn't dying. Not anymore.

Sin's eyes snapped open, and he was assaulted by fluorescent lights. He winced and turned away from the ceiling but was thwarted by the presence of a brace around his neck. The automatic response of removing the neck brace was met with resistance—leather straps reinforced by steel kept his limbs flat against a bed.

What the fuck was going on?

This wasn't where he'd spent hours waiting to die before everything had faded into nothing. His torture chamber had smelled of rotting corpses, of mildew, and disease. This room was sterile like a hospital.

Had they moved him? Were they doing something new—something more experimental? He'd heard that Janus did things like that...

The beeping grew erratic with the increased urgency of his movements. He tugged at the restraints, grunting, and gritting his teeth as sweat broke out on his forehead. The skin on his wrists ripped and blood pooled on the stark white sheets. The steel twisted, bent, and the leather straps popped open, freeing one bloody hand. Sin panted, staring in confusion at the broken steel, but did not focus on it or the implications. He reached up to fumble with the buckles that kept his head locked into place before freeing the rest of his limbs.

His body responded as if the torture had never happened; as if the

days of being twisted and pulled until he was nothing more than a disfigured heap of flesh had been a dream.

Sin sat up and felt a tug at his wrist. Tubes fed into his arm from an iv bag next to the bed, but it didn't stop him from peering into the mirror stretching across the wall.

His reflection was astonishing.

The blood was gone, the bruises faded, and the gaping wounds that had decorated his body were sewn shut and healed. He was clean, his hair was buzzed into a crew-cut, and the weight and muscle mass he'd gained in Mexico had melted away.

What the fuck?

Scenarios skittered across his mind—Janus was going to attempt re-conditioning in order to flip him; they'd decided to experiment on him; or they'd sold him to someone else. But, how long had it been? How could he have healed so fast?

And most of all—where was Boyd?

Sin ripped the iv out of his wrist and the electrodes from his chest. Swinging his legs over the side of the bed, Sin crouched on the floor in one smooth glide. Not only could he walk, but his response time was better than ever. It made no sense. Tendon reconstruction was a lot of trouble to go through for a prisoner, and Sin did not remember going through rehabilitation. He remembered nothing but grim walls and the smell of rot.

He stood up too fast and vertigo sent him cracking back down to the floor. A searing pain hurtled into his temple, and he gripped the side of his head with a shout. Standing wasn't an option when he could not see through the gathering tears, but there were voices emanating through the door, and that meant he needed to get mobile.

“—go in!”

“He's secured, you idiot. Calm down.”

“No way, do you know what that guy is capable of—”

Sin scrabbled with the edge of the bed but lost his grip and sank to his knees again. What was wrong with him? He had to get up. He had to move. He had to find Boyd. He had to—

The pain in his head intensified, and this time Sin screamed. A high-pitched sound bounced around inside his head until he covered his ears in desperation.

"Damn it, I knew this would happen," an annoyed voice said brusquely.

"What's happening?" another unfamiliar voice asked.

The voices were closer this time. Sin heard the door open and footsteps approached. Figures huddled over him, but he was unable to see anything but blurs.

"Sedate him."

"No!" Sin planted his hands against the floor and started to push himself up. "Don't—"

Something pricked the side of his neck, and the edges of his vision dimmed. A quiet conversation followed him into another deep bout of unconsciousness.

"Has he been stabilized?"

"Yes. He threw everything off by dislodging the IV and the meds. He has to be brought down slowly. It should be fine now."

"How do you think he broke the restraints like that? What does that mean?" a new voice inquired.

"It means it's working."

THE NEXT TIME Sin awoke, the disorientation and haze of confusion had lessened. His body was rested, and the nausea was gone. His thoughts were another matter. Things were still unclear.

Memories drifted in a way that made it difficult to discern the timing. He could not distinguish his childhood from his life as an agent. Snapshots of his past shone like glass fragments in the sunlight, reflecting blinding light at him, and causing him to flinch away before they shattered and turned into something new.

After years of repression, his memories took on a vivid clarity. He had to make conscious selections as to which memory he wanted to watch in which context before things snapped into place.

Monterrey. Boyd. The mission. Jessica.

When everything was sorted, Sin knew he was at the Agency.

He yanked free of the new restraints with little effort and skimmed the room for egress points and clues. There were no identifying marks of the Agency in the room, but somehow he was certain. Something ingrained in his muscle memory and senses intrinsically told him he was on the compound, and that they'd fixed him.

The IV was no longer by the bed, so Sin stripped the electrodes off his chest and stood. Again, he heard voices through the door.

“—tests and send the results to Dr. Fredrick right away.”

“—erative?”

“We’ll see.”

“—but there’s always sedation.”

The voices came closer. Sin pressed against the side of the wall next to the door, and it partially concealed him when it opened.

A woman in her early thirties entered with a clipboard in hand. She stopped just inside the doorway before spinning to survey the room.

“What the hell—”

Sin grabbed her and pinned her back to his chest, dragging her towards the mirror as she cried out in surprise. Her colleague rushed into the room, a young-looking man also clad in a white lab coat.

“Don’t hurt her!”

“Why am I in this room?”

“Frank, shoot him,” the woman snapped.

Frank fumbled with the buttons of his lab coat, attempting to extract the gun that apparently lay hidden beneath. Sin scoffed. How did any of the civilians on compound manage in the world if this was the extent of their weapons training?

“I guarantee this will not end well if you pull a weapon on me. Just tell me what I want to know, and I’ll be on my merry way.”

Frank froze. “Okay...”

“What have you done to me? Why am I in this room?”

“We were treating you, you imbecile,” the woman snarled. “Isn’t that obvious?”

“Why was I strapped to the bed? What were those electrodes?”

Fear crept into Frank’s face and heightened Sin’s suspicions.

“Why am I not in the Med Wing if you were just treating me?”

“Because the level of your injuries required extensive reconstructive surgery and methods that are not available to the rank-and-file field agents on this compound,” the woman gritted. “You’ve been comatose for months. Now get your goddamn hands off me and return to your bed this instant. I don’t care if you’re Connors’ pet fieldie, you *will* obe—”

Sin clamped his hand over her mouth.

Months? How could he have been out for months? And why wasn't his body more deteriorated if he'd been immobile for that long?

"Where's Boyd?"

"Who?" Frank seemed completely lost.

"Boyd Beaulieu, you fucking moron. Where is he?" Sin dragged the woman closer to the door, simultaneously shoving Frank out of the way.

"Oh!" Frank backed away until he bumped into the bed. "I haven't seen him. They said he's gone."

Implications and possibilities flooded Sin, and he lashed out. He sent the woman flying across the room where she slammed into the wall and collapsed into a heap. Frank did not resist when Sin disarmed him and snatched his keys, only reacting enough to attempt to shield his face when a punch arced toward it. The weak attempt at defense failed, and Frank flipped over the bed.

The nausea rose again, and a low humming filled Sin's ears. He tried to shut it out and fled the room. The outside corridor was completely deserted. Nothing was familiar.

He strode to the exit at the end of the corridor, but the weight of the unknown prompted him to backtrack after passing the glass door of an office. The interior was empty, but he saw a holographic projection of a file on the desk. There were lines of data, various links, and a picture of him in the corner of the document.

Sin swiped Frank's keycard and slipped inside. His gaze swept the room twice before he hunched in front of the desk and peered at the file.

Comprehending the scientific language was nearly impossible with the drumbeat in his head, but Sin struggled to put pieces of the data together. They had in fact performed extensive reconstructive surgery on his body, but there was more to it. There were sub-files relating to proteomes, somatic cells, and something called Project Zero, but Sin didn't understand what any of it meant. With Boyd's unknown status consuming his thoughts, Sin didn't take the time to figure it out.

He grabbed a black sweater dangling from the back of the chair and left the office as quietly as he'd entered.

The floor in the stairwell was cold against his bare feet, but there was nothing to be done about it. The belongings he'd had in Mexico

were all gone now. Even without remembering the full passage of time, everything that had happened in Monterrey seemed like a distant dream.

Sin peered out a sliver of a window next to the stairs and realized he was not in the Tower. He was in one of the nondescript buildings scattered around the compound that he'd always assumed went unused.

The suspicion accelerated into paranoia, and Sin was torn between returning to the office to read his file in-depth and finding a way to escape the building unnoticed, but Frank's vague statement about Boyd pushed Sin onward.

Dizzy spells slowed his progress, but within minutes Sin reached the top floor of the building. The keycard granted him access to the roof which Sin scurried across in a half-crouch. He pressed his back against the ledge nearest to a towering tree and looked around in dismay. The trees were full with leaves, but they'd attacked the JKS in November.

Had it really been months?

The growing evidence of a complete clusterfuck kept Sin going. He made the leap from the roof to a branch in the nearby tree and climbed down with dexterity that should have been impossible. His body was faster and stronger than ever, and his feet slapped nimbly against the cool earth when he dropped to a crouch.

Sin stayed in the shadows, watching for any sign of patrolling guards, before beginning his trek across the compound. He took a meandering route to Carhart's building, but that did not prevent him from running into a number of people.

Agents gawked with open curiosity while others went out of their way to avoid walking directly in his line of sight. Sin didn't care. They meant nothing except a potential problem if they notified the guards. He did not know if he'd been mandated to that building indefinitely, but knocking out the techs would definitely land him in trouble.

Sin broke into a jog. His pace picked up with each stride, and his attention darted around to seek an incoming squadron that would drag him back to the white room, but no one came. He made it into Carhart's building without incident.

Sin took the stairs up to the general's floor, but it proved to be a poor decision. He wound up drenched in sweat and dizzier than he'd

been before. He only managed a weak knock before nearly collapsing against the door. Sin braced his hands on the frame and sucked in great gulps of air. By the time Carhart appeared in front of him, Sin could barely see straight.

“Hsin—How?”

Sin’s knees went weak. “Where’s Boyd?”

Carhart gaped, and Sin gnashed his teeth. He reached out to grab Carhart’s shoulder, but managed only to lose his balance. He crashed against the older man’s chest and gave in to the sucking void trying to reclaim him.

THE SMELL OF food and the sound of a softly spoken conversation woke Sin.

“—sorry but something came up, Morgan.”

For the second time that evening, Sin awoke to lights in his eyes, but this time it was the dim, golden glow of a lamp. There was no one in the room with him, but someone had put him in a bed.

“I know, but what do you want me to do? I said something came up.”

Sin sat up with care and, again, took in his surroundings. A bedroom. Carhart’s bedroom.

“I don’t have time for this. I said sorry, I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

Gingerly, Sin stood. He waited for the world to begin spinning and swaying, but everything remained still.

Sin left the room with measured steps, feeling his way down the hallway and past the bathroom to enter the living room beyond. It had the same layout as his apartment, but it was decorated in rich, warm colors that made it clear Carhart actually considered this Agency apartment a home.

“Feel any better?”

In the fifteen years Sin had known Carhart, he’d never seen the man look so casual. He was shirtless, wearing a pair of fitted, faded jeans, and his wheat-colored hair was uncombed. Carhart crossed his arms over his muscular chest.

“Who the fuck is Morgan?”

“A woman.”

“What woman?”

“A woman who was going to come over tonight if you hadn’t crashed

the party.” Carhart took a step towards Sin. “Do you remember how you got here? You passed out.”

“Where’s Boyd?”

Carhart’s arms dropped to his side. “I’m not discussing this until you have a seat. You aren’t well.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Carhart. I need to know.”

“Hsin, please just calm down. I called the Med Wing, and you are not supposed to be mobile. You’re weak, and I’m not telling you anything that’s going to send you sprinting off the compound. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. I fucking understand you.” Sin pressed his hand against his face and took a calming breath. “Is he alive?”

“Yes. He’s fine. And that’s all I will say for now.”

“Is he—is he on a mission? Will I be able to see him? It’s apparently been months.”

“Six.”

Sin sagged against the wall.

Six months. Was Boyd on an extended undercover mission? Why had that tech made it sound so ominous? Sin wanted to shake Carhart to get the answers, but he knew any attempts at menacing the general would have the opposite effect.

“You had severe head trauma, or so I was told.” Carhart motioned for Sin to follow him into the kitchen. There were two large pots on the stove, and the smell coaxed a groan from Sin’s stomach. “Connors did not see fit to inform me of the true extent of your injuries, but he did tell me that if you were to flat-line once again, nothing would be done to revive you. For the past several months I’d come to the conclusion that you had died or that you were brain damaged.”

Carhart dished out two large bowls of white rice and some sort of stew. He set them down at a small table and nodded at Sin. Barely needing the invitation, Sin sat and wolfed down one of the bowls. He finished one, and Carhart nudged the second in his direction.

“Eat as much as you want, but don’t force yourself or it will make you sick.”

With a distracted nod, Sin ate the second bowl slower. It was good to have solid food in his stomach after what had most likely been months of liquid nutrients. When he sat back and wiped his mouth, Carhart smiled.

"Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"Good."

Sin slouched in the chair and rubbed his stomach. "So, is Morgan some woman you're fucking?"

Carhart blinked. "Wow."

"Just curious if you make her call you general in bed."

"Where did you develop this sense of humor?"

"Working in a bar."

"That wasn't the kind of employment I'd expected you to find." Carhart released an explosive sigh, and his eyes did a slow circuit of what he could see of Sin. "Just so we're clear, I was given no details about your mission other than that it failed. Connors was incensed by the outcome. He blamed Jeffrey and me for acting on faulty information and suspended us both without pay for a few weeks. Ryan attempted to piece together bits from his sources, but it was difficult."

"You know nothing at all? Not even how I got back?"

"A team was led by Trovosky—"

"Ugh."

Carhart nudged Sin's knee with his own. "Hush. He saved your life."

"I'm sure he will let everyone know."

"I said hush. Your chip indicated a flat-line, and he was sent to recover Boyd because you were assumed to be dead. The team found Boyd, but they also recovered you in the process. You were in such a poor state that no one expected you to survive."

Sin assumed Boyd had led the team to him. It was a miracle they'd found him alive. "Do you want me to debrief?"

"Please start from the top."

Sin nodded. He forced his mind to fit the pieces together correctly and retold the events of their time in Monterrey. He told Carhart about Noctis, Jessica, and the smuggler Boyd had encountered.

"A smuggler? There are plenty of smugglers across the border, why was Boyd investigating him thoroughly enough for the man to take notice?"

Sin shrugged. "He wanted to ensure the guy had no ties to Janus. He didn't, but he's one of the most feared men in the region. The guy has talent. He somehow tailed us for weeks."

"Someone followed you undetected?"

Sin scowled. "That's what I said."

Carhart's eyes narrowed. "What was his name? He may be someone we want to keep tabs on."

"He called himself Lo Más Chingón." Sin pressed his palms against the table. "I want a cigarette."

Carhart regarded Sin, but his eyes looked far away. After a moment he shook his head minutely. "Smoking was part of your cover. You don't need to do it anymore."

Sin denounced the proclamation and resumed his debriefing.

"Do you think Thierry feeding Boyd false information was intentional?" Carhart asked.

"It's possible someone fed *him* misinformation to figure out if he was betraying Janus. There's no way to tell unless we find the little bastard and ask him."

Carhart didn't look opposed to the idea. "How were you apprehended?"

This part of the conversation was inevitable, but Sin still tensed. He looked down at his scarred knuckles. "There was a civilian. Jessica Meza, my old boss. She was caught in the explosions, and I stopped to assist. Boyd told me not to."

"And you did it anyway."

"Yes. I knew I could get her to safety and still meet Boyd, but he got angry and told me to follow our plan B."

Carhart's brow creased. "Why would he get angry over that?"

"I have no idea. Maybe he really thought she would slow me down and thought I was endangering myself for some random civilian I happened to get along with. That had nothing to do with it. I would have stopped for any civilian."

"I know you would have," Carhart replied quietly. "What happened next?"

Sin stared into the half-empty bowl. "I fucked up."

"How, Sin?"

"I—"

He saw it all so clearly now. The dank warehouse, the pitch blackness of night, a terrified Jessica, and the gunfire tearing through the building. "I intended to leave her in a warehouse not too far from the jks before going to a safehouse. I scouted the area and returned to

wait for a patrol to pass, but she'd awoken. She'd already called her uncle for assistance, and her uncle was Hale Clemons."

"Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. So, I fucked up. Dozens of Janus ops showed up, there was a gunfight, and..." Sin balled his hands into fists. "She got caught in the crossfire. When I aimed at her uncle, she got in the way and the bullet... hit her. In the head. I froze and they took me down."

"Sin..."

"Just stop. Don't feel sorry for me, okay? It was my own fucking fault."

Sin kept his face downturned, but he knew Carhart was staring at him with sympathy which only worsened Sin's guilt. He remembered the spray of Jessica's blood and winced.

"I only remember flashes of the interrogation. Clemons wanted to make it special because I'd killed his niece." Sin didn't blame Hale for that. Even at the lowest point, when he had nearly accepted his fate and forced himself to keep fighting, keep living, until he was sure they had not apprehended Boyd, Sin had not blamed Hale. If someone had murdered Boyd, Sin would have done the same. "Everything from that time seems distorted. All I remember is pain and exhaustion, and refusing to give up. I don't remember the team rescuing me. I don't remember leaving Mexico."

"You wouldn't have. You were lucky to survive the trip home. As much of a home as this can ever be for you..." Carhart stood and picked up the bowls. "It all went wrong, Sin. The information Thierry gave you, then an eyewitness saw Boyd escaping. Everything went to hell. There was a manhunt and all white foreigners were rounded up. Kassian had just returned from Russia, but they sent him down there to round up Boyd and clean house."

"Of course." It figured Carhart would keep bringing up Kassian; the perfect agent that everyone revered even though he did the same dirty work as Sin. "I don't know why you're acting like Golden Boy saved our asses since it wasn't our fuck-up."

Carhart smiled slightly. "I know. Don't be so defensive. I'm not comparing you, and I wasn't implying that."

"You always compare us. So does Connors."

"Don't be immature." Carhart ran water into the bowls and leaned against the sink. "In any case, Connors was irate. The Directors came

down on him hard, and everyone around here was walking on eggshells. When you flat-lined, I refused to believe you were dead so he took his frustration out on me. He called me unprofessional and emotional. A disgrace. He banned me from any further meetings or decision-making and informed me that your body would not be recovered.”

“How sweet.”

“It was only after the team returned did Casey Archer tell me bits of what occurred.”

“Why did he give a damn? He can’t stand me.”

“Maybe so, but I have a long history with him. I served as a field agent with him nearly twenty years ago.”

That wasn’t too difficult to imagine. Both Carhart and Archer had likely been model agents—Archer still was. The hardest part of the mental image was thinking about Carhart and Archer going on missions with Sin’s wild and coked up father.

“Boyd convinced the team to look for you, and they found you bleeding out in an abandoned house. If it wasn’t for Boyd, you would have been left there to rot.” Carhart’s phone vibrated against the counter. He didn’t look at it. “When Boyd returned, he was summoned by Connors and Vivienne.”

Sin stood, and the chair screeched against the linoleum. “And?”

“He was punished, put on the Fourth, and released from the Agency for the past several months.”

“*What?* How could you let them put him on the fucking Fourth!”

“What else could I do, Sin?” Carhart demanded. “I’ve never been able to prevent them from doing it to you so how the hell could I stop them from doing it to him?”

“Fuck!” Sin ran his fingers over his buzzed hair. Carhart’s hand closed over his shoulder and squeezed, but he shrugged it off. “They don’t just fire people, Carhart. How do you know they didn’t fucking terminate him?”

“They didn’t. Connors said he was no longer needed since you were no longer functional, and they put a twenty-four hour surveillance detail around his house.

“Goddamn it. I have to see him.”

“You can’t just leave the compound, they won’t let—”

“Let?” Sin turned away. “Who the said anything about asking permission?”

Carhart fell silent, and Sin stormed out of the kitchen, moving across the apartment in quick strides.

“At least dress properly.”

Sin’s hand was on the doorknob, but the words stopped him. Running around Lexington with bare feet while half-dressed would only get the police after him, especially since his usual route led him out of an area inaccessible to the general public.

He returned to the bedroom, grabbed a pair of jeans that were too big, and a thick-soled pair of Agency-issued boots. Sin wondered if they were from Carhart’s field agent days. Shaking off the thought, Sin yanked open a drawer and started to remove a t-shirt, but a group of photographs sitting on the bureau caught his eye. One was of a blond woman holding a baby, and the other was of Carhart with Sin’s father.

Emilio had an arm thrown around Carhart’s shoulders, his green eyes twinkling as he smirked at the camera. They were in their mid-twenties and wearing the older, bulkier generation of the Agency’s body armor.

Carhart appeared in the doorway and pointed to Sin’s feet. “Do I get those back?”

“Depends on what the guards do with them when they drag me back to the compound and throw me back in that lab.”

“Lab?”

“Don’t ask because I have no real information.”

Sin pulled the t-shirt over his head and brushed past Carhart on his way to the front door. He pulled it open, conscious of the cameras that would be on him as soon as he stepped outside the apartment. It wouldn’t take long for them to follow if they really wanted him back.

“How are you going to get off the compound?”

“I have my ways.”

His way involved using a system of underground tunnels the Agency had installed years after seizing the Johnson’s Pharmaceuticals compound. Four tunnels extended beneath the property and branched out into separate parts of northern Lexington. Connors had abandoned them in favor of bomb shelters that dotted the compound, but Sin had learned of the network of passageways years ago, and he

typically used the one beneath an unused lab building to escape into Silver Lake Park.

Although, Sin now questioned whether those lab buildings were actually unused. For years, he had assumed they were leftovers from the real Johnson's corporation that weren't demolished, but the real reasoning behind their nondescript nature now seemed more insidious.

Sin started to jog down the hall but paused to look at Carhart over his shoulder. "Thank you."

Carhart's mouth curved up in a soft smile. "It's good to have you back, Vega."

SIXTEEN

SKITTERING RODENTS AND water splashing around Sin's boots shattered the oppressive silence of the tunnel. It was a thirty-minute trek through absolute darkness, but there were moments of sudden clarity when Sin's eyesight focused enough for him to see the ladder at the far end.

Those moments helped to steady Sin when the combination of impatience, disorientation, and creeping doubts about Boyd's safety made the tunnel seem endless, and triggered a feeling of suffocation. Even with keener vision, he was elated after finally bursting into the dense greenery above.

The exit led to an enclosed area under an overpass in Silver Lake Park. Long ago, the park had been one of the most beautiful green spaces in the city. Now, the Agency cordoned it off under the illusion that the land was radioactive. The reality was that it was simply too close to the compound for Connors' liking.

Sin scaled the chain-link fence surrounding the park, slowed his pace, and melted into a crowd of civilians. It was agony to walk when every minute summoned additional doubts and fears, but he shoved his hands into his pockets and kept his head down in an effort to blend.

The city was a blur of concrete, shadowed figures, and the stretch of steel sky overhead. He looked only at the glitter of crushed glass embedded in the pavement and put one foot in front of the other while his senses tracked the movement around him.

That all changed when he arrived in Cedar Hills.

Boyd's house sprawled on a block that was far too upscale for someone like Sin, and that was affirmed by the weight of a neighbor's glower. An old woman eyeballed him from her window in the house across the street and snapped her blinds shut the second he noticed.

