



SONNY&AIS

IN THE COMPANY OF SHADOWS

— **EVENFALL** —

BOOK ONE

# Evenfall

Book One

*of*

In the Company of Shadows

*by Sonny & Ais*

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## Prologue

The Fourth Floor Detainment Center would look innocuous enough to an outsider, were any ever allowed inside. The Fourth was large and sprawling with winding halls leading off into separate holding areas. The sections looked exactly the same despite the fact that they served very different purposes. Each corridor was silent and sterile with fluorescent lights glaring down. The overall appearance was very much like an institution or a hospital.

There was no way of knowing that deep within the Interrogation Center in the northern wing, blood-curdling screams were silenced by soundproof cells. Or that the walls and floors weren't made of tile for aesthetics but rather because it was easier to wash away the blood that often stained them. There were no indications that within those halls, people were dragged back to their cells or sometimes carried to the freight elevator-- an area that typically had one destination: the incinerator in the basement of the Tower. The staff were just as deceptive. Psychiatric doctors on Fourth existed for the sole purpose of reading the inmates; figuring out what made them tick and what the best tactics would be before proceeding with appropriate interrogation and punishment. Medical doctors on Fourth were entrusted with the duty of keeping the inmates alive until the Agency was ready to dispose of them.

In reality, the Fourth Floor Detainment Center held a variety of inmates that ranged from enemy captives who were ruthlessly interrogated before their fate was decided, to employees of the Agency who had committed a severe enough infraction to warrant torture-interrogation or a stint in isolation in the Holding Wing. For others, the Fourth was a final destination as they awaited their termination.

And for one infamous man, the Fourth was a holding area between his uses.

That man was at the forefront of everyone's minds today. Several guards were huddled inside a cell in the Maximum Security Wing and two were lingering outside in the hallway.

Officer Luke Gerant had seen several cells in Maximum Security but none of them were quite like this, which had been built specifically for the highly unpredictable man inside.

The entire wall between the cell and the hallway was made from bulletproof, high-grade reinforced glass, allowing no place for the prisoner to hide from the watchful guards. Even if the guards missed something in person, the guards monitoring the cameras would notice and raise an alarm. The entire Agency was watched by cameras but Luke had been in the monitoring room before. He knew that there was an entire wall of screens specifically for the Maximum Security Wing, which, unlike even the rest of Fourth, had cameras in the cells as well as the hallways. This area had more cameras than even some of the lesser-used buildings on compound had on all their floors.

"They're letting him out again?" Luke stared into the cell with an expression that was a mix of disgust and fear. His youthful features made him appear far younger than his peers, his wide-set eyes emphasizing the horror in his expression. "Captain Stevens was killed trying to detain him and now they're reinstating him? After everything that's happened?"

Office Travis Randazzo just shrugged and didn't seem particularly surprised by the information. He watched the guards inside the cell, large men who were outfitted in riot gear, surrounding a structure that could only be described as a box. It was six feet by five feet and appeared to be made of metal, although it was entirely white. The structure functioned as a cell within a cell-- an extreme punishment for a man who was known for performing extreme acts of violence. "I know you're the new kid but you need to learn that asking questions in this place is a good way to find yourself in your own little cell," Travis muttered softly. He shifted and crossed his arms over the black and grey uniform that all Agency guards were required to wear. "Even though we ain't agents, that still goes for us."

Luke glared at him for a moment, indignation clear in his dark brown eyes. "Don't call me kid, Travis. I'm not new anymore. My first day on the job was when we escorted this nutcase up here six months ago. I was backup security for his escort just like we

are now and he fucking ripped my commanding officer's throat out with his teeth and the cowards I was with were too afraid to intervene."

