

1/27

*an icos anthology*  
*santino & ais*



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Other books by Santino and Ais

*In the Company of Shadows*

Book One – *Evenfall*

Book Two – *Afterimage*

Book Three – *Interludes*

Book Four – *Fade*

*Other books in the ICoS Universe*

Post-Fade Anthology – 1/27

*After Midnight*

### *Acknowledgments*

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1/27:01

*Safety Harbor; a suburb near Melbourne, Australia*

A warm breeze blew in through the open window. Sunlight flooded the house, heating the wood floor beneath Vivienne's feet. Small comforts she had come to enjoy though she could not focus on them now.

Despite searching intently for the past twenty minutes, her tablet yielded the same frustrating results. Her network of contacts and spies had only increased over the past two years, and yet there were still unanswered questions.

Vivienne was no closer to knowing what had become of Zachary.

She had briefly, shortsightedly believed the others about his death, but over time, she had begun to doubt the validity of the claim. It was not possible. Not when Emilio had been present. If there was a person in the world who was more tenacious than Emilio Vega, she did not know of them. Emilio would not let Zachary die.

She told herself this, and yet each morning when she found a moment alone to search, empty results undermined her faith.

And now, a new doubt niggled at her calm mornings. For the past month, she had grown increasingly unsettled by the disappearance of her son. It was the continued reports that he had not resurfaced that troubled her this morning.

Since France, a day had not passed without her checking in. Bree kept track of everyone who had fled the compound, but Vivienne kept her searches to herself. Even after two years, she would not allow herself to depend solely on the R&D agent's intel. Admitting to anyone

that she was preoccupied with her son's safety, or that she hoped that Emilio would be as predictable as she believed, could easily turn to ammunition used against her. Only a fool would willingly give over that control.

Nevertheless, staring at the series of unchanging reports, the world felt very large and she felt strangely alone. A month had given her time to analyze what could have gone wrong. Why would Boyd vanish from the radar now, after over two years? Was he dead? Where was Hsin? She knew Boyd was a survivor and that nothing would stop Hsin, but Vivienne disliked not having the necessary information. She felt unbalanced and she loathed that feeling.

How could she fix anything if she did not have all the parameters?

Whenever Boyd and Hsin had gotten themselves into a new ludicrous mess at the Agency due to their lack of foresight, she had been in a position to work behind the scenes. She had been able to keep them alive despite idiotic moves that had made them seem hell bent on otherwise. But for the past two years, they had been a world away and all she could do was monitor them from afar. They had grown, they did not need someone maneuvering for them, yet it was that lack of control over her own life and theirs, which left her on edge.

There were times she wished she had never learned to care. It would have been easier if she had become as impervious as her grandmother Mireille had wanted her to be. In the end, Mireille had been right. No matter what, there would be weakness in Vivienne that she could never scrub clean. No matter how she protected herself she would always be a flawed human being. It was her mother's blood inside her.

A door shut deeper within the flat. In the same movement as Vivienne looked toward the hallway, she closed the search and returned her tablet to a regular news feed.

A woman in her twenties came out of Bree's bedroom. The girl yawned widely as she padded into the main area, her makeup smudged and dark hair mussed. Her shirt barely closed enough to cover her breasts.

Vivienne assumed this was Bree's latest fling—young enough to be Bree's daughter. Vivienne returned her attention to the tablet, but she could not ignore the racket the young woman made in the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” Vivienne demanded.

The woman’s head jerked up, watery blue eyes going round. “Sorry,” she said, voice too loud in the otherwise silent room. “Mack said I could find something to eat before I go. I’ve got a full shift this arvo and it’s already almost eleven.”

Vivienne sighed and turned off the tablet. Given the average age of Bree’s flings, there were days when she felt like she had to be more of a mother now than she had been all the years with Boyd. It was disconcerting.

“This is fine but you are searching the wrong areas. What do you wish to eat?”

“Dunno. Anything, really.” The woman pulled her shirt together although it was obvious that several of the buttons were missing. “Look, sorry about all this. I didn’t notice you there.”

Vivienne pursed her lips, but forced her face into smooth lines of neutrality before entering the kitchen. She forgot sometimes to temper the cut of her voice, and that people often thought she sounded angrier than she really was. She was still working on incorporating more contractions to sound more casual, though she felt awkward and uncouth in the usage of them.

“There’s no need to apologize. I simply did not wish for you to break anything.” Vivienne searched the refrigerator and located leftovers from the meal she had made the night before. She held the container out. “I assume you have no food allergies?”

Shaking her head, the woman grasped the container and peered inside. A smile brightened her face. “Thanks, love. You’re really nice. I was frightened maybe you were Mack’s lady for a moment.”

The casual compliment threw Vivienne off, making her response about her relationship with Bree delayed. “Roommates.”

“Ahh, I get it. I’m Kathleen, by the way.”

“Allison.”

“Nice to meet you. I’ll be out of your hair in a few!” Kathleen crinkled her fingers in a wave and backtracked towards Bree’s bedroom.

“Wait.”

Kathleen paused, and Vivienne grabbed a fork and a hand towel from their respective drawers. She handed them to Kathleen, who glanced



curiously at the towel.

“In the event you spill,” Vivienne explained. She saw the fluctuation of questions and answers pass over Kathleen’s too-open expression, and realized how that sounded—like Kathleen was a two-year-old who could not keep food in a container. “Your clothes. The sauce is easy to spill and I have discovered that it stains clothing. I did not wish you to have to clean them prior to your other plans today.”

“Oh. Thanks!” Kathleen grinned and continued her backwards trek. She pushed the door open with her foot and just before she disappeared inside, she added, “You’re gorgeous by the way.”

Vivienne thought to say ‘thank you’ only just as the door shut.

When she realized she was still staring at the door, Vivienne strode across the room to water the plants. The collection of greenery was the only color in the otherwise black-and-white home, and she had become inordinately fond of them. The simple act of tending to them was the only thing that could continually ground her in this bizarre, unnervingly domesticated world. One, an aloe vera, had been with Bree and her for nearly the length of time since they had escaped the Agency. It was the sole possession she brought when they fled to a new location. It was growing large and cumbersome, but it never gave up no matter the conditions, and she respected that resilience.

Vivienne returned to her tablet but pulled up other feeds and searches. When Kathleen left forty minutes later with a grin, Vivienne absently bade her farewell. Not long after the front door banged shut, Bree wandered out. Wearing loose shorts, a black tank top and a pink hoodie, Bree looked perpetually younger than her actual age, and the impish smile she shot Vivienne emphasized that fact.

“What’s up?”

“No immediate concerns, but I’m seeing reports from my sources that might be worrisome within the week.”

“With the Knights or the Jacobins?” Bree rolled her eyes. “These insurgent groups need to come up with less dramatic names.”

“The Knights of Enlightenment have been showing movement recently, but it is the Jacobins that are of more concern. They remind me of Janus.”

Bree scrunched up her face and walked around the bar, stopping at

the coffeemaker. “Well, that’s *no bueno*. Especially since they seem a little more outwardly extreme when they want to make a point.” Pouring herself a mug of coffee, she continued, “And on the extreme opposite end of that spectrum, I have a hunch about some other group of potential revolutionaries.”

As if there were not enough already. “Who?”

“I’m not quite sure yet. It’s... weird. A little creepy, actually.” Bree looked towards her bedroom as if she could see whatever had piqued her interest about the group. “In the past couple years there’s been an explosion of virtual reality gaming called rifting. Very intense stuff. So intense people have begun getting tech implants to stay permanently connected. Not my cup of tea, but I stumbled upon a few interesting characters when I plugged in and followed their IP addresses back to a hidden forum. I managed to access it just the one time before it basically disappeared completely. But...”

Bree picked up her mug. “But it didn’t just look like an innocent group of VR junkies gabbing about their simulation sex lives. They had virtual attack plans on major government bodies. They’re hackers. Damn good ones. Like Ryan caliber.”

Vivienne stared. “That is far more worrisome than the Jacobins. Other than you and Ryan, I know very few people at that level. It would be difficult to stop or defend against them if they acted on those plans.”

“Exactly. I hope they’re on our side.” Bree paused and tapped her finger against her lips. “Wait, what side are we on again?”

Vivienne gave her a tight-lipped smile. “Our own.”

“You got it, pumpkin.” Bree left the kitchen and set her coffee down before sitting backwards in one of the chairs. “So, what did you think of Kathleen?”

“She is younger than my son, but at least seems friendly.”

“Young and vapid is safer than the alternative. Besides, waking up to your face has ruined me for women in my age range. They all look like shit compared to you.”

Vivienne shook her head and watched the feed scroll. “I never know what to make of your flattery.”

“Completely serious flirting.”

Vivienne scoffed. “You would grow bored of your conquest quite

quickly.”

“Why? Are you saying you’re bad in bed?”

Vivienne remained silent for a moment, then she shot Bree an arched look. “You only wish. If you feel my face is such a sight that cannot be forgotten, you would surely find the rest even more unforgettable.”

Bree’s head tilted to the side and she blinked twice before her mouth curved up. “Well, *fuck*. So much for getting rid of that fantasy!”

The ability to remain on even playing ground with Bree brought some measure of control back into Vivienne’s day. It was a relief. She looked at a new article, flicked pieces of information into different files, and tracked the progress of each report along the way. A mental picture of the status of the world was growing in her mind, but she would not be able to verify any theories until she heard what Bree’s people said.

“You’re such a tease.”

“I do not mean to be.”

“You don’t, but you are.” A brief pause. “It’s been two years, so I think it’s time I got to the bottom of this—was it true what they said about you and Aisha?”

Utter surprise drew Vivienne’s gaze up. “What?”

“You know...” Bree took another sip of coffee, watching Vivienne over the rim. “They said you were into each other. Probably just because you seemed to like her and they wanted to talk nonsense, but I was a little curious.”

Vivienne pursed her lips and she considered Bree. For anyone else, she would have dismissed the question. After a beat, she slid her fingers from the tablet.

“She was competent and kind, and did not seem to fear or resent me. She was the closest to a friend I had at the time. It was... very difficult walking away from the burning car, pretending that she meant nothing to me. But I knew any emotion would be seen as a weakness that could be used against me or anyone else I seemed to favor.” Vivienne drew her eyebrows down. “It’s a wonder those rumors persisted past that point. I had assumed everyone used the event as further proof that they were right in their assertion that I should die.”

“Well, that was just depressing.” The mug thumped to the table and a bittersweet smile drifted across Bree’s face. She looked out the window,

the angle causing a swath of sunlight to sweep across her cheek. “Do you ever miss your old life? Or is it better now?”

“I find this life to be alarming.”

“Alarming?” Bree looked at Vivienne, incredulous. “How could it be alarming after what we walked away from?”

There were so many ways to answer that question, and so many ways Vivienne hesitated to admit.

“The Agency was a chess game I knew how to play. Everyone hated me or wished me dead, so it was simply a matter of identifying vulnerabilities and staying a step ahead. Here,” she frowned, “there are no rules. There are those who do not appear to have ulterior motive to harm or control me and that is disturbing. I constantly feel as though I should be on guard but have nothing to guard against. I distrust their motives but have no evidence as reason. It is unsettling.”

Bree rested her cheek against her fist. “Do you trust me at all, Vivienne?”

“In some regards, yes. In others, no.”

Bree rolled her pale-green eyes and twirled her finger. “Elaboration, maybe?”

Vivienne sighed. She was beginning to regret getting into this conversation. It was troublesome having to talk about these things at length. “I trust that you will not get me killed, but I do not trust that you see me as anything other than a potential dalliance that would quickly be forgotten. And I do not ever let myself be vulnerable to someone who will not be equally vulnerable to me in return.”

Bree bit her lower lip, gaze sweeping away. Her fingers curled around the handle of her mug. The ambient sounds of the day filled the house; the shrill of insects, birds, and the distant laughter of a child, until Bree spoke again. “Why don’t we play a game?”

“A game?”

Bree set her mug down and wagged a finger at Vivienne. “I just want you to trust me, and I’m willing to let down the wall a little if you’re willing to do the same in return.”

Vivienne watched her skeptically. “How would we accomplish this?”

“Look, I’m not stupid. I know you’ve been playing the same Agency games that I still play.” Bree leaned close, eyebrows lowering over

twinkling eyes. The corner of her mouth edged up in a sly grin. “The Agency breeds a constant state of paranoia in the people that work there, and I was there since I was a kid. Seventeen. It’s ingrained in me to keep all my secrets close—especially from former admin.”

“I see.” Knowing that information conversely made Vivienne relax. She felt more comfortable being on an even playing field. “What information do you have to share?”

“Agency stuff. Agency 2.0 stuff.”

Intrigued, Vivienne leaned forward with her forearms braced on the table. “I am willing to try this. As it was your idea, you can go first.”

“Are you going to hold up on your end?”

“I said I would.”

“Hmmm.” Bree sat up straight and extended her arm, jerking open a drawer in the counter. “So, first things first, I’ve been keeping an eye on some former Agency contacts. Folks the R&D department used for intel.” Her chair creaked when she settled back into it, a tablet in hand. “Looks like Agency 2.0 is up and running more than we thought.”

“What did you find?”

“Well, they’re definitely running missions again. I’ve taken up residence in the computers of a couple of their contacts, and there’s been a lot of exchange of info that point towards intel gathering for active missions. It seems like a recent thing too—like they’ve finally put the pieces back together fully and are ready to make a name for themselves again.”

Vivienne’s eyebrows twitched. She pulled her tablet out, entered the passwords to give clearance to the locked folders, and flipped through until she found the file in question. She turned the tablet around and tipped it up for Bree to see the headline on the stored article: **FOUR DEAD IN TRAGIC ACCIDENT.**

“When you say recently, has it been within the past five months?”

“Yeah, thereabouts.” Bree’s gaze scanned the article. “Cover up?”

“Yes. Four Journalist Guild members in Georgia were murdered. Based on the information in the article, I believed modded people might have been involved, but without further evidence or context I could not be certain.”

“A combination of JG and mods definitely sounds like the Agency

now that they're up and running. They've been... dabbling more these days. I guess Sin gave them good reason to feel like the mod route is a good way to create an army of super soldiers."

"Have they been openly discussing further modification research in the exchanges you saw?"

"No, but I've found something else." Bree shook her head and began accessing applications. "I keep hesitating because I get info not just from people whose hardware I've hacked, but also Agency contacts that are personal friends of mine. Hackers I've been tight with for years."

"I understand. I have become very protective of my sources over the years, particularly the ones who aided me in finding the information on the Directors." Vivienne looked down at her curled hands. "If it is any consolation, I would never endanger another person's informant. I take the safety of sources very seriously."

"I know you wouldn't pull anything. Well, I know that now. It's just a knee-jerk reaction to show-and-tell." Bree pulled up a video and set her tablet to display it fully. She held it up for Vivienne to see. "One of my buddies got ahold of this. Tell me who you see."

Vivienne recognized the street in Melbourne; it was fairly busy, near the train station, and populated with shops and hotels. At first she could not tell what she was supposed to see, as a crowd of people filled the screen. The video appeared to be taped by a handheld device judging by the way the view swung around. It zoomed in abruptly and a couple moved out of the way to reveal the reason Bree had this file.

Her shoulders tightened at the sight. She recognized him immediately.

"Cade Carter," she said aloud.

He was even more muscular than he had been years ago, when he had been a rank 9 Counter-Terrorism agent vying for a rank 10 spot. His dark hair was so short it was nearly shaved; between that and his light caramel skin, it barely hid the embedded metal in his head.

As Vivienne watched, she saw what must have drawn the attention of the person taping it: Cade seemed to be having some sort of fit.

His movements varied between stiff and truncated to smooth fluidity. He paused outside a hotel entrance, his face tipping toward the sky. Without warning, his chin jerked to the side, leading his body in a tight

circle while his eyes darted across the people nearby. He returned to the direction he had been before and began walking, and then stopped suddenly. He gripped the wall next to the hotel entrance with clawed fingers. Though his body remained facing forward, his muscles bulged and he turned his head as if it took great effort. His eyes rolled, searching the crowd with obvious desperation this time.

A nearby woman approached Cade. She hesitated, looked around, and reached out timidly. The second her hand touched his arm, Cade's eyes snapped shut and his pose loosened. When his eyes opened again, his expression was calm and the fit seemed to have passed. He appeared to reply in a normal manner. The woman did not seem fully convinced but when he spoke again, she nodded with reluctance. When she walked away, Cade entered the hotel as if nothing had occurred. The video went blank shortly after.

Vivienne's mind raced. This was getting into dangerous territory now; the Agency was in a much better status than she had hoped they would be, and the glint of metal troubled her.

"When was this taken?"

"Yesterday. I got the file this morning."

Vivienne tapped her fingers on the table. "This is worrisome. He was in very bad shape in the Reapers' care when last I knew of him. I was not privy to much of the Reapers' work even when I was Marshal, but when I learned of the Agency's involvement in my husband's murder I gathered what information I could before we left."

She met Bree's eyes. "I do not know specifically what has been done to Agent Carter, but I do know that the Directors had plans to increase their use of agent enhancement and modification in the future. In the last couple of years there was an acting order to the Marshal to watch for potential candidates and provide opportunities for the Reapers to gain access to them. When I did not allow the continued experimentation on Hsin, the Board must have recognized my reticence and did not give me further instructions for enhancements. However, judging from the video, it seems the Agency has not only begun running missions again, but their laboratories are operational as well. They must be fully functional if they are expending resources in that way."

Bree's breath whooshed out. She slumped in her chair and set the

tablet down. “I knew their takedown wouldn’t last, but I thought we would have longer to prepare....”

“I hoped we would as well.”

“If that’s the case, we’re all in danger. We should contact the others.”

Vivienne hesitated, her gaze drilling into Bree as she considered her options. It was easy to share information in a professional capacity but admitting anything on a personal level was much more difficult. Still, now that she knew that the Agency was much further along than she had anticipated, Boyd and Hsin’s disappearance was that much more disconcerting. It would help no one to stay quiet.

“There is one other matter. I have been tracking my son’s progress, but for the past month I have seen no sign of him or Hsin. They had already been taking measures for protection, but at that point they seem to have disappeared completely.” She paused. “Have you seen activity within the Agency that might explain that?”

“No, and I looked because I noticed the same thing. They’re totally off the grid for the moment, appeared to just have up and disappeared from Brazil in the middle of the night. Now, they’re dark to me just like Emilio and Zach.”

“Something must have happened. I looked for any reports in the area to indicate what might have occurred but I saw nothing that seemed to be related.”

“It’s worrying. They were steady in Rio and then... poof. I thought I was missing something, but I guess not,” Bree said. “It’s good to know you’ve been keeping your eye out too. Were you just checking on Boyd or the others as well?”

Vivienne didn’t answer immediately. “Primarily Boyd and Hsin.” She paused again before adding, “I have searched for Zachary and Emilio as well.”

“I’m surprised you fessed up to it. Does that make this progress?”

Vivienne smiled slightly, although it didn’t last long. “I suppose it does.”

“Awesome.” Bree returned Vivienne’s smile with a wider one. Her face brightened, causing her to look more youthful. “Because we are going to need all the resources we can get to get the word out to others.”

Vivienne’s gaze was drawn to the aloe vera plant. They would move



again, soon, but this time she felt strangely anticipatory. After two years, she would see what had become of the others. She would finally get an answer about Zachary and Boyd.

1/27:02

Brighton, New York, USA

*“Oh God, oh God, he’s dead, he’s dead, they killed him—”*

*The voice was loud—high-pitched, bordering on hysterical—and a tremor slid down his spine at the anguished sound of it. The tremor grew, intensified, and overcame his entire body until Emilio could not hold his hands still when he looked down again.*

*Pale skin, golden hair darkening with blood, a death rattle that couldn’t possibly belong to....*

*“Zachary?”*

*His voice cracked on the last syllable. Reality began to set in as he stared at the carnage of his lover’s body, the spreading blood and the slack mouth. Sobs began to rip from his mouth. Screams.*

*“Don’t be real,” he whispered, the words choked with tears. “Don’t be real. Please. Please. Please.”*

Emilio’s eyes snapped open and the blood-spattered scene disappeared. No slack fingers, no chalky skin and gore-stained body—no dead Zach. Just the dank ceiling far above him, patched from decades of leaking, and the guttering candles that were dangerously close to the base.

*“Fuck.”*

He sat up and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Even dredged out of the nightmare, the *memory*, he could see it clearly. Could smell the blood, hear Ryan’s screams, and feel Zach in his arms. Could

feel the terror transforming into a big yawning nothing that had prompted him to turn the compound into a kill zone.

Emilio's body protested when he moved to stand, still aching from fighting, fucking, and working out, but he rolled off the sagging couch in one stretch and looked around. He had fallen asleep in the outer room of the apartment they had claimed over a year ago, and Zach was nowhere to be seen. Emilio's pulse picked up again.

Stupid.

Fucking stupid.

Zach was fine. It couldn't have been more than two hours since Emilio had fallen asleep judging by the dark hue of the sunset. They'd gotten into a stupid argument about Emilio wandering off late in the night, and Zach disappearing for hours at a time. Two controlling assholes trying to make this weird-ass relationship work, but it hadn't been a big deal. Zach had been pissed at him, storming into the other room and leaving Emilio to knock himself out with weed and alcohol, but he was fine. Everything was fucking fine.