Sin slipped into the privacy gate surrounding the Beaulieu residence. The house was a classically suburban colonial with a white fence, contrasting shutters, and an attached garage. He could never imagine Vivienne living there.

The yard was unkempt, but Boyd's car was in the driveway. Sin's

heart soared at the sight of it, and he moved faster. He picked the lock with shaking hands and made an embarrassing amount of noise for a professional criminal. The sounds did not draw Boyd out, and an edge of worry burrowed into Sin's burgeoning hope.

The kitchen and living room were empty, as well as a small office with an ancient computer, but the door at the end of the hallway was partially open. Sin did not hesitate before stepping inside.

Boyd sat against the headboard of the bed with his attention fixed at some point outside the window. He was thinner and paler than he had been in Monterrey, and his jaggedly cut blond hair was still brown on the ends.

"Boyd."

Boyd's head snapped to the side and shock spread over his gaunt face.

Sin took a step forward with a ghost of a smile. It faded when Boyd threw himself off the bed and scrambled into the corner furthest from Sin.

"Is this some new trick?" Boyd demanded, voice quivering. "Is Shane doing this?"

Sin slowed.

"I haven't done anything; I haven't even left my house. Just leave me alone!" Boyd's voice cracked, and his body hunched forward protectively.

Halting, Sin held up his hands in a gesture that was supposed to be calming, but likely was not at all given the panic in Boyd's eyes. "Boyd, it's okay. It's me. I'm not a hologram or something. I'm not wearing a mask. I'm not dead."

"No." Boyd shook his head, still edging away. "No, they said you were dead. They said it was my fault. I saw what happened to you. I know what I did. I know you aren't alive."

For a fragment of a second, Sin heard Boyd's breath coming faster and the faint thud of his heart. This time, it was Sin who froze. He shook his head, and the sound faded away.

Boyd's back hit the wall, and he looked at Sin with liquid eyes. "Why are you doing this?"

"Boyd, please believe me." Sin searched Boyd for a sign of trust, but there was none. The only conclusion was that Shane had gone full-throttle psychological warfare on the Fourth. The very idea made

Sin want to tear the Tower apart and find the man who made a living off other people's pain and insanity. "Ask me anything. Anything about Monterrey. About us. I'll prove it's me."

Boyd's attention was sharp on the door as if expecting someone else to appear, and when nothing happened, he scanned the room once more. His searching stare fell on the windows, the dark hole of the closet, the corners of the ceiling, and returned to Sin. Uncertainty crept into Boyd's distrustful expression, and when his breathing hitched, Sin saw a measure of hope.

"When..." Boyd's voice quavered. "When you got your job at the club—you had a nightmare that night. What happened?"

Sin remembered that night so clearly he didn't even pause. "You woke me up even though I told you not to touch me when I'm asleep. We talked about my parents, and you said... you said I would always be human to you." Sin moved without thinking about it, the words activating muscle memory that drove him closer to Boyd. "It was the first night I got to sleep next to you."

The tremble of Boyd's mouth, and the brimming of tears, drew Sin in like a magnet.

"Hsin...?"

"It's me. I swear, Boyd. It's me."

Sin crossed the distance between them and put his hands on Boyd's shoulders. He had intended to keep them there, but they drew upwards. He cupped Boyd's cheeks, brushing his fingers against skin that was too pale and gaunt. It was a drastic change from the memory of Boyd's tanned face pressed against his chest in the tiny studio, and Sin could not remember ever seeing Boyd so haunted.

Boyd's fingertips brushed the back of Sin's hands with a whisper of touch. "Sin..." He was in Sin's arms suddenly and hugging him with fierce desperation. "Hsin, Hsin, I'm so sorry. It was all—I thought—How...?"

Sin dug his fingers into the fabric of Boyd's shirt. Even though the last several months were a void, his body craved the feel of Boyd's like it had been aware of the distance between them all along.

"I don't know how I'm here. They said I was in a coma, and that they fixed me somehow."

Boyd shuddered. "But you were—your heart stopped as we were leaving and there was blood *everywhere*..."

“Apparently I’m valuable enough that Connors doesn’t want to let me go.”

“I can’t believe this.” Boyd’s grip tightened. “I can’t believe this is happening...”

Sin tilted Boyd’s chin upwards. “When I woke up, I went to look for you. I didn’t remember anything, but Carhart told me what happened. About the Fourth, and Connors dismissing you. I was afraid they had killed you. That Carhart was wrong. They never let anyone go, Boyd. Never.”

Boyd’s unnaturally blue eyes slanted away. “I don’t know why they did.”

“Maybe it’s not true. You were vetted to be my partner and they thought I was done, so they shelved you.”

“If they thought you were done, they should have just killed me.”

“What?” Sin jerked back. “Why would you say that?”

A bitter laugh wrenched from Boyd’s lips. “How can you even ask? It’s my fault it happened. All of it. I shouldn’t have left you. I shouldn’t have said that—I didn’t even mean it. I was just so angry. And then—and then everything afterward...” Boyd exhaled. “It should have been me. It never should have been you.”

At first, Sin could not reply. Part of him wondered how much of this was the Agency’s doing, and part of him wondered how Boyd could possibly blame himself for the things Janus had done. “What happened is done with. You can’t change it and neither can I. I made the choice to break the plan, and I paid the price. It was a mistake, and that’s why I was captured. I should have listened to you.”

“No, you did what you always do. That was the whole point of me being there. I was supposed to help you, to be there when you improvised. They told me from the start that you helped innocents. I never should have expected you to change, especially when you knew the person. If I’d just supported you the way I was supposed to, if I hadn’t been so goddamned stupid about it being *her*, they never would have gotten you.”

“She was the problem, Boyd.” Sin released his partner. His thoughts returned to that night. His last full memory that wasn’t awash with the vestiges of agony and the seemingly never-ending torture from Janus. “She was related to Hale Clemons. It was her that brought

Janus to me. You were right. I should have fucking left her, but I was too weak to do what I had to do.”

“Wh—” Boyd gaped at Sin. “How did we not know?”

“It wasn’t a direct relation or something. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter, Boyd. None of that fucking matters. That failure of a mission was Thierry’s fault, and it will be proven when they track him down. What happened to me was not your fault. So please just—just never fucking say you wish you had died. I couldn’t live if you died. I wouldn’t want to.”

“Why?” Boyd whispered. “After everything that happened to you, how could you say that?”

“Because you’re... you...” Frustration swelled up and strangled Sin; trapping the words he wanted to say. He had never said any of this aloud. Never explained to Boyd just how important he had become. “You fixed me. You don’t believe it, but it’s true. Before I knew you I had never... never really had a conversation. Never had a friend. Never believed anyone could be close to me. I would still be locked in my own fucking head believing I couldn’t be anything but crazy if it wasn’t for you. And if you were gone, I wouldn’t want to be in this shitty world anymore.”

An indiscernible emotion skimmed Boyd’s face like shadows flickering from candle light. He touched Sin’s shoulders, and for a brief, hopeful moment, Sin thought Boyd would kiss him, but instead he pulled Sin down to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Don’t say that. I never want to be the reason you’re hurt. You mean too much to me.”

“So then why does it seem like you’re about to say something stupid?”

Boyd’s jaw clenched. “We—we shouldn’t....”

“Shouldn’t what?”

“Be around each other anymore.” Boyd stared at his hands, tangled in the hem of his shirt. “I—I always fuck up and everyone else has to pay for it. I never want to do that to you.” He twisted his shirt until the fabric wrinkled. “You’re too important to me, Sin. You’re the only one who makes me feel alive. Without you, everything is meaningless.”

“So don’t say you want us to be apart,” Sin snapped. “I’m fine. I’m here. We can be—it can be like it was before.”

Boyd was already shaking his head again. “It can’t. Things have—I have changed. I realized it after we found you. After... After something

Kassian said. After things Shane said.” His voice tightened at the interrogator’s name.

“What the fuck does Kassian have to do with anything? Why are you even talking about me with him?”

“I wasn’t.” Boyd flicked a glance at Sin. “It was after we rescued you. I freaked out when I saw your condition and he, his whole team, they saw how unprofessional I was. When we were flying back he and I were alone and he apologized for how harsh they’d been. He recognized why I was so emotional, so irrational, before I ever did. Later, I knew he was right.”

Sin could not get past the notion of Kassian discussing their relationship, and could barely follow the rest of Boyd’s words. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m a bad partner for you, Sin. I’m not professional when it comes to you. I care too much, I get jealous, and I think about you all the time. I—I fell in love with you and it’s going to make me do stupid things. I’ll put you in danger. And—” Boyd sucked in a shaky breath. “And I would rather die than hurt you.”

“You’re not going to hurt me!” Sin attempted to temper the volume of his voice and failed. “I don’t care what Connors or Shane said to you, it wasn’t your fault.”

“It was. And even if you think it wasn’t this time, that doesn’t mean next time it won’t be, or the time after that.” Boyd grabbed one of Sin’s hands, squeezing. “I’m not reliable anymore, Sin. If I care about someone, I become reckless and stupid. I’ll only end up destroying you.”

“So you’re just going to give up on everything because you’re afraid of something that might not even happen?” Sin’s voice rose again, and he had to stop himself from snatching his hand away. “That doesn’t make any sense. What was the point of any of this if you were going to back off as soon as you felt like you cared too fucking much? Why didn’t you just leave me the hell alone and let me stay how I was before?”

Boyd winced. “It’s the same for me, Sin. When I thought you were dead,” his voice faltered, “I—It hurt so much. I almost wished we’d never met. You changed me. You were the only reason I finally wanted to live and then—and then you were gone.”

“Then why the hell are you giving up on everything now after all

we went through to get to where we were in Monterrey!" Sin leapt up to pace the room. He remembered how it had been before the mission in Carson, before the first time they'd spoken in a way that was real, before he'd realized how much he needed Boyd. Isolated in his apartment, feeling caged in, an existence only for killing and fighting.... "You have no idea how much things have changed, how much you changed me and made my life worth a damn. Without you, there's nothing."

Boyd started to rise but remained perched on the edge of the bed. "It's just because I was nice to you and no one else was. If you have a good replacement partner, it might be the same."

"That's bullshit!" The pounding in Sin's head returned with a force strong enough to shatter his skull. "You're giving up because you think you're going to make a mistake, but I would rather have not woken up at fucking all than let you walk away now. After all we went through, after everything, I'm not quitting just because you talked yourself into it while I was in a goddamn coma."

"But I thought—I thought you'd..." Doubt colored Boyd's words—doubt that had not been there even seconds ago. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" Sin stopped pacing and knelt on the floor in front of Boyd, grabbing one of his hands and squeezing harder than intended. "Just give us a chance. Please. I can't go back to how things were before. I can't be without you. Okay?"

Boyd looked down at their desperately clasped hands. The stretch of quiet was so long that Sin's worry heightened, and he half-expected Boyd to pull away, but then he released a low, ragged sigh.

"Okay."

Relief flooded Sin, and he pulled Boyd close again. When Boyd's arms wrapped around him tentatively, Sin pressed a firm kiss to his forehead. "You make me feel like a person. I wasn't anything before."

"I really do love you," Boyd whispered.

A feeling swelled inside Sin that he couldn't begin to understand, but it cut through the last dregs of his hesitation. He kissed Boyd, and the taste of him, the feel of his breath, the low sound at the back of his throat—all of it unleashed the yearning and desperation in a way that left them both gasping. Sin pushed Boyd back onto the bed and aligned their bodies until every part of him was pressed against every part of Boyd.

When their lips finally parted, a faint smile crossed Boyd's lips. He ran his hands up Sin's back and between his shoulder blades. The touch left electricity in its wake.

"I missed you so much," Boyd murmured.

"I'm sorry I messed everything up. I always do."

"No. It wasn't...." Boyd shook his head. "Just don't."

Sin knew what Boyd was thinking, knew what he wanted to say, and fought the urge to correct him again. There were so many things wrong with the situation, but for the moment when things were calm and the Agency was nowhere in sight... Sin just needed to feel Boyd against him.

So, he relented and shifted to the side so they could lie wrapped in each other's arms. They stayed that way until Sin's eyelids grew heavy, and Boyd fell asleep against his chest. It had not been the plan, but Sin hadn't expected fear to take such a hard and fast hold at the thought of losing Boyd, and he had not anticipated the exhaustion that followed.

THE RINGING OF a phone signaled the start of the next day, as did the first pale rays of sunlight. Sin winced, turned his head, and saw that Boyd was already awake.

"Hey."

A soft smile curved Boyd's lips. "Morning."

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Sin told himself to mobilize before the Agency busted into the door, but only pulled Boyd closer.

"I wanted to watch you. I have trouble sleeping sometimes, and I still can't believe you're here."

"I am." Sin kissed Boyd, flicking his tongue against the parted lips. A slight shudder went through Boyd before he pulled away.

"I think the Agency is calling."

Sin frowned. "How do you know?"

Boyd grasped his phone from where it lay on the nightstand and flipped the screen over. The words "unknown caller" blinked at Sin. He grunted, unsurprised, and took the phone without untangling himself from Boyd's warm limbs. He knew, without even speaking to the person on the phone, that the Agency was nearby. Within minutes, the comfort and safety of their combined warmth would be shattered, but Sin was going to enjoy it while it lasted.

“Yes?” he growled into the phone.
“You have five minutes, Agent Vega.”

A WEEK PASSED, and Boyd still thought back on the quiet morning with Sin with disbelief. It was a marked difference from the weeks he’d spent in a daze upon being released from the Fourth.

Even after he was freed and doomed to isolation in his own home, nausea was made commonplace by continuous cycles of guilt and paranoia. He rarely ate and hadn’t been able to sleep in his own room. He’d worn layers to avoid touching or seeing his scars and avoided the mirror so he would not have to see his altered eye color; a constant reminder of Monterrey.

For three months, Boyd had curled up on the couch and tried to force himself to sleep. During that time, the nightmares started. Sometimes they began with Lou’s death; it was always rendered in vivid detail due to the video Shane had repeatedly played, but even if the nightmares started with Lou, they always ended on Sin. His torture, his murder, and his body sliding down into the incinerator.

Those nightmares did not cease. Even now that he knew Sin was alive.

It had taken months to come to terms with the reality of Sin’s death, and Boyd had transformed into the hollow shell he’d been after Lou’s murder. He’d accepted the loss of Sin so completely that—days after Sin’s sudden appearance in the middle of the night—there were moments when Boyd wondered if it had all been a dream. The fear fortified after a week with no word from Sin, and Boyd convinced himself that he’d imagined it all. Clearly, his isolation was leading to hallucinations.

But then Boyd received a message from Ryan, and everything changed.

Sin was being released from the Med Wing, and there would be a briefing soon.

The idea of a briefing was so far removed from Boyd’s present existence that he assumed it applied only to Sin. Maybe Sin would be placed on active duty already, and they would be kept apart for longer. That knowledge wasn’t enough to quell the slow blossom of hope in his chest, but he still re-read Ryan’s message multiple times. Just to make sure it was real.

Boyd resigned himself to waiting days, weeks, perhaps even months before he saw Sin again. The endless despair that had pressed in on him was gone, and now he was in free-fall. He had no idea how to cope with the freedom from so much pain, but it was okay. He could return to the pseudo-life he'd had before the Agency now that he knew Sin was alive. He would live for moments when Sin could escape the compound and spend his life in stasis when Sin could not.

The day after Boyd came to that conclusion, there was a knock on the door.

Startled, he peered out the window and spotted an Agency-issued car in his driveway. There were two agents in dark clothing and sunglasses just outside his door. His heart skipped a beat, and his first instinct was to dive to his belly so they wouldn't spot him through the window; so they couldn't drag him back to the Fourth for daring to interact with Sin. But then the logical part of his brain—the part that had fought to re-activate in the past few days—reminded him that they may need information from him for Sin's briefing.

Boyd unlocked the door and opened it just enough to see outside. He was met with two unfamiliar, impassive faces.

"We're bringing you in."

"For what?" Boyd asked evenly. "If they need my information, I can give it over the phon—"

"No phones. You're sitting in on the briefing with General Carhart."

"But—"

"I don't know anything else, Agent Beaulieu."

Boyd blanched at the use of his title, and he replayed Sin's words: *You were vetted to be my partner, and they thought I was done, so they shelved you.*

"I need to get ready," he murmured.

He left the men standing by the door and hurried to his room. Once inside, Boyd stood by his bed and stared at the wall. Truthfully, he needed nothing to get ready other than a moment to calm the racing of his heart.

Was it true? Did the unit really need him? Boyd had begun to believe that he'd already been replaced, but now...

"We need to go, Agent Beaulieu."

The voice drifted in from the living room, and Boyd knew he didn't have any more time.

The drive to the compound was far too short. In no time, the Johnson Pharmaceuticals wrought iron gates were sliding open before the vehicle. Boyd's stomach roiled when they clanked shut, but after exiting the vehicle it was surprisingly easy to tuck away his emotions. His protective wall was more accessible than he'd expected, and with it Boyd regained his first minor source of strength.

One of the agents shoved a new identification card at Boyd, and his hands did not shake. He could do this. He couldn't be himself or Kadin, but he could be stone, and stone wasn't afraid or uncertain. Stone was safe.

It was strange to walk across the courtyard again; to see the Tower shooting up into the haze of smog. His first thought was that nothing had changed in his absence, but after entering the elevator bank, Boyd realized some things were off.

There was an eerie silence in the Tower that Boyd had never noticed before. Staff members stared straight ahead, and no one cracked a smile. An ominous feeling swelled with each step Boyd took to the briefing, and the power over his impenetrable walls faded bit-by-bit.

Each silent corridor promised punishment until Boyd opened the door to the usual conference room and stepped inside.

Carhart, Jeffrey, Ryan, Owen, and Sin. No Connors, no Vivienne.

The relief was crippling.

"Boyd!"

Boyd's arms were full of Ryan before he could properly process that this was a real briefing. He zeroed in on Sin over Ryan's shoulder; he was healthy, whole, and staring at Boyd with an intensity better left for privacy. Boyd's breath guttered out, and he returned Ryan's embrace.

"Hi Ryan," Boyd said quietly.

"I've missed you!"

"Ryan, give him time to breathe. It's his first time back in this room in months."

Ryan heeded Carhart's advice and released Boyd. With space between them, Boyd saw the R&D was paler and more fragile than usual.

Boyd frowned. "Are you okay?"

"Oh... yeah. Just the usual."

Ryan flashed a tiny grin and retreated to his seat between Jeffery

and Owen. The analyst did not spare Boyd a glance. As usual, he was focused on his razor-thin tablet.

Owen, on the other hand, waved enthusiastically. "Hey there, homestyle! Hasn't been the same without little Beaulette at the table."

"It's good to have you back, Boyd." Carhart smiled at Boyd. "You've been missed."

"Jesus," Sin scoffed. "Can you people leave him the fuck alone?"

The words saved Boyd from having to respond. It was all too sudden; he had never expected to see any of them again. He took his usual seat next to Sin, and he relaxed infinitesimally when one of Sin's hands wrapped around his knee.

Boyd released a breath. "I was told I was finished at the Agency."

"Employees at the Agency are only finished when they have been officially terminated. Anything else is a temporary reprieve," Carhart said.

"Why would I receive a temporary reprieve?"

"I can't say for certain, Boyd. I don't know why the Marshal does anything. Let alone his reasoning behind the treatment of you and Sin, but I suspect the timing is not coincidental. Not only has your partner emerged miraculously from his coma, but we have intel relating to Janus after months of silence. You were hired to be in this unit, and now you're back in it."

It wasn't a relief. If anything, Boyd's anxiety amplified. The after-images of Sin's limp body filled his vision, and the sound of his own harsh words echoed.

This was wrong. It was a bad idea. He would ruin everything—

Sin squeezed his knee, and Boyd's racing thoughts calmed. He placed his hand over Sin's beneath the table and attempted to draw in the warmth and strength of Sin's presence.

"Am I supposed to go straight into active duty?"

"Correct."

"What if... What if I've forgotten something?" *What if I'm afraid?*

"I trust you, Boyd. And the administration must trust you if they've made you an active agent again."

"Yeah," Ryan said. "Besides, if you managed to remember every group and organization being vetted by Janus, I doubt you forgot anything about Mexico."

Sin's mouth quirked at the side and, hidden from the rest of the

team, he slid their fingers together. More tension bled from Boyd's back, and he tried to ignore the twinkle in Ryan's eyes. Ryan seemed to be making his own, likely correct, assumptions about what had happened between the two of them in Mexico.

"Immediately following the aftermath of the Monterrey debacle, an order was put out for Thierry to be brought in for interrogation," Carhart said. "Connors suspects that Thierry either supplied the faulty intel unwittingly or double-crossed us to lead you into a trap."

Boyd nodded. All things considered, that was the most likely scenario.

"For months his trail was cold and unsurprisingly, it appears that Thierry used his resources and contacts to disappear from the grid. Several weeks ago, it came to our attention that we weren't the only organization searching for him, but we didn't know who else was. A week ago, a contact of Thierry's, who has also worked with Owen, forwarded him an email."

A hologram of the letter appeared above the table and rotated slowly. The words were encoded.

"It says to only open the note if Thierry went missing for more than seven days," Jeffrey said. "A second set of instructions tells the reader to forward it to Owen. It included three possible locations to search for him since he wasn't sure where his pursuers would take him. He listed New Zealand, Mexico, and Ireland. Two out of those three regions are in known Janus territory."

Perhaps Thierry hadn't betrayed them after all; or perhaps he was trying to throw them off with a lie. Regardless, the mission details jump-started the part of Boyd that thrived on strategy and logistics. It was unexpected, but welcomed. Somehow, aspects of this job had become his element, and it was a relief to have something to fall back on to keep his mind in mission mode.

"I checked into New Zealand," Owen piped up. "I didn't find anything, but they could just be on the super down low. Mexico seems to be the place where all the big kids in Janus hang out, so we figured that was a good starting point. We investigated it and heard rumors about locations in northeast Mexico that have a lot of activity but are not attached to the cartels."

Boyd mulled the words over, frowning. "You can't mean Monterrey? It's true that Janus may have a connection to the police or even the

Federals, and I don't know what has happened since I was there, but all of the locations where they held Sin are not ideal for a prolonged capture."

"Just quick and dirty torture," Sin added. Boyd tensed, and Sin knocked their knees together. "Relax. I'm joking."

"It isn't funny."

Sin slouched in the chair and tilted his head back. He had suffered the most as a result of the faulty intel, but he seemed to have little urgency about the mission. "Maybe they have some place outside the city."

"But most of northeast Mexico is... desert." Boyd's voice trailed off as his mind skipped back to the mission—walking through the city with the sun glaring down like a burning deity, the hard-scrabble areas he'd roamed with Jorge, tidbits put together based on half-told information, and last of all... 4FF. "Laguna de Sánchez."

Five questioning stares met his proclamation. Boyd shook his head, and a thin thread of excitement buzzed through him. "General Carhart, can you display a map of Mexico, centered on Monterrey?"

Carhart input a command on the embedded keyboard, and a 3-D map of Monterrey appeared above the table in place of the letter. Boyd stood and swiped at the hologram with his fingers, following Highway 85 down until he saw the city of Santiago, and then dragged the map west into the mountains.