Luke couldn't help grimacing at the memory as he watched the guards enter the box to extract the Monster. The events of that fateful day played through his mind like a movie; he vividly recalled the look in the Monster's pale green eyes as he'd dragged Captain Stevens backwards into the cell. "He should not be allowed out of that cell," Luke said emphatically, gaze sharpening. Travis arched an eyebrow and gave him a flat look, not appearing very impressed by the declaration. "You're preaching to the choir, kid. None of us guards like it but it ain't up to us. Not much is. We're just here to secure the base, turn a blind eye to the weird shit we see up here, and not ask too many questions." Travis gave a one shouldered shrug. "But if you want my opinion... It's fucking insane that they even let this crazy bastard work for the Agency."

Luke nodded seriously. "Exactly."

"You know his story, right?" Travis looked at Luke sidelong.

"Just rumors."

Travis looked into the cell again, his eyes narrowed slightly. "He's the son of some bad ass agent that used to work for the Agency. The Monster was maybe fourteen or fifteen when he started working here and he was so pro at the job that they instated him as an agent. He fucking made level 10 when he wasn't even sixteen, man. Do you know how rare that is?" Luke raised his eyebrows in surprise at that. Level 10 was the highest rank a field agent could achieve and as far as he knew, it was very rare for anyone to make it that far at all. The fact that the Monster had done it as a teenager was shocking.

Travis moved closer to the cell as the guards inside began backing out of the box. "But even though he's like super assassin, he was always fuckin' up. Killing the wrong people, sometimes killing everyone. I mean, honestly, I don't give a shit about that if that's what he's assigned to do but it's the other stuff that bothers me..."

The guards pulled a tall, lanky man out of the box and dropped him unceremoniously.

Slumping against the sterile floor, the man appeared to be in his twenties and was heavily restrained. He wore only close-fitting black shorts so his body was completely displayed to the heavily armored men that surrounded him. He was sleekly muscular and incredibly well-toned despite his slender build. His light olive-toned skin was marred by horrific-looking scars, gashes, what had obviously been bullet holes, and a tattoo. Hsin Liu Vega, or Sin as he was widely referred to in the Agency, was emaciated and had a wild look about him. His untended hair had grown long during his time on the Fourth and was hanging limply about his face. The jet-black strands were dyed a deep red at the tips, the color having otherwise grown out.

Despite his reputation and the fact that Luke had almost expected Sin to burst out of the box growling and snarling like an animal, the man had a naked, vulnerable look on his face and he was shuddering uncontrollably. Almond-shaped eyes of a startling light green flitted around quickly and, in his half-alert state, made him appear very much like a caged animal looking for a means to escape.

Even then, it didn't seem as though Sin was entirely lucid. His face morphed into an expression of terror and his full lips were twisted into a grimace, dark eyebrows drawn together as the guards hauled him around without care.

"What's his problem?" Luke couldn't help feeling almost annoyed that the notorious Monster who had haunted his dreams for almost a year looked like nothing more than a frightened boy at the moment. "Oh, he's claustrophobic. That's why they keep him in that box. Pretty fucked up, but he deserves it. He'll liven up when the drugs wear off."

Luke stared at the Monster for a long moment before looking away. Despite his strong convictions that the man should be kept locked up, it seemed almost inhumane to keep him that way. "Anyway, what's the other stuff that bothers you?"

Travis gave Luke a distracted look before he seemed to realize he'd never finished the story. He reached up to idly toy with a pendant on the pocket of his uniform and looked into the cell again.

"Well, after he started taking assignments-- This is all based on what I heard, by the way. The people around here think we're fucking deaf and stupid just because we're not field agents." Travis snorted. "Anyway, after he started taking assignments they realized there was something wrong with him. Like no shit, he's a fourteen-year-old running around killing motherfuckers left and right, but they noticed that he was real strange. He'd flip out sometimes, just go completely nuts and turn on people. They ignored it at first-- maybe 'cause of the work he does, killing a few guards seemed inconsequential," Travis spat that part out bitterly. "But then, he went nuts in public one time. I don't know what happened but the bastard went on a rampage and ended up getting picked up by local cops."