They were still together two years past the riot, past the moment of terror when Zach had flatlined twice before being stabilized in an underground emergency facility in the Industrial District, and even now that they were using Brighton Community Prison to stay low.

The floor creaked beneath Emilio's bare feet when he moved to the bedroom they shared. The rotten boards sounded close to giving way. It had rained and the mildew smell grew more pronounced, but he barely noticed beyond the tequila on his breath and the cloud of smoke that had saturated into his skin. He needed a shower, but it could wait until after.

After he made sure.

A smart-ass comment was already crawling up his throat, lips poised to curl into a sardonic smirk, but both vanished when Emilio toed open the door and found the room empty.

No Zach.

The bed looked untouched.

Everything looked untouched.

As if no one had ever been there at all.

An irrational wave of fear swelled up until Emilio dropped his gaze to

the mottled floor. He pressed a palm against his eyes, concentrated, and tried to beat back the panic that often led to him jerking awake during the night, and leaning over to press his ear to Zach's chest to make sure he was still breathing. That all of this—their escape from the compound with Gerant's help, his other son's sudden usefulness and access to the kind of care that Zach had needed in exchange for every dime Emilio had, the months of recovery in a bomb shelter in Carson, and their new lives in Brighton—was real.

Not a figment.

He wasn't crazy.

He hadn't made this up.

Zach was here. He was fine.

“Fuck my entire shitty life.”

Jamming his feet into a pair of battered sneakers, Emilio grabbed a dirty Henley from the floor and yanked it over his white T-shirt. A black hoody came next, then a backwards cap. He finished getting dressed as he left the apartment, stashing his gun at the small of his back as he charged down the dilapidated stairs of what had once been a three-story townhouse. Once, it had been nice. Before the inhabitants fled and the government turned it into Brighton, it had probably been white-bread suburban hell. Now, it was the last stop for convicted murderers, rapists, pedophiles, and “traitors of the State.” The steel sky stretching above him and the chill in the air only made the place seem more desolate and depressing.

Emilio wasn't wearing nearly enough layers for the shrieking wind that had turned their cozy haven into a goddamn mausoleum, but he couldn't give less of a fuck with paranoia turning his brain into mush and his knees into gelatin. The nightmares were getting to him. The memories. The motherfucking separation anxiety. Leave it to Zach to turn him into a panicking bitch without even trying.

It had taken nearly six months for the former general to get back on his feet after Emilio had traded their freedom for a safe haven inside the prison's walls. There were very few people in the Brighton food chain left over from their time there two decades ago, but knowing the names of a few key players in a position of power had made this last-minute escape plan a reality. He had smuggled in drugs and weapons, a trade for

safe passage inside the prison. The interior wall was guarded closely, but no one had ever snuck inside. And that was why it had worked.

No one expected it, and no one would think to come looking for them within the walls of the place that had nearly caused the Agency to classify Zach as inactive, unusable material after his first and only mission inside. It wasn't as if Brighton had changed. If anything, it was worse. And now Zachary was a major player in the Brighton game. A major player who struck out on his own without having the goddamn common courtesy to tell Emilio first.

Emilio's breath puffed out in a cloud. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his hoody and looked around. In the distance, he could see the ten-story wall topped with glass and barbed wire that surrounded Brighton. Beyond that, he knew there were trees that extended for a few miles to the nearest form of civilization. With the exception of the watchtowers manned by robots that shot at anything that moved to touch their side of the wall, it was only him and the scumbags. And Zach.

The area immediately around the building was mostly deserted, and he could only assume it was because everyone had gathered at the pit. The realization allowed him to relax marginally, and he strode to the center of Brighton.

Reaching up to touch the slim metal band that encircled his neck, Emilio tugged the zipper to his hoodie down as he approached the pit. The building loomed before him in the smog-filled, starless night. Pre-war it had been a gym, but the denizens of Brighton had turned it into an amphitheater. What had started as a form of amusement for guys trading cigarettes had escalated into a form of slavery with weapons and drugs being the primary form of currency. The place had a ruthless pecking order made up of the undesirables of society, and Zachary had managed to beat his way to the top. And this time, he wasn't playing at being Emilio's bitch. It was the other way around. Zach was no longer a bright-eyed baby with a come-fuck-me mouth. He had enough battle scars and trauma to give him a worn-out, thousand-yard-stare that made him belong.

The guards at each side of the dented double doors looked at Emilio's collar before even glancing at his face to identify him as a fighter.

“Your handler’s already inside. I suggest you don’t make him wait,” the older of the two said. He was a few years Emilio’s senior and looked hardened by his time in Brighton, body carved from stone and covered in tattoos. “I’d hate to see him fuck up that pretty face.”

“He likes it too much to do too much damage.”

The guard shook his head, eyes following Emilio as he moved to the door. “Cocky fucker, aren’t you?”

“Just talking facts, bro.”

The comment earned Emilio a harder stare. He smirked and threw the man a wink before slipping inside. A year ago, that would have seemed like an invitation, but now people knew better than to fuck with him unless Zach gave them permission or an invitation. Even then, there were rules.

It was dimmer inside with most of the light bulbs having broken or burnt out. The remaining flickering, piss-colored lamps cast long shadows across the seedy halls of the former gym. An oppressive humidity encircled Emilio when he entered, especially when he approached the inner ring of the building. After the war but before the subdivision had been converted into a prison, the floor in that area collapsed. Once the government flooded the place with convicts, an industriously bored lifer decided to construct a giant cage in the lower level amongst the rubble. The inmates had used it as a fighting pit ever since. It was the only real form of entertainment they had beyond fucking, fighting, drugs and forming factions that tried to kill each other over the scant territory within the gates.

“Hey, Naco!”

Emilio gestured vaguely at one of the other fighters. It was a younger guy with thick blond curls. He was clinging to his handler like a bitch. The new dudes seemed to think the handler-fighter relationship was something other than enslavement just because it got them regular sex and a mote of protection from the hard-up, desperate masses.

“You fighting tonight?” Goldilocks asked.

“Fuck if I know. I guess we’ll see.”

“I hope you’re not fighting me!”

Emilio shook his head and shoved through the crowd of men shouting and talking as they waited for a fight to start. Zach would never

sic him on some baby gay who looked so much like Boyd. Even though Zach spent most of his time acting like a heartless creep, deep down he was still a sensitive cunt.

“Where the fuck have you been?”

Emilio turned to face Zach and got a backhand that nearly made him stumble. Fuck. So much for sensitivity.

“Overslept.”

“Get your shit together, bitch. You fight in fifteen minutes.”

Zach’s face was stone and for a moment the wick on Emilio’s temper lit, the flame burning bright and urging him to say fuck all this and break cover so he could shove his foot up Zach’s ass. But then his gaze dropped to the tiny curve at the side of Zach’s mouth and he noticed the twinkle in those baby blues.

Motherfucker.

Emilio took the measure of Zach, his libido already going into hyper-active mode at the sight of that lean hard body stretching out a too-tight T-shirt and military-issue cargo pants that were nearly faded beyond recognition. Everything from the sight of Zach’s muscular thighs encased in the thin material to the careless way he had combed his blond hair away from his face, gave Emilio a hard-on. He licked his lips, and watched Zach list forward, eyes dilating and zeroing in on the motion.

“Sorry, baby. Won’t happen again.”

There were people teeming all around them, the crowd seething and screaming for a fight. Down in the pit there was another type of show going on. Instead of shouting for a takedown, people were shouting suggestions for how much some new kid could take, and from how many. They didn’t get involved with that. Not anymore. And Emilio could see Zach’s attention flickering to the cage, his jaw clenching, and probably remembering when he’d been down there doing the same thing so many years ago.

“Want me to make it up to you now or later?” Emilio asked, reaching up to grab Zach’s chin and force his attention to return. “We got ten minutes, right?”

“Maybe more.”

Emilio let Zach shove him backwards and then jerk him around,

guiding him with aggressive impatience up the rickety metal stairs that led to the offices. The rooms were for larger transactions and storage of currency, but Zach had claimed a tiny, dingier one for them when they were preparing for a fight. There were definitely perks to Emilio being one of the stars of this shitty circus.

The only light inside were the dim glow emanating from the pit and reflecting off the dusky glass of the office's windows. People could see in if they paid attention, but it was private enough for now. As soon as the door closed, Emilio backed Zach up against the wall and licked into his mouth. His taste was enough to put the lid back on the roiling mass of nerves that went wild every time Emilio remembered the riot, and all of Zach's narrow escapes from death that had followed.

"We need to talk," Zach said against his mouth. He was muffled and breathless, his hands already sliding up Emilio's layers. His palms skimmed up to touch the valleys and bumps of Emilio's toned abdomen before settling on his narrow hips.

Emilio sucked Zach's lower lip into his mouth, meeting his gaze and gnawing before letting go. "Where the fuck were you?"

"When?"

"I woke up." Crushing Zach harder against the wall, Emilio pressed their hips together. "I woke up and you were gone."

"Emilio, what—" The beginnings of an incredulous reply faded when Emilio looked up and met Zach's eyes. They stared at each other, the details of their faces shadowy in the darkness, but after a beat of silence, Zach swallowed audibly. "I'm sorry. I don't think about it sometimes. You're so..."

"So what?"

Zach smiled and raised one hand to squeeze the back of Emilio's neck, kneading the muscles there. "Tough? Sometimes I forget it still gets to you. That you still have those dreams."

"Yeah, well. What can I fucking say? It was the worst day of my life, and it was your fucking fault."

"I know."

Their lips brushed together again, softer this time, and Emilio's heartbeat began to steady. Except, he didn't want it to.

"Make it up to me," he demanded roughly.



“How?”

“Fuck me.”

“Emilio, you’re about to fight, and there’s a guy—”

Emilio’s hands had already dropped to the front of Zach’s pants. He ripped open the belt and pulled down the zipper, fingers questing and finding the growing hardness that had been trapped against Zach’s fly. No underwear. Emilio released a guttered sigh and sank to his knees before Zach could protest. Long fingers dug into Emilio’s hair when he freed Zach’s dick and rubbed his face against it. Inhaling deeply, Emilio swept out his tongue and teased the shaft.

“Fuck,” Zach whispered. “Fuck, we don’t have time.”

“Shut the hell up.”

“Emilio, please—”

The words caught and came out strangled when Emilio took the whole length of Zach’s cock into his mouth. He sunk lower until every inch was down his throat, and buried his nose in tawny pubic hair. Emilio could hear Zach’s breath coming faster, the click of his throat when he swallowed, and then the deep moans when he started to fuck Emilio’s face. Both of his hands gripped the back of Emilio’s head and guided him harder, fingers clenching. When Zach’s dick began to pulse, veins protruding as it got harder, Emilio pulled away.

“Shit,” Zach gasped. He shuddered and dropped a hand to squeeze his balls. “Get on the fucking couch.”

Emilio stood up and barely took a step before Zach was dragging him closer again, pawing at his clothes, and invading his mouth. They moved together to the rundown sofa, Zach impatiently undressing him along the way. By the time Zach was sitting down with his legs spread as far as his bunched fatigues would allow, he had Emilio completely naked on top of him. The blunt edge of fingernails dug into Emilio’s back and sides as Zach rubbed his rough hands along the tattooed skin. Each scrape and pinch went straight to Emilio’s cock until his fingers were twitching with the need to touch.

He crouched above Zach, faced away with his knees bent, and shins pressed against the dingy cushion. Emilio spread his thighs so wide his hamstrings burned, but he straddled Zach and rocked against the tip of his dick. The need to be filled and fucked overrode any concern about

pain, and Emilio panted for Zach to just slick himself up as much as he could with dribbling pre-cum and saliva. When Zach complied, Emilio's eyes shut, his mouth dropped open. He didn't even try to bite back the groan when the thick length breached the ring of muscles in his ass. Instead, he began bouncing up and down on Zach's dick so fast that his own cock slapped back against his stomach with the motion.

"Oh God," Zach gasped. He put one hand on Emilio's hip and clenched the other around his ankle. "Oh fuck yes, Emilio."

Emilio's lips curled into a smile as he rotated his hips, milking Zach's thick cock until all Zach could do was press his face against Emilio's back and raggedly gasp for breath. Leaning back further, Emilio braced his arm against the wall and slammed himself down harder, fucking himself on Zach's dick with so much force that he saw stars. When Zach began to snap his hips up harder, Emilio cried out loud enough for the sound to extend far beyond the thin walls of the office. His toes curled, eyes squeezed shut, and he didn't try to taper the string of nonsense coming out of his mouth.

"Oh fuck," Emilio groaned. "Oh fu—right there!"

Zach said something inaudible and pulled out, causing Emilio to swear loudly, explosions of breath nearly muffling the words. He felt raw and unsteady, like he was coming apart and only the full length of that dick buried deep inside would bring him back together. Zach confirmed the theory when he flipped their positions and shoved Emilio down onto his back with his thighs spread wide and ass exposed.

"Fuck me," Emilio breathed. "Now."

His response was a smirk and the sight of Zach's eyes rolling back when he sheathed himself inside of Emilio's hole once again. He had one of Emilio's ankles gripped in one hand while the other crushed against his neck, and began to pound him so hard that all thought fled Emilio's mind. His eyebrows arched and drew together, lips parted and body trembling as Zach tried his best to fuck him straight through the couch. Even then, Emilio clawed at Zach with a shaking hand, as he demanded, "Harder."

"Yeah?" Zach's sweat dripped down onto Emilio's chest. He pulled out again and rubbed the head of his cock against Emilio's entrance, teasing it before he brutally shoved it back inside. "You want my dick

harder?”

“Jesus, yes.”

“Like this?”

“Yes!”

Zach flexed his hips faster, burying himself balls deep and going hard enough to make Emilio think his heart would explode out of his chest. It felt like he was being shocked repeatedly, so intense he couldn't see straight, and the tingling sensation that spread through his body was the kind of aching, near-painful pleasure that made him tear up and whimper pathetically. He couldn't help it, and didn't want to. When it came to getting fucked into a hands-free prostate explosion, he would beg for it all night.

“Yes, fuck, yes, oh shit—” The orgasm came so abruptly that Emilio shouted something incomprehensible. His body locked up and arched as the sound drew out into a high-pitched wail. He shuddered and grabbed his dick, pumping twice until he ejaculated. Hot streams of semen shot all over his torso and face as Zach continued to slide in and out of his hole, still going hard. Emilio kept his eyes shut, his mouth still gaping, and was utterly incapable of doing anything except keeping his knees open wide as Zach wrecked him. It felt almost too good after he'd just blown his load so hard, and he was a shaking mess by the time someone barged into the office.

“Ken, they're fucking waiting for you. Screw that bitch later!”

Emilio's eyes snapped open and he started to snarl at the intruder, but Zach distracted him. That face—it was fucking heaven. A rosy flush covered Zach's face, blue eyes round, and lower lip reddened and swollen from biting down. Zach was so goddamn sexy, especially when he came. He always looked completely overcome by pleasure when he finally peaked.

Emilio's breath hissed when Zach pulled out and jerked his dick, pumping it and shooting all over Emilio's quaking stomach. Emilio stared, transfixed, attention not shifting until he saw Zach mouthing his name, his real name, and something else. Three fucking words that meant nothing but still made Emilio smile like a chump.

“Jesus Christ,” the guy at the door said. “I'll come back.”

“No.” Zach looked over his shoulder, breathing hard and damp with

sweat. He slowly pulled away from Emilio and slapped one of his thighs. "I'm done with him. He can fight."

"You sure 'bout that? I don't see how he could stand up after what just went down."

Emilio pulled himself into a sitting position, unashamedly covered in jizz, and flashed a grin. Now that he wasn't being fucked in half, he saw that it was Creed—a young guy doing time for treason. He had narrowly escaped the pit by having the right friends. Despite the scornful words, Creed was running his eyes all over Emilio as if he wouldn't mind taking a turn.

Trying to look like he had it together even when everything still felt unsteady, Emilio got to his feet. "Takes more than that to make me immobilized, sweetheart."

Zach gave him a sideways look, and Emilio winked.

"Yeah, whatever," Creed said. He backed out of the room and jerked a thumb at Zach. "Your bitch is fighting Vinicio, so get him together if you want to keep fucking that ass." The man's dark eyes dropped to Zach's crotch as he fixed his pants. "Also, I'd wrap your dick up next time if I was you. Someone's peddling rubbers around here somewhere."

"What's the point? No one fucks him but me."

"You sure about that?"

"I throw him a twink every now and again, but his ass is mine."

"Lucky you."

Zach zipped up and shot Creed an impatient stare. "We'll be out in a minute."

Creed looked Emilio up and down once more before turning away, the door slamming shut behind him.

"Why is everyone in Brighton gay?"

Emilio tossed his jeans over his shoulder and moved to the narrow bathroom that was attached to the office. "Because a dude will do anything to get fucked once he's sentenced to rot in an all-male prison with no rules or expectations of morality."

"That was surprisingly eloquent."

"Yeah, the Agency taught me well. I'm gonna get cleaned up and go whoop that white boy's ass."

"Hurry up. We need to talk."

“I love it when you get all bossy on me, Zach. Even more when you get territorial. Gonna piss on me to claim me soon?”

“I haven’t gone that far off the rez yet, Vega.”

“Yeah, right.”

Zach muttered something but Emilio didn’t hear it over the running water. He poked his head out of the door and saw that his lover had turned to look down into the pit. Maybe the gangbang was over. Shaking his head, Emilio finished up and went back into the office. He spotted the duffel bag that held his fighting gear in the corner. Zach had likely brought it up earlier after making arrangements for the match.

“So, what’s your problem? It sounds all serious.”

Zach cleared his throat and turned to watch Emilio rifle through the bag.

“I ran into an old friend of yours. I was hashing out the fight with Bishop and Vinicio’s handler, and one of Bishop’s new friends knew the name Naco.”

Emilio’s head snapped up. “Someone from 4FF?”

“Yes. He’s going by the name Val.”

“Val? Who the fuck is that?”

“Dark skin, blue eyes, buzzed head and has M3 tattooed next to his eye.”

“Holy shit.” Emilio stood up straight, dropping the tape he had removed from the bag. “Moisés!”

Zach nodded, gaze trained on Emilio. “I take it he’s a friend of yours.”

“More than a friend. We met way before the Agency snagged me. Before my old gang Mara Tres became 4FF.”

“I see.”

Emilio could see the unspoken question in Zach’s face, but he ignored it in favor of yanking on a pair of tight black shorts. He strode to the window and peered down at the masses of inmates below, but could not immediately pick Moisés out of the crowd. “Damn, what the fuck is he doing here?”

“Who cares? The point is he knows who you are. When he heard the name Naco he immediately asked if it was the Naco with the green eyes and Aztec tattoo.”

“Aw, maybe he missed me. I might have to bend a couple rules for

him if you know what I mean.” When Zach only released a slow sigh, Emilio grinned. “Don’t get uptight on me, blondie. We can all have fun together.”

Zach’s jaw tightened. “You fail to see the problem. We’ve made it this far in this hellhole because no one knows you’re Emilio Vega. He’s going to blow that for us.”

“Moisés isn’t retarded, Zach. I stayed underground with him for ten times the fucking time I’ve been hiding out with you. He’s a pro. The dude has had my back since I was fourteen. Unless somehow he’s changed after the three decades I’ve known him, I’d trust him with my life.”

“Well then I suppose you should be grateful that you have someone so dependable with you again. Especially since he could be trusted with your whereabouts for all those years and I couldn’t.”

“Don’t even start, man. The scope of experience isn’t even comparable between you two. Especially if you think about how quickly you blew my shit up to Connors when you found out about me and 4FF after Hsin got himself fucked up in Monterrey.” Zach’s mouth thinned and Emilio knew he was pushing the wrong buttons. He rolled his eyes. “Don’t be such a jealous little bitch, man. C’mon.”

Zach turned to the door with an answering scoff. “Just get dressed so we can go.” Emilio grabbed his arm and Zach shoved him away. “Just do it. I’m sick of this.”

“Why? Because you’re getting your fucking nuts twisted up for nothing? You need to calm yourself.”

“Tell me to calm down again and—”

“And what?”

Zach turned. “You know what? Fine. Do it your way. Go make nice, find out about your old life, get drunk with him, ride his dick for all I care. The rules only apply when we’re undercover, so clearly they don’t apply to him. Have fun.”

Emilio sighed loudly. “Are you done?”

“No. While you’re at it, make yourself useful and ask him how to get in touch with the rest of your hoodrat buddies. Maybe they can find a way for me to get the hell out of here and you can do whatever you want.”

“Zachary—”

“Fuck off, Vega.”

“Oh my God, would you relax? Christ almighty you’re worse than Boyd with this jealous shit.”

“You want to talk about jealous rampages? You? The one who screwed my girlfriend to prove a point? The one who cold-shouldered me over Vivienne? The one who broke Bishop’s jaw just because I hooked up with him *once* even though you fuck every slutty twink that —”

“Alright, alright, *cállate. Coño carajo.*”

Zach’s biceps bulged when he crossed his arms over his chest, lips flattened in an unimpressed line.

“Aiiight, you got me.” Emilio held up his hands. “I’m shitty at being a boyfriend. But you are too, so what else is new? Can we keep the fucking melodrama down to a minimum and figure out how we can use Moisés to our advantage? I know I’m reaching for the goddamn stars by hoping you can be logical, but maybe you could give it a shot.”

When Zach flipped him off, Emilio smiled. Zach returned it grudgingly and moved further into the office once again.