"There's a place somewhere around here... There."

He flicked at the hologram, and it zoomed in on a kink in the road off Nuevo León 20. A small town surrounded by hills appeared, nestled in the mountains. A road circled the farmland, leading to houses and estates spread far apart from each other.

"This is Laguna de Sánchez. I don't know much about it other than its location, but Lo Más Chingón specifically warned me about it. He said the people there would not be fond of the company I kept."

Carhart's lips tightened.

"I'm assuming this happened while I was down for the count." Sin sounded disappointed that he'd missed yet another opportunity to confront the smuggler.

"Yes. We ran into him during egress. He'd taken over the tunnel we were using."

“Who is this person? Why would we even care what he said?” Jeffrey demanded impatiently.

“He’s one of the most powerful people in that area. Everyone was terrified to even say his name. I ran into him twice—once while staking out a base of his, and the second time was in the tunnel. I expected him to kill us, but instead he gave me that message.”

“Why would he warn you about a possible Janus base?” Carhart demanded. “What exactly happened when you encountered him during the escape?”

Boyd watched as the map rotated in front of him. “They stopped us at gunpoint. He was fairly reasonable during our first encounter, and had a sense of humor, so I took the risk and showed myself. I told him we had an injured colleague who needed help. He opened the van, spoke briefly to Kassian’s team, and must have realized I was serious when he saw Sin’s condition. At that point, he let us go with the warning.”

The others in the unit continued to watch Boyd in varying degrees of contemplation and curiosity.

“I know it might sound strange, but I trust him. He had a reputation that I know wasn’t exaggerated. If you’d seen the kid he ordered to be killed...” Boyd trailed off, lips pursing, and shook his head. “I don’t know why he warned me, and it’s possible it was self-serving. He saw us in our Agency gear; he had to know I was involved with some sort of organization. Maybe he thinks we can clear up some more of his competition by letting us know about Laguna de Sánchez. But regardless of his reason, he saved Sin’s life by letting us through.”

Carhart was inscrutable. When he failed to reply, Sin frowned and tapped his knuckles against the glass table. The general blinked and cleared his throat.

“What else do we know about that area?”

Sin pointed at the map. “My former employer mentioned it in passing. I wasn’t really paying attention to what she was saying, but she claimed she had family out there.”

“Family,” Boyd echoed. “Hale Clemons?”

“Probably.”

Ryan reached over to type one-handed on the keyboard, and the map morphed into a sprawling piece of property with a mansion and a slightly smaller house stretched across it. “I just dug this up. It’s

property owned by Hale Clemons in that exact location. It's like a massive compound. He owns property all over the place so we didn't focus on this one before."

"Sounds like we may have ourselves a lead," Carhart said. "Owen, Ryan, I want you to dig up any information about that property you can find. Blueprints, police reports, intel from sources—anything. Jeffrey, work with them to decode anything that may be hidden. And Sin—I need to see you outside for a moment."

Boyd was caught off-guard by the abrupt end of the meeting. Chairs scraped the floor as Owen and Jeffrey filed out of the room, and Carhart stood. He started to turn away, but hesitated.

"I was wondering if you have anything else about this Chingón character. Anything of note about his appearance, mannerisms, or accent?"

"He was... unique. He spoke fluent Spanish, but it was slightly different than the accent I'd become accustomed to in Monterrey. His English was also fluent, and he had an American accent. He used a lot of slang in both languages and vacillated between mocking and joking before abruptly becoming serious. He was stronger and faster than any insurgent operative I've faced so far on any mission. He got the drop on me with a knife to my throat before I even sensed his presence."

"Were you able to see any distinguishing marks on his person?"

"Not entirely. His identity is a well-kept secret in Monterrey so his face was mostly covered both times I encountered him." Boyd leaned back in the chair, thinking. Picturing Chingón was not difficult in the least; Boyd could recall minutiae about the man even now. There were times when having an artist's attention to detail helped. "He was a little taller than me and more muscular. He had a tattoo on his right forearm—I couldn't see exactly what it was, but it was intricate. Maybe a tribal pattern. He wore silver rings and may have had tattoos on his fingers. He also kept calling me *chico*."

"And his people?" Carhart asked curtly.

"I didn't interact much with them, but his organization uses the phrase 4FF to distinguish themselves. I never learned what it meant."

The words were met with ringing silence, but Carhart's eyes widened marginally and his nostrils flared. Again, Sin gave Carhart a sideways glance.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." Carhart picked up his own tablet, nearly dropped it, and grabbed it with a tighter grip. "Nothing. I'll look into it more in case Janus attempts to use his organization in the future. Sin—meet me outside. It will only be a moment."

Sin sighed and followed the general into the hallway.

"What was that all about?" Ryan nodded at the closed door. "Zach is acting weirder than usual."

"Usual?"

"Yeah. He was really withdrawn after they implied Sin was dead. I mean, I was too, but I was also pretty sick."

"I noticed you don't look as healthy as you did before." Boyd took in Ryan's sallow cheeks and dark circles. "Is it your condition?"

"Yeah, but I'm doing better now. Don't worry about me." Ryan grinned and pushed his glasses up his nose. "I wanna know all about you. We have to catch up; you have no idea how much I've missed you, Boyd. I was so worried..."

Boyd returned the smile although it was fainter. "No need. I was at home. Nothing really happened after I was released."

"I heard about... about the Fourth."

The smile vanished, and Boyd reached over to turn off the hologram projector. "I'm fine."

Ryan didn't look convinced, but he also knew when not to push. Instead he adopted a sly smirk and stood. "You and Sin have a vibe now."

"A vibe?"

"Yup. I won't bug you about it on your first day back, but expect me to dig for gossip soon. We have like fifteen hang out sessions to make up for. I've been forlorn and abandoned here without you!"

Boyd watched Ryan gather his belongings and load his enormous backpack. He had no idea why everyone was trying to be so nice. Perhaps they thought he was unbalanced after experiencing the Fourth, and they were overcompensating in response.

"Don't try to tell me you spent the whole time alone in your apartment watching anime," he said. "Surely you had someone to hang out with."

Ryan snorted. "Well, I did date this guy—Andrew Torres. He's a fieldie in Terrorism. A real white knight type. After hanging out with

you and Sin for months, he was way too noble for me. I missed you guys' bleakness!"

Boyd's low grade spark of amusement felt foreign after months of being isolated and depressed, but he didn't hide it. "I take it things didn't work out."

"Nope. He was too busy trying to save me. The story of my life."

"You'll have to tell me about it."

"Oh, I will." Ryan's grin turned wicked just as Sin re-entered. "And you can tell me about... Mexico."

"No one's telling you anything," Sin said. "Get out."

Ryan stuck out his tongue and headed for the door. He crinkled his fingers in a playful wave. Boyd raised his hand in farewell.

Sin toed the door shut and moved to sit beside Boyd again. "What are you telling him?"

"Nothing."

"Yeah right."

Sin didn't look convinced, but he grabbed one of Boyd's hands and brought it to his lips.

Every touch reaffirmed his survival and allowed fragments of darkness to recede from Boyd. The brush of Sin's lips was a balm, and it reminded Boyd that, impossibly, Sin still wanted him even though he'd had every right, and every reason, to walk away without looking back. Anyone else would have.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to come back. They keep doing tests on me. Making sure I'm fit to actually go on a mission."

Boyd ran his thumb over Sin's knuckles. "Is that what he wanted to talk to you about?"

"Yes. He warned me that they'll send Kassian in my place if I'm not cleared."

"Oh." That wouldn't be so bad. Boyd would at least have the opportunity to redeem himself in front of the other senior agent. "Maybe it would be best. You were severely injured and in a coma for months."

"Fuck that. You're not going anywhere with that douchebag."

Boyd let out a soft breath. "He really wasn't that bad. I was surprised."

"Yeah, whatever. I've known him for years, and you met him for ten minutes."

"You should know that he saved your life. He seemed very concerned."

"I'm sure he put on a good show for you. He likes it when people

think he's the perfect and most sensitive agent." Sin scooted his chair closer to Boyd and leaned forward to brace his arms on Boyd's chair. "How are you feeling?"

Boyd put his hands on Sin's shoulders and slowly rubbed them. "It's strange. I honestly didn't believe I would ever step foot in here again. At least not... in a good way."

"I don't even know if it's a good thing that you have to. It probably would have been better if I'd never woken up at all."

Boyd shoved Sin's shoulder. "How can you say that? We already had that conversation, and if I'm not allowed to say I should have died, you aren't allowed to say you shouldn't have lived."

"I know." Sin sat back with a sigh that bordered on disgusted. "Things are tense around here."

"I noticed. What changed?"

"Everything. We fucked up. Well, Thierry fucked us up. Connors got major heat from the Directors about the screw-up in Mexico, and he's been running this place like a dictator since then. Anyone who breathes in the wrong direction is put on probation, and he's still not over the fact that me and you were at the heart of this mess."

Boyd's heart sank. "Will he retaliate?"

"I don't know. But he did make it clear that if I ever let myself fall into such a state again, he'll personally remove me from life support."

"Compared to him, my mother seems to have a heart."

"Yes." Sin touched the metal collar that was once again gripping his throat. "From what Carhart and Ryan have said, the situation with the Directors has been building for a while. They were impatient with our Janus progress, and then Connors jumped the gun and promised that we would have them finished off before the mission was even in motion. When we failed, they came down hard. Thierry is our fall guy at the moment. I almost feel sorry for the bastard if he's guilty. Or even if he's innocent and turns out to be useless to Connors."

Boyd could not believe how all of this had snowballed. "I just want to get this over with. I just want to be alone with you."

"I want that too."

The gravely sound of Sin's voice drew Boyd's attention from the glass table, and he found himself struck by the sudden intensity in his partner. The familiar sheen of Sin's desire stripped away remnants of Boyd's guilt and fear, and decimated any doubt about whether

showing affection on compound was a good idea. The gaping emptiness inside Boyd was filled by being with Sin; Boyd craved his touch like starved lungs craved oxygen.

When their lips met, Boyd wondered how he had ever expected to turn Sin away.

“Let’s go to my apartment,” Sin whispered when they broke apart.

Even with so much else going on, Boyd was incapable of resisting the suggestion.

SEVENTEEN

FOR THE MOST part, life went back to normal for Sin.

With the exception of constant physicals, testing, and a mandated psychiatric session, it was almost as if the coma had never happened. As if Mexico had never happened.

Although the mission had nearly ended Sin's life, he was grateful for it. Without the mission, Sin was not convinced he and Boyd would have been pushed together for long enough to reach their current level. Now, they touched without fear of rejection, kissed when they were out of view of cameras, and fucked with his hand covering Boyd's mouth inside his apartment. Sometimes they managed to keep it down. Other times it did not work at all. After three weeks, the guards outside Sin's door knew the deal.

The mission had been worth it.

Sin shoved his hands in the pockets of his hooded sweater and thought of Boyd to distract himself from the hour-long psychiatric evaluation he'd just endured. Dr. Osland had pressed him to talk about the torture as if physical harm could ever bring about post-traumatic stress for Sin after all these years. And maybe it could have—maybe it should have. Osland had compared the situation to others, and wondered endlessly about Sin's triggers.

Why did one incident set him off and not another?

Sin didn't have those answers and probably never would, but he did know that he'd *chosen* to remain passive on that table while Hale played mad scientist. He'd chosen to stay conscious and fighting instead of giving in to the seductive pull of death. And he'd done it for Boyd. Without him, survival would not have been worth it.

But Sin couldn't tell Osland those things. He'd laughed off the idea of being traumatized by physical torture, and he had declined to mention the other issues looming just beyond the horizon.

It wasn't flashbacks of Janus keeping Sin awake at night. It was distant memories escaping years of repression. He didn't know why things were coming back after so long, but Sin jolted awake in a cold sweat almost every night. Even when Sin tried not to think about the

dreams of the moonlit field, streaking blood, and the echo of gunshots, it came back clearer and more detailed each time.

A sigh of annoyance interrupted Sin's thoughts, and he realized someone else was in the elevator bank with him.

Ann.

"It's you." Her hazel eyes fixed on him as if he was a speck on her windshield. "Wonderful. The icing on the cake of my day."

A flippant remark nearly left his mouth, but then the barest spark of a memory killed the words before they could arrange into a sentence. A face identical to Ann's—the same light brown hair, and thin, angular features—but twisted with pain and fear. Lydia's face.

Sin sucked in a breath. He took a step back. "Sorry."

"For what?" One of Ann's eyebrows rose, and she tilted her head to the side. "I thought you were dead."

"I'm not that easy to kill."

"Clearly." She looked past him to the corridor leading to Dr. Osland's office. "Have they decided to throw away another doctor? Have any grand plots as to how you're going to turn this one into a catatonic basketcase, or do you come up with that stuff on the spur of a moment?"

She wasn't being serious. He could tell. But his stomach twisted just the same. All he saw was Lydia; her imploring stare and coaxing smile, and then the sheer terror.

"Fuck."

The sarcastic twist of Ann's mouth smoothed, and she took a step closer. "Vega, are you—"

"No." Sin backed away and held up a hand to ward her away. "Stop."

"If you're having an episode—"

"I'm not! Just go the fuck away."

"I can call someone if you need me to," she insisted.

Incredulity snapped Sin out of the momentary rush of panic. "If you thought I was having an *episode* then why the hell are you standing here? Just go!"

"Because I am still trained as a doctor even if you are an asshole," Ann snapped. "Now tell me if I need to alert someone. You don't look well."

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open with a whoosh. Sin

sagged against the wall in relief. "I'm fine. Just, please..." His head thudded against the wall. "Annabelle, just go."

Ann hesitated, expression questioning, before stepping inside. Sin glanced at her once more before the doors shut again; she had not looked away.

Opting to take the stairs, Sin hurried to his apartment and avoided looking at anyone else. Every nerve in his body was on fire, and his chest and back ached from the tension. Everything was wrong—all of the little idiosyncrasies that had come to the surface with each training session, each physical. Each day made him settle further in a body that felt different than it had before Mexico and the coma. The flashbacks and memories emphasized the overall feeling of wrongness.

Sin arrived at the apartment covered in sweat, and he didn't look at the guards before slamming the door shut. He could hear the shower running and staggered toward the sound.

There was a pile of sweaty clothes on the bathroom floor, and Boyd was standing in the shower beneath the spray; his body was clearly visible through the glass door. Pale skin stretched over lean muscle that Boyd had recommenced the cultivation of in preparation for his return to the field. His re-dyed blond hair was slicked back, and his body conveyed a sense of ease that had been absent for weeks.

Stripping off his own clothes, Sin slipped into the shower and pinned himself against Boyd's back. The water was hot, but Sin felt a little less like flying apart with Boyd's skin against his own.

"You're so fucking beautiful."

Boyd's hand twisted back to press against Sin's hamstring. "You're not so bad yourself."

Sin buried his face in Boyd's neck, lips parting as he inhaled. The dread receded, replaced by pure want and affection that was hard to categorize. He slid an arm around Boyd's waist and pressed a hand against his stomach. Boyd didn't shy away from the touch of bare fingers against his scars, and Sin realized Boyd hadn't even flinched at being completely exposed.

He was so concerned with his own demons that he'd forgotten Boyd's.

Sin pressed his mouth to Boyd's cheek in silent apology. When Boyd turned his head to deepen the kiss, Sin caught the barest glimmer of

Boyd's natural amber eye color; the Agency had finally reversed the procedure.

He slid his hand down Boyd's slick stomach, gliding low to curl around his dick. The sound Boyd made echoed off the tiles. He pushed his ass back against Sin's erection, grinding, and planted his palms against the damp wall.

The kiss broke, but Sin didn't pull away. He kissed down, lightly biting Boyd's neck, before rocking against the tight, pert curve of his ass with more intent. Thoughts of the past, of Ann and Lydia, fled. Sin focused only on the feel and taste of Boyd, the slide of their bodies, and when the temptation grew too great he slicked Boyd's hole with spit and breached the tight ring of his ass.

"Ohh, fuck." Boyd's voice hissed out low and thick but with a slight undercurrent of pain. Even so, he cast a heated look over his shoulder. "More."

Sin wrapped an arm around Boyd's waist and clutched his shoulder with the other before flexing his hips to drive in deeper. Sin's body reacted to Boyd as if it was the first time they'd been together; completely on fire and short-circuiting as electricity coursed through his veins.

The first hard slam wrenched a loud moan out of Boyd, and then Sin was fucking him at a pace that left them both sobbing for breath. The sound skin squeaking against tile, slapping skin, of wet moans and low cries, and of Boyd whimpering when Sin angled just right, filled the room and was only partially drowned out by the water.

Outside the bathroom, Sin heard the apartment door opening. The tread of someone's footsteps was clear, as was the moment when the intruder halted in the kitchen. Sin didn't stop, couldn't even if he wanted to, and had no doubts that the person heard Boyd wailing when he came.

Sin pressed his head against Boyd's shoulder and unleashed every ounce of tension into the act of riding Boyd's ass. He didn't give a second thought to his uninvited guest when he finally peaked.

The comedown was stunning, and Sin felt lightheaded. He staggered against Boyd, his cock sliding free as he trapped Boyd against the wall. It was only when Boyd twisted out of the hold did Sin realize what he'd done.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." Boyd rubbed one of his wrists. "I'm trying to be... less affected by those things. It's a work in progress, but maybe someday."

The water beat down on them, and Sin couldn't help kissing Boyd again. "I'm sorry I wasn't here for you. I'm sorry they hurt you."

"I'm the one who should have been there for you. You have nothing to be sorry for. You can't protect me from everything."

"I can't stand the thought of you being on the Fourth."

Boyd dropped his eyes. The avoidance was becoming familiar. "I'm afraid it won't be the last time."

The possibility was anathema to Sin; it froze his insides and impeded his ability to feel the warmth of the water. "It will be if I can fucking help it."

Boyd pulled Sin into a loose embrace. He pressed his face against Sin's chest, ear to his heart, and the creeping cold halted its advance. "All that matters now is you're here. We're together. Partners again."

"Thank God. Just because I'm functional with you doesn't mean I can work with someone else."

"Give yourself more credit," Boyd said lightly. "You were fine in Monterrey."

"But that was Monterrey. It's different here. I'm... different here."

Boyd pulled back to see Sin. "What do you mean?"

Sin shrugged. "I'm the monster and whatnot, right?"

"Not to me."

The words chased the amassing tension, and Sin feasted on the sight of his lover. Boyd's skin was flushed pink from the hot water and steam, and Sin spied red marks where he'd gripped during sex.

"Too rough?"

Boyd's lips quirked. "I've had rougher."

A smile inched Sin's lips upwards. "You know, someone was here a few minutes ago. Right before you came."

"In the apartment?"

"Yeah."

Boyd peered through the shower door as if he could see the apartment beyond. "Who was it?"

"No clue, but they didn't stick around once you started getting loud."

"Great. Hopefully it wasn't someone unfortunate."

"If it was anyone important, they would have interrupted."

“Yeah, but...” Boyd grabbed the soap. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s finish up.”

Sin had no real urgency to investigate his mystery guest, but complied. The water was starting to lose heat, anyway. Once finished, Sin wrapped a towel around his waist and found a hastily scrawled note in the kitchen.

Briefing in one hour. Please remember to check your phones.

Boyd padded out of the bathroom with a towel around his waist and another draped over one shoulder. “What’s the verdict?”

“I think... Carhart’s assistant.” Sin held up the note between his fingers. “We have a mission.”

“IT TURNS OUT you were right about Laguna de Sánchez.”

Sin scanned the shifting images of Hale Clemons’ sprawling property. “It took three weeks to figure that out?”

“Information on it is locked down, and we needed to confirm a few things,” Ryan said.

“Like?”

“Whether or not there is Janus activity going on directly at the location. Even if Hale was the force behind your torture, Connors won’t give us clearance to bust into his house for revenge.” Carhart’s expression was sour, and he nodded at Ryan to continue.

“Yeah, so... There’s an excessive amount of security around the place; armed guards, dogs, and so on. The property has been the source of numerous complaints over the years by people reporting suspicious activity to the police.”

Owen bobbed his head in agreement. “But it seems like the authorities there treat Hale’s house kinda like, well, the Lexington peeps in blue treat our compound which is major red flag number one. Plus, dude apparently altered the property a few years back. People reported loud construction and filed noise complaints, but here’s the weird part: nothing on the exterior has changed. I couldn’t find updated blueprints anywhere so our information on what he modified inside is precisely jack squat. Ryan and I think it was something on the lower floors. I’m placing my bet on an evil dungeon lair... or the bat cave. But probably a lair because he doesn’t seem Bruce Wayne enough.”

Owen’s rambling very distantly reminded Sin of Johnny.

"We don't exactly have proof that Thierry is there, but we think that's the best place to look." Ryan spread his hands. "Sorry guys, we tried to find more, but it was slim pickings."

"You found plenty, Ryan," Boyd said. "There's no need to apologize."

"So then, we're going?" Sin interrupted, jerking his chin at the hologram. Boyd could pick another time to placate Ryan who was apparently, once again, his hangout buddy. Sin wasn't exactly jealous of their friendship; it was more like he was extremely selfish when it came to Boyd.

"Yes." Carhart nodded at two tablets lying on the conference table. "You'll find the pertinent information there. We've lost a lot of time and for all we know, Thierry may already be dead. Even if that proves to be the case, this is the first time we've had a real lead on a possible Janus safehouse. If we lose Thierry, we can still collect data."

"So it's not just a recovery?" Boyd turned on his tablet. Sin didn't bother to take his own device.

"You're to bring back anything or anyone that may have information on the organization, but your main goal is Thierry."

Boyd's lips bowed as he read. "What's our timeframe?"

"You'll be flown into Mexico and dropped off just inside the border. You'll have to acquire a vehicle and find your way to the destination. It is imperative that you remain as inconspicuous as possible. The helicopter will be waiting for you approximately twenty-four hours later," Carhart said. "The information is all there, as well as coordinates to each location. Since we haven't had a chance to scout the area, you will be the first to actually get close to the property. You'll have to improvise a plan to infiltrate and escape."

Sin nodded. He was already poised to rise.

"Wait, I have a last minute addition." Owen shuffled the papers in front of him.

"You lost them already?" Jeffrey asked in disbelief.

"No, they're just hiding out of view. Timeout. I'll find them."

Jeffrey shook his head and dismissed Owen. "Judging by the wording from Thierry's contact, I would guess Thierry expected something dire to happen. I would go in fully armed so you don't get yourselves foolishly captured again."

Sin arched a brow. "What, are you concer—"

"Eureka!" Owen shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "I almost

forgot I had the old blueprints! It won't show the changes to the interior, but you'll have something upon which to extrapolate. Or however the fancy people would say it."

"That would be really helpful. Can you upload them to us?" Boyd asked.

"But of course, my little emo-faced friend."

Jeffrey scoffed. "I have another meeting I need to be at in fifteen minutes. Are we finished?"

"Yes," Carhart said. "Thank you, Jeffrey."

Jeffrey nodded curtly and left the room with Owen close behind. Ryan mouthed a quick 'be careful' before hurrying out with his backpack hanging from one shoulder. When the door shut behind them, Carhart spoke.