"Oh, shit." Luke looked into the cell again and raised his eyebrows high. He was surprised that the Agency had allowed Sin to live after such a lapse. The Agency existed in the shadows, conducting its business covertly and doing anything to maintain the integrity of its cover and the cover identities of the people who worked there. As far as the public knew, and even most of the government as far as that went, the Agency didn't even exist.

Luke shook his head in dismay. "And they still used him after that? Wasn't his cover blown?"

"Yup. He was all over the news and everything too." Travis shrugged and walked a few steps closer to the glass, watching the activities on the other side. His gaze traced Sin absently, a slight frown marring the guard's face.

"It was nuts. The local cops tried to pin him with all kinds of murders and rapes and shit. I don't know how much of it is true, but that's when everyone started calling him the Monster. Then in county jail, what the fuck does this crazy bastard do? Decapitates the Chief of Police's son."

"Good God." Suddenly the fact that Sin was kept in the box was starting to seem understandable. "Why his son?"

"He was one of the cops," Travis said, gaze on the Monster as the man twitched against the floor. "There was some big manhunt after he escaped but the Agency got involved and took custody of him. They put him up here for fuckin'..." He looked over at Luke with a small frown, seeming more thoughtful than disturbed. "I don't even know how long, man. Years. When he got out the bastard was crazier than ever-- he just killed the partners they tried giving him and tortured his psychiatrist. That's why they got that." He tilted his head toward the box. "I thought they'd given up on him for good but guess not."

"That's crazy." Luke stared at Travis incredulously. He knew the Agency would do anything to achieve their goals but he couldn't entirely understand the thought process behind employing a mass-murderer to stop terrorists. "How can they trust someone like that?"

"I dunno man, but it's better if you don't go around asking too many people. I knew a guy who asked too many questions and let's just say that guy ain't around no more."

Luke looked at Travis in alarm but before he could get a word out, he realized that General Carhart was striding down the hall. His short blond hair shone under the fluorescent lights and Luke couldn't help noticing how surprisingly young the General looked up close. He was tall and well-built and his expression was darkly serious at the moment. Still, his face had a youthful quality that took away some of the intimidation that would have otherwise been there.

Luke nudged Travis and they both stood at attention, saluting the General when he approached. "Sir!"

"His status?" Carhart stared into the cell with hooded cerulean eyes; he didn't seem pleased by what he saw. "They just removed him from the box, sir. The drugs are not out of his system yet."

Carhart nodded and looked at Luke, eyes narrowing slightly. "Have him taken to the medical unit and have the collar installed before he wakes up. I expect him to be ready at 1200 hours."

Without another word, the General turned and walked back in the direction from which he'd appeared. Luke watched him go, unable to help feeling a mote of pride that General Carhart, the third most powerful person at the Agency, had pretty much entrusted such an important task with him specifically. Luke couldn't help idly wondering why Carhart hadn't given the order to Travis but after the 'kid' commentary, Luke felt vindicated.

Still, he didn't say any of that. All he did was ask, "What collar?"

Travis rolled his eyes. "I guess they came up with a new way to control him. Let's do this before the freak wakes up and rips our throats out." Luke shook his head and followed Travis into the cell.

They transported the Monster from the floor to a gurney and secured his wrists and ankles. Luke couldn't help sneaking glances at the Monster's face, marveling at the fact that someone so vicious could look so helpless. "What do they have him on?" "Who knows," Officer Dennis McNichols rumbled. He smirked and smacked the prisoner in the face; the Monster didn't even blink. "Whatever it is, sure turns him into a docile little faggot, eh?"

"Hell yeah, it does," Officer Harry Truman commented with a guffaw. "We used to have fun with him up here before Carhart installed the window."

Harry reached down and let one of his large hands slide down the Monster's bare skin, extending a finger to trace the well-defined chest before sliding it down his stomach. His gaze sharpened on the Monster in self-satisfaction. "Imagine how pissed off he'll be when he wakes up. If he even knew what was going on anyway..." Luke and Travis looked at each other and then at Harry in disgust. Luke glanced at the other guards, expecting them to share the sentiment, but to his surprise none of the other men seemed to mind. Then again, he and Travis were fairly new to Maximum Security.