“I want out of this place, Emilio. It’s messing with my head.”

“Yeah, I kind of got that when you started getting off on smacking me around. Not that I don’t enjoy it.”

“I’m serious. I know we had to be here in the beginning, and I know you did the best you could with the messed up situation I put us all in...” Zach trailed off, face clouding over. “But it’s been long enough that I want to try to get out. Go somewhere that doesn’t require me to drag you around by a collar, and you to fight in a cage.”

Emilio didn’t mind the fighting so much, but he kept that to himself. “I wouldn’t mind doing something a little more valuable with my precious time.” Reconnecting with 4FF actually wasn’t a bad idea. If anyone could figure out how to break them out of Brighton, it was his old crew. After all, they’d raided the Agency. “What do you think about going down to Mexico? Hooking up with *mis hermanos*?”

“Gun running?”

“Among other things.” It only took half a second for Emilio to realize Zach wasn’t into the idea. “Or... we could join up with someone else.”

Another group.”

Zach moved to stand beside the window, shoulder-to-shoulder with Emilio. His pale eyes focused on the horde of convicts teeming around the pit. Vinicio was already in his cage, flexing and hamming it up with his long red hair tied in a thick braid. One of these days, Emilio was going to scalp him just on general principle of the kid being such a fucking idiot.

“There’s been an influx of insurgents among the new inmates,” Zach said. “Seems like there’s a bunch of new rebel organizations popping up. They’re calling themselves revolutionaries.”

“Oh Jesus.”

Zach nodded. “I don’t know what’s worse. The Agency or joining one of the groups we helped to destroy. Although, these new ones seem a bit different.”

“I’d honestly rather go retire on a fucking beach and let you wreck my ass three times a day than join a bunch of idealistic *pendejos* in their quest for a better world.”

The stoic look evaporated and Zach smiled, sliding an arm around Emilio. “We could do that too. Until you get bored a week later.”

There was no denying that. “So, what’s the plan? See what Moisés can do for us and play it by ear? Go somewhere less shitty, regroup, and figure out what to do next?”

“Maybe...” Zach squeezed Emilio once more before releasing him. He turned fully and leaned against the window. One brow rose. “Or maybe we could find the kids.”

Now that was something worth spending time on. Emilio nodded slowly, not voicing just how avidly he wanted to see his boy again. Boyd, Doug, Ryan... Emilio wondered if asthma boy had survived the first year without his meds. The possibility of Ryan keeling over and laying somewhere dead stung more than Emilio had expected.

“You sure that’s a good idea? Maybe it’s better not to know. Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“Just in case they’re all dead. Maybe the Agency has hunted them all down already.”

Zach’s expression turned hooded. “Then we spend our time hunting



the Agency.”

Emilio’s mouth stretched in a smile. He hooked his thumbs into Zach’s belt loops and aligned their bodies.

“Sounds like a good way to die, General Carhart.”

Zach shook his head, eyes still half-shut. “You won’t let that happen.”

“Goddamn right.”

When Zach jerked him forward for another kiss, Emilio knew the fight with Vinicio would be waiting for a while.

1/27:03

*Spiddal, Ireland*

“Мы получили тревожные новости от наших на юге. Кто у нас там доступен на итальянской стороне? Это срочно.” Vitaly Voronov always spoke gravely; or maybe it was just that Owen never heard from the dude unless the sky was fucking falling in Russia.

“Мы можем связаться с Римом прямо сейчас,” Owen answered.

“Давай, свяжись с ними и мне нужно будет чтобы ты переводил.”

“Секундочку.”

Owen flipped through the screens on the tablet to his right—hardly having to look to navigate—while he fitted a second earpiece. He knew whom to contact in Rome. Three people led the Guild-affiliate group there, but his favorite was Alessia Bellandini. A quick check of her status showed that she was available. He flicked on the second comm just as she connected.

“*Ti disturbo?*” he asked her.

“*Affatto, e' sempre un piacere sentirti.*” Owen could hear the smile in her voice. “*Come posso aiutare la Guild?*”

“*Abbiamo notizie urgenti dalla sezione Russa. Sei in grado di ricevere le informazioni?*”

“*Certamente.*”

“*Итальянцы на связи, можешь говорить,*” Owen said into the left comm microphone.

He left both comm units running, Russian in his left and Italian in his right, and went into a zone where he translated the Russian directly into

Italian even while his mind catalogued the details.

*The Knights of Enlightenment are spreading into Europe, and adjusting their rhetoric for the local religions. They plan an attack in Rome in the coming month. As usual, they will blame others for the crisis and take credit for being there to help the survivors. They plan to be there in the aftermath, to convert people by claiming this is further proof that the end of the world is nearing, and that Christianity could not save them.*

Alessia asked questions along the way; where would this be, how would it happen, what was the time frame, what was the trustworthiness of the sources. Vitaly paused to listen as Owen translated the questions, and Owen translated the answers Vitaly gave.

*We don't know the specific location or what the weapon will be, although we assume the Vatican will be a target. We don't know if it will be multiple attacks or one. We're gathering intel right now on possible dates. Spread the word to the members and trustworthy law enforcement. We'll gather the proof of the Knights' involvement for media dissemination in the event we can't stop the attack.*

Alessia responded in kind:

*Thank you. We'll do our best to stop this. Please keep us apprised of further details. We'll provide the same courtesy to the Russian division if we ever receive information for your area.*

“*Certamente,*” Owen translated for Vitaly. “*Non ci aspettiamo niente di —*”

The back door blasted inward. Owen threw himself beneath the table, sheltering his head from the splinters careening around the room. Black dust sprayed everything, coating his face, his clothes, his equipment. Smoke billowed into the space even as Owen's heart rate skyrocketed. Alarmed Italian and Russian rose in both ears:

*“Какого хрена у вас там происходит? Вы попали под обстрел?”*

*“Owen! Che succede? E' tutto a posto?”*

Owen hissed out a quick, “I'll call you back,” in Russian and then Italian before ripping both comms out of his ear.

He skittered backward, reaching for his modified taser. If he had listened to Riley and carried a gun he'd have a better chance, but after the first horrible incident Owen had never wanted to shoot one again. He considered and discarded progressively stupid escape plans, and

wondered a bit frantically which of JG's enemies had come to find him this time. Maybe Lacie had returned to finish the job. Inately, Owen thought about how pissed Riley was going to be if he died today.

Scraping at the dust coating his face, Owen managed to swipe a clear path for his eyes and nose. He peered around the edge of the stand when he heard footsteps entering the room.

It only sounded like one hostile, but Owen was shocked when the smoke cleared and he saw a familiar dark glare. Jeffrey had a goatee now, and his hair was longer and spikier. A pair of thin-framed glasses with no visible lenses were over his eyes, and he wore what looked to be some sort of modified body armor with a variety of pockets and patches. Jeffrey was armed and he held the gun professionally, with his finger parallel to the trigger along the barrel. He'd definitely had some kind of training.

"Get out here. We don't have time."

Owen didn't move. His fingers tightened on the taser. He hadn't seen Jeffrey in over a year and a half, and the man looked more like a field agent now than he ever had in the Agency. Who was to say he wasn't the next former friend who had it out for Owen's head?

"I know you're in here." Jeffrey strode to the desk, glanced underneath, and stalked to the other corner of the room where he looked behind the couch. "I'm serious. Stop fucking around. You're going to be killed."

Owen hesitated. Baffled as he was by Jeffrey's sudden and violent appearance, the urgency in Jeffrey's voice caused Owen to crawl fully into view.

"How?"

Jeffrey turned and leveled the gun at Owen. "By me."

Owen froze.

Jeffrey tipped the gun upward in small motions, clearly telling him without words to stand. His face was an unrepentant mask.

"Come on, man." Owen stood slowly, his hands up with the taser sheathed at his side. No point even trying to use that. "What's going on? What's with the crazy entrance? Is this about—"

"Sorry. I have my orders."

"What? Whose—"

Jeffrey fired.

Time slowed to a crawl.

Owen shouted as he felt impacts against his body; two to the chest and shoulder. Blood splattered in his peripheral vision before he crashed against the floor. Jeffrey was at his side in an instant, the gun aimed at his face.

“For the Light,” Jeffrey said impassively. A beat later he mouthed: *play dead.*

Owen’s brow wrinkled. What the hell?

Jeffrey fired again, this time a direct hit to the forehead. Owen felt the crack against his head like a punch straight to the brain, and despite having no freaking clue what was happening, he did his best to remain silent and lay lifelessly.

Footsteps moved away from him.

“It’s done.”

Jeffrey’s voice was curt. Owen didn’t hear anyone else in the room but he kept his face slack and chest still just in case.

“Yes. I brought the accelerant.” Jeffrey periodically paused, likely listening to questions. “No, just squatters. No one important. Unknown. It’s a quiet area but mostly abandoned. 90% they don’t call on this but flipped on the fire. Yes. Yes. That’s my recommendation, too. Yes. Yes, sir. Two days. Understood. I’ll upload it after I finish here. Thank you. For the Light.”

Jeffrey made a noise in his throat, something Owen remembered from years back as signifying both his impatience and displeasure. It used to precede a lecture about why Owen sucked for not being more seriousface during briefings.

He listened to Jeffrey stomp back out the door, followed shortly by a lot of grunting and, for some reason, a heavy dragging sound. Owen didn’t dare peek nor did he let his chest shift more than minimally necessary. The dragging came closer before something dropped next to him.

“Stay still a second,” Jeffrey ordered.

Before Owen could respond, there were three fast successions of gunshots. Owen jumped, his eyes flying open. When he looked over and saw a corpse with the back of its head blown out, Owen panicked.

“Poxy fuckin’ wanker with a poxy—fuck—body—!”

Owen scrambled backward so frantically he fell over the TV stand with flailing arms. He jumped up, pointed down at the body, looked up at Jeffrey with a gaping mouth, and then pointed again insistently.

“What the *fuck?!?*!”

Jeffrey watched him with such impassivity it was disturbingly close to old-school Boyd. He had swapped the techie glasses and body suit for normal clothing and at Jeffrey’s feet was a black duffel bag. He slid some bullets into the magazine of his gun and jerked his chin toward the computers. “Delete the most damning evidence and grab what you need, but don’t make it look like you’re alive or knew this was coming.”

Owen couldn’t look away from the body. He had seen many dead bodies before but he wasn’t accustomed to them dropping down next to him close enough to make out. He realized with a start that the bullet holes in the body were in the same places Jeffrey had shot him. At the thought, he slapped his hands along his chest, shoulder, and forehead.

“Wait—I’m alive. What the—” His hand smeared through what he’d thought was blood, and he held his red palm in front of him in disbelief. “Did you *Halloween me?*”

“Go, you idiot!”

Galvanized, Owen fell into a routine. He had a go bag and a prewritten program that would delete the essential JG information from the computer. As the leader of the Journalist Guild, Bell was a meticulous man. As a result the Guild members and their equipment tended to be prepared for just about every scenario—from ‘Surprise! I’m alive, motherfucker!’ to ‘Just kidding, I’m dead’ to ‘What? I’m just your normal everyday civilian and have no idea about this group of which you speak.’

In a handful of minutes, his face was clean and he had disguised his mass of red curls. He returned to see Jeffrey standing in the doorway he had so utterly destroyed in his apparent excitement to defile bodies and mock-kill old friends. Jeffrey glanced at Owen, nodded at him to leave, and dropped a lighter to the floor the second Owen was clear. Flames bloomed magnificently at his feet and raced like hellfire into the home, engulfing it in seconds.

Jeffrey grabbed Owen’s arm and dragged him along. “You’ll have to

leave any transportation you had here. I have a car but it's parked on another street to keep the plate from being read."

Owen gaped at him and flailed his arms toward the house. Jeffrey snapped Owen's arm back down between them, and Owen settled for dramatic hand rolling.

"What the hell was that, man? You couldn't have jumpstarted my heart any better if you'd come in with a fucking defibrillator!"

"Would you have preferred I'd filled it with holes?"

"I'd prefer you left it out of the equation entirely! What in the name of Odin's ghost is going on?"

"Did he have one?"

"What?"

"Odin." Jeffrey looked at Owen curiously. "He was a god, so did he have a ghost? As far as that goes, did he ever die?"

"What—*No*." Owen punched Jeffrey on the arm. "You don't get to go on tangents like they're legit conversational starters! That's *my* thing. You're supposed to be the straight shooter—but, you know, don't be when you have actual guns."

"I wouldn't have actually shot you."

"Why the charade in the first place?"

"They would've known if I didn't do anything."

"*Who?* The—" Owen's eyes widened and he leaned closer to whisper in horror: "The Agency?"

Jeffrey gave him the same disgusted look as he had when they were R&D. "No, you idiot. We watched the little dream-team duo destroy them live on TV, didn't we? Why the hell would I be working for them? Do you ever even think before you speak?"

"Then who?"

Jeffrey sighed and shook his head. "Wait until we get somewhere safer and I'll show you. Just. Shut up for now. I need time to think."

"You're not the only one," Owen muttered.

The small houses that dotted this area of Spiddal were all but lost in the field of dead grass and cover of early morning darkness that stretched between them. Half a mile from the North Atlantic, the vacation homes were built in the same manner as the rest of the houses. They lined the street with great spaces in between for privacy, and with

no fences in sight, the field acted as both a barrier and a shared yard.

If this had happened decades ago, Owen might have run across neighbors as he and Jeffrey fled the burning home, but that time had long passed. Now, the majority of the houses in Spiddal were ramshackle and empty. Now, the few squatters who lived in town stayed far away from each other, and paid even less attention to what happened.

Jeffrey started running across the field, but Owen pulled him in a new trajectory. “Hold up, dude. Since I’ve apparently just died and will not be returning, I have one stop first.”

Jeffrey looked ready to argue, but Owen raised his eyebrows and Jeffrey sighed.

“Fine. But it better not be far. We don’t have time for one of your stupid tangents.”

“*Imigh leat*. She’s probably hiding in the bushes; you can chill.”

“She?”

Owen ignored him, and darted up the low, sloping hill nearby. The sun was just rising, leaving the world cast in alternating shadows and light, but soon the rush of the fire would risk drawing what little attention there was available. Owen whistled as quietly as he could, and paused near a crop of brambly bushes alongside the road.

“Come here, you wee dote!” he stage-whispered.

A dog came bounding out of the bushes. She was medium-sized, with a huge lolling smile and perky ears. All black with some white lining her face, paws and the tuft of her tail, it wasn’t until she jumped up excitedly to play-dance with Owen that his favorite part of her was visible: A white, heart-shaped mark on her breast nearly glowed in the dim light.

The dog was clearly ecstatic, jumping all around, darting in a circle around Owen, and then rearing down with a *whuff!* Her butt rose in the air with her front paws stretched forward. Owen grinned and tried to ruffle her fur but she hardly stood still for it, bouncing all around instead.

“You have a *dog?*”

Owen looked at Jeffrey sidelong. “You’re acting as shocked as if I’d whipped out a kid.”

“Why the hell do you have a dog? And you call it ‘dote’?”



“No—Her name is Croí. Heart. Because—”

“Of the mark. Got it. I’m not a moron.”

“Well, considering you thought I named her ‘dote’—*Dia ár sábháil...*”

“I didn’t actually—”

“We should get going.”

Jeffrey glared at Owen, the dog, and then turned and started to run.

“How far away did you say you parked?”

“Follow me and stop talking, and *tell your dog to shut up.*”

Owen scrunched his face and looked down at Croí, who was quite sure they were in the middle of a rousing game of tag and was running around them in huge, herding circles whuffing and yipping happily. Owen patted his thigh and she sprinted at him, veering at the last second to run alongside him. He leaned down to run his fingers through the silky fur of her ears.

“It’s all right, *a chroí*. He looks like a hard ass but he only pretend-killed me so we’re still friends. And he just doesn’t know you yet, that’s why he’s being mean. Right, petal?” He ruffled her ears and she huffed. “What’s that? What are you saying to him? *Amadán? Imigh sa diabhal?*”

Croí grinned at him. Jeffrey punched Owen on the arm. Owen scowled and rubbed the bruised area but said nothing. As they continued their escape, he lapsed into silence. They were wraiths, slipping between the dying shadows. To the south, the home Owen had used for months cracked and popped and burned to a crisp with his substitute body inside. Owen figured no one would even care until they smelled the smoke, and felt the heat of fire threatening their own hovel.

It was kind of depressing. He’d come to know some of the squatters, but it was all stalking from afar. He hadn’t introduced himself, and hadn’t talked face-to-face with anyone in months. The Guild kept him way on the down low, and even if Jeffrey’s arrival started with an attack and the disturbingly calm desecration of a body, when Owen looked over at Jeffrey’s serious profile he was glad the guy had come knocking.

Soon, they came upon a sleek black electric car tucked down an abandoned driveway. Jeffrey started the car from afar with a fob, and when they got up to it, he threw the driver side door open. Croí raced inside right beneath Jeffrey, tripping him so he landed on his ass in an ungainly heap. Croí jumped neatly out of the way, and ran dirty-paw

circles all around the interior before stopping at the passenger seat and fogging up the glass, grinning out at Owen.

Owen tried not to laugh, but he lost that battle when Jeffrey righted himself and, with a pissed off, uppity glare straight out of 2019, shoved her and his duffel bag into the back seat. As Owen gingerly lowered himself into the car, he heard Jeffrey muttering to himself:

“Goddamn dirty, mangy mongrel of a dog—she’d better not have any fleas!”

Jeffrey aimed the last part at Owen, who held his hands up in surrender. “Whoa, let’s put away the Cyclops glare, man. It’s cool. I keep her up to date.”

“Why the hell do you have a goddamn dog anyway? Get a damn cat if you need an animal. They’re so much less,” he glared in the rearview mirror at her tongue dripping on the seat, “unclean.”

“Hey, don’t take it out on her. She was a little orphaned mutt and I took her in. She’s been keeping me company all this time so leave her alone.”

Jeffrey huffed, and put the car in drive. They didn’t speak at first, and when Owen tried, Jeffrey gave him a quelling glare. Owen fell silent and alternated between studying his old colleague and watching the Irish villages and countryside roll by until he could no longer stay quiet.

“Where are we going?”

“If I drop you in Westport, can you find a way to the Guild without drawing attention?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. Is that your end game, too?”

Jeffrey glanced at him sidelong but didn’t answer. They returned to the tense silence that was occasionally broken by keening or a bark from Croí. She settled her head on Owen’s shoulder, and he spent the time petting her absently while wondering what in bloody hell was going on.

Within two hours, they pulled into a small, abandoned home outside of Westport. Jeffrey hid the car around the back, and then unlocked the door to the house. He surveyed the dank interior before settling his stare on Owen.

“I can’t be here long, but it’s safe to talk for a while. I’ll leave you here when I go. No one should be around, but you’d be best to leave within the day.”

Owen nodded. He dragged a half-broken chair from what had probably been a kitchen before someone had destroyed or removed all the appliances. Croí circled the two humans nervously, her tail low and waving slowly, her eyes darting and ears fluctuating. She kept looking at Owen for a command until he settled and patted his knee.

“Croí. *Goitse.*” She was at his side in an instant, and he leaned over to ruffle the fur around her head affectionately. She leaned into the touch with a happy smile. “*Iontach maith, a chroí!* Want to go play? Explore?” Her eyes snapped to his intently, and he pointed down a dark hallway. “Go check it out. It’s okay. *Fanfaidh mé anseo leat.*”

She bounded up when he let her go and bounced off into the dark with a quiet woof. Owen turned to look at Jeffrey. The former R&D agent was hovering in the middle of the space, his hands shoved into his pockets and weight shifting. He didn’t meet Owen’s questioning gaze even as Owen stretched his hand out and scrunched his fingers twice.

“Alright. Give it to me. What’s the deal?”

Jeffrey stilled and tensed visibly. After a stiff pause, he deflated with a sigh and began unbuttoning his shirt.

Owen watched in confusion as Jeffrey peeled off the black button-down, revealing a surprisingly toned torso. With a nervous flick of his eyes to Owen’s, Jeffrey turned, his shirt hanging loosely from his wrists.

At the sight of Jeffrey’s back, Owen sucked in a breath with an audible hiss.

“*In ainm Chroim.*” He stood and approached slowly. Owen raised his hand, fingers trembling, and he hesitantly traced the intricate black tattoo spreading across Jeffrey’s entire back. Jeffrey jerked at the touch but did not shy away while Owen examined the tattoo. Metal embedded the design and seemed to vibrate when Owen’s fingertips ghosted over it.

“The Knights, Jeffrey?” he whispered, horrified. “You *joined* them?”

Jeffrey pulled away abruptly and threw his shirt back on. His head dropped forward while his shoulders shifted with the movement of buttoning his shirt. “Conscripted is a better word.”

“How?”

Jeffrey remained huddled and facing away for a drawn out pause. “I was with this guy and he betrayed me to them.”

Owen frowned. “What does that even mean? You were the one pressing hard on not making new friends or saying anything unnecessary to them. How’s some dude you met have anything to do with you joining the apocalypse crazies who make Janus look like hippies?”

Jeffrey sighed and finally turned around. “No. I mean, I was *with* this *guy*.”

Owen stared.

Jeffrey grimaced and looked away.

Owen’s eyes widened. “Oh! Oh my God. You mean—” He made a gesture for sex.