"You leave in two hours. If you have any questions, I'll be in my office. You've been given clearance to get any supplies from Artillery."

Sin started to leave, but Carhart grabbed his forearm and squeezed. The warm, strong grip was unexpected—he and the general had barely touched in the fifteen years they'd known each other, but a gradual shift had begun on the evening Sin had woken up from the coma. With each passing day, that shift ebbed at the older man's professional visage, and his behavior resembled more of a protective father figure than a supervisor.

Carhart's hand slid away when Sin graced him with a puzzled look.

"Just be careful. Both of you."

"It's not that big a deal," Sin said dryly. "This is not the most difficult assignment we've ever had."

"Even so."

"Even so, you're acting like a big sap." Sin tracked Carhart as he walked to the door. "I'm starting to think you stay here worrying whenever I go on a mission."

Carhart made a soft sound at the back of his throat and opened the door. "You should have started thinking that a long time ago, Vega. Please be careful, and wear real armor."

When he was gone, Sin asked, "What the hell was that about?"

Boyd grabbed Sin's tablet and slipped both into his messenger bag. "Consider what happened last time you went to Mexico. He's probably afraid. We weren't even near an actual Janus building before, and

this time we're headed straight for what could be their interrogation center."

"We'll be fine," Sin said. "There were extenuating circumstances last time. Although..."

"Although what?" Boyd asked warily.

"Hale has a vendetta against me. If he knows I'm there, he may do everything in his power to make sure I die for good this time, but that'd be the case regardless unless he's fond of home invasion. I just thought you should know so there are no surprises."

"But why does he have a vendetta against you personally? You weren't even seen by the witness."

The spectral form of Jessica's body, limp and bloody, appeared before Sin's eyes. "He knows me." Sin swallowed heavily and blinked away the image. "When Janus arrived at the warehouse, Hale was there. He—I shot at him, and Jessica got in the way. She died. I shot her in the head." Boyd moved closer as Sin continued in a wooden voice. "So when they had me, he was the one who personally oversaw my interrogation. It was his idea to leave me there to bleed to death."

Boyd slung his bag over his shoulders with brusque movements and tightened his pale fingers around the straps.

"I don't know how stealthy this will be given my history with storms," Sin admitted with a sardonic twist of his mouth. "But I don't want to give these psychotic people more of a reason to specifically hate either of us. Janus having a personal vendetta could compromise us completely."

"I agree. The idea of them trying to take you again..." Boyd shook his head sharply. "We'll be careful. Or try to. It's hard without having full knowledge of the land."

"It's hard, but we can do it. After all the shit we've been through, there is no way I'm dying in some rich bastard's mansion."

Boyd's smile was wan. "I agree but there's one more thing..."

"What?"

"What we talked about at my house."

"Oh fucking God, not again."

"Sin, just hear me out." Like Carhart, Boyd grabbed Sin's arm before he could escape. "I know myself. I know how I feel about you, and I know how *that* could potentially compromise our missions in the future. You didn't see how emotional I was down in Monterrey—it

could have ruined the mission. I just—I just think it’s dangerous for us to work together.”

“It’s not dangerous.” Sin’s patience with the topic wore thin every time he noticed Boyd’s doubts reawakening. “It means you’ll have my goddamn back, and that’s all that matters to me. No matter what you think about yourself, I have faith in you.”

“You’re so...” A soft kind of sadness infiltrated Boyd’s voice but was soon subsumed by neutrality. His hand tightened and then fell away. “We should go.”

“We should, but are you ready?”

“I don’t know.” Boyd gave the room a cursory glance as though, once again, checking for signs of surveillance. “I don’t like not knowing what Connors will do to us if we *do* end Janus.”

“Anything is possible. Connors doesn’t want me to be close to anyone, and he already sees us together as trouble.”

Connors’ threats hung in the air unspoken, and the weight of them settled in Sin’s stomach like a stone. His worry was mirrored in Boyd’s shuddering sigh, but Boyd only squared his shoulders.

“We’ll deal with it when we return. Let’s go finish what we started.”

EIGHTEEN

ONE COULD BE forgiven if they got lost on Hale Clemons' property; it was not only the picture of opulence, but it comprised several acres of land. The mansion itself was five times the size of Boyd's house in Cedar Hills, and the guest house was not much smaller. In addition, there were tennis courts and gardens, a gazebo, a pool, and multiple garages.

Sin had no idea how one person could have use for so much shit.

A guard post populated by armed men was situated by the wrought iron gate, and dogs roamed the lot, which further complicated their silent infiltration. Security at the Clemons mansion was almost as tight as it had been at the JKS, and Sin was already out of patience.

It would have been easier to go in with guns blazing and peripheral bombs going off, but staying low as long as possible was their best course. Not only would it lessen the chance of Hale getting a visual on either of them, but Thierry would have a higher chance of getting out alive. Assuming Janus hadn't killed him yet.

With that in mind, Sin prowled across the estate. For all the manpower Hale possessed, his surveillance system was limited to mounted cameras that were easy to evade with stealth, speed, and body armor enhanced by holographic camouflage. The trick was avoiding the interior guards. The HUD on Sin's goggles had displayed heat signatures of clusters of hostiles huddled together like worker ants in the mansion, but he wasn't picking up much in the guest house. Either it was more desolate or Hale had invested in a heat shield.

With no drawbacks, Sin scaled the side of the house and sliced a clean hole into one of the windows. He slid his hand into the hole, unlatched the window, and listened for signs of an approach. Sin slipped inside when he only heard the distant sound of thunder.

"What exactly am I looking for again?"

"The northeast rooms. They may lead to an extra wing." Boyd sighed through the comm. "I don't know why I bother showing you blueprints. Where are you now? I can direct you there."

"I don't need you to tell me where to go. I asked a question, you answered, the end." Sin crouched in the darkness and scanned the room

critically. He was in a gallery that wrapped around the upper part of a room full of artwork and musical instruments. What a fucking waste of money. “Besides,” he added. “Not like you’re even *sure* it’s that area. You’re just assuming it *might* be.”

“Of course I’m not certain. If I was, we wouldn’t have split up to search.”

“No unnecessary noise on the radio,” Sin said, and stopped transmitting. Annoying Boyd on assignments would never cease to amuse him.

Sin peered over the side of the gallery railing and analyzed the floor plan. It was an open concept which made it easier to scan the immediate vicinity. Glass doors led outside to a pool, and the space transitioned into a kitchen on the left side. There was a guard in each area, but the man in the kitchen was watching a soccer game on a holographic projector. Tiny, flickering figures darted around a table, and the guard focused on them intently. A closer examination of his surroundings showed not only a kitchen, but a serious looking set of double doors that did not fit the design of the room.

Sin crept to the left side of the gallery and hopped atop the slender railing. He walked along it until he was directly above and slightly behind the soccer-watching guard. Sin leapt off the railing, dropped to the balls of his feet, and snapped the guard’s neck. A coffee cup flew across the counter when he slumped forward and, though Sin caught it before it shattered against the floor, the clatter caught the attention of the guard outside.

Ducking down, Sin propped the dead man upright against the counter. From his angle, the other guard should have only been able to see his colleague leaning over the table as if focused on the game.

When there was no sound of the glass doors sliding open, Sin peeked around the counter. The poolside guard had turned away to play with his phone. Hale obviously had some stellar guys stationed here; they’d probably lapsed into complacency over the years.

Sin dragged the body towards a nearby cupboard and pushed it inside. He searched the man’s clothing and found a radio, a wallet with three nudie pictures, and a key ring. Sin stuffed the items into his pocket and shut the door.

He tried different keys on the double doors. On the third attempt,

the heavy lock opened with a click loud enough to alert a savvier set of guards. But, again, no one appeared.

After going through the door, the guest house became a maze. A corridor was lined with more doors and three separate carpeted hallways leading in different directions. Sin followed the one that led to the northeast and gave each room a cursory glance along the way. Most were unused; they were filled with useless, artsy crap that Boyd probably would have fawned all over if he had the time.

Shadows swallowed Sin as he moved slowly with his back pressed against the wall. The only illumination was from sudden flashes of lightning that accompanied louder booms of thunder. The patter of rain thrummed against the roof and windows, and a low warble of voices followed only seconds later.

Sin flattened himself against the wall and crouched beneath a nook under the window just as two people rounded the corner.

“—two weeks now,” a man snarled.

“It’s not as easy as you’d think. Things take time and this is a sensitive situation. Do you know how useful he could be?” a woman replied, her tone derisive.

Were they talking about Thierry?

Sin debated shadowing the pair to get more information, but the radio he’d swiped crackled to life; a man’s voice demanded for someone named Eric to state his position. The pair in the hallway froze, and Sin rolled his eyes. So much for stealth.

“What the hell?” the man exclaimed.

“Don’t fucking move!” The woman yanked her gun out and pointed it in Sin’s general direction. “Identify yourself, *now!*”

He had two choices: pull a Boyd and pretend to be a guard to avoid confrontation or get rid of them both. The first option was only plausible if they were complete idiots, so Sin went with the latter.

Sin grabbed the woman’s throat with one hand and her wrist with the other, and twisted until it popped. The gun fell to the floor as Sin slammed his foot into the man’s groin. He doubled over with a shout.

“Hands where I can see them or I’ll break her neck.”

It would be easier to shoot them both, but he was still trying to go for half-assed stealth, and an attempt at negotiation would work more in his favor.

The man put his hands up after staggering to his feet. “Who are you and how did you get in?”

Sin ignored the question. “Where’s your prisoner?”

“We would rather die than talk,” the woman growled with typical Janus fervor.

This was why Sin hated talking to hostiles. He started to repeat the question, but she made a pathetic attempt at kicking him in the nuts. He evaded, and the man turned to sprint down the hall. Sin sent one of his knives whistling through the air. It slammed into the guard’s skull, but the distraction allowed the woman to pry herself free.

Sin snapped her neck before she could reach the gun.

Annoyed, he searched for a place to hide their bodies and settled on concealing them behind the floor-length curtains. A quick frisk of their bodies turned up another key ring. This one had a keycard.

There were only two possible entrances they could have emerged from, and Sin tried them both. The key card gained him access to a library with a dome-shaped ceiling and shelves upon shelves of books; there was nothing in the room special enough to warrant an electronic lock.

Sin searched for false walls and hidden compartments in the bookshelves, but found nothing. The floor was a different story.

Large, marble tiles shone beneath the dim lighting, but one didn’t have the same texture as the others. Sin knelt to examine it and scraped at the grout with the blade of his glass cutter. It was looser than the others, and he pried it up without much effort. He removed the one next to it and revealed a dark, square hole that led to a narrow staircase.

“Target area possibly in sight,” he muttered. “Will verify shortly.”

THE TRANSMISSION CAME at the perfect time. In another few minutes, Boyd would have moved even further into the complex skein of the mansion’s interior. A thorough search of the entire building would have taken hours.

At this point, Boyd could have doubled back to meet Sin, but he was reluctant to retreat before receiving confirmation that the mansion didn’t need to be searched. Sneaking in this far without being spotted amid the clusters of guards and confusing web of showrooms had been a feat in and of itself.

The scattered light of the storm gave the rooms an eerie appearance. Rain pounded against the window panes and the few skylights dotted across the building. The lightning cast the room into relief, exposing cream walls, gold molding, and expensive paintings. Thunder rattled the windows and muffled the soft creaks and groans of the mansion which put him further on edge. Even though they had the blueprints, it had been impossible to judge which rooms were most important to search, and so Boyd's list of target areas was hit-or-miss. He had come across a few interesting spots, but many of the rooms were more reminiscent of entertainment centers or museum galleries than a living space.

The cavernous interior contained a large number of guards, but so far Boyd had only come across a few. Although the heat signatures had implied dozens, they were more spread out than Boyd anticipated. It made his job easier, but he was also caught off guard when someone appeared, and he had to abscond quickly from a half-searched room.

Boyd followed his route while waiting for further word from Sin. He entered a room with an illuminated aquarium running along the length of the wall. Exotic fish of varying colors and sizes undulated in the water. The light cast shadows of their movements across the room, washing up the walls and glowing faintly across the ceiling. Boyd tracked the shadows, and his eyes caught on the structure of the vaulted ceiling.

The entire wing followed an open floor plan, but certain areas had walls that scaled the room two thirds of the way before leaving a gap between it and the ceiling. In this wing, the vaulted ceilings were constructed with wide wooden beams suspended between the upper part of the half-walls and the ceiling. Conceivably, a person could scale the wall, grab one of the beams, and use it as a vantage point to look around the entire wing.

Boyd flipped on his night vision goggles, surveyed the area, and dashed to the side of the room. He used the momentum to jump off the side of the wall, push up, and spring upward to just barely catch one of the wooden beams.

He dangled there, breathing hard, and imagined David Nakamura would be proud. In the past few weeks, Boyd had practiced that move repeatedly with the trainer.

Using the beam for balance, he partially walked up the wall and pulled himself on top of it. His heart was pounding by the time he was steady, but the height afforded him a view of the surrounding rooms. The HUD on his goggles did not display any infrared sensors in the area, but Boyd did spot a black fuse box in the western corridor. It was a random place for a fuse box, and there had been no circuit panel present in this area of the blueprints.

The process of crawling between the beams was arduous, but he became more confident as he covered additional ground. It took minutes to reach the western corridor whereas it would have taken triple the time by foot.

He dropped to the floor in a smooth roll and crouched just below the box. Up close, he realized it was halfway embedded into the wall next to a door. Further investigation proved it to be a security access terminal, and it required a four-digit password to bypass the main screen. Frowning, Boyd touched one of the buttons on the side of his goggles and activated a slim UV ray. The HUD displayed illuminated fingerprints on four different numbers.

Crouching down, Boyd worked his way through the possible permutations. He got it on his ninth try, and the device emitted a sharp beep. Boyd froze, but no one reacted in the vicinity or on the other side of the door, and he didn't pick up any heat signatures inside.

Still moving with caution, Boyd entered the narrow, metallic doorway with his tonfa in hand. The room beyond was empty of people, but the open laptop on the desk struck a chord of excitement in his chest. For all that his future at the Agency was shrouded in uncertainty, Boyd could not deny that parts of the job sparked aspects of his personality that had lain dormant for years. The ability to acquire and apply new skills, to explore, and to strategize was almost enough to distract him from the not too distant future.

There was a small couch settled at an angle with a gap between it and the wall, but Boyd found nothing behind it. After discovering nothing of note in a bookcase, he turned to the laptop. The previous user had failed to log out.

Boyd slipped a dummy wallet from his pocket and extracted a silver credit card. It was realistic in style and shape, but was really the covert housing for a razor-thin USB drive. Boyd plugged it into the laptop's port before selecting to copy the data cloud.

The progress bar inched along. The laptop was fairly outdated and moved sluggishly between the different drives in his attempt to copy as much as possible. It was up to the C drive when the exterior code on the door beeped.

Boyd ripped the USB from the side of the laptop and leapt toward the couch. He slid behind it, shoved the drive into his boot, and hoped the person wouldn't sense his presence.

The door opened and footsteps thudded toward the desk. Boyd could hear the quiet tapping of fingers against the keyboard, and wondered how long the person planned to stay. With the information on the USB possibly corrupted, and Sin in a hostile area, Boyd had no time to spend hiding behind a couch. The quietest course of action would be to sneak up on the person and snap their neck, but Boyd was not good at mimicking the move Sin performed flawlessly. He didn't have the strength needed. Boyd's best bet was the tonfa.

"I can't believe this," a woman muttered at length. Her voice was oddly familiar.

Boyd frowned, letting her voice wash over him, but failed to make a connection. The woman shut the laptop with a click and left the room before he could figure it out.

After counting out thirty seconds, Boyd got to his feet and grabbed the laptop. Copying the files was no longer an option, and he was anxious to start his trek to the guest house if needed. The laptop disappeared into the backpack he'd brought; it was slim, flat, and molded to his back beneath his armor. It required some effort to re-attach, but he returned to the corridor in minutes.

He was only through the door for a single heartbeat before realizing he'd made a mistake.

"Identify yourself," a voice commanded.

Boyd froze and turned with his hands in the air.

"Reed?"

Dana.

"What the fuck! Kadin?"

And Rick.

Shit.

It felt like the mission at the JKS had happened lifetimes ago, but he recognized them immediately. The only difference in either of their appearances was a thick burn scar running along the left side of

Dana's face and neck. The burn extended beneath her shirt, and her left hand was encased in a glove.

Boyd cursed himself for spending so much time with the pair.

"Wow, what are you two doing here?"

"Kadin Reed." Dana's steps were predatory. She slammed him against the wall and pressed her uninjured arm against his windpipe. Lightning struck and flickered in her dark, deep-set eyes. "I should gut you right now, you worthless sack of shit."

Boyd adopted a facade of fear. "What the hell—"

"Traitor."

Boyd struggled, but she only pressed her wiry body against him tighter.

"Dana," he gritted. "Let me explain."

She sneered, but Rick approached and put a large hand on her shoulder. "I want to hear what he has to say."

"Search him first," she growled at her lover.

Rick complied. He found Boyd's tonfa, glass cutter, and ripped the night vision goggles from his head.

"Let him go," Rick said. "I have to hear this explanation."

Dana ripped away from Boyd with a snarl. "You certainly came prepared."

"Of course I did," Boyd snapped. He rubbed his throat and sucked in a shaky breath. "I came back to join up—I was stuck in Monterrey until a few weeks ago. After the convention center was bombed, I hid in rat holes and dodged the Federals for months."

Dana's response was to rear back and slam her fist into his jaw, stunning him. Stars and blotches of light danced before his eyes, and Boyd sagged against the wall. It took everything he had to keep playing the role and not end the game now, but there was more of a chance they would take him somewhere useful if he kept it up.

"Dana..." Boyd looked up through the hair that clung to the blood on his mouth. "I know I fucked up by running, but I came here to try to fix things. I came here to rejoin the cause. Do you remember when we talked about it, Rick?"

Rick nodded jerkily, his mouth pressed together. "Yeah I remember, man. But where the hell have you been? You're on the fucking list and have been since the attack on the orientation. The core wants your blood."

“What list?”

Dana released a bark of laughter. “A list of traitors. You should have listened closer when I gave my speech, *Kadin*. Your name, your face, and everything we suspect you of doing is circulating with every Janus cell in the international community. If you hadn’t come traipsing in here tonight, someone would have found you. I am so goddamn glad it was me.”

Boyd straightened too fast and his head swam; it added to the streak of horror at the idea of Janus hunting the real Kadin Reed. The Agency had him in hiding, but there was always a chance...

“I get why you’re pissed, but I’m not a traitor. I was afraid—I nearly burned to death in that room, and I ran for my life!”

“*Bullshit!*” Dana was contorted with rage. “You’re a coward and a traitor. I nearly lost my arm because I stopped to help my comrades, and you *ran!* Saving your own *worthless life* at the expense of everyone else!”

An image of Sin standing over Jessica sprang to Boyd’s mind. His expression after Boyd had commanded him to let Jessica die must have resembled Dana’s—irate and disgusted.

There was something missing inside of him; a human factor that took away his instinct to help others. He was the monster.

“What happened at JKS was obviously an inside job.” Rick’s deep voice boomed in the empty corridor. “Anyone who turned up MIA was put on the list.”

“Look,” Boyd started, a ragged edge in his voice. “I already told you—”

Dana hit him again, and his head snapped back against the wall. Boyd fought the instinct to retaliate. He wondered if this entire interrogation would be spent with her ranting and punching him while Rick loomed over his shoulder.

“Enough of this.” Rick’s hand enclosed Dana’s shoulder again. “Bring him.”

NINETEEN

GOING THROUGH SO much trouble for Thierry was pissing Sin off.

The staircase had descended to yet another set of pointless rooms, and Sin had tailed two more Janus operatives—ultimately killing them—before finding yet another hidden entrance to an even lower sublevel.

It was out of control, and Sin had no patience for skulking around and using his powers of deduction to find clues. Why couldn't people just do their dirt out in the open instead of hiding it in eighteen sublevels? Hale had Agency-level paranoia; a fact that made sense once Sin finally reached the underbelly of the building.

Blank corridors and walls, vinyl flooring, and an austere sterility with all the signs of a white torture chamber. Sin was reminded of the Fourth.

There was nowhere to hide with only the stark anteroom and a short hallway leading to a wider area, but Sin pressed his back to the side of the wall and silently crept inside. The corridor led to a room where several guards stood in front of a narrow, metal door with a wide, vent-like opening in the middle. They didn't look particularly concerned about the door and were deep in conversation, but that fit the attitude of most of the guards Sin had come across so far. The rank-and-file security personnel were far less intense than the fanatical Janus operatives. Sin almost felt bad about killing them.

"Back up needed in the guest house! We have an intruder and a man down!"

Apparently someone had located one of Sin's hurriedly-stashed corpses.

The guards snapped out of their lethargy and shifted to the corridor. Their eyes fell on Sin instantly, and showed a range of emotions from shock, annoyance, to alarm, and only one reacted without pause.

The man charged at Sin while the other two reached for their weapons. Just as two Browning Hi-Powers jerked up in his direction, Sin snatched his attacker and twisted around to use him as a shield when bullets hurtled in his direction.

The warmth of blood soaked through the guard's clothing and

seeped into Sin's. He disarmed the dead man and unloaded on the two hostiles by the metal door. The radio was exploding in a burst of chaos, but Sin ignored it; stealth was no longer an option.

He let the body drop, stepped over the others, and peered through the door. Sure enough, Thierry was cowering in a corner of a barren, white cell. He was light years from the confident, sophisticated man he'd been in Paris. Skinnier, paler, and trembling as he covered his eyes.

Sneering, Sin did a quick search of the guards and located the key to unlock the door.

"Get yourself together. We need to go."

Thierry's head snapped up. "Sin!"

Sin grabbed Thierry's arm and dragged him out of the room. His bare feet slid in the pooling blood.

"Putain de merde!"

Hostiles charged into the corridor and gunfire filled the white room. Sin slammed his shoulder into a stunned Thierry and sent him flying back into the safety of the cell. Spinning around, Sin threw himself backwards and let his back hit the floor to avoid the flurry of bullets. They embedded in the wall behind him, and he rolled out of the way of the continuing gunfire. Sin raised his gun just enough to take out two of the four hostiles, and scrambled against the recess in the door.

"Kill Beauvais!" one of the men shouted. He received a bullet between the eyes for his trouble.

The remaining hostile froze but was temporarily saved when Sin's gun clicked uselessly. He tossed it aside and sprinted across the room, dodging bullets after the man snapped out of his lapse. They sprayed in an arc due to his unsteady hand, and Sin ran up the side of the wall to evade, flipped forward, and knocked him down. The gun skittered across the floor, and Sin landed squarely on his chest.

With two short movements, Sin snapped his neck while Thierry watched from the door of his cell.

"Get the fuck up now," Sin growled.

"Yo-you—" Thierry's accent was heavier than usual. "You will kill me too!"

"If that was the plan it would have already happened. Get your ass moving, *now*."

Without waiting for Thierry to comply, Sin yanked him out of the room and half-dragged, half-carried him to the corridor.

HALE CLEMONS WAS as average as he'd looked in the Agency's files if not more provincial due to his khaki pants and polo shirt. There was nothing overtly alarming about him except for a pair of dark, spiritless eyes.