Harry and his crew were the typical guards so the information likely wasn't surprising. It was even possible that they all got in on it together.

"You should probably keep that to yourself," Luke snapped.

"Oh? Feeling defensive over this sick fuck?" Harry looked at Luke and sneered. His fingers clenched around one of Sin's nipples and he twisted it violently. It should have been painful but the Monster didn't even flinch. "Why should you care after all he's done? He deserves everything I give him." Harry's eyebrows rose.

Luke scoffed and ignored the warning look that Travis was giving him. "Yeah whatever, but that kind of behavior doesn't make you any better than him. No wonder he's a fucking monster if he's treated like that. I'm not going to report you or anything but for the record, you probably should be locked up too."

"Fuck you, fairy boy," Harry snapped.

"Real intelligent," Luke retorted and began to wheel the gurney out of the room. They were halfway down the hall when he happened to glance down at the Monster's face.

Luke felt his heart plummet.

The pale green eyes were no longer vacant and despite the fact that they still had the medicated glaze, they were alert. And, for the second time in Luke's life, they were focused on him. He stopped in his tracks and held eye contact as he struggled to tell Travis that the Monster was waking up.

He'd almost found the words when one of the prisoner's dark eyebrows rose slightly and a ghost of a smirk whispered across his full lips. Luke blinked incredulously even as the expression disappeared and the Monster was staring blankly once again.

"What's wrong?" Travis looked down at the Monster and then up at Luke with a puzzled expression. "Come on, man. I don't want to be around those creepy fucks anymore," he said impatiently.

"N-nothing," Luke stammered. He shook his head, told himself that he'd imagined it, and they continued on their way.

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Vivienne Beaulieu strode through the Fourth Floor Detainment Center, eyes scanning the corridor indifferently despite the fact that there was any number of dangerous individuals behind the locked doors that lined the hall. Her pale blond hair was pulled tightly into a French twist at the base of her neck, and her light grey pencil skirt suit combined with her dark blue blouse gave little color to her otherwise pale complexion. The stiff way she held herself and the unattainable quality of her demeanor made her appear older than her late thirties.

There was nothing but disinterest in her ice blue eyes, even when she glanced at the man to her right.

"One would expect the creature to be prowling the room judging by what I have heard of him. Are you quite certain it is properly restrained, General?" General Zachary Carhart strode down the corridor with his hands behind his back; he was dressed in faded military fatigues, although it was known on the compound that it was more of a clothing preference than a way of showcasing his rank. Despite the fact that the Agency had a hierarchy structured much like the military, the similarities ended there.

"The men exaggerate. Sin is just as human as you are," he said calmly, and although there was a touch of reproach in his voice, his face remained mostly expressionless.

Vivienne did not bother answering and silence fell between them as her high-heeled footsteps echoed down the hall ahead of them. When Carhart and Vivienne turned the corner into the maximum security wing, Carhart saw that Officers Luke Gerant and Travis Randazzo were once again standing side by side in front of Sin's cell along with Dennis McNichols and Harry Truman.

"General. Inspector," they said smartly, saluting to Carhart and Vivienne respectively.

"What is his status?" Vivienne asked coolly.

She directed her gaze through the bulletproof glass and into the room that the men guarded.

"Secured, Inspector," Travis said immediately.

Sin lay slumped against the wall inside the cell. He was clad only in black shorts, a sleeveless shirt and a slim metal band that encircled his neck. The collar was an innocuous device that was capable of producing high-voltage shocks that could incapacitate or kill, depending on how long it was activated.

Sin appeared to be alert although his pale green eyes were still glazed over from aftereffects of the tranquilizers. He tested his restraints almost absently, likely struggling to fully regain coherent thought after months of existing in a drugged stupor. After a moment he gave in to the strength of the chains binding him to the wall. He collapsed back against the cold metal and resigned himself to staring out at them through the window.