Jeffrey’s face pinched. “I didn’t know he was a Knight.”

“But... how...?”

“It doesn’t matter. The point is, he found out how good I am at cryptography and turned me over to the Knights. They didn’t give me a choice. Even when they have a person, they don’t stop. They keep watching, looking for other pressure points. So far they don’t seem to know who I really am but with the way they are, it’ll only be a matter of time. My family, we have too much money. We aren’t anonymous. The second they know I’m a Styles they’ll go after them, too. They’ll go after everyone. So I’m trying to stay under the radar as best I can.”

“Wait, hold up. I’m still caught on the earlier thing. Did you just come out to me, Jeffrey Styles?”

“Would you not act like a two-year-old for five minutes, Owen?” Jeffrey snapped. “I’m trying to tell you your life is in danger and I’m fucked. Is that really the part you want to focus on?”

“Yes. I had no idea you were gay!”

“I’m not gay.”

“But you—” Again with the gesture.

Jeffrey grabbed Owen’s wrists and yanked his hands apart. He stepped in close, a glare across his face. “Stop it.”

“Dude, it’s nothing to be ashamed of. I don’t know if you know, but my sister’s bi, or possibly just a lesbian now. I’m not sure. She hardly ever likes guys.”

“I don’t care. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“But—”

“For fuck’s sake Owen, just knock it off. I have limited time here and I don’t want to be caught in the middle of some after-school special about labeling ourselves and how we’re all the same inside no matter our differences. We need to focus on the problem.”

“Okay, okay. So, you got screwed by the Knights. How long have you been with them?”

“Since not long after we parted.”

“Jesus. But what’s a cryptographer doing running around with a gun and shooting dead people?”

“They don’t really do R&D versus field like the Agency did. Everyone works all angles. I’ve had to do some assignments already, and I was about due for initiation into the next level. Then your assassination came on and I volunteered.”

Owen grimaced. “Thanks... I guess?”

“They want to dismantle the Guild, and for that they’re targeting key players. They knew one of the best people they have now is known as Captain—”

“Ohh that’s so cool, they know the code name I gave myself!” Owen grinned. “Do they know the full name is Captain Pineapple McGillicuddy or do they just call me Captain?”

Jeffrey continued in a hard tone, “—*and* has risen in the ranks in the last two years. The only thing known about him for sure is that he’s often the primary contact for real-time translations. If they could start crippling the Guild’s communications network that could go a long way toward disabling them. I had to prove myself soon anyway, so I volunteered to take you on.”

“You knew it was me?”

“Who the hell else is going to call himself Captain in the Guild and be known for his fast and accurate translations? Of course I knew it was you.”

“Then what was with the fireworks? Why not dial down the psychopath routine a smidge so I didn’t nearly die from shock?”

“Because the Knights track everything. That tattoo tracks vitals and GPS. It’s fused into my spine and will paralyze me, or worse, if I defect. I have to wear the glasses on-assignment. It lets the handler see and hear everything I do. It’s why I had to spray the dust in first, so they couldn’t

get a good visual on your face. I'm hoping they think that was some sort of defense mechanism the Guild had and they don't know the real reason for it."

"But they aren't watching you now?"

"No, not after successful completion. I'll have to check in with my handler again in an hour or so and be back within two days or they'll come after me. The tracking is fine if I pause by Westport for a bit; they'd expect as much for me to keep out of view. But too long and they'll wonder."

"Who else are they targeting?"

Jeffrey shook his head and dropped onto a chair. Somewhere along the line, Croí had entered the room. She reared up and placed her paws on Jeffrey's thighs. Jeffrey scratched behind her ears and she twisted her face to lick the inside of his wrist. Distaste crossed his face and he pulled his hand out of licking distance.

"I don't know everything. I imagine the upper echelon. Bell, Riley, Genna, Liv..."

"Do they know you know Guild members?"

"No. If they did, I'd be worse off."

Owen worried at his lip. "Are you sure you're going to get away with this?"

"Fairly. And if not, I'll figure it out."

"Do you need help—"

Jeffrey scoffed. "Like that would make anything better, getting help from the person I allegedly killed."

"I'm just sayin—"

"If you want to help me, lay low for a while. Let the Captain code name die. Use disguises. Change the vernacular of your translations. I know you; you understand nuances far better than you ever let on. Stop dicking around acting like an idiot below your intelligence and you'll come off as an entirely different person in the underground. If I'm lucky, they'll think the Guild got a replacement that soon."

"Yeah, and what about when they want that replacement killed?"

Jeffrey shrugged, and dug his fingers into Croí's fur beneath her collar. Her eyes slit and her ears swung back in pleasure. "You should have time. Figure something out with the Guild. I probably won't be

there as a buffer next time.”

“Why don’t you come with me instead? This is fucked up that you’re even talking about returning. You’re fucked if you do, Jeffrey.”

“I have to.”

“But I’m telling you, the Guild can help! And if not them, maybe someone else. Maybe, I don’t know, dude—maybe Boyd and Hsin know where Ryan or Bree are. They could help, they’re the most brilliant hackers I know and—”

“Owen. Stop focusing on me. I’ll figure it out. You need to let the Guild know there might be coming attacks. None of them are safe. If the Knights figure out a roster like Janus got on the Agency, nothing will stop them. The Guild deals in information. Even now, they rarely take outright action unless it’s preventive. You won’t last against all-out warfare. Your people aren’t trained to deal with that.”

“I don’t get why you’re doing this.”

Anger tightened Jeffrey’s features. “You honestly think I’m the sort of person who would hear that an old friend was going to be assassinated and I’d sit by doing nothing? What the fuck, Owen?”

Owen winced. “It’s not like I think that but, why do you keep randomly putting yourself out there for people like that? Like me?”

Jeffrey scoffed, making his disgust clear. “This is the stupidest conversation. I’m not going to repeat myself. Are we done here?”

“No.” Owen leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Listen, Jeff. You should know something.”

“What?”

“The Guild... there have been rumors.” Owen glanced at Jeffrey, and saw a growing wariness and suspicion in his expression. He wished he had better news to deliver. “We’re hearing word that the Agency may be reinventing itself. That they may be putting out feelers.”

Jeffrey stared at Owen for one motionless second before he jumped up. Croí fell backwards with an indignant yip, and Jeffrey twirled to slam the side of his fist onto the wall. “Shit. *Shit*. We are so *fucked*, Owen! If the Knights don’t kill us, the Agency will! The Guild’s the only neutral group around and they aren’t combatants—they’ll never be able to protect us. Or anyone. They’ll be wasted by the Knights or the Agency, and everything will be back to how it was before but more

fucked up and hi-tech this time around. What the hell was the point of any of this!”

He dropped his forehead against the wall, breath heaving and hand curling so hard his knuckles were white. His collar had fallen backwards, showing the upper portion of the black and metal Knights tattoo.

Owen watched him for a moment, unable to deny the truth of how screwed they all were, but also ultimately unwilling to leave it at so dismal a state. He stood and stepped up next to Jeffrey; wrapped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him in for a side hug.

“Come on, man. We’ll figure it out. We still have the others—”

Jeffrey let out a bitter laugh at that and pushed him away. “Right. How could I forget the, what—sixteen of us that started this whole thing? That’s assuming Carhart and Emilio aren’t dead, and counting two useless assistants. What’s left in that? One modded freak, a few decent fighters, a manipulative shrew and a bunch of nerds. Oh, and we have no goddamn clue where any of them are. How in the world is that a good thing?”

“Well, with the help of others, two of them and the Guild took down one of the most powerful covert organizations in the world, so I wouldn’t count them out. We’re a resourceful bunch.”

“Temporarily took them out, you mean. Leaving us worse off than before.”

Owen shoved him “What the hell is wrong with you, man? You used to be the one that was always hardcore about everything. You used to lecture us about not trying hard enough.”

Jeffrey smiled mirthlessly and jerked his shirt back into place. He buttoned the last two buttons. “That guy was a rich, sheltered ass who’d never truly been alone. He thought he knew everything but he didn’t. He was an idiot.”

“No he wasn’t.” Owen grimaced. “I mean, no you weren’t.”

Jeffrey gave Owen a long, considering look. “Let me ask you something. You told me once you grew up on the battlefields. Is that true?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Just answer me,” Jeffrey said tiredly.

“Well, yeah. I was born here in Ireland but then the war hit when I



was pretty young. My mom was a doctor and my dad a linguistics professor, you know. Ma wanted to do something to help so we went all over Europe for my teenage life, treating people in war-torn areas, that sort of thing.”

“You saw a lot of death and disease, and saw some of the worst of what people did to each other.”

“I guess. It was shite at times but we were together as a family. I think it hit us kids differently. My older brothers, Innis and Mannix, they thought the only way to stay safe was to be successful and influential. My oldest sister Roísín, she wanted stability and a family to love so that’s what she did. Caoilfhionn and me, we wanted to make a difference, to stop it from happening again.”

Jeffrey didn’t turn his pensive stare from the shadows. “So in the States you remade yourself into someone who could change things, but you were afraid you might not succeed. You acted like an idiot so no one would blame or praise you either way. You could be invisible while you tried to help and if you failed then you could try again without judgment.”

Owen tilted his head. “That’s... creepily accurate.”

The silence stretched.

“I used to be so angry with all of you.” The admission was as dark as the hallway Jeffrey studied; as dark as the expression on his face. “In that unit, I felt like I was the only one who took it seriously. Ryan was always groveling over Hsin or gossiping with Boyd. Half the time you behaved like you were acting out some nonsensical dream. Hsin barely listened to anything and argued every point he made. And I hated Boyd for bypassing all the work I’d put in and getting special treatment from the start.

“It didn’t matter how attentive Boyd was in the meetings, how much Ryan multitasked, or how Hsin always got the job done. It didn’t matter that you were always ahead of schedule on your work despite your behavior. I thought life was about excellent marks and above-average achievement, because that was all I’d ever had to work for. Money had been no object since my birth, and I wanted people to see me for me, not my name. I wanted them to be forced to admit that I was worthwhile all on my own, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could

do it, I could be the most dedicated one out there.”

Owen picked at the loose threads on his pockets. “You kind of sound like you’re giving a speech before you go off to die, dude. You’re freaking me out here.”

“The point is...” Jeffrey focused on Owen again. “I didn’t truly understand strength back then. It was too black and white to me. I saw rules and how we had to follow them, and I looked down on everyone who strayed. But I see now how all your circumstances were so different. I see how you all deserved to be in that unit as much as me, if not more.”

When Owen didn’t interrupt, Jeffrey continued.

“Now, I think about how hard it must have been for Ryan to be orphaned so young. To have been imprisoned by the Agency and his own body, and how he might have felt like his genius was the only thing that people valued in him. I wonder how Hsin was as controlled as he was even with his mental breaks considering how the Agency had systematically dehumanized him from the start, and still expected him to jump through hoops. I think about how Boyd was just a suicidal kid thrown into a world he had no way of understanding, and how harsh all of us were on his every mistake all because we hated him for his mother’s actions. And I think about how you’d seen firsthand what came of war and disease, and you’d repeatedly worked yourself ragged until you were perpetually exhausted just so you could do your best to stop other people from feeling that pain again. And through it all somehow you maintained optimism and belief in humanity. Somehow, you still retained your humor.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because now that I understand, I also understand the kind of choices people have to make when they’re backed against a wall. You haven’t seen me since shortly after we broke apart from the Agency. I know you knew me as that man who lectured others constantly, who focused only on the negative. I know you thought I’d betrayed you all to the Admin back then. I never betrayed you back then, and I never will now. No matter how it might have seemed to you all, you were the only friends I had. And now, you’re the only friend I can locate. The only one I can protect.”

“But maybe we want to try to protect you. Even though you weren’t in on the planning for fleeing the Agency, you still became involved. They’ll see you as an accomplice either way.”

Jeffrey smiled sadly and gripped Owen’s shoulder. “It’s okay, Owen. Honestly. The second the Knights got me, I knew my life was over. I survived the Agency, but they were only ruthless. Not fanatics. The Knights are too dedicated to their cause. I knew from the second I was tattooed that it would be the death of me.”

“You’re being way too accepting of this concept.”

“Because I realized that my life, all that time I spent trying to prove myself... it didn’t matter. I was looking at it like life was upper-class schooling, all about the grades. But it was never about the marks; it’s about the way the assignment is carried out. Maybe I don’t have much time left on this world. So what? Today I was able to keep a friend alive that much longer. The longer I can keep this charade going, the better you will all be. And in the meantime, maybe I can find a way to feed you or the Guild some inside intel on the Knights. It won’t be much, or often, but you can think of me as your inside man until they kill me. I have a purpose now, and for once it isn’t solely focused on me.”

“Jeffrey... man. You’re killing me with this.”

Jeffrey’s gaze burned into Owen. He opened his mouth to speak and then suddenly stiffened, looking down at his wrist. He flicked the side of the watch and a small hologram screen shimmered over the surface. Owen couldn’t see from his angle what was on screen but Jeffrey’s face darkened.

“It’s Mateo.”

“Who?”

“My—” Jeffrey looked away with a scowl. “The guy I mentioned earlier.” He looked around the room swiftly, urgency now filling his voice and every motion. “I have to go.”

“You’re still with that dude?” Owen asked incredulously. “After he sold you out?”

Jeffrey ignored him and strode to the door. “I’ll find a way to get info to the Guild.”

“I’ll find whatever you send. But Jeffrey—”

Jeffrey paused halfway out the doorway, seemingly drawn by the

conviction in Owen's voice.

"What?"

"Don't think this is over. You're a goddamn idiot if you think I'm letting you just run off to die."

Something indefinable flashed in Jeffrey's eyes before they cut away. "Do what you want, Owen. You always have."

Jeffrey walked out the door and was gone.

Owen curled his fingers in his dog's soft fur, felt the heat of her body pressed against his leg, and felt more crushingly alone than he had in years. He didn't let himself dwell on all the impossibilities. He glared at the ghost of where Jeffrey's tattooed back had been, and said firmly to the empty room:

"I have to do something."

1/27:04

*Catacombs under London, England*

Every step drew them deeper underground. Arched ceilings dipped low and high in the shine of the flashlight. Hallways spread in a labyrinth, with vaults appearing and disappearing on either side, two by two by two. Even the faintest sound echoed through the cavernous space. New vulnerabilities emerged at every turn.

Boyd and Hsin moved with precision, boots scraping and catching on the dirt-covered stone floor. The way in front of Boyd was seen in ghostly walls rising ahead of him and chasms spreading to his right. As it had been since the Mod had blinded him two years ago, everything to the left was endless, pitch black. And as it had been since then, Hsin's presence was a warm weight in that void. Occasionally, their hands brushed against one another.

They had not yet found a suitable place to hide. Boyd began to wonder if anywhere on Earth could keep them from the Agency's hold.

Around a corner, shadows shifted malevolently. Boyd felt Hsin slow at his side so he did too, and then they appeared: silhouettes darker than the slate shadows, fanning out around them. Boyd turned to look at Hsin. His jade-green eyes, turned forest in the gloom, stared straight ahead—pitched slightly to the right. Boyd knew Hsin was listening; cataloguing more people in the catacombs than Boyd would have been able to see even with both eyes.

Hands raising in a nonthreatening way, Boyd looked toward the nearest figure. "What's going on?"

A man moved closer, and a light flashed on. Aimed as it was at Boyd's face, it was blinding. He reflexively used his hand to block the glare. There were four people, nondescript in their dirty, tangled mess aside from the sharp gleam in their eyes. Their gazes roamed Boyd and Hsin—catching on bulges for hidden weapons, and the worn bag over each of their shoulders. The man standing at the front wore an LED miner's light and seemed to be the leader. A scar cut through his lips. He looked at Boyd's eyepatch, and that gash grew larger in a smirk.

"Give us everythin' yeh hae and we won't kill yeh."

"We don't want any trouble," Boyd said.

"Yeah?" The man nodded to the others. "Search 'em."

Two of the men patted Boyd down with rough, hurried motions. Boyd held still even when one of them grabbed his gun from the holster and handed it to the leader, who hefted it appreciatively. The other man yanked Boyd's bag off his shoulder and retreated by the others to rifle through it. They did the same to Hsin, who hadn't moved. Dark lashes sheltered his eyes, which shot to Boyd and away into the dark. Someone else had to be out there with a weapon.

"Right." The leader kicked the bags behind him and flashed his ghastly smile. "That's all, then."

He gave the killing order with a nod to his men.

Hsin killed the nearest bandit before the man could take a step. The bone-shattering crack of his spine echoed. Everyone froze momentarily, and then the other two rushed Hsin.

The whine of an arrow sliced through the air from the corner. It was sheer luck that Boyd wasn't speared through the temple. He threw himself to the floor, felt the air displace over him with another near miss, and rolled to regain traction. The flashlight clattered to the floor and rolled, highlighting scenes in stop motion. He felt a presence on his blind side and reacted instantly, turning his body to see even as he recognized what the danger was: The leader aiming the gun at his head.

Boyd slammed the leader's hand to the side and grabbed his arm in the same movement. He twisted the two of them, gripped the trigger and shot the archer hiding in the corner. The crack of the gun was deafening in the catacombs, assaulting Boyd's senses. He struggled with the leader, the gun swinging in dangerous arcs until Boyd knocked it

from the bandit's grip and sent it skittering into the shadows.

A man shouted in pain and Boyd looked over toward Hsin to see his progress. Four men fighting now. Reinforcements must have come.

The bandit leader swung at Boyd while he was distracted. Boyd deflected and grabbed him by the collar. In seconds, Boyd had the man in a chokehold on his back, encased in Boyd's arms and legs from beneath him, with Boyd's forearm crushing his throat. The struggle steadily weakened until there was nothing left but dead weight. Even then, Boyd kept him there, shepherding the man from unconsciousness to death. The man's pulse was a music box winding down; rhythm going loose and ragged until finally it fell silent.

Boyd rolled the corpse off him and started to stand when he abruptly found himself hitting the floor. He scrambled up, trying to make sense of the situation even as his head rang, but fell again. Fingers clawed at him, catching on his eyepatch and hair before transforming into closed fists. He fended it off as best he could, but whoever it was stayed in his blind spot. Sharp breaths and the scraping of their limbs on the floor were the only sound shared by Boyd and his attacker, offset by truncated screaming not far away.

Finally connecting with the man's arm, Boyd wrenched it around and twisted. He braced against the floor and kicked the man up and off him, sending him flying back. The man rose, his face caught in a beam of light and twisted with hatred. He started forward again but a knife flew at him from Hsin's direction, burying to the hilt in his head. The bandit went down with eyes frozen wide in surprise. He did not rise again. Boyd hurried to the corner of the vault to recover his flashlight and gun.

Behind him, Hsin sent one of the bandits flying into a column with such force that the man's face exploded in blood spatter before he slid to the floor. It wouldn't be long before he was done.

Boyd turned and saw Hsin's form nearly hidden in the shadows outside the light. A bandit struggled against Hsin, clawing at him with the desperation of any prey in its predator's grasp. Hsin tilted his head ever so slightly behind him and then toward Boyd. As the rip of bones and flesh cut through the quiet, Boyd saw the last of the bandits rising behind Hsin with a knife. Boyd shot the man clean through the head, the sound cracking through the catacombs. The knife slipped from

spastic fingers and fell to the floor with the body. Hsin brought bloody hands away from the throat he had just caved in, and yet another corpse dropped to his feet like a ragdoll.

Boyd flashed the light over Hsin to check for injuries and, seeing nothing alarming, continued the motion to look for anyone left alive. There was no one. A scene from a horror movie fell into the cone of light behind Hsin. Bodies fanned out with Hsin in the center, calmly flicking blood from his fingers as he stood. His gaze ran along Boyd in assessment, narrowing on the scrapes along the left side of his face.

Satisfied they were both safe, Boyd retrieved their bags. He started to thank Hsin for the earliest assist when Hsin returned to his left side, close enough for Boyd to feel the tension thrumming through his partner. Boyd turned his head to see clearly. Hsin's gaze shuttered and swept past the *ombré* of light and shadow.

*"Guān dēng,"* he whispered and Boyd complied, flipping off the light.

Darkness settled in around them. Boyd tried to see through the afterimages haunting his sight, but he detected nothing. Boyd felt the catch of callouses on his jaw, and strong fingers pushed back his hair. Breath warmed his skin, followed by Hsin's low rumble against his ear:

*"Hái yǒu."*

Before Boyd could gesture to ask how many more hostiles to expect, light flooded the room—brighter than before and coming from three angles. He squinted and raised his hands, ready to start all over again, when a woman's hard voice rang into the silence:

"You did that?"

Glancing at Hsin, Boyd saw he was glaring toward the light, standing at attention, but wasn't tensed to attack. The people hidden behind the blinding light were apparently not aiming weapons at them.

"So what?" Hsin retorted.

"Why?"

"They attacked us," Boyd answered. "And no matter the odds you think you have, trust me. If you try the same, you'll meet a similar fate. If you let us pass, we'll have no problems."

There was a heavy pause. The sort that typically involved the exchange of meaningful glances. At length, a figure detached itself from the shadows and became a silhouette before the lights. Boyd was struck



by the memory of Emilio as *Lo Más Chingón*, standing before the headlights and blocking a tunnel not unlike this. The same strong pose, the same unfettered confidence. The same unknown future stretching into the darkness behind his back.