"Who is this?"

"He goes by Kadin Reed." Rick shoved Boyd forward a step. "He was MIA from the—"

"No further explanation is needed," Hale said. "I know exactly who he is and what he is part of."

"He's a traitor," Dana said in the same harsh tone she'd used in the corridor. She dumped Boyd's equipment and tonfa on Hale's desk. "I don't even believe he is who he says he is. A fellow comrade would never betray Janus."

The game was growing tiresome, and Boyd was close to admitting the truth when Rick's radio emitted a panicked transmission: "Back up needed in the north building! We have an intruder and a man down!"

Hale looked from Boyd to Rick. "Is there a second intruder?"

Rick shook his head and brought the radio to his mouth. "Is the intruder in your sights?"

There was no response.

The tension in the room escalated, and Hale snatched the radio. "One intruder is already detained. Is there a second?"

Sin's voice came across in Boyd's ear: "I have Thierry, and I'm moving out now."

Rick's radio transmitted a jumble of words. "Multiple men down—guest house— intruder—"

Each transmission was cut off and spoken in harried tones before the radio went silent.

"Repeat," Hale shouted. When nothing happened, he shoved it at Rick's chest. "Go find out what the hell is going on. Radio me immediately."

Dana stiffened. "I can go instead—"

"No," Rick said hurriedly. "I'll handle this."

"But I—"

"Dana, please," Rick insisted.

"Yes, Dana," Hale said, his voice dripping acid. "Please."

Her eyes dragged away from Rick and refocused on Boyd. She inclined her head in a rigid nod. "Yes, sir."

With a lingering look, Rick sprinted from the room.

"Let's try this again," Hale spat. "What is your *real* name, and what institution are you part of?"

"You just said you already knew," Boyd pointed out. "How are people supposed to follow you if you can't even keep your facts straight?"

"Heh." Hale held his hand out before Dana.

She pulled a blade from a sheath and handed it to Hale. She then positioned herself behind Boyd to grip his arms and jerk them back.

"Are you prepared to answer or should I begin cutting?" Hale asked.

Boyd shut off the part of himself that recoiled at the sight of the knife and assessed Hale. Different scenarios ran through Boyd's mind, and he let the Kadin act drop. His body eased into a better stance; a fighter's stance.

"I'm perfectly aware of how sick you are. You tortured and killed my partner."

Behind him, Dana sucked in a breath, but Hale continued to smile grimly.

"If you mean the trash who bombed the JKS with you, he killed my niece. I felt it was an even exchange."

The blade flashed in an arc and lightly slashed the skin at Boyd's throat. Boyd's eyes flew open and fear tore through him; the wound was superficial, but it was only centimeters from his jugular.

Breathe, he told himself. *Don't panic or you really will fail Sin.*

"You're right," he said. "I'm not Kadin Reed. I killed him before he made it to the convention center."

Dana's breath gusted out. "No wonder Reed's commander claimed all contact had ceased before he was set to arrive."

Boyd said nothing but was unable to stop staring at the blade.

"We suspected you were a mole working in conjunction with the trash who killed my niece. The one with the scars and green eyes." Hale held up the knife again. "He was strong, but you might be easier to break."

"Don't bet on it."

Boyd slammed his back into Dana's chest, forcing her to collide

with the wall. He grabbed her scarred upper arm and used his hips to flip her over his shoulder. Dana fell to the floor with a shout, and Hale charged forward with the knife in hand. He swung it in wild, unpracticed slashes; his face was a mask of rage.

Evading the reckless attack, Boyd grabbed the outer side of Hale's wrist and twisted down sharply to disarm him.

"Dana!"

Hale's shout cut off when Boyd slid behind him and twisted his arm until it snapped. Hale fell to his knees, and Boyd spun towards Dana. She had staggered to her feet and ripped a gun from the holster at her thigh, but he kicked it out her hand.

Grabbing the tonfa from the desk, Boyd extended the weapon and drove it into Dana's stomach before flipping it up to strike her temple. She collapsed to the floor.

Boyd grabbed her gun and grazed the muzzle against Hale's forehead. "Where is Janus' headquarters located?"

Hale's lips curled. "Even if I told you to spare my own life, giving up Janus' core is a death sentence."

Boyd hadn't expected anything more. The only information gained from a Janus soldier would be through decryption and espionage; they were too well-trained, or too scared, to talk.

Jaw clenched, Boyd adjusted his grip on the gun. "If my partner hadn't killed your niece, would you still have tortured him?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

Hale's eyes narrowed, but he said, "No."

Boyd's mouth tightened at the sides. "That's the problem with Janus. Your idea of justice is completely disproportionate to the crime. Still, I'll do you a favor since you thought you were avenging your family."

Hale settled on his haunches. "Are you going to claim to spare me the treatment I gave your friend?"

"No." Boyd pulled the trigger. Hale's head snapped back, and gore and blood sprayed the wall behind him. "I won't bring you to the Fourth."

Turning away, Boyd checked Dana's pulse. She was still alive.

Was it necessary to kill her too? Was she as much of a threat as Hale?

No, she wasn't. For once, he could save someone.

Boyd dragged her to the corner and away from Hale's pooling blood, but couldn't risk doing anything further. She would wake soon, and once she saw Hale she would be out for his blood.

The element of surprise was a wash, so instead of creeping slowly through the darkness, Boyd sprinted to one of the mansion's exits. He ran through different egress solutions in his mind and made a quick detour to the garage. Most of the guards were absent from the mansion and were likely swarming Sin in the guest house.

"Sin! Status?"

Outside, the sky was pitch black and, between the darkness of the night and the intensity of the rain, the lights dotted across the complex were dim and distant. The deluge of rain and flooding water was momentarily shocking; the downpour had reduced visibility to such a low degree Boyd couldn't see across the estate. The resounding cracks of gunfire blended with occasional thunder and echoed across the estate. It complicated his ability to pinpoint the origin of the sound.

Boyd hurried through the darkness as rain water and gravel flew around his feet. "Sin! Answer me! Are you okay?"

The silence was punctuated by a sudden explosion, and Sin finally said, "Peachy."

Boyd's breath hissed out in relief. "I'm getting the vehicle. Get the hell out of there."

"On it."

Hale's garage was as extravagant as the rest of his estate, and there were a dozen vehicles inside. They were mostly electric models with some classics, but the best vehicle for their purposes was a silver SUV parked in the corner. Boyd crouched next to the driver's side of the car and examined the interface next to the handle. He pressed a button and the computer came alive. Just his luck, it required facial recognition and instantly rejected his.

Hissing in frustration, Boyd knelt on the floor and tapped his damp fingers against the touch screen on the interface. He bypassed the facial recognition screen and went to the settings, finding the option for key input. He swore and slid his phone from the strap beneath the hem of his pants.

Ryan picked up in seconds. "Are you out?"

"I need the root key for the facial recognition software in a vehicle. I'm in a hurry."

"No sweat, what kind of car?"

Boyd skimmed the vehicle, scowled deeper, and scooted to the back so he could see the spoiler and trunk. "It's a Lexus. The interface said it was an LX-22."

"Gimme one sec."

Boyd turned to look at the entrance to the garage. He heard Ryan typing and muttering to himself. Finally, he made an 'aha!' sound.

"Is it a boxy thing with sharp edges and a huge grill?"

"Yes."

"Oh, those are awesome!"

"Ryan!"

"Sorry, sorry. Go back to the interface, and I'll read you the key."

Boyd cradled the phone between his head and shoulder, and punched in the root key as Ryan read it aloud. The R&D agent guided him through the process of accessing the administrative panel and reprogramming it to respond to Boyd's face instead of Hale's.

"Thanks," Boyd said briefly and hung up. He flipped back to the comm and dropped into the driver's seat. "I have a vehicle. Where are you?"

"Northwest corner, behind the pool house." Sin's voice was entirely too calm considering the ruckus he was making.

Boyd backed out of the garage and sped to the center of the estate without bothering to go along the perimeter. A few guards saw him driving through but, in the chaos of the moment and the low visibility, they could not seem to identify whether he was an enemy or an ally.

The SUV nearly fishtailed as he took an abrupt turn toward the pool house. The yard was a mess of slippery mud and deep puddles; the few paved paths arcing across the property had a layer of water over them that would make it easy to hydroplane.

The headlights cast weak light across the landscaping and area behind the pool house, but he could not see Sin or Thierry. Boyd slammed on the brakes, barked out his position on the comm, and unlocked the doors.

Less than a minute passed before Sin emerged from the darkness. His lanky form flew towards the SUV, and he was dragging a thoroughly soaked and barefoot Thierry behind him. They were both

blood-splattered and dirty, but Thierry's eyes were wide as saucers in his pale face.

A barrage of gunfire sliced through the rain and missed them by centimeters. When the two of them entered the vehicle, Thierry went slack with relief after spotting Boyd. He didn't know if Thierry was genuinely happy to see him or if he was just relieved to no longer be alone with Sin. Judging from the rough way the senior agent was handling Thierry, it could have been either.

The gunfire redirected to the SUV, and the wheels sent mud and water flying as Boyd peeled out of the pool area and drove full speed to the southern end of the property. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Thierry shrinking away from Sin.

Sin did not appear to notice; he was splattered with blood, his hair and clothing soaked from the rain, but he was calm in the midst of the storm. His eyes moved between the windows and his guns—one of which was an automatic MP5 he must have acquired along the way.

Boyd swerved to avoid a group of bushes. "Status?"

"Flesh wound," Sin said vaguely.

They barreled towards the electronic gate leading out to the road. Sin lowered the window and leaned out, shooting at the control box and the guard manning the gate. The guard dove out of the way, and the gate slid open at a sluggish pace.

"Fucking ridiculous," Sin muttered. "Drive through it. Don't stop."

"You are crazy!" Thierry screamed. "Boyd, do not—"

Boyd accelerated and braced for impact just before the grill of the SUV collided with the gate. There was a metallic whine and a loud bang, but the gate bent around the front-end of the vehicle before falling backwards into the street. Gunfire erupted behind them once again, and a quick peek into the mirror showed another SUV and two sedans in fast pursuit.

"Go!" Sin yelled. He leaned out the window and fired at their pursuers.

The road leading away from the estate was made treacherous by the steadily pouring rain. Boyd almost missed a turn and spun the wheel, causing the back of the SUV to swing to the side as the tires briefly lost traction. The wheels caught just before they could hydroplane.

Sin's guns were an ear-cracking noise resounding in the SUV as were Thierry's screams of terror. Bullets slammed into the vehicle, but

it withstood the damage to a degree that rivalled even the Agency's tactical vans.

Boyd spun the wheel again to clear a fallen tree, and a muffled cry drew his attention. In the backseat, Thierry's face was aghast as Sin hung halfway out the window. His gloved hands moved dexterously over the slick exterior, and he pulled himself entirely out. The vehicle was easily pushing 120 mph, and Boyd could tell Sin was dangling precariously at the side with one hand gripping the rack on the roof, and the other hand shooting his gun.

Thierry's attention switched to Boyd. *"Comment peux tu supporter d'être près de quelqu'un comme ça? Il est cinglé!"*

Boyd shook his head. Now was not the time to explain how he could work with someone as crazy as Sin. Not with the trees thinning in a way that would allow the hostiles to speed up and surround them.

SIN'S BOOTS SLIPPED on the slick surface of the SUV, but he managed to pull himself up to the roof. Flattening himself against the top, he squinted at the pursuing vehicles. One was an armored SUV nearly identical to the one they were in, but if he judged by the dead passenger in the Nissan, the two sedans didn't have the same defenses.

Bullets ricocheted around Sin; some just missed while others grazed his body. He ignored the pain and the force of the rain slamming into him, and lifted his Ruger. Holding steady was a feat as the car bounced onto a less evenly-paved road. Sin clenched his teeth and aimed just as the Nissan inched closer to their bumper. He sent two bullets through the windshield and into the driver's head.

The car slammed into the back of their SUV before spinning out of control. It collided with the other sedan, and both cars swerved off the road in a heap with their tires stuck in the thick mud. The sound of tires squealing and rubber skidding echoed through the night.

Sin's focus switched to the relentless SUV. Shoving the Ruger in his belt, he leaned over the side of their vehicle and attempted to grab the MP5 from where it hung on the rack. It was nearly in his grasp when Boyd took a sudden turn that caused Sin to fly over the right side of the roof.

He caught the rack to keep from dashing to the ground, but the momentum of the fall and speed of the vehicle sent him crashing through the window. It caved inward, and his legs rammed into

Thierry. The Frenchman screamed and recoiled against the other door.

"Ralentis! On va tous mourir!"

"Thierry!" Boyd shouted. *"Ferme ta gueule!"*

Sin ignored the shouting and returned to his position on the roof. He dodged a bullet that would have sent his brains splattering across the black fiberglass and finally grabbed the MP5. He blew out one of the tires on the tailing vehicle and rubber exploded all over the road. The driver briefly lost control, and one of the back passengers tumbled from the window he'd been leaning out of.

Sin sprayed the SUV with automatic gunfire, but it wasn't a high enough caliber to penetrate the glass. Piece of shit 9mm bullets. He tossed the MP5 over the side of the roof, and a bullet tore through his thigh.

"Motherfucker."

Sin's tolerance for the battle of the SUVs wore thin, and he switched from bullets to explosives. He removed the last grenade from his belt and yanked the pin out with his teeth. Hopefully the goddamn pursuing SUV wouldn't circumnavigate the grenade or worse, he didn't blow himself up while cooking it.

He flung himself over the side and dropped the grenade on the pavement. Sin dove through the window just as the other SUV rolled over the grenade. It exploded right under the gas tank. The vehicle was engulfed in a ball of flames so intense the shockwave slammed into their SUV.

Between the momentum and the explosion lifting it off the ground, the destroyed vehicle continued to skid along the road. Debris flew through the air; bits of glass and pieces of metal smashed into them like a hailstorm of shrapnel.

Sin raked a hand through his drenched hair. "We're green."

"Good timing," Boyd said as they approached Laguna de Sánchez proper. He slowed in the small city and sped up again once they were headed toward Nuevo León 20. Boyd didn't speak until they were at full throttle again.

"Are you okay?" he yelled over the noise.

Sin yanked off a strip of cloth from his shirt and wrapped it around his bleeding thigh. "Nothing serious. Sorry about the fireworks, by

the way. There wasn't a way to avoid Janus ops, and they were determined to kill him before he could escape."

Sin's gaze flicked over to Thierry. Their captive was gloomily looking out the window and rubbing his arms with his hands. During the entire race from the guest house, he'd reacted as if Sin had been mowing down innocent people even though the bloodshed had saved his miserable life. Thierry played the political intrigue game with some of the most dangerous people in the world, but he certainly was not accustomed to seeing anyone die.

As if sensing Sin's glare, Thierry pressed tighter against the door. "*C'est un monstre.*"

Sin didn't speak French, but the words translated well enough. He sneered and redirected his attention to the Ruger, ensuring it was not water clogged.

"Thierry." Boyd's voice rang out from the front. "I realize this must be an alarming time for you but don't forget that he just saved your life and risked his own in the process. And if you're going to insult him, at least do it in English. I'm not translating for you."

Thierry said nothing, and Boyd's amber eyes flashed at Sin in the rearview mirror. "The explosions actually helped. You created a good diversion."

Sin gave a one-shouldered shrug, but the corner of his mouth twitched up in a tiny smile. It remained even while he finished dismantling and reassembling his weapon.

The wheels skidded as Boyd turned onto Nuevo León 20. The road they careened down was full of sudden twists and hairpin turns. At times the mountain rose in a wall on one side of the road and a sheer drop down the other. Thierry gripped the seat like a lifeline while Boyd navigated the vehicle through the terrain.

Once they reached the relatively flat planes of Villa de Santiago and hooked back up with 85, the ride was less eventful. Silence permeated the vehicle as they drew closer to their pick-up spot. Thierry's grave expression grew pronounced and, when the Agency helicopter was in sight, he lifted his chin in Boyd's direction.

"I did not betray you. They lied to me as well, and then they... they tortured me. They killed my lover."

Sin didn't bother to comment, but after pulling over, Boyd turned in his seat. "I understand. And I'm sorry about your lover."

Thierry nodded and returned his vacant stare to the waiting helicopter.

They evacuated the stolen vehicle and met with the transport team, running across the flinging sand while the blades chopped noisily in the air.

“Seriously,” the pilot yelled. “What is this, my new detail? Go fly to bumfuck Mexico and wait around for the hotshots to come running in at the last minute? Would you people fucking hurry? I got shit to do back home!” He hit the side of the helicopter a few times.

The three of them piled into the back, and Boyd shot the pilot a tight smile. “Thanks, Jim.”

“Well, fuck me sideways,” Jim hollered. “You remembered my name! Guess I better thank my lucky stars.”

Sin had no idea what to make of their exchange, but Jim appeared mollified despite the sarcasm and turned back to the cockpit. The helicopter was in the air almost before they had buckled in, and a few minutes into the ride, rock music blasted out of the cockpit. The bass shook the floor and walls as Jim screamed off-key lyrics.

When the ride turned smooth, Boyd sat by him with the medical kit and tended to his wounded thigh. He worked without comment until Sin nudged him.

“Told you we’d do well together.”

“Occasionally you’re right,” Boyd admitted with a smile.

Satisfied, Sin allowed Boyd to patch him up and paid no heed to Thierry’s watchful gaze.

The trip back to Lexington required a transfer to a private jet in Texas and then a three-hour ride to Pennsylvania. At that point, Thierry was not the only one who tensed. All three of their fates were uncertain, and Sin could not help wondering whether Connors would find a way to fault their performance again.

A transport agent named Brian Diehl picked them up from the Lexington airport and directed them to load up in a hurry. He was more polite than most, and continuously shot curious looks at Sin, but wisely did not ask any questions.

In the early morning hours, the city was dark and quiet with very little movement or sound except for the occasional police patrol monitoring neighborhoods with curfew restrictions. Thierry’s hands wrung every time a patrol car came close, but local law

enforcement knew better than to stop a vehicle bearing the Johnson's Pharmaceuticals logo.

Exhaling slowly, Sin looked up at the Lexington skyline. Not even a second later, his hand slapped down on Brian's arm. The transport agent's eyes jerked to him with surprise while Boyd leaned closer to follow his gaze.

In the distance, the lights of the Tower flickered.

"Power surge?" Brian ventured.

As they watched, the Tower's lights went out entirely. The high-rise disappeared from the cityscape and left a dark column in the skyline. Sin's heart stuttered. He had never seen the Tower shut down in all of his years at the Agency. It was like the moon abruptly blinking out of the sky.

"Not likely."

A measure of alarm crept into Brian's face, and he pulled the car to a full stop.

"Then what?"

"I don't know, but we're not going in through the front gate or through receiving." Sin met the agent's wide-eyed stare. "Let Boyd drive. We're taking another route."

TWENTY

THE GATE TO Silver Lake Park was as ominous as the Tower going dark. The metal was rusted and a heavy chain affixed a sign reading “Caution: Radiation Hazard”. It swayed in an unfelt breeze and clattered along the bars. Boyd half-expected to find ghosts roaming inside.

“What are we doing here?” Brian frowned. “This place is off-limits. Don’t you see the signs?”

“Contaminated by radiation?” Thierry’s bare toes balled up on the cold concrete.

Sin strode down the sidewalk and did not stop until they reached a gap in the barred fence that was a little wider than the rest. “What’s off limits to civilians isn’t automatically off limits to us.” He squeezed through the bars with no trouble given his lanky frame and jerked his chin at Brian. “You can stay here if you want. I don’t need you. But you—” Sin reached through the bars and yanked Thierry through. “Are staying close to me.”

Thierry’s feet sank into the damp earth on the other side of the fence; he moaned in protest.

Taking pity on him, Boyd followed and placed a comforting hand on Thierry’s arm. “It’s okay, Thierry. You’re as safe as you can be with us, and Sin wouldn’t bring us here if there was real danger.”

Thierry did not look so certain.

“I have no idea what we’re walking into, but we’ll keep you with us,” Boyd reassured. “And if I can believe you about Janus, the Agency might as well. Okay?”

Thierry shrunk in on himself, but he took a breath and nodded. “Okay,” he said quietly.

“How touching.” Sin shoved his arm through the fence and grabbed the front of Brian’s shirt. “Get your ass in here or get back in the van.”

“Alright, alright!” Brian squeezed his more muscular body through the gap, grunting when his boot caught. He stumbled and huffed out an embarrassed laugh. “That’s why I failed my fieldie test.”

“No one cares.” Sin stalked deeper into the park and clearly expected them to follow. “This part of the park is said to be locked down

because of radiation but, in reality, the Agency forced city officials to make the park off-limits.”

“Is there a path through here that leads to a back entrance of the compound?” Boyd asked.

“There’s a system of tunnels under the compound. Their existence is the only reason why even half of the Agency’s pre-war staff survived the bombing of Lexington, but since they’re only 500 feet underground a lot of the original survivors still died from radiation poisoning. Connors had bomb shelters built in place of them, and the tunnels were forgotten.”

“It’s not on the blueprints.” Boyd suspected this was how Sin snuck off the compound undetected. “How do you know about them?”

“They’re in the original plans for the Johnson’s facility before the Agency acquisitioned the property. I’m not sure why they aren’t sealed off, but I assume it’s to maintain an escape route in case there is another attack in the future.”

“Where does it come out in the compound?” Brian asked.

“There’s a couple of entrances on the compound, but the one I use is inside of an unused lab.”

They approached an overpass that went over the lake, and Sin led them to a partially enclosed area. There was nothing of note inside, but he knelt and indicated a hatch in the ground.

“Just so you know,” Sin said. “There are no lights down there, and it’s entirely possible it may be compromised.”

Brian’s mouth dropped open. “So we could just go down there and be killed?”

“Pretty much.” Sin shrugged. “Like I said, you have the option of staying behind as long as you don’t loiter in the middle of the fucking street.”

Thierry pointed to his feet. “I don’t have any shoes...”

“It’s not a sewer if that’s what you’re worried about. There are rats, though.”

Thierry took a stumbling step back.

Boyd mentally calculated the distance between the Agency and the park. “I’m guessing it will be about a half-hour walk. We can get you some clothing once we’re on the compound, but that won’t help the current situation. Sorry, Thierry.”

“Just try to keep up,” Sin said flatly.

It wasn't clear if he was directing the order at Thierry or Brian, but Boyd suspected he was talking to them both.

Sin removed the hatch and revealed a ladder leading to the tunnel. He went down first, and Boyd's stomach dropped with each dragging second once Sin was completely submerged in the void below. Thierry hopped from foot-to-foot and stood closer to Brian.

Boyd had one hand braced against the side of the hatch and was fully ready to follow when Sin's voice floated up.

"All clear."

"*Dieu merci*," Thierry uttered.

Brian patted Thierry awkwardly on the shoulder and raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "Your partner is fearless."

"You have no idea."

They descended into the hole and, once shut inside, Boyd realized it truly was pitch black. The tunnel itself was dank and smelled strongly of mildew. Rodents scattered across the concrete, but no one spoke during the trek through the darkness.