"I realize that you haven't had any interaction with him in the past but I know you're aware of his history and his father. Although I'm not sure how much you know, considering Emilio worked here before your time," Carhart said, studying Sin through the glass.

A slight frown marred Carhart's youthful features but it was faint and fleeting before he replaced it with his previous stoicism.

Vivienne scrutinized Sin with an expression of distaste. "I recall hearing about a vulgar man who was quite skilled at assassination, yes. I suppose it is unsurprising that this is his offspring. The previous Inspector's files indicated that the man was completely incapable of remaining discreet in or out of the Agency." Carhart paused and stared at her for a long moment, blue eyes narrowing slightly before he looked away. "Despite

his behavior, Emilio was the best assassin the Agency's ever had. Until his son, of course."

He watched as Sin's calculating gaze shifted between the two of them slowly as if he were trying to figure out what they were saying and what they wanted from him. What their plans were now. "I am aware of the man's reputation," Vivienne replied with little inflection. "Although I remain unclear as to how he met his demise."

Carhart pressed his lips together briefly, still not turning away from the glass as he explained, "As far as we know, Agent Vega was killed during the course of an assignment. After some time it became apparent that something had changed; his usual style was notably absent from missions. As you said, Emilio was known for his flair for theatrics, his inability to remain covert. Later we found out that Sin took over the assignments after his father's death. He carried them out so efficiently that for a long time we didn't know what to make of the change."

Vivienne didn't respond so Carhart continued the story. "As I'm sure you know, it wasn't until Sin responded to a recall for his father that we found out about the previous events. Nobody knew until the day he arrived that Emilio even had a son. Sin's origins are murky and we still aren't sure who his mother was or how he came to be trained, but he was only fourteen when we first came in contact with him and he was already a lethal killer."

The Inspector raised a slim eyebrow and she scrutinized Sin as though she were inspecting a tool that she was planning to purchase. "To my knowledge, even as a boy he was determined to be certifiably insane. And despite his incompetent mental state, the Marshal insists on using him again."

It wasn't a question so much as an obvious judgment call.

Carhart sighed and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Yes, he can appear quite insane at times. Attempted psychiatric evaluations have ended disastrously; the last doctor who saw him is now in a vegetative state in a nursing home. However, common

consensus is that he suffered severe abuse as a child which is what led to his current unstable and unpredictable mental state."

Vivienne appeared to be unmoved by this explanation. After a moment in which she did not respond and Carhart stared at Sin, Carhart continued. "He has difficulty sticking to mission parameters; he's wild and impulsive, doing what he pleases most of the time. But it's when his mental instability rears up that he is known to snap completely, turning into a totally ruthless killer who will not stop until all threats in the vicinity have been neutralized. Despite this, he is an efficient agent and as I already said, the best assassin we have. Most difficulties he has with missions tend to be staying within parameters and negotiating successfully. Because of this we began attempting to assign him partners six months ago but he killed them all within a week of their perspective trials. Despite his insistence that it was 'self-defense,' he was put into the box indefinitely."

"Charming," Vivienne said evenly, and then looked at the General briskly. "I will see him in person. Those chains will hold if I walk in, correct." The question was said as a statement and she was already moving toward the door to enter without waiting for confirmation. She glanced over her shoulder just in time to see Carhart pause; her eyebrow quirked, as if finding fault in his hesitation. Carhart shook his head slightly, returning her gaze steadily. There had been a reason why, despite the fact that she was higher up in the chain of command than he was, she had been kept out of mostly all dealings with Sin. Her role as Inspector of the Agency was to make sure the organization remained underground, covert, and basically invisible to the outside world.