But this was not Emilio; this was a stranger. And although the chairman had alleged that Hsin's fathers had survived the riot, the lack of confirmation plagued them, Hsin especially, and there was no way to verify the claim.

"Who are you?" the woman demanded.

"Sid and Angel," Boyd said, gesturing to himself and Hsin respectively. "Who are you?"

Again the hard silence.

"What are you doing here?" a different, harsher woman's voice barked.

"We're just looking for a place to rest. We aren't a threat unless you make us into one."

If anything, Boyd's answer only caused the disembodied voice to sharpen. "The entrances to the catacombs are blocked. How did you know to look for them?"

Boyd exchanged another quick look with Hsin before replying.

"Liani told us about this place and an underground community they've conducted business with. She said we might be able to find shelter with them if we ran across them. Is that you?" Boyd left out the bit where Tayla had emphasized how little the community trusted outsiders, and how the leaders were notorious for their treatment of new people.

Boyd heard muffled rustling, a sound he attributed to people shifting their weight or crossing their arms.

Finally, warily, the woman spoke. "You know the Snakes?"

"Yes. Quite well."

"You could be saying a name you heard once. Prove you know them."

"No," Boyd said. He saw the silhouette of the woman straighten and felt Hsin tense at his side at something only he could see.

"No?" the woman repeated darkly.

"I don't know who the hell you are. I don't know how many of you there are—" Boyd gestured toward the people in the dark. "Whether

you're friends or enemies, or whether you're a threat to us or to the Snakes. The information you're demanding could endanger people we have known and trusted for years, people who have saved our lives more than once, just to satisfy your curiosity. We won't say anything until we can verify your identity."

"You could be saying that to cover your lie," another woman growled.

"Believe what you want but I'm not about to expose my allies to strangers. If you are who I think you are then you know the Snakes wouldn't trust someone who would give information so easily."

"And if you do know them," Hsin said, "you know how to contact them to verify our claim."

Whispered conversations waxed and waned in the dark.

"Very well," the silhouetted woman said. She paused for a long moment, leading Boyd to believe she would not continue, but then she spoke. "You say you aren't enemies. What about allies?"

"Athea!"

"Ghita," the silhouetted woman snapped back.

The harsher voice fell silent.

"Stop blinding us and we can talk," Boyd said.

The lights swung away to diffuse against the wall. As Boyd's eye adjusted, he saw that there was a group of maybe ten people of various heights. They were all women, and although they had weapons, none were drawn. Still, their untrusting expressions and fighter's stances showed not a single one of them had let their guard down. Each woman wore some type of armor; some looked like old gen Agency bodysuits, but most were a mishmash of whatever they seemed to have scavenged and stitched together.

Athea turned out to be a tall, lithe woman with dark eyes, russet skin, and short black hair. Coming up behind her with as sour and hateful a glare as Boyd had ever seen, was a woman he assumed was Ghita; gray-haired, maybe in her fifties, and with her hand not far from her gun.

Athea widened her stance, arms crossed at her chest and eyes sweeping Boyd to settle warily on Hsin. "You're good fighters. We would rather not have you as enemies."

Hsin gestured to the bodies behind him. "Are you with the fucking idiots that just tried to take us out with a crossbow?"

“No. We were hunting those men. They’ve been looking for something to scavenge for days now, and we wanted them out of our tunnels.”

A new voice spoke up from the back of the crowd, this one younger although Boyd could not see the speaker. “Scavvies and Ferals are getting bold. They know we’ve got a stockpile and a clean setup, and they want it. We’ve had more raids than ever.”

“Maybe you should say thank you instead of interrogating us, then.” Hsin wiped a spray of blood from his cheek, unflinching in the face of ten sets of eyes staring at him with expressions ranging from intrigue and fascination to fear.

“Maybe you should answer my earlier question,” Athea returned. “For allies who will fight alongside us, we might have temporary shelter.”

“How do we know we can trust you?” Boyd asked.

“You can ask the Snakes the same as we will ask them.”

Boyd moved closer to Hsin, brushing the tips of his fingers along Hsin’s bloodier hand. He could tell Hsin was leaving this up to him. A clear choice: did they want a safe place for the night or did they want to go it alone with Ferals lurking?

If Athea was true to her word, the choice would be easy. Boyd and Hsin had been running on fumes since fleeing Brazil, and especially since they’d disembarked a ship owned by a colleague of the Snakes. Rest would be good.

“We’re willing to earn a spot in your haven. We haven’t had downtime in over a week.”

“Doesn’t seem to be slowing this one down,” Ghita said, flashing her light at Hsin.

“Not much does,” Hsin said. “Either you want us or you don’t. Don’t play games.”

“No games.” Athea tossed her flashlight to Hsin, and he caught it easily. “I’ll take you back to our community.”

“Fine. Let’s go.” Hsin turned away, walking toward the tunnel.

“Charming lad.”

A faint smile crossed Boyd’s face. In the seven years he and Hsin had been partners, in and out of the Agency, he always seemed to hear

variations of that same comment.

“He can be.”

Most of the group moved forward to follow and surround Hsin, but Boyd trailed behind to watch their backs. They walked in a circuitous route that stopped abruptly at a heavy door that had been fitted against a large hole. As Boyd watched, Athea placed her light against the door and flashed it in a pattern that apparently gave them entry. There was a heavy groan and the large slab of metal slid aside.

They walked into a cavernous area. It was mostly empty, except for a small group of well-armed women who were crowded near a lean-to, discussing something in hushed tones. At the sight of Hsin and Boyd, the women fell silent and stared. Ghita, Athea and three others continued to guide Boyd and Hsin to a smaller entrance at the back.

Ghita walked them there before jerking her head to the side. “In you go.”

Boyd and Hsin did not take a step further. This close, it was clear it was a cell. Hsin’s body went rigid. “What is this?”

“We can’t trust you just yet. There must be a meeting. Leadership fell to me when we came together,” Athea said. “But this is a democracy. It has been since the world ended and all that was left in our lives was the twenty-six women who survived from the shelter. So, we’re careful. And you, Angel, are dangerous. You slaughtered those men with barely any effort and could do the same to us.”

“I understand your need to be cautious, but the cell is excessive. If Angel wished, he could have already killed you all,” Boyd said with a hint of steel in his tone.

“Regardless, we can’t just trust anyone. We’ve defended this area for going on two decades, and haven’t made it that long by trusting every formidable scavvie who comes along. We keep to our own ranks and trust only each other,” Athea said. “Before London fell, we were homeless, battered, or lost. Now we control one of the most sought-after underground spaces in the city.”

“What is this, some Amazonian catacomb community?”

Athea’s lips pursed at Hsin. “You can call us whatever you want, but we’re not to be dismissed because we are women. Rest assured.”

“People underestimate us.” Ghita sneered. “I’m sure you can work

out why.”

“Trust me,” Boyd said. “Some of the toughest, most resourceful people I know are women. We aren’t underestimating you. My partner and I were simply unaware of the structure of your group.”

Athea and Ghita remained unimpressed.

“Oh for fuck’s sake. I don’t like anyone. Women are the least of it. And we suck each other’s dicks like twice a day,” Hsin replied in his blandest tone. “Trust me, neither of us are that kind of potential problem.”

Boyd looked sidelong at Hsin, who shrugged.

Athea’s eyes twinkled in the dim lighting of the tunnel but her mouth didn’t so much as twitch. “Like I said, it’s not just for us to decide. We’ll vote.”

“And we stay in there while you vote?” Hsin demanded.

“It won’t be long.”

The women simply watched them, making the options clear: Go in or leave.

Boyd glanced at Hsin and read the question in his eyes. Boyd shifted his weight minutely toward the cell, and Hsin hesitated but ultimately stepped inside. A hidden door slid out and slammed shut behind them. Athea peered through a small grate in the center.

“We’ll be back.”

“What the fuck,” Boyd hissed when the sounds of footsteps faded.

Hsin looked at the walls and ceiling. His hands curled into fists, expression darkening. “The Snakes didn’t mention this part of the fucking initiation process.”

Boyd pressed his hand against Hsin’s lower back. “It’ll be okay. We won’t be in here long.”

“You don’t know that.” Hsin’s breath came out with a faint shudder. “I can take a lot. You know I can. But if they try to keep me in here, I’ll kill them all, Boyd. I will.”

“Hey.” Boyd pressed cold palms to Hsin’s cheeks, centering their gazes on one another. “You won’t have to. I will never let anyone cage you again, and if they try I will tear this place apart getting you out.” Dark amusement brought a ghost of a smile to his lips. “It wouldn’t be the first time, right? You know how far I’ll go for you. No matter what

they try to do, I'll be here and I'll fix it so you won't have to worry."

Hsin stared down at him, jaw clenched and body still coiled tight. After a beat, his eyes slid shut and he nodded.

"I'm just so tired of this."

Boyd didn't have to ask what 'this' was; it was the constant running, being at the mercy of others or luck, never knowing for sure where they would be sleeping each night or whether the people they tentatively relied on would betray their trust. Boyd sat on the floor with a sigh, and leaned against the wall.

He held his hand up, his palm open. "Sit with me?"

Hsin looked down at him. Their fingers clasped and he slid down the wall until he sat beside Boyd. Their shoulders bumped together and, after releasing another quiet breath, Hsin turned to embrace Boyd. Face pressed into Boyd's neck, Hsin didn't hide the weariness in his voice when he spoke again.

"It's always going to be like this. Brazil was the best we had and even that was..."

"It wasn't perfect. None of it is."

"I don't want us to live like this forever, but I don't know how the fuck it will ever change."

"As long as the Agency exists, it can't." Boyd pressed his cheek against Hsin's hair and looked at the barred grate in the door. "Have you changed your mind about not going back?"

Hsin's fingers tightened on Boyd's shirt. "No. I don't know." He paused and moved back so he could see Boyd's face. "Sometimes I think anything would be better than us having to be this way, but then I look at you—" He touched Boyd's eyepatch. "And the idea of going back makes me want to fucking destroy someone. I can't even imagine a goddamn reality where I would help them put themselves back together."

Boyd threaded his fingers through Hsin's hair. "I think about that, and what they did to you, and how almost everything that fucked up my family and me was their fault, and all I can see is the evil in them. I know I should also try to think of the good they did but it's hard to believe they'd change. I still worry about what's going to happen to the others."

“I know, but we can’t trust them. Everything he said could be a lie. Even about knowing where the others are, about... Carhart and my father.” Hsin grew quiet, his fingers tightening on Boyd. “He mentioned them for a reason. To lure me in and make me crave the resources they have to find them. In reality, they’re probably dead. Incinerated.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It’s a possibility. Your mother made it sound unlikely that they survived, and I know if Carhart died, my father wouldn’t be too far behind.” Shadows and resignation darkened Hsin’s features. “I really believe that, in the long run, if we don’t join them, we’ll have to try to finish them once and for all.”

Boyd ran his hands along Hsin’s back, down the curve of his spine and up to his neck. He couldn’t deny that he felt the same. This life had been difficult on both of them for different reasons. Lately, the weight of all of it had grown heavier on Hsin’s shoulders with each passing day. Boyd saw it in the exhaustion on Hsin’s face, the smiles becoming more fleeting, and the way he curled in on himself at night.

“I know this has been really hard on you, Hsin. I feel responsible.”

“Boyd, enough already with that.”

“No, listen. You didn’t trust the Guild and were hesitant about my plan to go after the Agency, but you followed me anyway. I know I’ve said before how little I trust the Agency or their offer but it doesn’t matter. It’s my turn to follow you anywhere. So if you’ve changed your mind, that’s okay. I’ll go back with you and we’ll make it work no matter what. All I need is you; I can deal with anything else.”

Hsin pressed their foreheads together, noses brushing. “I know what you’re saying, and I know why you’re saying it, but even though I spent most of my life on that compound... we can’t go back. Even if it means you and me wandering this ruined Earth and dodging bullets forever, I would never ask you to go back there.”

Boyd’s hands stilled. “Why not?”

Shaking his head, Hsin looked away at the grate in the door. “No matter who gave the direct order to send those fucking modded-out freaks after you, no matter who pulled the trigger and nearly killed my father and Carhart, even if they’re dead now, going back would be like acting as though those things never happened. Like they didn’t almost

destroy everyone I love after I finally learned that I could love anyone at all.”

Boyd let out a low breath. He couldn't deny the relief he felt at Hsin's words. His hands slid down Hsin's arms until their palms met and fingers interlocked. He kissed Hsin's knuckles. “I think that's best. I'm afraid of what they'd do to you if they got their hands on you again, no matter what they say.”

“Nothing good. Whatever it is that makes me the way I am it's because they spent so much time and money on me. As far as they're concerned, I'm not a person. I'm a product. They think I belong to them.”

A smile drew on Boyd's lips. “Well, as far as I'm concerned you belong to me, so they can fuck off.”

“Oh yeah?” Hsin's hand slid up to cup the back of Boyd's neck. “Maybe you should mark me just to make it clear.”

Their breath intermingled, but before their lips met, Boyd moved across Hsin's jaw and down, not quite touching until he brushed a light kiss on the side of Hsin's neck. Parting his lips, Boyd began to suck. Tongue piercing massaging Hsin's skin, Boyd took great pleasure in the sound of Hsin's breath quietly catching and his body subtly shifting toward Boyd's mouth. He bit down, not hard but enough to make indents, and licked the spot.

When he felt Hsin's fingers move up to tangle in his hair, Boyd trailed the open kisses upward. He caught his teeth lightly on Hsin's earlobe and sucked in, feeling the shiver in Hsin's muscles become more intense, the more he kneaded it with his tongue.

“How's that?” he murmured.

“It's enough to make me want to fuck you right here.”

A thrill went through Boyd's stomach. Their bodies aligned like magnets snapping into place, and with just as strong and compelling a force their lips crashed together. It began hungry and desperate; a need for release from this prison cell, from their lives. Hands caught in hair, breath sped, and tongues tangled between nipping teeth. Hsin's taste overwhelmed Boyd, made a sound like a whimper release from deep in his throat and catch against Hsin's groan. The kiss burned bright, hot as a candle flame, and dimmed just the same.



Frantic passion slowed and relaxed into the familiar, deeper intimacy of languid tongues and feather-soft kisses. Boyd became aware of their thundering hearts and the clench of Hsin's hands in his hair, on his back, softening into the gentle touch that had so fascinated him when they had first become lovers. They couldn't quite break apart yet, lips still brushing one another, breath still intermingling, until finally Boyd pulled himself back enough to focus on Hsin's face.

With Hsin's body solid and primed beneath his palms, it was tempting to push it further. Boyd wanted to feel Hsin strain and bend and break until all the tension that had been haunting him for the past two years could briefly, gloriously be absent. But it wasn't the right time or the right place, and as their gazes burned into one another, it was evident they both knew it.

Boyd smiled wistfully and closed his eyes, resting his head on Hsin's shoulder. "I love you."

Hsin pulled him closer, and Boyd could feel Hsin's heart running a counter beat to his own. Even though they were in a cell, even though their future was dark and uncertain before them, even though so many things could and probably would go wrong, Boyd felt almost serene with his body pressed flush against the man he loved. Hsin's heartbeat was his serenade and nothing else mattered.

Hsin ran his fingers through Boyd's hair and pressed a kiss to his head. "I've got plans for you whenever we're out of this situation."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"Like—" Hsin's arms tightened and the words shifted. "They're back."

Rising to his feet in one fluid movement, Hsin raked a hand through his hair. It was longer than it had been in a while, the black strands touching the nape of his neck and hanging around his face.

Boyd sighed and pulled away. The door creaked open as he turned. Athea was framed in the doorway with Ghita and two women standing behind them that Boyd didn't recognize.

"We've come to a decision."

Ghita moved closer behind Athea, hand still near her weapon. Boyd felt the subtle shift of Hsin's energy; preparing for a potential attack. The tension was slight, yet something Boyd felt as clearly as words after being at his lover's side for so many years. It made his stomach clench

and he shifted discreetly to a more stable stance.

Athea did not notice this or chose not to acknowledge it. “We have chosen to allow you to stay for a probationary period.”

“And our confinement?” Hsin asked with an edge.

The women looked at him, not seeming to miss the coil of his body, and the promise of danger in his eyes. It probably didn’t help their cause, but they’d already witnessed the extent of his brutality and power. Boyd knew it was better for people to see the true Hsin. He was dangerous, and it was best to let that be known.

“It isn’t permanent,” Athea answered. “We will contact the Snakes to verify you are who you say you are. We have worked with them enough to know how they vet their allies. If you do indeed know them, our people will feel safer.”

At their twin stares of distrust, she continued. “We aren’t doing this to be a problem to you, but some of our people are worried about the danger Angel can pose. They felt we’d be fools to lead you straight to our home where you can analyze our weaknesses or steal our supplies. We’ll provide you with water and food.”

When Hsin simply turned his head and stared at the wall in disgust, Boyd sighed and crossed his arms.

“Okay. Mind bringing us some blankets, though? I have a feeling it’ll get cold in here.”

Ghita and one of the women behind Athea exchanged a glance, but Athea simply nodded. “Of course. We’ll bring you a mattress as well, for more comfort. I assume you won’t need two?”

“One’s fine. Thank you. I’m confident you’ll realize soon enough that you can trust us. We really have no ulterior motives.”

“We’ll be the judges of that.”

Athea held up a hand to quiet Ghita. “We’ll be back within the hour with the provisions.”

At the unspoken dismissal, the women behind her stepped back and, without looking away from Hsin and Boyd, Athea shut the door. Although they could see through the small barred window, it felt that much darker when the lock clanked shut. If even Boyd could sense the slight shift, it had to be that much more oppressive to Hsin with his claustrophobia.

Boyd let out a sharp breath, puffing a fall of hair off his eyepatch.

“Well, I guess at least this means we have some privacy.”

“For now.” Hsin put a hand on Boyd’s shoulder, his fingers digging in. “I won’t be able to put up with this for long. I’m not going back to being locked in cages and only being allowed out to fight.”

“I know.” Boyd placed his hand on Hsin’s and squeezed. “What do you want us to do?”

For a moment, Hsin was silent. He inhaled slowly and his eyes rose to meet Boyd’s. “I’m tired of being hunted. I think it’s time we make the first move and go after them.”

1/27:05

*Karachi, Pakistan*

Harriet leaned back against the wall of the house and felt her hair catch on the rough plaster. She could hear the white noise of living in a city: the rush and ebb of distant traffic, a voice rising above the rest yelling at someone (Urdu, she absently noted, although she still could not understand a word they were saying), and the nearer sounds of their neighbors watching some show with the windows open. She didn't have to follow the sound to know who it was. Hannes was like clockwork—always in the kitchen making breakfast with the TV going at the same time every morning. He tended to talk to himself in German.

Expats primarily lived in the area which left many of them in a transitory state between wanting to communicate with others and not wanting to reveal too much depending on their profession. Being around people in a similar situation was interesting but on days like this, Harriet wished they could have found somewhere a little closer to the shore. It would have been nice to look out on the Arabian Sea while smoking—a bad habit she had picked up after too much time spent around Doug.

Harriet took a last drag off her cigarette and stubbed it out in the clay pot they had converted into an ashtray. It hadn't taken them long to realize that their attempt at owning a plant had been foolish and in vain.

Lifting the hem of her tank to knot at the side, she walked through the backyard of the house and re-armed the security system when the door shut. Her clothes were soaked through with sweat from working

out in the sunlight. Even after months of living in Karachi, she kept thinking it would be cooler than 26°C in the morning.

After kicking off her sneakers, Harriet walked into the kitchen and saw that Archer was not only home from wherever he'd been at nine in the morning, but he'd also brewed a pot of coffee.

"Where were you earlier?" she asked, grabbing a mug.

"Getting us a job. Doug still sleeping?"

Harriet filled the mug and brought it to her lips. It was strong and bitter. Mornings were always better when Archer made the coffee. "Yeah, he came stumbling home in the middle of the night. I don't know if he'll be of much use any time soon."

Archer grunted. He dragged one of the chairs out from the kitchen table and dropped down. One arm rested on the back, and a hand wrapped around his mug's handle. "He'll have to wake up fast. We leave in four hours."

"Four hours?" Harriet stared at him dubiously. "What's the job?"

"Escort to Islamabad for some rich asshole."

"Oh boy. You guys' favorite type of thing, but it's better than we've had in the past month."

Archer snorted and then took a long drink of coffee. "Better than rotting in this hellhole. If I had to spend another week doing jack shit in this city I'd fucking go insane."

"Yeah, and the lack of anything to do only contributes to Doug's drinking. He's been worse than usual lately."

Archer's hawk-like stare settled on the staircase. At length, he finished off his coffee.

"I had to wake him last time," he commented.

"I knew that one was coming. Don't you think it's more effective when you go marching in there?"

There was a twitch of Archer's eyebrows and, she could have sworn, his lips.

"He likes waking up to you more than me. You do it and maybe he'll be less of a pain in the ass when we spring this job on him."

"Ha. There will be no end to the bitching about how this job is only boredom on wheels." Harriet stood and nudged his shoulder with her hand.

“Right. And we’ll already have one person bitching the whole way. No need to add another if we can avoid it.”

“If the client doesn’t like it, which he won’t because they never like our little trio, they should have held on tighter to their original squad. I’m assuming this is last minute for a reason.”

“It is. You heard of the passenger ship taken by pirates on Monday? Off Yemen?”

“Yeah. Doug said he wished he’d been on the ship so he’d have something interesting to do.”