More than once during the journey, Sin stopped walking and stared into the distance. Boyd had no idea what Sin could possibly be hearing or seeing, but he knew to trust his partner's instincts. There was only a single occasion wherein Boyd thought he sensed something happening above them; a slight shaking beneath the hundreds of feet of concrete, like thunder without sound.

Anxiety took hold with a strangling grip.

Something was wrong on the compound. It should have been impossible because the compound was supposed to be untouchable, but when they climbed up the ladder and gathered in the basement of the unused lab, it was an undeniable fact.

A burning smell permeated the air, and smoke drifted like low-hanging fog. The stench of extinguished fire was stronger outside, but the courtyard was a ghost town. There were no patrolling guards, no agents rushing to start their day in the early morning hours, and the unmistakable sound of muffled gunfire echoed from a distant location.

Boyd's stomach knotted. He wondered if Ryan and the team were okay.

Thierry deflated and his thoughts were stricken across his tired

face: he had managed to escape one war zone just to be caught in another one. "What now?" he asked.

"We find General Carhart," Sin said.

Brian surveyed the courtyard with a shell-shocked, slow shake of his head. "How the... what could have happened? I don't understand."

Boyd shared the sentiment. A potential security breach was mind-blowing on its own, but the situation was made more confusing by the lack of manpower neutralizing the threat. Where was Connors, directing the troops? His mother? Who even knew about the compound in the first place, let alone how to attack it?

He supposed anyone good enough to get inside was also good enough to compromise the Agency's response. Judging by the darkness, the generators had been shut down, although Boyd had no idea how an outsider would know where to locate them.

Could it have been Janus? But they didn't know about this location, did they?

A darting figure flashed across a rooftop lit only by the moon, but slid back into obscurity before Boyd could discern whether it was friend or foe. Without light, there was no way to be certain from a distance. There were no corpses in the immediate vicinity, but the smell of gunpowder indicated a recent firefight in the area.

The others were silent, taking in the same eerie scene with different reactions. Sin was the only one of them who wasn't visibly unsettled; he was merely intent.

"Where will the general be?" Boyd asked.

"I don't know. This has never happened before. There are emergency plans in place in case of natural disaster or another attack on the city, but the idea of someone directly raiding the compound was never put on the table. It's not supposed to be possible." Sin appraised their surroundings. "If Carhart is alive he's either fighting or giving orders, but I'm betting surviving officers are somewhere secure in case the intruders plan to decapitate the Agency."

Brian drew his gun. "Maybe we could check one of the bunkers? They're well-fortified and only have two exits. If anyone attempted to infiltrate it would be extremely difficult unless they an army, but from the looks of things—"

"It seems like a relatively small but well-organized group using guerilla tactics," Sin finished the sentence. "They're more likely to strike

quickly and silently which is most likely why they're using darkness for cover. A direct attack on a bunker would be stupid."

Boyd nodded in agreement. "Also, the fallout bunkers are wired underground so the power should be uncompromised. From what I recall from training, the bunker near the courtyard was the most recently built. It's centrally located and has additional surveillance. That location may be the most logical choice for command to gather."

"Sounds good."

Sin tossed one of his guns to Boyd. Together, they flanked Brian and Thierry, and moved in the direction of the bunker.

The state of the compound was uncanny. There were indications of drag marks and blood on the ground, soft scrabbling sounds echoing across the deserted courtyard, and Boyd had the unshakeable feeling they were being watched. No one attacked and no other agents approached, but more than once Sin dropped into a crouch with his gun drawn. Boyd followed suit, heart pounding louder each time, but whatever Sin heard eventually faded away.

The first shots rang out when they got to the entrance of the bunker. Brian was hit in the shoulder, and Thierry shouted in fear, pulling him to safety in the recess of the bunker's entrance.

Boyd and Sin ducked beneath the railing with their backs to the wall. They both returned fire, bullets flying into the dark, and ringing silence blanketed the area again. Boyd had no idea if they had taken out their assailant, or if their enemy was only lying in wait for a better shot.

The pressing shadows and spectral light of the moon hindered in every way; hiding their attackers while exposing their positions.

A low beep emanated from the door, and Boyd jerked to the side. The locks released with a clunk, and the door hissed open. They barely waited for a large enough gap before hurrying inside while Sin provided cover.

Boyd once again found himself descending below ground. This time, it was even farther.

General Carhart met them at the bottom with disheveled blond hair and a stubble coated jaw. Boyd had never seen the man look so casual. His sweatpants, t-shirt, and athletic sneakers implied he'd either rushed out of bed or was caught during a workout when the raid began.

“What the hell is going on?” Sin demanded.

Carhart eyeballed Thierry but led them further inside rather than ask about the mission. “We have a problem.”

“No shit.”

They entered a room that rivaled the cafeteria in size. A triage center was set up in the far corner, and Boyd knew additional rooms led to spaces large enough to contain a few hundred people.

“Is this your idea of a secure compound?”

Sin’s question drew the attention of the others in the room, but there weren’t many. There were only a couple dozen agents and two officers besides Carhart. Boyd recognized them as Lt. General Stephens and Lt. General Willis. They were both tall and well-built, but Willis had the physique of a bodybuilder.

Willis’ lip curled. “Doesn’t anyone teach it to be respectful?”

“Didn’t anyone teach you how to keep militants off your base?” Sin countered.

“Sin, shut up.” Carhart nodded at one of the medics and jerked a thumb at Thierry. “Take care of him, but I don’t want him out of my sight.”

The medic nodded and stood, but Thierry limped over to him without pause. He looked grateful for someone to finally inspect his battered feet. With the Frenchman in good hands, Boyd looked at Carhart again.

“A lot has happened in the last hour, Sin. We’re not entirely sure what’s going on. We only recently managed to regroup here and piece together the chain of events and the locations that have been hit so far. I have scouts gathering information so we can figure out how many active shooters we have in the area so we can deploy the emergency action plan. With everything shut down and people scattered, it hasn’t been possible up until now.”

“This is all you have?” Sin demanded as he waved at the paltry group of field agents inside. “This compound houses two hundred fieldies alone.”

“I know that,” Carhart said with a hint of impatience. “But the residences were struck first, and there are shooters at both exits of this bunker so people may be doing recon before engaging.”

Sin’s face was etched with displeasure, and he simply shook his head.

“As I was saying before the interruption,” Stephens said pointedly, “I realize that in a perfect world consolidating the non-combatants into a more defensible position would be preferable until we can send out rescue teams, but in this setting that would be opening ourselves up for disaster. It’s better to keep them in contained areas where we know they won’t put themselves or others at risk.”

Carhart switched gears and turned to the other man. “I agree. At this point, we need to focus on de-escalation and getting a better idea of the number of hostiles present, the locations of the shooters, and disarming IEDs before we can even consider making a rescue mission a priority.” Carhart spread his hands. “And in the event that we did, we would send teams to the field agent residences first. They are priority.”

“And non-combative staff is collateral?” Willis demanded hotly.

“If we had to choose between who would be more effective in this type of attack, *yes*.” Carhart did not appear to have a remaining shred of patience. Seeing him so disheveled and on edge was an oddity and did nothing to calm Boyd’s growing unease. “I think we need to end this argument before we waste any more time on it. It’s already been vetoed by two of us, and if the Marshal or Inspector were here, they’d both agree.”

“So you presume to speak for the Marshal?” Willis’ nostrils flared.

“As the third-in-command, and the *first*-in-command with them AWOL, yes, I do.”

“Don’t forget, Zachary,” Willis spat. “Some of us remember where you came from.”

Carhart’s eyes narrowed and Willis loomed over him with their faces scant inches apart. Beside Boyd, Sin straightened. It was the barest of motions, but everyone fixated on him and the way he stepped closer to Carhart.

“I don’t mean to interrupt, generals,” Boyd butted in cautiously. He had garnered the gist of their debate, but it still did not shed any light on how exactly *anyone* had managed to infiltrate the compound. “But we just returned from a mission and have no idea what’s going on. I don’t know about Marshal Connors, but I would be surprised if the Inspector wasn’t in the Tower right now. Have we lost communication with them?”

“Are we briefing every random agent on the situation now?” None

of the staunchness had retreated from Willis' tone, but he backed away from Carhart.

"Considering Vega is the only rank 10 field agent we have on the compound at the moment, and that their unit is one of the most classified, I don't think writing them off as random agents is wise." Carhart took a calming breath. "We know for a fact that both Connors and your mother are on the compound. Both their cars have been in the parking lot since last night or very early this morning, but contacting them is another story..."

Stephens nodded curtly and picked up the explanation. "The compound was attacked around 0330 hours. The electricity failed, and the back-up generators were tampered with or destroyed because power never returned. Phones, comms, and radios are useless. The group is using some kind of frequency jammer to keep us silent."

"Great," Sin said flatly.

"Precisely." Carhart's expression was strained. "There were a series of explosions powerful enough to damage a number of areas, but not flashy enough to garner attention from the outside. That is actually helpful, considering the ensuing mess if civilians were to alert the authorities. The LPD knows we're out of their jurisdiction, but we don't need civilians getting too involved. They can be misled about the sound of gunshots and the cause of it, but not by something as obvious as a large explosion."

Stephens nodded. "With everyone scattered around the compound in the darkness, and with an unknown amount of assailants and casualties, all we could do was gather as many agents as we could. It is imperative that we formulate a plan before these terrorists pick us off one by one."

"No one's been up to the Tower?" Sin asked.

"It's been barricaded," Stephens replied. "We have no way to contact those on the inside, so we are not sure if it was barricaded by our people or the hostiles. We were hoping the amount of guards positioned there would be substantial, but anything is possible."

"What about Senior Agent Trovosky's team?" Boyd asked. "Are they not on the compound?"

"Archer was on a recon and sniping tour," Carhart said. "Harriet and Kassian live off compound, and neither Blair nor Michael has checked in, but Willis also has Andrew Torres attempting recon on

the residences. There's no doubt many other field agents are already engaging in combat, but there is no way to know their status."

"So where are you at as of now?" Sin demanded, exhibiting his usual impatience with extended briefings. "What's the plan to get this under control?"

Several agents gathered around them in a loose knot. Boyd recognized a few of them from training or simply walking the compound, but none by name. They gravitated to the generals as if they too wanted answers but had not been assertive enough to demand them on their own.

"Our first move was to gather intel," Carhart said. "We can move forward once one of our scouts returns with more insight. But one thing is certain: we need to get inside the Tower."

Sin rolled his eyes up to the ceiling. "Are you people completely incompetent? How can you not have deduced a scenario by now? We figured out a couple of possibilities thirty seconds after returning to the compound."

Willis planted his hands against the table and leaned forward. "I think this situation would be a lot easier if we put him back in his cage where he belongs. All he's doing is exacerbating an already difficult situation, and I will not have him disrespecting his superiors while you," he gave Carhart a disdainful look, "do nothing to control him."

Boyd sucked in a breath and took a step closer to Sin. The impatience and weariness bleeding out of his partner did not bode well if Willis continued baiting him.

"Exacerbating a difficult situation?" Sin asked incredulously. "Excuse the fuck out of me for wanting to know why you're sitting here with your thumb up your ass while whining about how little you know. Even Brian over there figured it's a small but well-organized group. They would have a much larger force if they wanted to wipe us out or at least used stronger explosives. If they managed to plant demolitions around this compound, they could have just as easily blasted us to hell with a thermo bomb, not to mention the fact that their so-called snipers could have killed us all when we approached this bunker. It seems more like they're using isolation and distraction tactics rather than focusing on full-on slaughter, probably because they have a different goal. And," Sin added acidly. "They most likely

got in the same way we did—with the goddamn tunnels that are sitting unblocked and unmonitored under the entire compound.”

Willis fell silent, but the storm clouds did not fade from his expression.

“Those tunnels have been a security breach ever since Connors decided to keep them unguarded,” Carhart muttered. “I assumed they were sealed after the creation of these bunkers, but obviously that is not the case.”

“I was under that impression as well,” Stephens said with a disapproving head shake. “If Agent Vega is correct, the tunnels were likely used in this attack.” His piercing gaze returned to Sin and Boyd. “Did you note any enemy activity within them or at the entrance outside?”

“No enemy activity, sir,” Boyd said. “We didn’t encounter anyone until we made it to the bunker’s entrance.”

“Did you see anyone else? Were you alerted by someone to come to this specific bunker?”

“No, sir. We just figured it would be the best location. We were looking for General Carhart.”

“That’s unfortunate. We need more manpower available or accessibility to communication.” Stephens rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and the creases in his face deepened. “Regardless of the number of hostiles present on the compound now, we can’t afford to have their numbers expand. We should post guards at the entrances to the tunnels and assign one agent to be a runner to alert us if additional enemies are approaching.”

Carhart mimicked Willis’ pose and pointed to a shimmering, interactive map of the compound. He marked four icons with a finger and each one emitted a soft glow.

“Four internal entrances lead to the two tunnels, and one of them leads into the basement of the Tower. We’ll be able to penetrate it if we send a team in through the connecting tunnel.”

The knot of field agents drew in tighter, and Carhart surveyed their faces.

“Captain Darrell, I want three groups of three agents posted at the other entrances. Four is ideal but we don’t have enough manpower. The lowest ranked agent will serve as the runner. We need to organize a team of the most experienced agents to penetrate the Tower. Sin will serve as team leader.”

Three pairs of eyes snapped to Carhart incredulously, and even Sin's mouth pulled down in a slight, dismayed frown.

"You can't be serious."

"With all due respect General Carhart—" Darrell began, but Willis cut him off.

"You're out of your mind, and that is out of the question. We already have very little manpower and you want to send in an entire team with that psychopath? How do we know we can trust him? How do we know he won't turn on *them*?"

"It shouldn't come to that as long as you're not there," Sin said.

Willis reddened. "Are you threatening a commanding officer?"

"Enough of this nonsense," Carhart snapped. "Willis—"

"No, it's bad enough that you and Stephens want to leave our allies unprotected and exposed, but now you want a raving lunatic to lead the few agents we have? The man is a freak, a monster, he enjoys killing—"

Sin went ramrod straight.

"—and he is just as much of a threat as these cowardly intruders who bombed residential buildings at four in the damned morning. He should have never been released! He belongs in that box! He's nothing but an animal. Don't any of you remember what he did to poor Lydia Connors?"

Sin's hand snapped around Willis' throat. Without effort, he lifted the general off the ground; a man who outweighed him by fifty to sixty pounds. Everyone went stock-still. Next to the medic, Thierry's preyed upon expression returned.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut about things you know nothing about," Sin hissed.

"Sin." Boyd placed a hand on Sin's arm. "It isn't worth it. You'll just get in trouble, and right now we need your help elsewhere."

Tension roiled in Sin's muscles. Boyd thought he wasn't going to listen, but then Sin released Willis and stalked over to the door.

"Just keep him away from me."

Boyd let out a low breath. The last thing they needed was the small force to split up, but Willis seemed determined to ostracize Sin at all costs. Boyd quaked with the urge to express his aggravation aloud, but he knew it would only make it worse.

Stephens was the first to respond. "This is *not* the time for pissing

matches. Agent Vega, control yourself. And Willis, I trust Carhart will take appropriate measures with his men. We don't have time to waste squabbling. The longer we wait to execute our orders, the more casualties there will be."

"I've given my opinion on every matter you put on the table, and I've been subsequently ignored and disrespected each time." Willis rubbed his throat gingerly. "From this point on, I remove myself from the discussion."

"Willis, your concerns have been addressed," Carhart replied with little compassion. "But I am still your superior, and you have second-guessed and insulted me long before Agent Vega arrived." He ran a hand through his hair again. It spiked out wildly and, between that and his boyish mien, Carhart looked even less like the superior of a sixty-year-old man. "Your expertise in handling terrorists is needed here, Willis. I'm hoping you will utilize your knowledge and skills to help us in this situation and forget your personal feelings regarding Agent Vega. It has been proven time and time again that Sin is capable of completing assignments alone that other men need an entire team to tackle. Furthermore, he is the only agent present with knowledge of the tunnels. If you can think of someone more fit to infiltrate the Tower, please enlighten me."

Willis thrust his thumb in Sin's direction. "Connors has kept that man locked on the Fourth like a dog for the better part of the past decade, and you now expect us to trust him when the overall security of the compound is compromised? It's absurd."

There was a chorus of whispers and murmurs of agreement from the people surrounding them. Darrell nodded vehemently, but others appeared less certain. A slight blond woman glanced at Sin and then back at Willis, and her face pinched. It seemed like she wanted to disagree with the general but was intimidated into silence.

Boyd knew his own reasoning would be dismissed faster than Carhart's, but he opened his mouth to make an attempt just as Brian jumped into the debate.

"With all due respect, sir, I have to disagree," Brian said. "Like you, I've been taught to distrust Senior Agent Vega because he... can be unstable sometimes, but if it weren't for his wherewithal and insight about the structure of the compound, we wouldn't have been able to

access this command point and likely would have died upon entering the receiving area or front gate.”

Sin looked at the transport agent in surprise, and Boyd gave Brian a thankful nod. Brian only shrugged his good shoulder as a medic worked on the other.

Stephens redirected the conversation before another debate could rear up. “I recommend Agent Archer accompany Agent Vega on the Tower team.”

Willis grit his teeth, but an insistent beeping erupted from the computers before he could protest. Thierry scrambled away from the sound, but the medic explained quietly, “That’s just the proximity alarm.”

The security display showed several agents huddled at the entrance. Two of them were shooting into the darkness, and Boyd recognized Archer’s profile. After ducking into the bunker, a group of seven agents appeared moments later with Archer in the lead. A Latino man with a lean build stood beside him.

“Report?” Carhart and Stephen demanded simultaneously.

“The Tower’s inaccessible, general.” Archer reloaded one of his guns and put it back in its holster. “Fifteen agents had congregated at the front in an attempt to find a commanding officer. Eight were dead, and I brought the rest with me. Visibility is low. Night vision glasses don’t help, as they don’t distinguish between enemies and allies. I had to cease my sniping detail. I took out two of their snipers, but there may be more. They were targeting the Tower.”

Willis shook his head grimly and turned to the agent next to Archer. “What did you find, Torres? Were you successful in infiltrating the impact zones or getting an estimate of casualties?”

Judging by his interaction with General Willis, Boyd assumed this was the Agent Andrew Torres that Ryan had dated. Boyd studied the man anew and vowed to ask if he knew Ryan’s status. Every second that passed with them discussing logistics in the bunker seemed a second closer to the death of the only friend Boyd had managed to gain at the Agency.

“Unfortunately, sir, all three impact zones are currently too hot for me to enter solo,” Andrew said. “I’m still unsure as to how stable the actual structures are due to the explosives used, but there are a high

number of bodies in all three areas which leads me to believe there may be even more casualties inside.”

Boyd’s heart plummeted and his worry tripled for the missing members of their unit.

The blood drain from Carhart’s face.

Willis spoke with slow deliberation. “If three out of five primary residential buildings have been hit to that extent, it’s no wonder we haven’t been able to get much manpower down here.”

“The hostiles targeted the agent dormitories, sir.”

“Goddamnit,” Willis hissed. “Did you get a visual on Lt. General McAvoy or Hughes?”

“No, sir.”

“Did you notice any enemy activity?” Carhart demanded.

If Andrew was intimidated by the influx of sharp questions, he gave nothing away. “I didn’t fight any of the hostiles head-on with the exception of the snipers gathered around Residential Complex A, but I did stumble upon bodies that were dressed in black armor and wore masks.”

“Was there anything distinguishing about them?”

“Negative, sir. They were of varying ages and ethnicities. Perhaps we can have a few teams split up and investigate the residential complexes to gain more insight.”

Carhart’s pale eyes moved over the gathered agents. Sin, Archer, and Boyd were the highest ranked in the bunker, and the strain of that knowledge was apparent in the general’s puckered brow.

“We need to get moving on this. As Stephens said, Archer and Vega will lead the Tower team. That team will split in two parts—the first part will secure the tunnel’s entrance within the Infirmary, and the second part will head up into the Tower.”

Stephens scanned the agents milling around. “That leaves the other two entrances.”

Sin finally spoke up. “The entrance to the second tunnel is in the empty lab building on Havit Street, but that was deserted when we entered. The other entrance is in the basement of Residential Complex A which is why the enemy is guarding it.”

Before they could designate additional team leaders, Andrew blurted, “I’d like to volunteer for Residential Complex C, sirs.

Someone should take stock of the damages and casualties, and look for the wounded.”

Boyd moved to stand beside Andrew. “I would as well.”

Carhart scrutinized Andrew and Boyd; he knew Ryan lived in C and likely knew that was why they were so quick to volunteer for that specific location. “If the others are fine with that, then I am too.”

To Boyd’s relief, nobody objected. He tried to remember where Jeffrey and Owen lived, but he had no idea. He wasn’t nearly as close to them so he could only hope they were fine, but it was Ryan who brought a constant thrum of worry.

The next several minutes were spent designating teams. Captain Darrell led the Complex A team, Monroe—the lowest ranked agent—led a team to the lab on Havit, and Agent Lee led the Infirmary team. Agents Green, Banks and Williams were assigned to the Tower team, and Boyd and Andrew were paired with Thomas and Lowe.

Carhart selected two agents to clean the area around the bunker, and another two members of the tech support staff to make their way to the backup generators in an effort to restore power. Everyone was given instructions to pick up additional manpower along the way, and either bring them along or direct them to the bunker for further instruction.

Willis ordered the teams to leave in staggered groups. Captain Darrell’s team was the first to depart followed by the Havit Street and Infirmary teams.

Boyd approached Sin while his team gathered ammunition and prepared to depart. He tilted his head slightly, and Sin followed him down the hallway so they were out of earshot of others.

They stood silently and observed each other; the weariness on Sin’s face mirrored Boyd’s feelings. Blood stained Sin’s clothing and, although he most likely appeared as impervious as ever to the others, Boyd could tell his partner was beginning to fray under the strain. After a long night of running and fighting, the last thing they had expected was to be launched into another storm. Boyd didn’t know where cameras might be so he tilted his body to shelter a brush of his fingertips against Sin’s wrist. So many thoughts clamored for his attention, but he ordered them by priority.

“I know you’ll have a lot on your mind, but if the enemy’s targeting the Tower I can only imagine they’re going for the administration.

My mother wouldn't stand a chance against an attack and... And I don't want her to die." Boyd hesitated. "If you see her, can you help her?"

Sin adjusted the strap to the shotgun holster across his chest. "I will if she'll let me. You know how she is."

"I know. But if she's really in trouble, I think she will."

Sin's lips parted to respond before his attention skipped to the door. His team was assembled, armed, and heading for the exit. He and Archer made eye contact before the group disappeared up the stairs. When the last of them were through the door, Sin turned to Boyd.

"Don't get killed or I'll be very annoyed with you."

Boyd smiled. "Same to you. So be careful."

They exchanged another lingering look. All the words Boyd wanted to say, all the doubt he felt, remained unspoken. He knew Sin was stronger than anyone else, and he used that thought to quell the tightening of his chest as Sin set off after his team.

TWENTY-ONE

WORKING WITH RANDOM agents instead of Boyd felt wrong.

A year ago, Carhart would have never suggested Sin work with a team. Now, they were throwing him into situations with agents he barely knew and definitely did not trust to have his back. Either the generals were desperate enough to agree or they were noticing something about Sin that was better left tucked away from prying eyes: a burgeoning ability to work with others.