She was a direct liaison to the people who orchestrated the Agency but despite that, she was not agent-trained, had no military background and was mostly regarded as a civilian employee by the staff because of this. The official story was that the Marshal had felt it imperative to keep her interaction with such a dangerous individual as Sin at the minimum as a form of protection for his second-in-command. The real reason was more likely to be that Marshal Connors knew the higher-ups would not

appreciate if Vivienne was killed by a well-known security risk that he insisted upon keeping as an agent.

The General looked at Sin again and set his jaw slightly. He had the utmost respect for Vivienne and though he was sure that any concern he may show for her would only be taken as an insult, he couldn't help hesitating before nodding to give his approval to let the slender blond woman into Sin's cell. "They should hold. If they don't, the guards have a remote to activate his collar."

Vivienne's gaze dropped to the metal collar around Sin's neck. "The prototype worked according to plan?"

"Yes. It's capable of very high voltage and is an improvement from the stun belt." The words dropped from Carhart's mouth in a toneless voice although a distinct look of discomfort briefly shadowed his face.

"Have you tested it?" Vivienne asked.

Carhart glanced at her briefly. "Yes but not on him."

Vivienne looked over at the guards who were standing at attention near the door. "Who has the remote?" she inquired, looking between them.

Luke hesitated briefly then stepped forward. "I do, Inspector."

"Hand it to me." She held her hand out and the guard immediately gave her a small metal remote with two buttons. She studied the remote briefly and its straightforward design, seeming to understand without needing to ask how to use it. She met Sin's glazed eyes as, without a hint of hesitation, she pressed the button.

Carhart's eyes automatically turned to Sin and he watched as a shudder went through him. A normal man would have immediately crumbled to the floor as the collar sent volts of electricity into his body. Sin merely tensed up, his teeth clenching together and eyes narrowing as he held out a slightly shaking hand to support his weight against the wall.

Beside them, Luke and Travis exchanged subtle glances but none of the guards commented. Carhart couldn't help noticing the slight glimmer of glee in Harry's eyes as they narrowed on Sin.

Carhart's mouth curled slightly and he looked at Sin again. The longer Vivienne activated the collar, the more the electricity overpowered him and his senses.

"His pain tolerance is unparalleled," Carhart said unnecessarily, maintaining an even tone despite the uncomfortable feeling that grew inside him.

Vivienne watched Sin with a clinical air as she steadily increased the power; Sin's eyes narrowed further and his olive complexion turned paler as sweat broke out on his skin. The tension grew considerably in his body and a stronger shudder went through him but he managed to maintain a relatively unaffected disposition until Vivienne put the remote at maximum power. Sin slid down the wall and fell onto the floor, trembling violently with his teeth gritted and eyes squeezed shut, yet through it all he didn't make a noise.

Once it was clear Sin was incapacitated by pain, Vivienne immediately turned the collar off and looked at Carhart with narrowed eyes. "The collar should be recalibrated before he is released. He should be incapacitated long before the highest setting."

"Like I said," Carhart replied stiffly, looking away from her and focusing instead on Sin. Even after maximum voltage had been used on him, the man was still struggling to get upright and was still lucid. The other subjects had suffered severe convulsions before falling unconscious after the same amount of voltage had swept through them. "He has amazing pain tolerance. I'm sure the techs weren't aware of how strong it is but they will be informed."

Vivienne nodded curtly in acknowledgment and held the remote in her hand. She strode to the door, looking expectantly at the guards. After a brief hesitation, Travis input a series of codes into the keypad beside the door. There was a low beep and a green light indicated that it had unlocked. Travis stepped inside immediately, a few other guards ringing her as she entered.

She walked directly into the room and did not comment on the guards, instead watching Sin with detachment.

"Can you understand me?" she asked him clearly.

Sin's head rolled to the side and he stared up at her through his hair, his face set in a grimace even though he didn't give any indication that he was still in pain. He opened his mouth, closed it, wet his lips, and opened it again. "I've been fluent in English for some time," he slurred, his voice low and deep. "Although this beautiful necklace you've gifted me with seems to have put me out of sorts momentarily."