“If he’d taken up with Rocco’s crew on that side job two months back, he’d have been on it.”

That gave her pause. In their time living in the region, Rocco’s crew of mercs had become something close to allies, as ex-soldiers scrambled for work like scavengers. Rocco had sniffed them out as pros early on, and showed interest in joining up after a while.

“Are they dead?”

“Don’t know, but they’re gone. No one knew until today when they were supposed to show for this shitty escort job. When Qadir heard Rocco was out, he called to see if we were available. Apparently the client wants some mercs who know the local area.” Archer shrugged. “So, short notice.”

“Goddamn.” Harriet thought about Rocco and the guys, their resourcefulness and endless enthusiasm. “I’ll be surprised if they didn’t make it. But if it’s true, we can drink to them after the job. They’d like that.”

Archer nodded. “If local law enforcement haven’t gotten their shit together and figured it out by the time we return, I’m jumping in. If Rocco’s still alive they’ll need backup. But it’s too soon for any intel on where the passengers went.”

“Well count me in for anything, Archer. You know that.” Harriet nodded towards Doug’s room. “And that asshole too, I’m sure.”

“Good. Speaking of.” He looked at her pointedly.

“Fine, fine. I’m going.”

Harriet drained her mug and set it down with a thump before leaving the kitchen. She debated changing into something less revealing than her workout clothes, but the modesty boat had sailed over a year ago

when alcohol and sexual frustration had led to her and the Australian getting horizontal on more than one occasion. It had seemed strange when it first happened, but now the situation had normalized just like everything else that had happened with the three of them since the Agency had succumbed to gunshots, grenades and hellfire.

Taking the stairs two at a time, Harriet strode through the dim hallway that led to his door and did not bother to knock. Doug's room was so mismatched from the rest of the house that sometimes walking into it was like crossing the threshold into an alternate reality. Whereas she and Archer were eerily similar in terms of being organized and neat, Doug was a sloth who couldn't be assed to do more than pick up his dishes a couple times a week. His clothes were balled in a mound in front of the closet, workout equipment, armor and weapons strewn across a vanity, and a half-filled duffel bag open with things exploding out of it in the center of the floor. For a man a decade older than she, it was a lot like living with a teenage boy.

Shaking her head and kicking a sneaker out of the way, Harriet approached the bed and stood over it. There was a Doug-shaped lump beneath a sheet with only one foot and some of his jet black hair peeking out on opposite ends.

"Doug, get your ass up."

When he didn't so much as twitch, Harriet rolled her eyes and ripped the sheet off him and tossed it aside. It was damp with sweat, and beneath it he was mostly naked, wearing only a pair of black briefs. She raised her hand to slap his ass, but paused just before making contact.

Despite being an obnoxious bastard and an overgrown child, Doug was nice to look at and Harriet enjoyed the view more when he was unconscious. Deeply tanned skin poured over a carefully cultivated muscular body, and all of that messily tousled black hair made for a gorgeous package that was constantly ruined by him running his mouth. Harriet was convinced that it was only his Australian accent that drew the women in even after he'd begun talking his bullshit to them, and that was why she and Archer had had to come up with strict guidelines under which Doug was allowed to bring someone home. After living together for months and realizing that his drinking and fucking only got more extreme after the reality of the raid had set in, they'd had to keep

him in check.

The alternative had been splitting ways but Archer, and surprisingly she, had been reluctant to send the Australian on his way. Especially after one night when he'd broken down and cried for hours over the loss of Emilio.

Something in her softened and Harriet rolled her eyes, putting a hand on his shoulder to shake instead. "Hey, get up. We have things to do."

"Mmm."

"Doug, get up!"

He groaned and rolled onto his back, squinting up at her despite the fact that the room was dim. His bright blue eyes were bloodshot. "Fuck off, Harriet. I'm hungover."

Harriet looked him over to check for signs of having been in a fight, but spotted nothing other than the way his dick was erect and stretching out the front of his briefs. When her eyes lingered, Doug's mouth widened into a grin.

"Like what you see, right? I guess it's been a while since you've had the pleasure."

"More like been a while since I've been drunk enough to consider fucking you."

"Mmm, I love it when you get all blunt and sassy."

"Shut up and get your ass out of bed." This time, she did raise her hand to hit him and he scooted away, scowling.

"Hands off unless you're bein' nice, little girl. You've gotten all deluded lately thinkin' I've basically become your bitch."

Harriet's eyes lowered into slits and again, she surveyed him. It only took a moment for her to shift gears and allow the flat-lipped frown to curl into a smirk as she raised her eyebrows and moved closer to the bed. "Who said I was going to hit you?"

"Well, that's all you fuckin' do! I've got half a mind to put you in your place, but I can't bring myself to hit such a pretty girl."

Her brow twitched, and her desire to smack him intensified. She ignored it. "Is that a fact?"

Doug shrugged, still scowling when she lowered herself on the bed next to him. "I dunno. Maybe. Maybe I'm just talkin' shit, yeah?"

"As always." Harriet turned sideways on the bed and stretched out



next to him, not missing how he smelled strongly of booze, cigarettes and sweat. Harriet reached up to push hair away from his eyes but he shied away defensively, scrunching up his face.

“What’re you doin’?”

“Playing nice. Isn’t that what you wanted me to do?”

“Well, yeah, but I didn’t expect you to do it.”

“Why not? You’re looking good this morning.”

“I’m always lookin’ good, love. It’s a fuckin’ gift.” Doug shifted on the bed, fingers curling when she finally pushed the hair away. Her other hand slid down to cup the bulge in the tight black cotton of his briefs, and Doug’s mouth fell open partially. When she squeezed, his dick pulsed and he sucked in a breath. “Fuck.”

“Do you always wake up this hard?”

“Yeah.” Doug licked his lips and rocked against her hand. “Pretty much, yeah.”

Harriet slid her hand up, rubbing his dick with more pressure. “Isn’t that a little inconvenient?”

“Sometimes. Like when you’re on a fuckin’ mission and need to be ready for action with somethin’ other than an eight-inch cock.” Doug’s eyes scanned her face as if searching for a sign that this would end up as a joke and a pair of blue balls, but when she peeled down the band of his underwear and closed her fingers around the girth of his dick, he groaned. “Oh, yes, baby.”

A low laugh bubbled up in her throat and she started to pump her hand slowly, the pad of her thumb pressing against the slit of his dick. She watched as he bit his lip and looked down, appearing fascinated by the sight of her warm, sure hand working him over and causing his skin to flush and breathing to pick up.

“D’ya want my cock, Harriet?”

“Maybe. But it seems more like you want my hand.” Harriet squeezed tighter but kept the speed agonizingly slow.

“More,” he said gruffly, meeting her stare again.

“More what?”

“Faster,” he said, voice coming out with a harsh breath. “Jerk it faster.”

Harriet complied. “Like that?”

“Oh—oh, yes.” Doug’s head dropped back against the pillow and he

canted his hips up, humping against her hand. “Oh fuck yes, please.”

“Please what?”

“Please don’t stop,” he moaned, brows screwing up. Pre-come oozed from his slit, and she ignored the way her own body clenched as the hand job got a bit sticky. She jerked him with more urgency, increasing the pressure, and listened as his breathing got erratic and his moans got more frequent.

“Your dick is dripping.”

Doug groaned wordlessly, thrusting into her hand.

“Sometimes I forget how big you get when you’re hard.”

“Oh fuck, Harriet. Keep talkin’, yeah? Make me come?”

She bit back a smile, enjoying the high pitch in his voice and the way he opened his eyes to stare at her with naked desperation.

“Can I touch you, please?”

“No, this is fine.” Harriet tightened her grip, swallowing thickly. The deep moans dripping from his mouth were making her wet. The idea of straddling him and using his dick wasn’t bad, but she liked to save that for when she could write it off as a drunken mistake and not a deliberate act. His ego would inflate even more if he knew she enjoyed riding him.

“Please, Harriet,” he pleaded when she leaned closer to him. His Adam’s apple bobbed when he swallowed. “Please, kiss me.”

“No.”

Doug released a frustrated whimper that quickly transformed into a guttered groan when she twisted her hand and jerked him with just enough speed and pressure to make him explode. He came with a sharp cry, shooting all over himself and moaning her name. It made up for her brief moment of regret at not getting off with him.

“Mmm. Fuck, yes,” he whispered. “Nice.”

Harriet raised her hand and pressed it against his lips. “Clean me off.” When he complied, she patted the side of his face. “Good boy.”

Doug’s eyes flew open. “The fuck?”

“So much for you not being my bitch.”

“Now, you wait a second....”

Harriet stood up and wiped her hand against her track shorts, a wider grin stealing over her face. “How many times did you beg me? You even said my name at the end.”

“Well—well, what d’ya expect?” he exclaimed. “You were milkin’ my cock like a goddamn... like a fuckin’—”

“Don’t be embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed!”

“I enjoyed the show. You have a lovely come face.”

Doug glared at her. “You don’t love me at all, do you? I reckon you just like makin’ me your little slut.”

“Yeah, pretty much.” When he flipped her off, Harriet couldn’t hold in her laughter anymore. She patted his thigh. “Now get up. We’ve got work to do.”

He grabbed a T-shirt from the floor and used it to wipe his chest. His face was set in sullen lines, pouting in a way that was almost charming despite him being far too old for the games. “Work, eh? What work?”

“Archer secured us an escort gig. Bodyguarding some rich asshole on his way to Islamabad.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be shittin’ me.” Doug stood, his muscles rippling as he stretched and then adjusted his dick unashamedly while she looked on. “I hate them fuckin’ bodyguard jobs. Can’t you just leave me here?”

“How would you feel if one of us got shot because you wanted to stay back and drink?”

“Dunno,” he admitted. “But I bet my sweet ass you’d be regrettin’ not spendin’ the day sittin’ on my face instead of runnin’ off to get your brains blown out by someone tryin’ to kidnap this fucker.”

“Jesus, Douglas.”

“What? I know how much you like having my tongue up your—”

Harriet clapped her hand over his mouth and started to shove his face backwards, but he caught her arm and twisted until he had her pinned against the wall. Doug pressed his face into her neck and inhaled deeply.

“You smell good, baby.”

“I smell like sweat. Unlike your lazy ass, I spent the morning working out.”

“You know I like it dirty.”

She slammed her elbow back and scowled when he took the hit without even attempting to dodge out of the way. “Come on, Doug. We already had our fun for the day. We need to get going.”

Doug sighed and pulled away. When she turned, he was rubbing his

chest. “What’s the big rush?”

“We leave in four hours.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ, Harriet. You two are the absolute worst partners ever.”

Harriet snorted and started for the door. “Get ready, asshole. And make it quick.”

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After living in Pakistan for nearly two years, they had built enough of a reputation to make connections with contractors that were willing to pass them jobs on a freelance basis. Rocco and his crew worked for a private military company that extended to them regularly, and a man named Qadir often acted as the go-between.

Qadir informed them that their newest client went only by the name Adnan, was worth billions, and had a high chance of being abducted if he was in the wrong hands. They didn’t realize Adnan was a goddamn teenager until they met to finalize the first half of payment.

“You’ve got to be pulling my fuckin’ chain.” Doug stared at the kid and then turned to Archer. “I know we all joke about babysitting, but fuck man, I didn’t mean it literally.”

Their charge wasn’t even Pakistani. The little bastard had skin paler than an infant born in Norway, blond hair, and a scrawny body poured into the kind of clothes that would get him snatched up in a heartbeat; all designer and costing more than Archer’s car.

Doug waited for Archer to demand a goddamn explanation, but the sniper just approached ‘Adnan’ with a grim face, and finished the transaction.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”

“Just relax, Doug,” Harriet said. “It could be worse.”

“I’m not a motherfucking babysitter, woman.” Doug cast a baleful look around the large house. “I’m a fighter and a goddamn former assassin.”

“No, you’re not.” Harriet clamped her hand around Doug’s wrist, fingers digging in. “You’re nothing. Just like me and just like Archer. Three transient nobodies with no home and no real employer. And no

money. So shut the fuck up, and take the job. Don't mess this up for us."

He ripped his arm away, teeth grit. The rage was boiling and he wanted nothing more than to ream them both in front of their new client, but she had a point.

"Fine. Whatever you want, lovely. I'll keep my fucking mouth shut."

"Doug, it's *money*. Easy money."

"Yeah, all right. Whatever."

Harriet released him with a hissed exhale. "How did you ever manage as an agent?"

"I didn't."

Archer trudged back to them looking like someone had electrocuted his balls. "American family, not giving up real names. We travel in his vehicle to Islamabad, and we get a bonus to rent our own van to take back to Karachi. His father doesn't trust public transportation—"

"No shit with a kid looking like that. He's begging for a flash kidnapping and a fat ransom."

"—and his vehicle is armored. He has a team of bodyguards who will shadow us on motorbikes and auto rickshaws, but his father wanted mercs in the car to cover all his bases."

Doug scoffed and shoved a cigarette between his lips. "Spermicide would have covered his bases better."

Harriet smirked a little, but Archer tossed him a flat stare.

"Just deal with it," he said stonily. "It's the best money we've had in a while."

"Yeah, thank you, I just heard it from this one." Doug jerked his chin at Harriet, still scowling. "Let's get this shitshow on the road."

For the first few hours of the trip, they were silent. The van was bulletproof, reinforced, and not that dissimilar to the Agency's vans except it had two bench seats in the back that faced each other instead of rails to cuff prisoners.

The kid popped a pill and fell asleep almost instantly. Doug was thankful. Somehow, he'd gotten screwed and stuck in the back while Archer drove and Harriet rode shotgun. The kid snored louder than a fucking blitzkrieg, so Doug reached between the front seats and flipped on the radio. A while later Harriet turned it to a different channel. Sometime after that, Archer turned it off. Doug tapped his fingers on his

thighs and tried to ignore his raging headache.

“Fuck all, this is so borin’.”

“And here I thought you wouldn’t complain anymore,” Harriet said.

“You wish, sweetheart. I only kept it shut this long because I owe you an orgasm.”

“Jesus, can you keep anything quiet?” She turned and pinned him with a lethal glare.

“Oi! There ain’t no secrets between Archer and me. We known each other since we was baby agents.” Doug grinned and leaned forward, shoving Archer’s shoulder. “Ain’t that right, mate?”

“Even if that weren’t true, you’re both terrible at keeping personal secrets.”

“How do you figure?” Harriet demanded.

“Doug can’t be fucked to lie and you’re shit at lying to friends. And—” Archer swerved into the tiny space between an overloaded bus and a motorcycle. “You have a tell.”

“What the hell? I do not.”

Archer snorted. “I’ve known you eight fucking years, Harry. You have a tell. I could beat your ass at poker if I ever wanted.”

“What’s her tell? Give it up, man. I dunno it since she didn’t even bother hidin’ what she thought of me back when I was her trainer.”

Harriet scoffed. “Maybe because you were an abominable dick.”

“That’s how I broke you little fuckrags in. If you can’t survive a trainin’ sesh with me, you goddamn sure wouldn’t have lasted beyond probation.” Doug tilted his chin at Archer. “So?”

“Figure it out yourself.”

“Oh, fuck off.” Doug waved his hand dismissively. “She’s the one who will be up all night tryin’ to work it out.”

“As long as *you* don’t know, I’m fine with the mystery,” Harriet said.

When Doug flipped her off, she snickered and they drifted back into silent vigilance. Or so he thought. It seemed their conversation had dragged the kid out of his medicated slumber, and he was blinking watery doe eyes at Doug and Harriet.

“So you two are doing it?”

“Doing what?”

The kid sniffed and ran a hand through his sloppy Mohawk. It looked

like he had given it to himself while stoned or drunk. “You’re fucking that black chick?”

Doug’s hand twitched, and it was only Harriet reaching back to grab his collar that prevented him giving the kid a smack hard enough to send his face through the window. The kid threw himself back against the seat, laughing.

“Relax, man. I’m kidding!”

“Watch your fucking mouth or I’ll send daddy back your teeth.” Doug pulled away from Harriet and rolled his shoulders. “You got that?”

The kid rolled his eyes. “No need to be such a toon, man. That chick isn’t even getting this uptight.”

“Keep talkin’, and I’ll show you uptight.”

“Calm down.” Archer looked in the rearview mirror.

Doug pulled out a pack of cigarettes, nearly snapping one in half with his tense movements. Harriet unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed into the back to sit on the bench beside him. The kid gave her a big smile, eyes wandering all over the exposed amount of leg and thigh beneath her shorts.

“Man, if that was my partner I’d want to do her too.”

Harriet patted Doug on the shoulder and leaned forward, elbows on her knees. She smiled. “Where are you from, kid?”

Adnan hesitated then lifted his chin and cracked the same cocky grin. “California.”

“Yeah? Whereabouts?”

“I can’t say, but it doesn’t matter. If you want to party, we can do it anywhere. We can do it tonight when your two friends get lost and give us some privacy.”

Harriet’s laugh interrupted Doug’s snarl, and she squeezed his thigh.

“Let me ask you kid—what do you know about Krav Maga?”

Adnan shrugged. “I dunno.”

“What about Jiu Jitsu? Muay Thai?”

“Look, I don’t know martial arts, but I know how to work my dick. I’ll show you—”

Harriet leaned closer, eyebrows rising as Doug looked on.

“What do you know about guns? I, myself, prefer an XM8, but my friend up front likes a nice Tac-50 and a headshot from 2,500 yards

away.”

Adnan’s eyes flicked to Archer and back to Harriet. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you’re presently in a vehicle with a sniper with 500 confirmed kills, a man who could kill us all with his bare hands, and a jack-of-all-trades with a Mensa IQ who can fuck your world up if you get on my bad side.” Harriet walked her fingers up the kid’s torso, traipsing them up his chin, lips and then flicking his nose. “So, why don’t you keep your goddamned mouth shut?”

Adnan sat back, his lower lip protruding. “Whatever...”

Harriet nodded. “I’m glad we could come to an agreement.” She relaxed in the seat next to Doug, and his face split in a grin.

“So much for being nothing.”

She rolled her eyes and elbowed him in the side. “Shut up.”

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By the time late afternoon approached and the van was roasting, they were well out of Karachi and Adnan was demanding they stop for the evening. He’d stayed quiet for the rest of the ride, but was still causing them to lose four hours of road time just because he was bored. Spoiled little fuck.

Mood sunk and patience frayed, Doug was grinding his teeth by the time it was determined they would stay on Indus Highway to head to Larkana for the night. Adnan’s detail would cover the perimeter of the hotel, but one of them would have to stay by the kid’s room. They weren’t supposed to let him out of sight for even a moment. Being the goddess of patience that she was, Harriet volunteered for first watch.

Sleep would have been nice, but it didn’t come easy. In fact, it didn’t come at all, and Doug resigned himself to a reality of making the trip to Islamabad with bloodshot eyes and a bad temper the next morning. He rolled out of bed and grabbed a cigarette. Unsurprisingly, Archer was awake too.

“Can’t sleep?”

“Nah.” Doug shoved a cigarette between his lips and ran a hand through his hair. He was sweating despite the cranked-up air



conditioner. “You neither?”

Sheets rustled, and in the shadows, a darker shape rose to slump forward on the other bed. Archer grunted and turned to lean back against the wall with his legs stretched out in front of him.

“It’s too damn hot. And I keep thinking that idiot kid is going to get himself kidnapped sneaking out for booze or some other stupid shit and we’ll have to track him down. Who the hell stops five hours into a seventeen-hour trip? It would’ve been safer on the road at night and I’d’ve liked to get his ass off our hands sooner than later.”

Doug opened one of the windows and leaned against the wall next to it. “That’s what’s been in my head all day, handsome. After Harriet shut little Adnan down, I tried to cut out my usual naggin’ since I figured I better get used to my trivial fuckin’ existence or just blow my brains out.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Doug heard more rustling, followed by quiet footsteps. Archer clapped a hand on Doug’s shoulder. Doug leaned in to the touch before Archer pulled away.

“What’s going on with you?”

Doug exhaled a puff of smoke. “What you mean?”

“You seem miserable lately. Something happen?”

“You starting to read me pretty well, ain’t you handsome? I got a tell too?”

Archer smiled. “Everyone has tells if you pay attention.”

“I guess paying attention is your job, sniper.” Doug took another deep drag of the cigarette, eyes cutting to the window and the blur of lights outside.

“I was good at being a sniper because I’m observant. But I got news for you; you aren’t my job, Ferguson. You’re my friend. And you’re redirecting.”

Doug sighed, rolling his eyes. “I dunno, man. Just lately I been wishin’ someone would just give me a king hit to the back of my head and put me out of my fuckin’ misery. Existence is bloody futile.”

“Why?”

“Oh, c’mon. What am I good for lately? Get tanked, get laid from randoms, go on pointless assignments that we scrounge up for chump change. It’s a laugh. The best part of it is you and Harriet, but fuck, man

—I kind of miss havin’ a fuckin’ purpose. At least with the Agency I felt like I was good for somethin’.”

“I know what you mean.” Archer’s back pressed against a closed window. “I miss knowing that the missions we worked were part of a larger picture. Even if I didn’t know what it was, I knew it was there.”

Doug nodded. “Right. Yeah. I mean, I fuckin’ hated that job sometimes, you know? I trained those little shits for months only to watch them come back in a body bag or not at all on their first few missions, but at least I gave ‘em somethin’ to work with. And it wasn’t boring.”