What a horrible concept.

Sin ran up the stairs as his mind raced ahead to what awaited them outside. The amount of unanswered questions was aggravating.

Who would know about the tunnels other than a current, or former, agent? Was it an inside job? Did the Agency have a mole? It seemed likely, but Sin wasn't about to bring that up with General Willis having a temper tantrum in the bunker.

The unknown bothered Sin more than the possibility of being ambushed outside the bunker. If it was a rogue agent, or an insurgent group with information fed to them by a mole, the situation could be catastrophic. The best case scenario was the hostiles leaving the compound after accomplishing their mysterious goal, and not diminishing the entire compound to rubble.

When they reached the top, Archer moved to unlock the door, but Sin stopped him.

"Wait."

Archer regarded him silently.

Sin tilted his head to the side. "How about we make a deal?"

"What kind of deal?"

Green and Williams exchanged glances.

"I'm not very good at this whole team player, team leader business so... how about I just let you take over that role and, in return, you don't give me shit if I wander off on my own once we're inside the Tower."

Archer considered the offer before nodding curtly. "Fine with me."

Sin released Archer's arm.

They moved out and jogged to the Infirmary. The sound of sporadic

gunfire rang out at alternating distances, but they encountered no hostiles on their way.

"I wish the sun would rise already," Banks muttered as she watched the shadows.

"We still have another hour for that," Williams replied. "And even then, the light won't be strong enough to break through the smog until after seven. We'll have to make do with night vision for now."

Before Banks could reply, Archer shot him a glower which served as a silent order to cut the conversation. The two agents fell silent.

Archer gestured for everyone to spread out once they approached the roadway that led to the Infirmary. Sin hid behind a low wall across the street from the building. He located the position of the other team and spied Agent Lee, the team leader, at the northeast corner of the roadway. Sin started to signal Archer, but realized Lee was kneeling next to a prone figure.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Sin made his way to where Archer was hidden behind a tree.

"They already have a man down," he whispered. "They're lying low so it's probably another sniper."

Archer peered around the tree trunk. "Make your way to Agent Lee. You might draw out the location of the shooter."

Sin shrugged and got to his feet; he didn't mind being bait. He stepped out into the open, and the ensuing crack of a gunshot ruptured the eerie silence. Sin dodged, barely missing a direct shot to the head. He zigzagged across the road and strafed away from another bullet whizzing over his shoulder.

He could hear Banks and Green hissing at him to take cover, but he ignored them and took a meandering route to Lee until he could identify the trajectory of the bullets. The moment he realized the shooter was on the roof of a small residential building across the roadway, Sin rolled out of the way of another bullet and scrambled behind a lamppost to make eye contact with Archer.

Archer was already on it; he fired his rifle once, and their assailant tumbled over the side of the building.

At least they'd given Sin one good agent on this lame-ass team.

He jogged over to Lee and recognized the injured party as a lower-ranked agent who'd recently been promoted from being a guard. He had lost a lot of blood, but he was alive. Lee looked at Sin warily

and inched closer to the downed agent. The others approached in a spread-out formation.

"There were two of them. We managed to take out the other, but Agent Shield was wounded before we located the position of the second."

Sin shrugged, uncaring. "I didn't say anything."

Archer stopped at Lee's side. "Where are the rest of your men? Didn't you have three others on your team?"

"I have two," Lee said. "They'd made it into the Infirmary before Shield was taken out. I didn't have a good vantage point to find the shooter, so I ordered them to move ahead while I waited for back-up."

Judging from the amount of blood and the location of Shield's wound, the bullet had likely struck a vital organ. Sin did not think he would last more than an hour without immediate assistance. Even so, Archer jerked his head toward the Infirmary.

"Carry him alone; we can't afford to lose another gun."

Lee struggled to half-carry, half-drag Shield along with them. Banks and Williams spread to the sides while Green covered their backs. Archer and Sin led the way.

They secured the lobby and trooped to the entrance of the tunnel while Sin scouted ahead for potential hostiles. He came to a halt near one of the staff offices, and held up a hand to stop the agents behind him. The room was in shambles and two bodies were sprawled on the floor.

Sin nudged one of the bodies over with the toe of his boot. The two men were medics, but had firearms close by their sides. They had not been murdered in cold blood, but it did not bode well for the rest of Lee's team.

Upon seeing the bodies, Banks made the sign of the cross.

Other than the two medics in the staff room, they did not find any other bodies. Either they had escaped, or the hostiles rounded up all non-combatants. Whether they'd slaughtered them in another location or simply locked them away was unknown.

After reaching the rear of the building, Archer stopped by a small examination room. It was within steps of the back exit and the staircase leading to the basement with access to the tunnel.

"Stop. We'll take care of Shield here."

Banks, Green, and Williams fanned out across the hallway, and Sin

kept an eye on the rear exit while Archer helped Lee bring Shield into one of the rooms. When they returned to the hallway, Shield was absent.

“We’ll come back for him,” Lee said.

Sin didn’t comment.

Their trek ended just inside the entrance to the basement stairway, and they found the corpses of the remaining members of Lee’s team. Archer shook his head and motioned for Lee and Green to follow the original plan to remain in the Infirmary and prevent anyone else from accessing the tunnel; they would tend to the dead later.

Without pausing for confirmation, Sin went down first. With the electricity off, the narrow stairway was completely black, but he could make out the barest outline of a man standing near the closed basement door.

Sin crept down, slipping his knife out of his belt, and drew it across the hostile’s throat. He cradled the body and moved it to the side, propping it against the wall. Sin removed a light stick from his pack and signaled the others to come down before leaning closer to the basement door. He heard faint voices on the other side.

Within seconds Archer, Williams, and Banks crowded the stairwell. Sin pointed to the door and indicated there were at least three people on the other side.

Archer cracked the door open, tossed a stun grenade inside, and shut it again. A crack filled the air, and Sin opened the door, dove inside, and took advantage of the stunned hostiles.

Between the short, controlled blasts from Archer’s MP5 and Sin’s accurate shooting, all of the hostiles were down in under twenty seconds with little to no resistance. Williams and Banks moved into the cleared area, and Archer signaled for them to investigate the hallway to the left as he and Sin made their way down the right side.

The basement was used primarily for medical supplies and storage, but it had a large electrical room in back where the hatch leading to the tunnel was located. There, they encountered yet another group of hostiles. The ensuing firefight lasted only seconds, but Williams was shot in the leg. It was a flesh wound, and he maintained that he could still complete the mission.

They secured the area and, after exchanging curt instructions, Sin descended the ladder to lead them to the Tower.

THE DAMAGE TO Residential Complex C did not look promising. There were massive chunks missing in the lower levels which left rubble and broken cement in its wake. The metal structure of the building was still relatively intact, and the upper floors hadn't caved in but with fourteen floors rising above the severely damaged foundation it would only be a matter of time before the structure destabilized.

Boyd didn't recognize the bodies strewn among the debris, but many of them were crushed beyond recognition. Andrew, Lowe, and Thomas grimly walked around the bodies but none of them paused.

In spite of the damage, it was exactly as the generals had noted; the enemy had rigged the lower floors for demolition, and it appeared as though the intention had been to distract rather than annihilate everyone in the building. Despite the death toll—that would undoubtedly mount—Boyd noted that it could have been far worse.

The team split up; one group started at the ground level while the second group started at the top. Boyd and Andrew paired off to sprint up the stairs and make their way to Ryan's apartment, which was on one of the upper floors. Along the way, Andrew shot Boyd continued glances through his goggles.

"What?"

"Nothing. Ryan just told me a little about you."

"Oh?" Boyd scrutinized the carpeted corridor before moving forward. "What did he say?"

"Primarily went on and on about how great you are, and how people give you a hard time because they're assholes. He mentioned your partner too."

"Did he say the same about Sin?"

"He kept trying to tell me that Vega isn't as bad as everyone says and that he isn't as frightening as he looks."

Boyd peered around a corner, didn't see any hostiles, and resumed walking. They both kept their voices pitched low so the sound wouldn't carry.

"I won't argue with that assessment," Boyd said.

"A lot do. He's intimidating even when he isn't doing anything. Maybe it's different once you know him." Andrew reached up to adjust his goggles. "Hey, if you don't mind me asking, is it true what they say about—"

Boyd heard the faintest of sounds and held up a hand to silence Andrew. Further down the corridor, one of the apartment doors was open and shuffling sounds floated from within. They slunk closer.

Andrew flattened himself against the wall next to the door, paused, and then moved in with Boyd close behind. Boyd hurried into the kitchen and ducked behind the island counter.

Boyd peeked around the side and saw a man in the living room facing away from them. He was tall, leanly muscled, and had a thick rope of dark hair hanging down the length of his back. He wore black cargo pants, cowboy boots, and a sleeveless shirt that displayed tattooed arms. Boyd frowned, wishing he could make out the detail better through his goggles.

The hostile muttered to himself and backed away from the drawer he had been ransacking, a rifle in one hand, and the strap of a backpack in the other.

“Drop it!” Andrew shouted.

The man started to turn, rifle swinging around, and Boyd shot him in the head. The body crashed to the floor, and the backpack spilled open with a clatter.

Andrew’s head whipped around. “Dude, what the fuck was that?”

Boyd checked his gun for clearance and held it at his side. “He would have killed us.”

“He may have had information.”

“What good is information if we die before we can relay it?”

“It’s worth it to try to take hostages or at least glean information.” Andrew’s voice was sharp, and his previously friendly tone was absent. “If you just kill them without even asking anything, we’ll never get information.”

Boyd walked over to the hostile’s body and did a quick search, briefly ignoring Andrew’s presence at his side. The dead man carried no identification and the backpack was full of stolen items and money. When Boyd continued to feel palpable disapproval rolling off Andrew, he sighed.

“Andrew, how would we have dragged around a hostage? He would slow us down and potentially put us at risk if we come upon a group of his friends while we continue our search. And if we’d tried to tie him up and leave him here, it would have left too many options for him to escape and hurt anyone who lived through the attack on the

building.” Boyd stood and let the backpack drop to the floor. “Our assignment is to secure this building, not interrogate hostiles. Besides, my focus is Ryan, and I know yours is too.”

Andrew’s voice was stiff when he responded. “Fine. You may be right about taking him hostage, but we could have questioned him. I’m not a shoot first kind of agent. It’s not always necessary.”

“That’s fine,” Boyd said. “If we run across another and that’s truly what you want to do, you can stay behind on your own. But I’m not wasting time with people who probably won’t even answer our questions if it means getting to Ryan too late.”

Boyd didn’t wait around to see Andrew’s expression. All he could see in his mind’s eye was Ryan being attacked by a looting hostile.

Andrew didn’t argue further, and the two of them hurried to Ryan’s unit with more speed and less caution. Approaching his door did not abate Boyd’s unease; it only heightened at the absolute silence inside.

Andrew tried the doorknob but, unsurprisingly, it didn’t give. With the power out, there was no way to access the mechanized lock. He slammed his fist against the door.

“Ryan! It’s Andrew and Boyd! You in there?”

No sound emanated from inside.

“Shit! Should I try to kick the door in?” Andrew looked to Boyd for guidance.

“Step back.” Andrew obeyed the command, and Boyd called through the door, “Ryan, move away from the door if you’re there.” When no answer came after several seconds, Boyd shot the trim and door’s edge. The wood splintered and allowed them entrance with a firm kick.

The apartment was a mess. The desk was flipped over, and Ryan’s laptop, files, and action figures were on the floor in disarray. The bookcase had also fallen to the side, and books, manga, and comics were strewn across the rug.

“Ryan?” Andrew peered into the bathroom. “I’m so scared he went outside. All of those bodies around the compound...”

“Don’t think that way.”

In spite of his words, Boyd had similar thoughts. The idea of Ryan being hunted by a group of hostiles out in the dark courtyard was more terrifying than the possibility of him hiding while terrorists looted his apartment. Boyd shoved the idea aside and hurried

through the dark living room. Ryan was too smart to roam around by himself when the compound was under attack. If he wasn't here, he was somewhere in the Tower.

He and Andrew entered Ryan's bedroom, but it was empty. Boyd's heart sank and contingency plans populated in his mind; quickly scouring the floor for Ryan and finding a way to get a message to Sin. There had to be a way to warn him that Ryan may be in the Tower as well. It was the only place that made sense—Ryan was infamous for waking well before sunrise to begin work.

"We need to—"

A soft rasping sound interrupted the words. Simultaneously, they looked across the bedroom, and the sound repeated. A low, unsteady breath.

"Ryan?"

Andrew threw himself across the room, kicking debris out of the way, and grabbed the mattress from where it had slid halfway off the frame. Andrew shoved it upright, and Boyd saw Ryan crumpled on the other side of the bed beneath another collapsed bookshelf.

"Ryan!"

Boyd hurried to the R&D agent's side and shoved the books and debris away as Andrew righted the bookcase. Ryan was covered with dust, and his breathing was labored and punctuated with thin wheezes.

"Fuck, is he okay?" Andrew's voice was ragged with fear. "Is he conscious?"

"No." Boyd checked Ryan for overt injuries, but found no open wounds or blood. "I don't think he has any broken bones, but he must have been trapped for almost two hours."

"Damn it. I knew I should have come straight here!"

Boyd was even more aggravated by the wasted time in the bunker; during that time, Ryan had lain here alone and suffocating.

"Let's just get him out of here."

TWENTY-TWO

"HOW FAR ARE we?"

"Under a quarter of a mile."

"Is that—"

Whatever Banks started to say caught in her throat when Sin stopped running. The agent collided with his back, and the sound of footsteps faded. In the distance, Sin could see the glow of warm bodies near the ladder at the end of the tunnel.

Crouching down, Sin pressed his back to the side of the tunnel. Archer and Banks mimicked him, but Williams hesitated and squinted into the near-opaque darkness. When he finally backed against the wall, his boots thumped against the iron siding, and the sequential sound reverberated.

The rat-tat-tat of gunfire was a deafening echo in the narrow passage. Williams fell back from the impact of a bullet, and Banks threw herself flat against the ground.

"Fuck!"

Sin fought the urge to put Williams's face through the goddamn iron wall. "Get down, you moron."

The gunfire was sporadic, and the haphazard trajectory made it clear their assailants did not have a clear line of sight.

Banks started to scoot towards Williams again, but Archer grabbed her arm. "How far?" he hissed.

"Four hundred yards, give or take," Sin said curtly.

"How could you see..."

Banks' question trailed off, and Sin did not bother to respond. Instead, he nodded at Archer. The sniper understood the silent communication and slid onto his belly to position his rifle as another burst of gunfire sent bullets ricocheting around them. It was only a matter of time before one of them was hit somewhere vital.

"Take them out," Sin growled.

Archer peered through the scope of his rifle and pulled the trigger twice. The distant shapes fell, and the heat of their spattering blood sent an explosion of color across Sin's HUD.

When the tunnel fell silent and Sin was on his feet, he speared Williams with a vicious stare. “Did it penetrate your vest?”

“No,” Williams groaned. “But it still hurt like a motherfucker.”

“Then get up and stop wasting time,” Sin growled. “I have an objective, and if I fail it because you’re taking too long splashing around in the puddles, you’ll find the next bullet penetrating your skull.”

Uncaring about their thoughts on the matter, Sin marched ahead without looking back.

They met no resistance after finally reaching their destination, but Sin was disquieted by the absence of life within the Tower. The Agency’s non-combative staff kept the building running day and night, and the high-rise should have been full of them. Instead, the silence was unrelenting even on the ground floor that typically served as a hub of activity.

The team fanned out to begin their search, and Sin nodded at Archer before he ran up the stairs. The rest of the team would begin a floor-by-floor search, but his objective was on the administrative level.

The lights flickered briefly when Sin sprinted past the tenth floor, and he was able to remove his goggles by the time he reached the top of the Tower. The dim, bluish light from the backup generators flooded the staircase; at least the tech support guys had been successful in their mission.

Sin stood to the side of the door to the administrative level and examined the enemy’s handiwork. They’d sliced clean through the hinges of the doors with a torch and had simply set it slightly to the side in order to infiltrate.

Squeezing through the gap caused by the displaced door, Sin hunkered down and peered around the vestibule. It was quiet, but it wasn’t unnatural and muted. There was no sense that corpses lay somewhere in the immediate area; the sense he got from a body that no longer had a presence.

He started for Vivienne’s wing without giving Connors’ a fleeting thought, but the sound of low voices drifting from the Marshal’s office drew Sin’s attention. He paused, wary, and redirected his path when the voices rose.

“—know nothing. You’re not smart enough to decipher...”

Sin frowned, leaning closer.

“—blackmail me as if you had any *clue* about the state of the world at that time. You were and continue to be nothing more than a filthy lowlife.”

Connors’ voice was a furious whisper, but the response came in the form of a quiet laugh from an unknown man.

The hair on Sin’s arms rose; his heart inexplicably faltering. He uncoiled from his crouch and closed a hand around the grip of his gun. Every instinct in his body was telling him to burst into the room and engage the hostile, but the escalating beat of his heart rooted his feet to the floor. Indecision turned to hesitation, and then something moved in his peripheral vision.

Vivienne was pressed against an ancillary hallway. Like him, she peered at Connors’ door in the gloom of the lobby, but her gaze soon turned to Sin. They locked eyes, and she slowly shook her head.

She didn’t want him to intervene.

Sin glanced at the door again, unsure about the game she was drawing him into. He was a soldier, and the second-in-command did not want him to perform that function; she did not want him to neutralize the threat. Why? What was in it for her if Connors died?

Getting sucked into Agency politics had not been part of the bargain, but the sound of Connors’ voice so thick with disdain even as he faced his killer blotted out Sin’s instincts.

What would happen if Connors survived? How could they be sure Connors was finished meting out punishment for Monterrey? That he wouldn’t find some draconian method of keeping Boyd and him apart?

Sin didn’t look away from Vivienne even when a single shot thundered behind Connors’ door.

He flinched. Vivienne did not.

The door to Connors’ office opened, and a man stepped out. He was slightly shorter than Sin, and his muscular body was encased in a tight, black armored suit. Like the other hostiles, he wore a mask.

Shifting his weight, Sin aimed his gun at the hostile’s head, but rapid footsteps approached from behind. A female voice called out in the accented English of a native Spanish speaker, “Everyone else is out—we have to get moving if we’re finished here.”

A woman jogged into the lobby, but she skidded to a stop at the sight of Sin. She was in all black, wore a black scarf, and raised the

barrel of her shotgun without a second of wavering. Sin threw himself out of the way of a hurtling shotgun shell and rolled behind Samuel's desk again.

"Go!" the woman screamed. The man had stalled, half-turned in Sin's direction, but she grabbed his shoulder and dragged him to the exit. "Go, damn you!"

The barrel of the shotgun wheeled in Sin's direction again, and he ducked out of the way as bullets scattered in his direction. He rolled backwards and grabbed one of Vivienne's ankles, jerking down so she was flat against the floor. If she made a noise, it was drowned out by another boom. Sin threw himself over Vivienne to shield her from the raining wood and metal from the destroyed desk.

Quiet words were exchanged across the room, and it almost seemed as though the hostiles were arguing. Sin tensed, poised to jump to his feet, but Vivienne's slim hand closed around his upper arm.

Sin glanced down at Vivienne. Their proximity—and her lack of reaction to it—was startling.

"Take them alive," she whispered.

"Got it."

He was on his feet in an instant and whirling out of the way of another discharged shell. It lodged into the wall behind him.

Sin raised his pistol and aimed for the woman's head with an immediacy stemming from a lifetime of being trained to kill. He altered his aim and sent a bullet tearing into the woman's thigh in a precise angle that wouldn't hit any arteries. She screamed in rage and stumbled, but didn't drop the shotgun until he flipped forward and kicked it out of her hand.

Shoving his own gun back in the holster, Sin locked his hands around her forearm to initiate an armbar, but she twisted away and brought her knee up into his midsection. He evaded the full impact of the blow, dodged a punch thrown at his jaw, and stooped low before tackling her with his shoulder and driving up to knock her off her feet. Within the space of a breath, she'd regained her footing.

For a couple of minutes, they matched each other blow-for-blow, and a grudging respect for her skill blossomed just below the surface of his annoyance over how time-consuming the fight had become. The order to keep her alive forced him to hold back, but she was too good for games. Ultimately, Sin pinned her to the side of Samuel's

desk, but the hostile refused to submit until he squeezed her throat with his thumb jammed into her windpipe.

When the woman stilled, the click of Vivienne's heels rang out behind them. The inspector stood before them with her implacable veneer firmly intact. She ripped the black scarf away.

The woman was not much older than Sin. She had sandy skin and long black hair that came loose from the band that had held it in place. A look of furious defiance fixed on Vivienne.

"I will not talk," she panted. "Kill me now."

Sin released her from the hold, but pinned her to the desk with his hand around her throat so they were face-to-face. "That's pretty loyal considering one of your guys just left you to die."

The hostile's attention snapped back to Sin, but instead of retorting or spewing indoctrinated rebel crap, disbelief became apparent in her expression.

Sin's brows drew down, and Vivienne observed the woman keenly; she had clearly not missed the strange reaction.

"Incapacitate and carry her."

Sin inclined his head even as the hostile's intense glare riveted to his own. He pressed his thumb and the web of his hand in deeper, and the lack of oxygen knocked her out within seconds. She went limp, and Sin slung her over his shoulder.

"Carhart is using the central bunker as a staging area," he said.

"Good. What is the status of the compound?"

With the hostile a weight on his shoulder, Sin went through the events of the past couple of hours. He left out the part where Boyd had asked him to save her.

Vivienne acknowledged the information with a swift nod. "If the hostile lied or miscalculated and there are still enemy combatants in the building, what sort of resistance should we expect between here and the bunker?"

It was the first time Vivienne spoke to him with any semblance of respect, but Sin filed that information away and considered the question.

"Archer and some less competent agents have been cleaning the Tower. I shouldn't have a problem unless the enemy swarms me, but with the lights returning and the sun rising, it seems more likely that the enemy will flee."

“Good.”

Sin waited impatiently for further orders. He’d accomplished his task, but his ultimate priority was returning to Boyd. There had been very few qualified agents assigned to the teams, and he hadn’t had the opportunity to check in with his partner for over an hour. Anything could have happened during that time.

“Can we—”

Vivienne was staring at Connors’ door, but her eyes slowly returned to Sin. She said nothing, but the silence spoke volumes.

Sin adjusted the woman draped over his shoulder and sidestepped the inspector. “It’s unfortunate that the Marshal was killed before I arrived.”

“Indeed.”

He glimpsed her expression over his shoulder, took in the minor uptick of her mouth, and set out for the bunker.

As expected, they encountered no resistance; the hostiles had all but vanished. Whatever their goal had been—whether it was Connors’s assassination or information retrieval—there was little doubt they had accomplished it.

And deep down, Sin knew this had nothing to do with Janus. Janus was loud, flashy, and quick to announce their intention, motive, and ideals. This group was different. Small, ruthless, and very well informed about the layout of the compound.

The implications were disturbing.