"A useful excuse, no doubt," Vivienne said shortly. She surveyed Sin's restraints with a clinical air and strode closer; stopping just far enough away that he would not be able to reach her even if he surged to the ends of the chains. She kept the remote in her hand but made no move to use it again. "I should hope that you are intelligent enough to understand that you are a tool to the Agency, nothing more."

"And all this time I thought I was Carhart's lovetoy," Sin smirked mockingly, appearing relatively unaffected by her cool disdain. He stared at Vivienne through narrowed green eyes that glinted dangerously and with a calculating quality that caused the guards to glance at each other uneasily. "I'm fully aware of my situation, woman. Though I'm not aware of why you're in here reiterating it."

"You will address me with no term or Inspector, nothing else," she informed him. She stared at Sin with an expression that brooked no argument. Even though she was a woman of average height and strength, she seemed entirely unaffected by the fact that she was standing in the presence of a man who utterly terrified so many of the staff; a man who could kill a person in seconds. A man who was making even the guards nervous.

"I maintain the secrecy of the Agency and as such I find it necessary to invest a minimal amount of interest in you." She watched Sin closely. "I do not appreciate misunderstandings so I will make myself clear. I do not take kindly to dealing with fallout from preventable mistakes, particularly in high profile situations. Do not make the

assumption that you are ever out of my view, whether on compound or elsewhere. I will be watching you and I deal with all infractions swiftly and without sympathy." She paused just long enough to let the point sink in. "If you find yourself capable of remembering that simple rule, I anticipate few issues between us." Sin struggled to right himself, managing to crouch in front of her. He raised his eyebrows, his humorless smile firmly intact. "Keep me out of that box and I'll do whatever you want, woman."

"Clearly not," Vivienne said with obvious disdain at the usage of the word 'woman.' She looked down at him with cold blue eyes. "Do not disappoint me. You would not appreciate the situation you found yourself in if you did." He stared up at her silently for a very long moment, although it was unclear what was happening behind his pale green stare. "Why specifically are you here?"

Her face was like a mask, her eyes completely unreadable as she watched him. There was a beat of silence in which it seemed she would not answer but then she said with mild contempt, "Your intelligence is grossly exaggerated if you honestly expected me to answer that question."

Sin's eyes remained trained on her in the same narrow-eyed, hawk-like manner. The average person would probably turn away from such an expression, would shudder at what appeared to be a genuine ability to promise violence simply by the slightest narrowing of his eyes. Yet Vivienne watched him evenly, expressionlessly, and after a moment Sin just shrugged. He allowed himself to fall back against the wall gracelessly as he gave up on whatever enjoyment he gained from attempting to intimidate her.

"It's been a pleasure," he said blandly after a moment. Vivienne scrutinized him for a breath longer before she turned and strode back into the hallway without further comment. Once the guards followed her out and the door was locked once more, she said to them firmly, "Give him another dose of the drugs you are using to control him. If he has the energy to be disrespectful, he has the energy to escape. Remember that."

Turning to General Carhart, she said simply, "He will do."

The General looked at Sin and frowned at Vivienne's instructions although he didn't disagree out loud. "What did you conclude?"

She strode further away from the guards and out of their hearing range before she stopped where she had a better view of Sin. Her ice blue eyes were narrowed and the faint reflection of her expression in the window was as unreadable as ever.

She didn't speak until Carhart was standing next to her again, staring into the cell as well.

"Despite his attitude, he gives the impression of reasonable intelligence," she said calmly. "I would not hesitate to have him terminated should he once again become a liability; however, he may prove useful. I have decided to go through with my recommendation for his newest trial partner."

Carhart's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He'd previously thought that this visit had been solely for the purpose of Vivienne determining whether or not Sin would be a public risk if he were reinstated as an agent. "Oh?"

Vivienne's nod was curt and her gaze never left Sin. "I will notify the party tomorrow."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"My son."