A slow grin flickered on Archer’s face. “Remember that raid in ’98? The clusterfuck after Cameron ignored protocol because he was so fucking sure he knew Santiago better than R&D after tailing the guy for so long?”

Doug slid down the side of the wall to sprawl on the floor, and returned the smile. “Yeah, that idiot. He thought he had all the damn answers, and we were slowing him down. That fucker would have sacrificed us all to save his own ass, though. He and Emilio together on a mission were a goddamn mess.”

“They were lucky I didn’t hogtie the both of them and leave them in the safe house some days. Cameron was a cocky fuck and Emilio always seemed a step away from wasting him.”

“Oh, he was. There was bad blood there since Cam dragged Vega from whatever slum they found him in down in Mexico. That’s what happens when a fuckin’ sociopath meets a fuckin’ psychopath, you know?” Doug coughed around a cloud of smoke. “Not that I’m sure which was which.”

“I think they both had the qualities. What was the deal with you two, anyway?”

“Whatcha mean?”

“You and Emilio. You were... close. Until Zachary.”

Doug raised an eyebrow. “What you mean close, son? Tryin’ to imply shit?”

“Well, if you’re going to be that dense about it, I won’t imply anything. I’m fairly certain the two of you fucked around at least once. So?” He looked at Doug intently. “What’s the deal?”

“Oi, don’t beat around the bush or nothing. Jesus.” Doug scratched the stubble covering his jaw and took a long drag. He exhaled, causing smoke to fill the air between them. “Me and Vega had our, er, moments, but it wasn’t like that. He was my best mate, but I wasn’t in love with him like every other cunt on the compound. He was the first person I could call a friend in that place, and everyone who came after died in the bombs. Camille, Alicia, Scott, fuck—even Cameron. All of ‘em dead ‘cept you, Bree and Emilio. Y’know?”

“Yeah,” Archer said soberly. “I know.”

Doug nodded. “Yeah... yeah, so, after the bombings and whatnot I just had it. Didn’t want to make no new friends, and definitely not no brownnosing bitch like Zachary Carhart. I stayed by my lonesome except Emilio, and after he died there wasn’t nothing. Just me and the quarter of my trainees who actually made it past the first few fucking missions. I dunno, man. I dunno what it is, but that little motherfucker has always been special to me because of all we’d been through together. It ain’t romantic, but I do love him. The idea of him being dead, incinerated, breaks my goddamned heart.”

Archer nodded at length. “I can understand that.”

Ashing the cigarette out the window, Doug was silent for a stretch before seeking out Archer’s eyes in the darkness. “Do you ever miss anyone?”

“David. We used to spar sometimes. I miss working with Kassian’s crew. Blair was a strange kid but he’d take me up in the air sometimes where we just watched the world below.”

Doug wondered if David Nakamura had survived the riot, but he didn’t voice the thought. “Kassian was a good man. One of my favorite of the kids I trained. Though I gotta say... I always thought it was weird that he was *your* team leader. The fuck was up with that, anyways? You got no ambition, man?”

Archer’s strong shoulders rose and fell, the light playing off his muscles in the dark. “There was nothing good about being a 10. Everyone thought you had more options but you didn’t. Every rank 10 but Emilio and Zach died back in the day, and the kids haven’t fared better. Kassian turned into an alcoholic after Russia, they drove Hsin insane and kept him locked up like an animal, and Boyd came back

strung out with anger problems after his first long-term assignment. It was like a fucking soap opera at that level.”

“You’ve got a point there. All the functional 10s died in the fuckin’ bombings, and then asshole Connors took over and nothin’ was the same.”

“I don’t know what the hell they taught the 10s after that, or what they made them do, but it fucked them all up in the head. Emilio is the only one who didn’t go nuts. ‘Course, he was crazy from the start.” Archer dropped his head back against the windowpane. “I miss the Agency sometimes. Other times I like the freedom we have now.”

“That’s the bane of my middle-aged angst right there, sir.” Doug’s fingers twitched with the desire to light another cigarette. He repressed the urge. “At least Harriet is happy.”

Archer pushed away from the window and shifted in front of Doug. His hands landed heavily on Doug’s shoulders. “You’re looking at it wrong. Harriet isn’t happy, but she knows what she has to do to survive. So do I. And neither of us are attached to Pakistan.”

He shook Doug and the invasive stare was back. “You need a change, Doug, not death. We have something good with the three of us, so if you think I’m gonna let you waste away on my watch, you’re a goddamn idiot. If you’re unhappy with the way things are, let’s change it up. Try somewhere new. You don’t have to suffer in silence.”

It wasn’t the first time Archer or Harriet had implied they’d stick with him wherever, but it was the first time Archer had said it so explicitly. Doug stared up at Archer with a wan smile.

“Thanks, mate.”

“No problem.” Archer squeezed Doug’s shoulders one last time, and then dropped his hands. His gaze returned to the lights outside the window, hazy through the cloud of smoke. “Besides, we should enjoy this while it lasts. Things won’t always be this calm.”

1/27:06

*Mexico City, Mexico*

The shattered blue-and-yellow mosaic tiles crunched beneath Kassian's feet. After walking in silence and blending with the shadows for nearly an hour, the remains of the *vecindad* were what betrayed his stealth. He flew into a rolling crouch at the sound of guns cocking, his own weapon snapping out in case bullets unleashed before words.

“¿Qué quieres?” a voice demanded.

“*Estoy buscando a alguien que vive aquí,*” Kassian called into the darkness.

“¿Quién es?”

Kassian flexed his fingers on the grip of the gun. Shooting one of the men who guarded the sprawling tenement complex would land him in the kind of hot water that already had him ducking into shadows, but he wasn't sure if Ryan was still going by the same name.

“He calls himself—*se hace llamar...Ghost.*”

There was a pause long enough for Kassian to peek around the side of the wall. There were two men standing just inside the archway that led into the *vecindad's* courtyard. Illuminated only by the flickering lamps sitting on the crumbling remains of a fountain, he saw that the men were actually teenage boys. Their Spanish was good, accents better than his, but neither of them looked like a native. The boy holding a sawed off shotgun was as blond as him and the other looked Chinese.

Both teens were ashen and emaciated with bruised, darting eyes that reminded Kassian of the VR junkies that he'd begun to see with more

frequency. People so addicted to the false world of a VR rift they only stepped outside to seek a fix of something that would keep them hopped up and plugged in longer. Kassian had seen a lot of shit in his lifetime, but the combination of gaming and drug addiction creating a generation of people who could no longer tell reality from VR was not something he had expected.

“What do you want with Ghost?” the blond asked.

“I need to ask a favor.”

“A favor is free. If you want to see Ghost, you better come correct with money.”

Kassian looked between the two boys again and uncoiled from his crouch. Going on the instinct that they weren’t actually cold-blooded killers, he slid his gun back into its holster and faced them fully. “We’re old friends.”

“I never seen you before.”

“I haven’t seen Ghost in over a year.”

The words said aloud packed more of a punch than the reality he’d been living since he and Ryan had split ways.

Kassian looked beyond the boys to take in the rest of the slummy tenement. He wondered which of the doors behind the rusted balcony belonged to Ryan. The place was in shambles with weeds springing up from between the cracked tiles in the courtyard, and parts of the interconnected structures falling apart. Decades ago, it had probably belonged to one of the city’s wealthy elite. Now, the place belonged to kids like these. Kassian would bet that the whole place was full of squatters, and not rent-controlled in any way.

It made sense. Mexico City was one of the most diverse cities on the continent now, and this particular neighborhood attracted a glut of the poverty-stricken, disenfranchised foreigners that had migrated to the country after the war. It wasn’t the type of area he’d have chosen for Ryan, but he’d given up rights on those opinions after killing two of the former R&D agent’s friends.

“Why so paranoid?” Kassian asked when the kids continued to regard him with wariness. “I’m harmless. To you.”

The Chinese kid smirked and lowered his pistol. His inky dark hair hung well below his shoulders and the smartass expression reminded

Kassian of someone he hadn't seen in years. "People are trying to claim this place, and we're not letting it go so easy."

"Owner?"

"Nope."

The kid didn't seem too keen on explaining, so Kassian jerked his chin up at the balconies. "Where can I find Ghost? I'm not here to fuck with him. I know him. It took me a week to track him down to this place."

"Why didn't you call him, then?"

"Changed his number."

"Guess you're not that good of a friend," the blond sniped.

"Kid, just tell me which fucking door is his before I shove my foot up your ass."

The sawed-off jerked up and Kassian forced himself to keep his arms at his sides when the kid shoved it against his neck. Tilting his head back, Kassian took the measure of the kid from beneath his eyelashes.

"Don't take it there, kid," he murmured. "You don't want it."

"I could blow you away right now, *cabrón*."

"If you had the balls to do it, it would have happened already."

The blond sneered and leaned in, lips parting to say something else, but as soon as his feet shifted Kassian's hand shot out and grabbed the barrel. He twisted it out of the guy's hand and shoved the muzzle into his cheek.

"Jesus, Kev," the Chinese kid muttered.

"Now tell me where the fuck Ghost is."

The blond's face radiated hatred but his hand flung out, bandaged fingers indicating a faded-yellow door on the far side of the courtyard. Kassian flashed a grim smile and sent the two on their way. He kept the sawed-off as a souvenir and told himself next time he wouldn't be so generous.

The *vecindad* was quiet but Kassian's hackles rose and his hands tightened around the shotgun. With each step, the weight of stares burning into his back tripled. He knew there were dozens of people tracking his every move with suspicious eyes or through the scope of a gun, so he didn't so much as shift an inch out of his trajectory. Kassian knew without a doubt that he could take any of the punk-ass riflers

squatting in the bohemian hellhole, but stirring up trouble wasn't what he'd intended. That was what had caused trouble between him and Ryan last time.

Kassian stopped in front of the door that allegedly belonged to Ryan, raised a fist to knock, but paused. He shoved the sawed off into the back of his pants and ran a hand through his dingy hair, thinking he could have benefitted from a cut and a shave. Also, a change of clothes. He didn't look much better than the band of delinquents guarding the *vecindad*.

A jittery feeling stole down his spine. Kassian's fingers spasmed as his stomach knotted up with anticipation. Pushing it aside and focusing on his purpose, Kassian rapped his knuckles against the door three short times, paused, and then knocked again. The rhythm had been a code they'd established early on in their escape from Lexington, back when they had moved every two weeks until they'd found somewhere they could blend. Ryan's bitterness about Kassian's decision to leave Emilio and Zach had faded in those early days when all they had had were each other, the comforting weight of a gun strapped to their bodies and the darkness that hid them, and their need to get closer in vain attempts to block everything else out.

Kassian took a step back from the door. He squinted in the gloom, barely making out a metal reflective plate drilled into the top of the door. There were no other signs that anyone had upgraded the century-old property, but Ryan likely had the place wired to high hell for security or contingency in case the wrong person found him.

The wooden floor on the other side of the door creaked and Kassian licked his lips, bouncing on the balls of his feet while his heart pounded. But it wasn't Ryan who appeared when the door swung open. It was a big dude with a mean mug wearing a pair of skintight briefs that exposed his bulge. He loomed in the doorway and glared.

"You got the wrong door."

Kassian's fingers curled into fists. "The kid told me Ghost lives here."

The guy cocked his head to the side, dark eyes skimming over Kassian. "What do you want with Ghost?"

"That's for me and him to talk about."

The man's look sharpened into something darker. He took a step out



the door, only leaving an inch of space between his bare chest and Kassian's armored one. The urge to aim a gun at the motherfucker's head was strong, but Kassian had long ago recognized that a decade of Agency employment had left him with a quick trigger finger and a lack of patience for civilians who challenged him. They stared at each other, and this close Kassian could see metal glinting along the guy's temples and in the sides of his neck. He had VR hardware embedded in his flesh.

"I'll ask you one more time before this turns into a problem."

Kassian stopped staring at the bits of metal and shifted into a defensive stance. "You're already making it a problem by being in my face."

The man scowled and started to close the remaining gap between them, but a voice stopped him cold.

"Twan, cut the shit."

Kassian's eyes swung to the doorway and opened up wide when Ryan appeared. He was as aggressively thin as ever and his black hair resembled the long mess of curls and cowlicks that it had been when they'd first met, but everything else about Ryan's appearance had changed. Ink covered his body liberally, tattoos of bionic parts snaking across his chest and shoulders with a full sleeve consuming one thin arm. He was half-dressed with a pair of pants falling off his narrow hips. All the shyness that he'd had in the past was gone. Ryan stared at him, sleep-tussled with bite marks on his neck.

"You know this fucker?" Twan looked over his shoulder. He seemed to tense when he caught the intensity of Ryan's eyes as they focused on Kassian.

Instead of answering, Ryan crossed his arms over his chest. "What do you want?"

"We need to talk."

"About?"

Kassian frowned. "We need to talk in private."

"Funny how you pop up and think you can tell me what I need to do."

Kassian's jaw clenched but he backed away from Twan, hoping the show of submission would earn him a little credit. "Don't be this way."

"I'll be how I need to be."

Kassian looked up at the sky. It was thick with smog and he could

barely make out the stars. “I need your help. I wouldn’t come if it wasn’t important.” There was a silence punctuated only by the distant whisper of traffic and shouts emanating from beyond the wall that surrounded the tenement. Kassian looked at Ryan again, at the unmoved expression and the empty indigo eyes. “I’ll beg you if you want me to.”

“What would I get out of that?”

“I don’t know, Ry—I don’t know.” Kassian shut his mouth before he said too much, gave too much away, especially in front of Twan whose stance was so territorial and possessive that Kassian had no doubts that the man thought Ryan belonged to him. “Can we just talk and stop this bullshit?”

Ryan’s mouth twitched and his gaze slid away. “Twan, why don’t you take a walk? See if my good friend Max left anyone alive down by the gate.”

“I didn’t hurt—”

“You okay to be left alone with this asshole? He looks like trouble.”

The look Ryan speared Twan with could have frozen water on a summer day, but Twan didn’t react.

“Just get dressed and give us some room.”

Twan looked between Kassian and Ryan once more, nodded sharply and stormed into the bedroom. Kassian’s attention didn’t shift from Ryan even as loud, shuffling sounds drifted through the door. Kassian couldn’t take his eyes away from the dark ink spilling across pale skin, or the bandaged fingers and bruises on one of Ryan’s thin wrists. It was difficult not to stare at the signs of a VR addiction. By now, Kassian had become accustomed to identifying the dark smudges that formed on the fingertips and wrists of rifters after they plugged in for hours.

“You’re doing that VR stuff?”

Ryan’s hand shot up to cover his wrist. “So what?”

“So it’s fucking people up, Ry. Do you know how many people are getting modded with techie shit because of it?”

“Well, I’m not. All of my hardware is exterior.”

“What about your boyfriend?”

“My boyfriend is none of your fucking business.” Ryan stopped covering his wrist and crossed his arms over his chest. “And to be quite honest, neither am I. You gave that up when you started keeping

secrets.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Ryan. Do you have any idea why I was keeping those secrets? I didn’t want you to know what I was doing to score money for your meds. If you’d known, you wouldn’t have taken it.”

“Damn right I wouldn’t have.” Ryan broke their standoff and snatched a tiny red hoody from the floor. He shoved his arms in and zipped it up over his bare torso. “I don’t need anyone babysitting me or rescuing me. I can take care of myself. I have ever since we split.”

Kassian wanted to demand how he’d been taking care of himself, how he’d been getting money to buy the medication that kept him alive, but Twan stalked back into the room with the sullen grace of a teenager.

“I’ll check in with the Anthonies.”

Ryan nodded. “Okay. Let me know when they want the software.”

“Fine.”

Twan gave Kassian another hard look before dipping his head down to press his mouth against Ryan’s. Kassian averted his eyes.

“I’ll be back in twenty.”

“Give me an hour.” There was no warmth in Ryan’s voice.

When Twan left the tiny apartment, he slammed the door hard enough for the walls to rattle. Kassian grimaced.

“What are you doing with that guy?”

“Fucking him, Kassian. What does it look like?”

“It looks like you found the most tatted up piece of shit rifter to bang that you could. What, did you send out a fucking ad?”

Ryan gave him a tight-lipped smile. “Jealous?”

“Yes.”

The quick admittance seemed to startle Ryan, and he looked away. “Well, that’s your problem. I’m sure you’ve been having your fun.”

“Not really. I have bigger things to worry about than finding a willing lay.”

“Wouldn’t take much effort. You look good.”

“Well, it didn’t take you long to forget that.”

Ryan’s face reddened. He stalked across the room and shoved his palm against Kassian’s chest. “You always act like we had something going, but we never did so don’t try to act like some fucking victim! You nailed me a couple times, played out your little twink fantasies—”

“Oh, like that guy doesn’t?”

“—and that’s it!” Ryan raged. “You fuck *everyone*, Kassian. Don’t try to pretend I was ever anything special. You’re just surprised that I didn’t sit around mooning over you after it happened.” By the time Ryan was finished, his voice had risen to a shout. His breath was coming fast, and he’d closed his fists around the front of Kassian’s shirt. “I didn’t leave because of that. I left because you lied to me. You told me you were a bodyguard, and I found out you’d gone right back to doing murder for hire after—after everything, and then said you did it *for me*. Like I *ever* wanted that!”

Ryan pulled away with a disgusted sigh, and wiped a hand across his face. His shoulders hunched forward.

“I don’t understand you, Ryan. I really don’t. I was trying to keep you alive. How else could we make the money for your medication? You were getting sicker and sicker and I didn’t know what else to do.”

“I would have never asked you to go back to... that life. After we’d just escaped. After you’d told me you hated it, and you hated being an assassin. You didn’t even give me the choice. You decided you needed to save me, and didn’t even tell me your plan. I would have never—”

“What was the alternative?” Kassian burst out. His voice filled the apartment, booming loudly and probably extending through the thin walls. “To sit there and watch you die? I’m sorry but I couldn’t do that. Do you think I would want to keep going on if you’d died?”

“I don’t see why you care.”

“Don’t be immature.”

Ryan gave Kassian a deadly look. “I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone. I’m doing just fine on my own, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, you’re doing *great*.” Kassian waved his arm in a sweeping gesture, anger making him say all the wrong things. All the things that had initially pushed Ryan away. “In a goddamn slum with a rifter boyfriend who probably gets off on choking you out when he fucks you judging by the hand marks on your neck.”

“Maybe he does. And maybe I like it.”

Kassian could feel his anger building to the point where he would explode, and tried to fight it. Taking a deep breath, he turned away from the hard look on Ryan’s fine-boned face. It was difficult to remind

himself that Ryan wasn't his, had never been his, and he had no right to be this jealous. He had no right to judge Ryan. He was the one that had taken up contract killing not even three months after leaving the Agency. He was the one that had taken a contract on two of Ryan's friends.

"I'm sorry for everything, Ryan. I'm sorry I didn't tell you what I was doing for money. I'm sorry for Joshua and Marie. I'm sorry I didn't tell you they had a price on their heads, or that I'd taken the contract. They were responsible for a fire that killed three sons of a wealthy businessman, and the money bought your medication for three months. It's not like they were good people. The fact that they got you into rifting—"

"Means what? You had the right to kill them because they showed me how to stay plugged in?"

The conversation was getting worse instead of better, and it was clear to Kassian that everything he said was wrong.

"Ryan. I'm sorry." When Ryan continued to stare at him with stony silence, Kassian tried again. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I'm sorry I didn't trust you. I'm sorry I made decisions for you. Okay?"

Even then, the former R&D agent seemed unmoved. He shook his head and sat on one of the sagging couches, bringing his knees up and wrapping his arms around them. "What do you want from me, Kassian?"

"I need your help."

"With what? Tracking a target?"

"No. I'm not doing that anymore."

Ryan rolled his eyes. "You're such a bad liar. I can smell an Agency hit a mile away, and I've been keeping track of yours."

It was on the tip of Kassian's tongue to ask why Ryan kept track of him after everything that happened, but he stopped himself. Seeing Ryan again had completely made him lose focus.

"I'm not just taking high-dollar contracts anymore," Kassian corrected his statement. "I focus on criminals, and I get a lot of kidnapping cases."

"I know. The sudden rash of recovered abductees is what made me notice your patterns." Ryan picked at the knee of his pants, eyes cast

down. “I thought it was good. That you um... were doing that. It was nice or whatever.”

Kassian smiled faintly. He crossed the distance between them and sat down on the couch. When Ryan tensed, Kassian grabbed one of his thin hands and kissed it. “Stop being so jumpy. I’m not here to ruin whatever you have going for yourself. If you’ve found a way to make money without hurting yourself or others, good. If you found someone... you care about—”

“He has a connection to a black-market Zalkosine distributor. That’s it. I play at being his boyfriend and he keeps me medicated. He knows the deal.”

“Oh.” Kassian felt even less inclined to release Ryan’s hand. A dark thought populated his head, one involving a heist, and using that Twan idiot to break into the facility where the distributor stored the Z-tabs. Becoming lost in thought, Kassian threaded their fingers together. He stroked the soft skin of Ryan’s wrist with his thumb.

Ryan flashed him a wary look, drawing Kassian out of the schema that had begun to build. “What do you need help with?”

“I need to get back into the United States, and I can’t find anyone who can make papers as good as you.”

Ryan ripped his hand away and jumped to his feet. “Have you lost your mind?”