They met up with Archer at the now-blocked Tower entrance, and the sniper informed them that the enemies had sealed the non-combatative staff away in large areas. The dead comprised of agents who had put up resistance or who had been armed. Williams and Bank were still alive, but both were injured and in serious condition.

With sunlight flooding the shattered compound, the collection of non-wounded employees emerged from their hiding places. They joined Sin, Vivienne, and Archer on the way to the bunker, and blanched at the scattered bodies, toppled buildings, and pools of blood. Vivienne, however, never broke her stride.

Sin forced himself to keep pace with the inspector, but all he wanted was to run ahead and get back to Boyd. Sin’s thoughts were racing now that the situation was less dire, and worst case scenarios filled his mind until the anxiety ramped up to intolerable levels.

His arrival at the bunker was met with looks of awe and grudging respect, but Sin tossed the captive at Darrell and rushed to Boyd's side. His breath did not release until he brushed his fingers against Boyd's hand.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, but I'm glad to see you. You found her." Boyd released a low sigh of relief. "No hidden injuries?"

Sin smiled tiredly. "No."

He was aware of multiple sets of eyes on them, but Sin was beyond caring. He was exhausted, and an intense need to drag Boyd somewhere private and curl up together swelled inside of him. But it wasn't possible. Not with Vivienne having a hushed conversation with Carhart and the lieutenant generals in the interior room, and a sick Ryan lying nearby with Torres crouched at his side. The sight chipped at Sin's impatience, and he frowned.

"Is he...?"

Boyd rubbed his hands together. "His respiratory system is not good. He needs to be moved to the Infirmary as soon as possible, but they have him stabilized for the moment."

The information bothered Sin more than he had expected. "The enemy cleared out except for the woman I brought in. I don't know what they wanted unless it was to assassinate Connors."

"Connors is dead?" Boyd's voice came out hushed.

"Very. And you know what that means don't you?"

"I—" Even with dozens of Agency staff nearby, Boyd did not stop himself from squeezing Sin's hand. "He can't... hurt us anymore. My mother is in charge now."

"Exactly."

They were surrounded by walking wounded, critically injured, and dazed non-combatant staff while the administration worked to put the pieces of the Agency's hierarchy into perspective only a few feet away, but Sin didn't turn to them.

He didn't care.

The Agency only mattered as much as it affected their ability to be together. As long as he had Boyd, Sin was ready for whatever came next.

THE END

YET ANOTHER NOTE

WE HOPE YOU enjoyed the Director's Cut of Evenfall: Volume II. We cannot stress enough that ICoS will be a work in progress until we feel it cannot be improved any further. Since writing is a craft that is ever-improving, it is unlikely there will ever come a time when either of us say it's perfect. However, there *will* come a time when it will be professionally edited to catch all the things we undoubtedly missed.

That being said, it is important for new readers to keep in mind that although *In the Company of Shadows* is a completed series, the next three books do not conform to the same content revisions as the Evenfall Director's Cuts. This does not mean you shouldn't forge ahead and keep reading, but we want you to be prepared for the differences in density, editing, and minor details that may not quite match up. The story will make sense, but you may notice some slight differences here and there.

Please keep that in mind if you choose to go forward with reading. Should you choose to wait for an Afterimage Director's Cut, we expect to start work on that in the next year or two after dedicating our schedules to other projects.

APPENDIX

DUE TO THE amount of Spanish in this volume of Evenfall, Ais compiled the translations below.

You will find it ordered chronologically and grouped by chapter, with a dash separating conversations or scenes. We couldn't have done this without the incredible help of Ale and Gaby, who helped us identify the correct slang and word usage for the right regions, and gave us other extremely helpful details about Monterrey and Mexico. *Muchísimas gracias, amigas.* We really appreciate it!

Incidentally, if you don't know Spanish, you probably shouldn't learn it from the below translations. Most of this is not appropriate for polite company.

This appendix also includes the translation of anything said in French. For the French, we want to send a huge thank you to Kira, who helped us out back in 2007 when we first wrote those scenes.

CHAPTER ONE

Sin: *Cállate la boca, güerito* — shut up, white boy

Boyd: *putain de beau gosse* — fucking beautiful man

Sin: *Dame éstos* — give me these

Sin: *Bésame el cul* — kiss my ass

CHAPTER THREE

Unknown man: *pinche joto* — fucking fairy (as in, gay person)

Jorge: *¿Qué pedo, cabrón?* — this is a slang/slightly derogatory way of asking "What's up?" or "What are you doing?"

Boyd: *Perdón, pero no hablo español.* — Sorry, but I don't speak Spanish.

Jorge: *Vete a la chingada.* — fuck off

Jorge: *Put a madre, escucha, pendejo.* — fuck's sake, listen, asshole

Jorge: *¿Sabes dónde queda Pío X?* — Do you know where Pío X is?

Jorge: *El parque, no la calle.* — the park, not the street

Jorge: Hmm. *Nada*. — Hmm. Nothing.

Jorge: *Sur*. You see up hills? They are empty. — *Sur* means South

Jorge: *Pon atención*. — pay attention

Jorge: I find you, *compa*. I know. — *compa* is short for *compadre*; think of it like ‘dude’

Unknown man: *Oye morrito, te equivocaste de ruta?* — Hey lad, you lost?

Unknown Man 1 (to Boyd): Hey *güero*, *traes lumbre?* — hey white boy*, you got a light? (for a cigarette)

****Note:** *güero* is a way of referencing a person’s coloring as being light, be it hair color or skin tone. Any person who is white, regardless of their hair color or nationality, could be called *güero*. The usage of it varies, as does how derogatorily it is used. Some people might use this term between friends, but the tone of it could also easily lend itself to an insult. Between strangers, it’s a somewhat rude or cavalier way for someone to refer to Boyd as ‘white boy.’

Unknown Man 2 (to 1): *Mira, guey. Se ve del nabo. ¿Cuánto dinero crees que trae? Sería fácil de quitárselo. Apuesto a que ni siquiera sabe español.* — Check it out, man. He looks fucked up. How much money you think he has on him? It’d be easy to take it. I bet he doesn’t even know Spanish.

Boyd: *¿Dónde está un taxi?* — where is a taxi?

Unknown Man 1: *Sigue adelante. Verás una gran calle, mucho tráfico. No hay como no la veas. Los taxis pasan todo el tiempo allí.* — Keep going. You’ll see a big street, tons of traffic. You can’t miss it. Taxis go by there all the time.

Johnny: *Tú debes ser Big J. Español o inglés?* — You must be Big J. Spanish or English?

Sin: *No me gustan los chismes.* — I don’t like gossip.

Johnny: *¿Ni tantito?*—Not even a little?

Sin: No.

Johnny: Pfft. *Vas a ver.* — We’ll see.

Sin: *Vámanos*. — Let's go.

Note: in the below scene, Boyd is not very good at Spanish yet so the literal translation of what he says is very awkward and the Spanish he uses is grammatically incorrect, hence why Sin is amused and confused:

Sin: *¿Cómo?* — How/what?

Boyd: Uhh... *Cuando caminé, fue un...* hill? — When I walked, there was a... hill?

Sin: Cerro. — Hill

Boyd: *Cerro. Y cuando miré, el...* *¿Cómo se dice* 'dirt' o 'ground'? — Hill. And when I saw, the... how do you say dirt or ground?

Sin: Dirt *es tierra* y ground *es suelo*. — dirt is 'tierra' and ground is 'suelo'

Boyd: Thanks. I mean—*gracias*. Uhh... so, *la tierra...* *¿cayó? Debajo de mí. Y pues...* *Yo choco con una casa*. — Thanks. I mean—thanks. Uhh... so, the ground... it fell? Under me. And so... I crashed into a house.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jorge: *Ni madres* — no way

Jorge: La Rana — this is a nickname the kid who was in a gang; literally means The Toad

Jorge: *El muertito*. The one died. He was bad. *Halcón*. — The dead person. The one died. He was bad. *Halcón*.

***A note on halcón: although literally that translates to 'falcon' or 'hawk', in this case it is slang which refers to a young person who the cartels or drug dealers have watch their territory and report back. These kids are often armed or can be very dangerous, both to other street kids as well as to anyone who is in the wrong territory. If they report to their superiors that there was an issue with a specific person, that person could be targeted by the cartel or dealer. Halcones are usually preteens and teenagers, but do not tend to be as young as Jorge or the other kids his age. When Jorge is old enough, he could be forced into joining a specific group for protection and become a*

halcón, himself; but for the moment his age and intelligence allows him to remain a street kid who is unattached to any group and is very careful to remain that way.

Jorge: Mean. Hurt us. *Nos violaba. Se madreaba a la raza. Pendejo.* — Mean. Hurt us. He raped us. He used to beat the shit out of people. Fucker.

Boyd: ¿*Violaba?* — Raped?

Jorge: ¿*No entiendes? Nos cogía a fuerzas y sin pagar.* — You don't get it/understand? He fucked us by force and without pay.

***Note:* Jorge references 'without pay' because some street kids sell their body for money, so he is saying that La Rana not only raped kids who weren't prostituting themselves, but he also didn't even give them money afterward as compensation. It's a testament to the life Jorge leads that he thought it was necessary for Boyd to know that money didn't end up being involved in the end.

Jorge: *No vale verga.* — He wasn't worth shit/he was a piece of shit
Jorge: ¿*Sabe?* — Who knows?

Jorge: *No nos metemos con Santiago.* — We don't fuck with Santiago

Jorge: You know nothing, *pendejo!* — You know nothing, asshole!

Jorge: *Ese puto se metió con Lo Más Chingón.* La Rana sold drugs and got caught *con las manos en la masa*. Only *el puto maldito idiota* sell that shit, especially in *Territorio Ching*— — That fucker messed with Lo Más Chingón. (Translation of LMC: the baddest motherfucker). La Rana sold drugs and got caught doing something he shouldn't have and he was messed up because of it. Only a motherfucking idiot (would) sell that shit (drugs), especially in Chingón's Territory—

Jorge: ¿*Cierra el pinche hocico! ¡Chingada madre!* — Shut the fuck up! Motherfucker!

Jessica: Jase, *ven aca. Hay una tiendita en la terraza.* — Jase, get over here. Someone's setting up shop to sell drugs on the terrace.

Sin: *Ahorita voy* — I'll be right there.

—
Estrella: ¡*Chale... tengo hambre!* — Man... I'm hungry!

Johnny: *Vamos a mi casa* — let's go to my place

Johnny: I'm waiting, *cabrón*. — *cabrón* can mean bastard, asshole, etc, but it isn't quite as derogatory as those words mean in English. It's closer to how we would throw out 'dude' but it isn't a word that should be used in polite company.

Estrella: ¡*Cállate, cabrón!* — Shut up, asshole!

Johnny: ¡*Quiere chupársela!* — She wants to suck it!

Jessica: *tiendita* — literal translation is 'little store;' it refers to when someone is selling drugs from a location (in this case, a dealer is trying to set up a regular score of selling on Noctis' patio).

CHAPTER SIX

Sin: *Suena bien pero practica más.* — Sounds good, but practice [your Spanish] more.

Boyd: *Estoy tratando* — I am trying.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sin's POV: ... how he was going to end up on the shitlist of some *sicario*. — hitman

CHAPTER EIGHT

Chingón: *Hola, chico.* — Hello, boy.

Chingón: ¿*Qué chingados haces aquí, pinche maricón?* — What the fuck are you doing here, fucking fag?

Boyd: *No hablo español.* — I don't speak Spanish

Chingón: You've been casing this place for days, *pendejito*. — asshole

Chingón: *No me chingues.* — Don't fuck with me.

Chingón: ¿*Qué quieres?* — what do you want?

Chingón: You have some *huevos*, *chico*. — you have some balls, boy.

Chingón: ¿*Dónde está su novio?* — where's your boyfriend?

Chingón: Enough. *Vete.* — Get out/go away.

CHAPTER NINE

Estrella: ¡*Deja de decir pendejadas!* — You're always talking bullshit!

Johnny: *Es la verdad.* — It's the truth.

Johnny: I won't blow *mi maestro.* — my teacher.

Aldair: *¿Nombre?*

Estrella: *Gracias.* — Thanks.

Estrella: *Ay dios* — Oh God

Estrella: *Las putas.* — whores

Estrella: *¿Qué? ¿Me estás jodiendo?* — What? Are you kidding me?

CHAPTER TEN

Boyd: *Eso fue rápido.* Thanks, Jorge. — That was fast.

Boyd: We've already been over this; one more stop and then you're done. *¿Te acuerdas?* — Remember?

Boyd POV: He wouldn't want anyone taking out the *gringo* willing to triple his wages for each minor job. — *gringo* is a slightly derogatory way of calling someone American.

Boyd: *"Entiendo.* Thanks for the help but I just need one other thing. *Vámanos.* — Got it. [...] Let's go.

POV: ...a faded sign that simply read *Farmacia.* — Pharmacy.

Jorge: *Quédate ahí, guey.* — Stay here.

***Note: guey doesn't have a direct translation to English; it's a term used when talking to someone who the speaker knows fairly well or cares about in some way. It isn't used with someone the speaker doesn't know or see very often, unless they are being rude. In this case, Jorge subconsciously shows Boyd he's become more used to him/cares about him in some fashion by using guey instead of his usual pen-dejo or güero.*

Tayla: *Mi información, su información.* — my information, your information. She's doing a play on the phrase *mi casa (es) su casa*, which would literally be my house (is) your house, or otherwise means 'make yourself at home.'

Unknown Man to Boyd: Hey, *gringuito! Unos chingazos a ver si se te*

quita lo marica! — hey, little white boy! Maybe if I beat the shit out of you, you'll stop being a faggot!

****Note:** this is in response to Boyd being seen with Jorge when Boyd is both a white guy in a non-tourist area, and so androgynous that they assume he is gay. They think Boyd might be using or about to hurt Jorge and are threatening him.

Jorge to Unknown Man: *Vete a la mierda, él está bien.* — Fuck off, he is fine. (As in: Lay off him, he's with me and he isn't doing anything wrong.)

Jorge: You stand out. Stupid red hair—*el más güero que conozco.* — the whitest guy I know.

Jorge: *Tienes suerte* — You're lucky.

Boyd: I was surprised they met me. *Gracias por tu ayuda.* — Thanks for your help.

Jorge: *No hice nada.* They study before they plan to meet so they know you are *neto, no chota, ni cartel, ni malandro, o tiendero...* —

Note: there's a lot of slang in Jorge's dialogue, in which one word in Spanish has a much more complicated meaning in English. The English translation is much more awkward than it sounds in Spanish:

I didn't do anything. They study before they plan to meet so they know you're honest/not fucking with them; that you aren't police, or with the cartel, or someone who dedicates their lives to doing shit that messes with everyone else for no reason, or a drug dealer...

Boyd: How is it that they aren't afraid of Chingón? *¿Entonces no todos le temen?* — I thought everyone was scared of him.

Jorge: *No sé.* — I don't know.

Boyd: Do they deal in different items on the market, too? *¿Drogas, lana, armas...?* — Drugs, money, weapons...?

Jorge: *A lo mejor, pero no es normal.* They can get anything, *pero normalmente trafican.* — Could be, but it isn't normal. They can get anything, but normally they traffick.

Jorge: *No, pendejo, ¡escúchame! Trafican. Que dan paso.* They help people get what they want from where it come. Anything.

Sometimes, they bring you too. I hear they help *gente maltratada y enbroncada*. It doesn't happen always but if you have big enough problem, sometimes they help. *A veces* you have enough *lana*, you pay to go. But they no always do this. And they no help many, and not around always. *Así que*, you are lucky. —

No, fucker, listen to me! They traffick. They provide passage. [...] I hear they help people in really bad situations. [...] Usually you have enough money, you pay to go. [...] So, you are lucky.

Boyd: Jorge, *cálmate*. *Está bien*. *No es un arma*. I would never hurt you. — Jorge, calm down. It's ok. It isn't a weapon. I would never hurt you.

Boyd: *Has sido muy valioso*. More helpful than I can say. I wouldn't betray you, Jorge, come on. *Puedes confiar en mí*. — You've been invaluable [...] You can trust me.

Jorge: *¿Qué es eso?* — What is that?

Boyd: I got you something. *Un regalo*. — A gift.

Jorge: *¿Pa' mí?* — for me? (This is an especially slangy/kid way of saying it.)

Boyd: *Sí, pa' ti*. — Yes, for you. (Boyd uses the same format to show he isn't talking down to Jorge; that he's reaching out to him)

Jorge: *¿Qué quieres a cambio?* — What do you want (from me) in exchange?

Boyd: Nothing. *Tómalo ya, chamaco*. I've told you before all I want is information. *No soy uno de aquellos, deja de tratarme así*. Come on. Take it, already. — Nothing. Take it already, kid. [...] I'm not one of those people (the sort of people who would use or hurt others for fun), stop treating me like I am.

****Note:** *chamaco* is a non-rude way of saying kid but is more slang than *chico* or *niño*. Boyd learned it from overhearing other people, and he uses it here as another way of being on Jorge's level, by using slang in a gruffly affectionate manner like Jorge does.

—

pov: *Cruz de San Benito* — translates literally to Saint Benito's Cross
pov: *Escapulario* — translates literally to 'scapular.'

Boyd: *¿Qué, a poco ya tienes uno?* — What, you already have one?

Jorge: *¿Por qué?* — Why?

Boyd: Because I like you, Jorge. *¿No es razón suficiente para ti?* — That isn't a good enough reason for you?

Jorge: *¿Qué tipo de gringo cree en este?* You mock me! Think I am stupid kid, believe in *milagros*! — What kind of foreigner believes in this? [...] stupid kid, believe in miracles!

Boyd: *No me estoy burlando de ti*, Jorge, I promise. It doesn't matter what I believe. What you believe is all that matters. *Ya estuvo, chamaco. No estoy jugando contigo.* — I'm not mocking you, Jorge, I promise. [...] Knock it off, kid. I'm not messing with you.

****Note:** If you are interested in these, look up both *escapularios* and *Cruz de San Benito* for more information. They are popular good luck charms in Mexico that are tied into Christianity, but even people who are not religious can find meaning in them. Children are often given them by a certain age, but Jorge, being a street kid, never received one before. Boyd thought that might be the case which is why he got it for Jorge; he didn't think Jorge had anyone looking out for him who could afford to get one or would bother to try. In that regard, he probably saw a little bit of himself from childhood in Jorge. In giving it to Jorge, it's as if Boyd is telling Jorge that his existence is as meaningful as any of the other kids who have a family and a home. It's why Jorge is so touched by Boyd's gift, which quickly turns to insecurity and then defensiveness by assuming that Boyd is somehow making fun of him, thinking he's a stupid little kid who believes in miracles and doesn't understand his lot in life.

Boyd: I wanted to ask a few more questions. *Sobre Chingón.* — About Chingón.

Jorge: *Lo sabía, pendejo.* You always have question. *Apúrate.* — I knew it, asshole. [...] Hurry up.

Boyd: What does he deal? *¿Armas?* — Weapons?

Jorge: No. *Él no depende de nadie.* — He's independent.

Jorge: I want my money. This pay for nothing. *No puedo comprar nada con esto.* — I can't buy anything with this.

Jorge: You should not ask those questions. He is too strong, *demasiado poderoso*, even if the Snakes help you. And there are others who are not him. *Esos no te dan chances.* It is dangerous—*mu*

riesgoso. And, I will not find another *gringo* stupid enough to pay me so much if you die. Careful, *vato*. — [...] He is too strong, too powerful [...] People who aren't tolerant. It is very dangerous—very risky. [...] Careful, man.

Boyd: I will. You, too. *Ten cuidado*. — Be careful.

CHAPTER TWELVE

María: *Nos nos haga daño, por favor, señor, por favor* — Don't hurt us, please, sir, please

Federal: *Cállate* — Shut up.

María: *No. No nos mate, no nos dispare, por favor, somos inocentes, por favor...* — No. Don't kill us, don't shoot us, please, we're innocent, please...

Federal 1: *No está aquí*. — He isn't here.

Radio: *Sigan buscando. El capitán cree que está en el área*. — Keep looking. The Captain thinks he's in the area.

Federal 1: *¿No tenemos información más certera?* — We don't have better information?

Federal 1: *¿Seguro que está aquí? Tenemos días buscando*. — Are you sure he's here? We've been looking for days.

Radio: *No, pero ya revisamos los otros barrios y nada. Independencia es el mejor escondite pero pura madre que un gringo sobrevive ahí*. — No, but we've checked the other neighborhoods and found nothing. Independencia is the best place to hide, although it'd be fucking hard for a white boy to survive there.

Federal 1: *Ni madres*. — no kidding.

Radio: *Por eso hay que concentrarse en el Barrio Antiguo. Pues, apúrense. Vayan a todas las casas que sea necesario. El capitán quiere que arrestemos e interroguemos al sospechoso antes del fin de semana*. — For now, let's concentrate in Barrio Antiguo. And hurry up. Go to all the houses needed. The captain wants the suspect arrested and interrogated before the end of the week.

Boyd: For María, *dale las gracias*. — Tell her thank you.

Jorge: *¡Ándale, ya vete!* I don't want to stay here *pa' verlos* beat you down *en mi cara, ni tampoco* let them kill me *por ti*. You are no worth it! — Get the hell out of here! I don't want to stay here to see them beat you down in front of me, or let them kill me for you.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Chingón: Aww, *qué lindo*. — Aww, how cute.

Chingón: ¡*Pásame una lamparita!* — Give me a flashlight!

Chingón: Or is this a kinky *maricón* costume party? — faggot/gay

Chingón: You should come be in my gang. *Puedes ser mi zorra*. —
You can be my slut.

Chingón: One more strike and you're out. *¿Comprendes?* — Got it?/
Understand?

Chingón: *Baboso*. — Idiot.

Chingón: ¡*Vámanos muchachos!* — Let's go, boys!

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Thierry: *Putain de merde!* — Holy shit!

Thierry: *Comment peux tu supporter d'être près de quelqu'un comme ça? Il est cinglé!* — How can you stand being around someone like that? (Sin) He's crazy!

Thierry: *Ralentis! On va tous mourir!* — Slow down! We're going to die!

Boyd: Thierry! *Ferme ta gueule!* — Thierry! Shut up!

Thierry: *C'est un monstre*. — He's a monster.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thierry: *Dieu merci*. — Thank God.

Books by Ais & Santino

IN THE COMPANY OF SHADOWS

Book One:

EVENFALL VOLUME 1: DIRECTOR'S CUT

EVENFALL VOLUME 2: DIRECTOR'S CUT

Book Two: AFTERIMAGE

Book Three: INTERLUDES

Book Four: FADE

Post-Fade Anthology: 1/27

Available at www.inthecompanyofshadows.com

Spin-Off: AFTER MIDNIGHT

Available at Amazon | Smashwords | All Romance Ebooks

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ais and Santino met fourteen years ago, and have been writing together in some capacity for at least a decade. They met in anime yaoi fandom, and eventually branched off into developing original characters for RPGs before entering the realm of original fiction. They have been writing and planning *In the Company of Shadows* since 2005, and are dedicated to improving their largest-scale writing project to date.

Ais has future plans to return to writing fantasy and has been developing ideas for an LGBT police procedural at some point in the near future. Santino's future projects are in the contemporary romance and paranormal genres.

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