“It’s for a good—”

“No! No fucking way, Trovosky! I’m not helping you put yourself at risk. Are you nuts? You think it’s safe just because the Agency is out of commission temporarily?”

“I’m not just going for old times’ sake, I—”

“You can forget it. You’ve lost your mind and I’m not helping you go back into the red zone.”

“Ryan, just listen to me!”

Ryan had begun pacing by the time Kassian finally got in a full sentence. He was raking his hands through his hair with sharp, jerky movements.

“I won’t let you do this.”

“Ryan, I have to. It’s my sisters. I need to see them.”

The pacing halted.

“I keep having these nightmares that they’re in trouble. That the Agency has found them. That they’re using them to get information about my whereabouts. That they’re on the Fourth.”

When Ryan only stared at him with a distant, haunted expression, Kassian gripped his narrow shoulders.

“Ryan, I have to see them. I know I sound crazy, but it’s every single night. I have this dream every time I close my eyes. I hear them screaming, I see my parents dead and Kimberly strung up and—”

Kassian broke off, blinking. He could see it so vividly. Could hear the shrieks, smell the blood. The images stained his vision until Ryan reached up to press his palms against the scruff on Kassian’s cheeks.

“Hey.” Ryan tilted Kassian’s face down so their eyes could meet. “They’re okay. They’re not hurt. The Agency doesn’t have them.”

“But what does it mean, then?” Kassian’s voice came out hushed. “It’s every night, Ryan. I can’t escape it. If I find out the Agency has them, that Shane has them, I would die trying to get them back. Do you have any idea what they do to women during interrogation?”

“Yes. I do.” Ryan smoothed his hand along Kassian’s face until it curved around his neck. “But they don’t have your sisters. I promise you. I still check in on them every week, Kass. I’ve been doing it for the past two years. That didn’t change just because I left.”

Kassian’s hands tightened on Ryan’s shoulders, digging in so hard that he was sure there would be more bruises later.

“You’re certain?”

“I wouldn’t lie. They’re okay. They’re alive.”

“Oh, thank God.” The relief was almost crushing. They weren’t in the Agency’s hands. Not yet. “I need to see them, Ryan. I need to warn them. I need to go make them understand that they have to disappear. No phone call or coded message will make it real to them. They need to see me. And they need to understand that as long as they’re in the United States, they’re in danger.”

Ryan shook his head, eyes shifting away. His lips moved several times before he said, “If nothing has happened so far, why do you think it would now?”

“Because.” How could he explain without sounding insane? How could he make this real to someone besides himself? “Because Ryan, I

have a really bad feeling and I can't shake it. I've tried for months to tell myself I'm being paranoid, that this hole opening up in my gut will close up, but it hasn't. It's gotten worse. Like how I felt right before the raid. Before everything went wrong. I just know in my heart that my family is in danger, and I have to stop it."

When Ryan said nothing, when his troubled face remained turned away, Kassian forced him to look up. "Do you believe me?"

"Yes." Ryan nodded slowly. He twisted his fingers in the material of Kassian's shirt. "I do. I believe you. But you're not going back without me."

"No."

"Don't you fucking tell me no, Kassian. We go together or you don't go at all. Even though we had problems, when it comes to the Agency we're a team."

Kassian started to say no again, to shut the suggestion down, but the words died on his lips as he took in the fierce expression on Ryan's face. An intense swell of affection filled Kassian. He told himself to drop his hands and move away. Instead, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Instead of backing off, Kassian felt himself leaning closer. His lips brushed Ryan's forehead, then the tip of his nose before dropping down to the curve of his mouth.

Ryan went rigid but Kassian cradled the base of his skull with one hand, preventing him from moving away. Ryan exhaled in a rush, the sound quickly muffled by their lips pressing together again. Kassian felt the hot wetness of Ryan's mouth for only a moment, just barely tasted him, before Ryan turned his face and broke the kiss.

Kassian panted against Ryan's smooth cheek, eyes shut.

"You can't..."

"I'm sorry."

Ryan sighed raggedly. "Kassian, you can't just do whatever you want."

"I'm in love with you."

"No, you're not."

"How can you tell me how I feel?"

Stepping away, Ryan brushed hair out of his face with a shaking hand. "You just think you're in love with me because I'm all you have left. But you're not. I'm just the one that's here."



“That’s bullshit, Ryan. You have no fucking idea how I feel, and I’m tired of you acting like all I know how to do is fuck. Like I don’t know how to care about someone and want to be with them.”

Kassian followed when Ryan headed to the back room. It was a mess. There was a tangle of clothing and bed sheets in one corner, and a glut of wires and parts of computer hardware in another.

“Ryan, I love you.”

“Can you quit saying that?” Ryan snapped. He refused to meet Kassian’s eyes and dropped into a rickety chair by an equally wobbly desk.

“Why won’t you take me seriously?” Kassian sank to his haunches beside the chair. “What do I have to do to get you to believe me?”

“What does it matter if I do or not? It won’t change anything between us.”

Kassian recoiled from the words. Rejection had never made him feel like sinking into the earth before, but someone he loved had never rejected him. The sudden inability to keep an even expression was unexpected, and Kassian failed to mask how keenly that retort had turned him inside out.

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Just forget it. I keep pushing myself on you even though you don’t want me. It’s stupid.” Kassian shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. Like Ryan hadn’t just stomped on his heart. “I’ll stop being such an idiot.”

“You’re not—it’s not stupid.” Ryan grabbed his glasses from the desk and stared at the smudged lenses. “It’s just that no one has ever said that to me before, so I didn’t know what to say. And everything with us is... so weird. We’re, like, broken. I am, anyway.”

“No, you’re not.” Kassian spun the chair so that they were facing each other again. He forced a smile. “We’re not broken.”

“Yes we are, Kass. You know we are. The only reason you ever noticed me is because I’m always here for you when you need me whether it’s for my ability as a hacker or because... because you feel alone. Or at least that’s what my head tells me, and that’s all I believe even if you keep telling me it isn’t true.”

“It’s not. Maybe one day you’ll believe me. Maybe one day you’ll give me a chance.”

Ryan said nothing. He wiped his thumb along the lenses of his glasses, making the smudges worse. Guilt ebbed away at Kassian’s bitterness even though looking at the unkempt bed and the string of condoms on the side table made his chest feel close to caving in.

“Forget all that, okay Ry? We’re a team. When it comes down to it, even if there’s nothing else, we’re a team. We escaped hell together and nothing will change that.”

Ryan nodded, blue eyes barely visible behind his long lashes. “Nothing will. And you’re not leaving me here while you go off to get yourself in trouble. I won’t let you. A fieldie is nothing without his nerd.”

Kassian’s smile was more fond than strained. He kissed Ryan’s forehead again, but this time he forced himself to pull away.

1/27:07

*Undisclosed location, Washington, USA*

The forests of northern Washington were an alien environment. Rich, green, pristine, and removed from the industrialized grime that had spawned Bex. Even at night it was too pure. When the van abandoned the wealth of natural beauty for the darkness of the man-made tunnel that led to the US Agency's new compound, Bex was almost relieved.

She didn't belong in beautiful places. They made her skin crawl. The enveloping shadows should have brought relief, but instead Bex tried not to curl in on herself when nausea hit. Her body felt strange—wrong, and not quite fitting together correctly as if her bones and muscles would burst from her skin. Her stomach was weak, her joints sore, as if the growing pains of her prepubescent years in the sprawling council estate were attacking all over again.

For a moment, Bex wondered if Sin had felt this way. She shut the thought down with a gnash of her teeth, swallowing bile when the rage flared up too hot and bright. Thinking of Sin just made her think of the other one. The one that needed to die.

“Are you okay, Agent Hunt?”

Bex's eyes snapped open.

The dim light from the Agency's garage filtered into the car's tinted windows. So lost in thought, she'd somehow missed the entire drive through the tunnel that ran deep underground and into what should have been the solid interior of a mountain. Instead, parts of it were hollow. A decade-long process to build a facility now masked inside of

the mountain except for the occasional span of reflective windows. For the first time since the US Agency's inception, the headquarters were truly invisible to the outside world.

"Bex?"

"Agent Hunt will do."

Flashing her teeth at the driver, she pushed the door open and stepped out. Vertigo hit, but Bex swallowed the vomit that rose. She would not be sick in front of one of the teenagers the Agency had begun to recruit. She would not show weakness in front of the scores of new fieldies that roamed this new compound. Especially not since now that *she* was the super agent.

"Where am I wanted?"

"Marshal Stone wants to see you."

"Good."

Bex grabbed her pack from the back seat and headed to the glass lift that would take her to the upper levels. The building was more like the Agency HQ in Prague than the sprawling compound in Lexington. More secure, better hidden, and with the kind of technology that required her to perform security checks to move from one area to the next. Like the European facility, it was newer and lent itself to the kind of technology needed to keep it shielded completely from civilians. The outside world only saw a majestic mountain climbing high into the pale blue sky.

The lift rose through the different levels, moving away from the underbelly where the Interrogation and Detainment Center now resided, and the garage where they'd parked the car. It passed the dormitories and shot up to the administrative levels where Marshal Stone and Chief of Staff General Lange were. The directors had yet to name an Inspector.

At the highest level, the lift came to a full stop but the doors did not open. Bex leaned in to the panel beside the door, and the additional iris scan verified her appointment with Stone. The doors slid open cleanly and she stepped into the cold, minimalist style of the suite. The only other person in the outer office was a blonde woman so unnaturally perfect that Bex wondered if she too had an enhancement.

"I've gotta meeting with the man."

The blonde, Evelyn according to her name plate, nodded. She barely blinked and continued to type on a touch keyboard that connected to a holographic screen. “Please go in, Agent Hunt. General Lange will be on her way out.”

Bex nodded but was caught staring at the sharply defined edges of the woman’s cheekbones. There was definitely something off about her. The same thing that was off about a lot of the newer staff and European implants. Bex had never noticed how obviously Modified some folks were until she’d moved to the US Agency and spent time around... normals.

Boots thudding against the floor, Bex shoved her hands into the pockets of her grommet-laden hoody. The corridor that led to Stone’s office was one of the few places in the complex that afforded a glimmer of natural light. The window that spanned it was camouflaged from the outside, but from the interior she could see a great expanse of forest, mountains and moonlight that was continuously distracting. The landscape seemed all but untouched while seventy percent of the world had turned into a nightmare.

Bex turned away from the window and raised her fist to knock. She froze before her knuckles rapped against the door, and leaned closer.

“—was a mistake. Even if they never intend to follow through with the deal, exposing the Agency as being active again was foolish.”

It was Marshal Stone.

“What could they do?” a woman’s voice asked. She had a German accent. “Hsin Vega is barely human but the two of them alone are no threat. If they join forces with the others, it changes things.”

“Exactly! There are too many uncontained agents roaming the world. Hackers, intelligence and field agents—there’s enough of them to cause major problems if they choose to come together.”

“Or perhaps they will be easier to crush if so. The Chairman must know what he is doing. Possibly this is a way to draw the others from hiding. The ones we haven’t yet found.”

Bex rocked back on her heels. The conversation faded away with the distance, and she touched a hand to the side of her face. Had they really...

The door to Stone’s office swung open, and General Lange exited.

Barely having been in the woman's presence in the past year, Bex gave her a quick once-over. Lange was average height, had a sturdy, curvy build and short, dark hair. Her eyes were vivid blue when they settled on Bex. They reminded her of General Carhart; the man Lange had replaced.

"Agent Hunt."

"Yo." Bex jerked her chin in greeting.

Lange gave Bex a scrutinizing stare and a short nod before continuing on her way. Bex crossed the threshold and moved into the office.

"The transport agent told me you were sick twice on the way back."

Bex kicked the door shut and looked at Marshal Stone narrowly. "Yeah, what of it? I'd never been worked on this much at once before."

Stone regarded her, gray eyes critical. He was a young man for this rank and an American expatriate who'd been recruited into the Euro division after working as a mercenary and spy for years in England. They'd met several times before her move to Lexington, but he'd become a different man since gaining the position. Now, he reminded her of Vivienne Beaulieu. Cold as ice.

"We'll see how it pans out. The doctors were overzealous when you responded positively to the last round of enhancements. If your body fails, I'll have that whole department liquidated."

"Swell."

"Indeed." Something chirped and Stone's eyes flicked to the slim tablet that lay on the desk. "You've been cleared for three weeks of downtime unless something imperative springs up. During that time, you're mandated to have counseling sessions with Dr. Connors three times a week. When you train, you will do so in the laboratory. You're limited to exercise four times a week under scrutiny, and no more than that."

"That's bollocks. I work out every day."

"Not during this phase, you don't. If your body fails you become useless to me, and I've invested too much money in you for that to happen."

"Understood." Wanker. Bex flexed her fingers, curling them inward until the crescents of her fingernails bit into flesh. "Missions have been slow anyway, haven't they?"

“In a sense.” Stone didn’t take his eyes away from her. “And I know you too well to believe that was an idle observation.”

“It wasn’t.” She paused, thinking about the things she had overheard. “When I’m tip-top, I want to be sent out.”

“To where exactly?”

Bex’s lip curled. “You know where.”

“And you know that won’t happen.”

She’d known the words would come, and yet the rage exploded in her as if they had been unexpected. A rush of anger and frustration overcame her, accompanied by an afterimage of Jordan’s face slack with death and spattered with brain matter. The vision was burned into her cornea. She would never forget.

“They are traitors.”

“Thank you for that extraordinary observation Agent Hunt. Care to share another?”

Bex slammed her palms down on his desk, causing a mug to jump and liquid to slosh over the side. She leaned closer, spiky black hair hiding half her face. “So, they expose the Agency, cause the deaths of dozens of agents and staff, and they’re free to go?”

Stone tilted his head. “Do you think you’re my confidante, Bex?”

“Why in the fuck would I think that?”

“You seem to think I should share the Agency’s plans with you.”

“I want them dead!”

She’d all but shouted in his face, but Stone did not flinch. He looked at her as if she were an insect barely worth his time, indulging her with his attention more out of curiosity than an actual obligation to be attentive. Or maybe because she was so bloody expensive.

At the back of her mind, a voice wondered if they would eventually begin locking her in a cage as they had Sin. If they would treat her like a fighting dog on a short leash.

It would be worth it if she could kill *him*.

“You can’t let them get away with it.”

“They won’t.”

“It’s been over two years since the riot. The Agency is only starting to recover now, and they’re still out there. Still fucking free and living their lives after all they did.”

“You mean after they killed your sister.” Stone tilted his head. “Isn’t that what this is about? It’s not justice. It’s revenge. You’re not defending the honor of the Agency, you want to hurt the people who took your twin and lover. Isn’t that so?”

Bex didn’t look away from the vacant eyes that regarded her so impersonally. “Yes.”

A beat passed, then two, and Stone’s attention diverted to the tablet again. “It’s impossible. They’re useful in the world where we can track their movements. They appear to be free, but it’s an illusion. I know thinking was your sister’s strength, but surely even you can see that much. The Lexington Defectors will be dealt with in due time, but only after we track down every member of the Journalist Guild who helped them. At that point, you’ll get your revenge. After interrogation, they will all be disposed of except for Hsin Liu Vega. He is our material and will be used again.”

“But what if—”

What if Freedman died in the meantime?

What if she wasn’t the one to watch the light go out of those pretty blue eyes?

The thought of it made Bex’s stomach sour and her body go cold with dread the way it had when she’d awoken in the smoking remains of the courtyard, and remembered how Ryan had murdered her sister.

“This conversation is over,” Stone said without compassion. “Rest. Train. If you’re not one hundred percent by the end of the month, Cade can easily become my new super agent as you like to call yourself. He is less inclined to question.”

“I only want—”

“You want what you want no matter how many times I say no,” Stone interrupted. “Sometimes I think your time in Zachary Carhart’s unit did more harm than good. You started to have... opinions.”

Bex’s lips tightened. “Are we through, then?”

“Go.”

She turned round and gripped the doorknob, forcing herself not to slam it shut on the way out. A flurry of thoughts scattered across her mind, and an explosion of emotion caused an ache in her chest. Impotent rage, desperate and wild, boiled up until not even the



beautiful view could soothe her. A need for murder uncoiled deep inside her, and Bex knew it would never be satiated until she had Ryan in her grasp.

“Well, now. Don’t you have a sweet look in your eye?”

Bex looked up with a snarl, pinning Seth Nguyen with a hateful stare. “The fuck you doing here?”

Seth flipped the switchblade he always carried between his fingers, the blade flashing in and out. His short-sleeved shirt showed off the tattoos covering his arms, and his long black hair was back in a low tail. He watched her with the same mild intrigue he always did, and pushed away from the wall he’d been leaning against.

“Got a meeting with Stone.” He grinned. “I’m gonna volunteer to be the next experiment, if he lets me. See if I can be the next Mod.”

“The next Mod?” Bex flashed her teeth at him. “You fucking Americans. Haven’t you noticed every newbie from Euro is a Mod?”

Seth snorted derisively. “Please. They’re babies, got fucking giraffe necks or whatever. I don’t care about that shit.” His dark eyes glittered with a fervor that wasn’t normally directed at her. Most people avoided making eye contact. “I wanna be like you. Like Cade. Super-agents, maxed out on power. Speed, sight, strength, whatever man—I want all of it.”

A sliver of impatience went through Bex, and she fought the urge to shove him aside. They got along. No need to make another enemy.

“Cade ain’t like that. He’s got all tech implants. And Vega was the last of the *real* specials. They don’t go all out with genetic modding no more. Not even on me. Not after what happened with Vega escaping after they’d basically made him fucking invincible. If you want to be a guinea pig that bad, you’ll end up half a cyborg.”

Disappointment was clear on Seth’s face. The knife flashed in and out reflexively. “Cyborg would be fine by me but I really wanted a full upgrade.” He eyed Bex. “What’d you get if they aren’t doing the Vega special anymore?”

“Trying to up my reflexes. Maybe my senses. But my body don’t respond the way his did. No one’s does. That’s why they fucking want him back, innit?”

“Are they sending a team?” Seth flipped the knife closed and shoved

it in his pocket. “I volunteered for the recovery team after they escaped. I was gonna kill Beaulieu, make it a matching set with Krauszer, but then the Agency sent Euro Mods and my team got canceled.”

“What?” Bex frowned. The fuck was this kid on about? “Look, I dunno what beef you’ve got with Boyd but I could frankly give a fuck if he and Vega rode off into the sunset. I got my sights set on someone else. And I’ll get him even if I have to go it alone since the admin ain’t ready to send anyone out yet.”

“Nah, I don’t got beef with anyone. Just thought it’d be fun if I had the chance. Who’re you going after?”

“Ryan Freedman. And Trovosky.”

Seth’s response came ready and easy. “I’d do Trovosky, too. Can I go with you?”

Bex found herself smiling for the first time in a while. A flash of teeth, slow and cold, as she thought about unleashing this vicious gangbanger on Ryan while she forced Trovosky to watch. It could be worth it. Even if she had to hunt them down herself.

“Yes.”

## 1/27 Author's Note

In the *Company of Shadows* seems to be about defying our expectations. We started writing for fun and planned to write one story for a couple of months. It expanded to four books that spanned over 1.5 million words in almost eight years.

At the end of the series, that was going to be it. We left the ending open to invite readers to decide for themselves how they thought the characters would spend the rest of their lives. Then we decided to write this anthology. Something small, something simple. Something that didn't make waves. It expanded to nearly 40,000 words and seven stories that showed glimpses of fifteen characters from the ICoS series.

Most importantly, it answered the question we'd planned to leave unanswered:

What happened after *Fade*? And what did Boyd and Hsin decide?

Even that answer was not what we originally expected. We knew from the start that their answer could have gone either way, which was another reason we left it open-ended in *Fade*. Yes, they go back; no, they don't. Each side had its reasons, each side had justifications. But in the process of writing their story we knew what they would do and plan.

We wrote each story independently and out of chronology. We examined each group or pair and looked at those characters, their circumstances, and their hopes and dreams. Somehow, during that process, we realized none of them would be content for a quiet holiday drabble as originally intended, and none of them would be willing to stay still for even a handful of pages.

That final moment, again, defied our expectations. We realized that the sequel we hadn't fully committed to, and the idea that hadn't fully come into focus, was taking on a new life with every anthology story.

Like many readers, going into the anthology we had vague images of Boyd and Hsin as the Marshals of a new, improved Agency. It was the initial idea we'd had for a sequel if one was ever written, and it would have been all new characters with the ICoS crew appearing as the occasional cameo in the background. But we realized in writing 1/27 that the Agency had caused too much damage, that Hsin and Boyd

couldn't trust the promises they'd been given, and that the Agency still had an agenda.

This anthology became a catalyst that made us both realize that a sequel is now about 85% more likely than it ever had been before. Now, we imagine it filled with characters we met in ICoS, with a new main POV: Ryan Freedman.

So what would the new ICoS look like if we do write such a sequel? A world of technology and powerful organizations at odds with each other, and a single core group apart from it all:

The Lexington Defectors, and all the trouble they bring.

Ais and Santino

March 2014

**KNIGHTS OF**



**ENLIGHTENMENT**



**RIFT**



**THE  
JOURNALIST  
GUILD**



**THE JACOBIANS**



**THE AGENCY**



**THE LEXINGTON  
DEFECTORS**

**ICOS SEQUEL**

**COMING IN THE FUTURE FROM SANTINO & AIS**