Carhart tried to hide his shock and stared at Sin intently. "What makes you think he would be a good candidate?" he asked with forced professionalism.

"He would be unaffected by such mannerisms," she responded calmly. "And he is intelligent enough to avoid playing games." There was another beat of silence and this one was wrought with tension. Carhart turned away from the window, away from Sin. "We'll see how it turns out, then," he answered finally.

Yet as they began their walk back to the entrance to the Fourth, Carhart could only marvel at the fact that Vivienne had basically just given her son a death sentence.

## Chapter 1

The compound for Johnson's Pharmaceuticals loomed before Boyd.

The skyline was broken by a cluster of high-rise buildings that served as a stark contrast to the crumbling skyscrapers that had been devastated by the war. The city had never quite recovered from the bombs that had destroyed the entire eastern and southeastern section of the city's suburbs and wiped out entire neighborhoods within the city boundaries. Although the economy had been decimated by the third world war and the companies and stores that hadn't been lost still struggled to survive, drug manufacturers continued to make a profit. With the diseases that followed the war like a plague, people became desperate for everything from prescription drugs that could make them forget, to miracle drugs that could cure the illnesses wasting away their loved ones. While most people could hardly afford a roof over their head, drug companies had enough money to spend on sprawling compounds and private security guards to protect their assets.

Boyd stopped at the gates to the compound, waiting while a woman in front of him flashed an ID and the guards let her in. Although Boyd didn't bother to get any closer even in the few seconds before the gate slammed shut again, the shorter guard eyed him. Boyd noticed that the taller guard's grey and black uniform had a small silver tag that read 'Veliz' while the shorter guard's read 'Garrett.'

"What do you want?" Garrett watched Boyd suspiciously.

"I have an appointment with my mother," Boyd said impassively.

"What's her name?" Garrett asked while Veliz continued to alertly watch the street behind Boyd.

"Vivienne Beaulieu."

For some reason, the name caused both guards to look at him more closely. Garrett especially scrutinized him, taking in Boyd's empty expression, the uncombed fall

of long blond hair that went well past his shoulders, and the honey brown eyes that watched the guards blankly.

Boyd wore all black, from his long-sleeved shirt and simple pants to his military-grade boots and the long trench coat over it all. The dark color made his pale skin look even more washed out.

Garrett's eyes narrowed. "Show me your identification."

Boyd held out his driver's license. Garrett snapped it roughly from Boyd and studied it seriously before turning watchful brown eyes onto Boyd again. Finally, Garrett handed the card back and glanced at Veliz briefly. Garrett disappeared into a small one-room building to the side of the gates.

Boyd stared ahead, not listening to the short conversation between Garrett and someone on the phone, and not looking at Veliz, who had resumed his scrutiny of the surroundings. Silence fell between them, lasting for a few minutes.

Garrett finally returned with a handheld metal detector. He ran it up and down Boyd's body; the detector made a quiet whining noise once it passed Boyd's belt and pockets, but once Boyd was directed to empty his pockets and remove his belt, it was silent. Garrett waited while Boyd silently put the belt back on and slid the keys in his pocket.

Garrett had a bright green visitor's pass with the day's date scrawled on it and he held it out as he said, "You're cleared. An escort will be here shortly."

Garrett stepped back to join his partner in watching the surroundings while Boyd placed the visitor's pass on his trench coat where it was clearly visible.

Boyd blankly watched the solid gates until they opened enough to reveal a guard from inside the compound. The new man was dark-haired with a dark complexion and taller than Boyd by several inches. As he stepped in front of Boyd, the small silver tag reading 'Amos' was almost directly in front of Boyd's eyes.

Amos grabbed Boyd's arm and started to direct him through the gates. Boyd didn't care for the fingers curling around his arm and wanted to pull away. In the end he didn't bother. It would simply draw more attention to himself.

As they passed the other two guards, Boyd heard Garrett mutter sarcastically to Amos, "Better watch out with that one. He'll excite the shit out of you."

Veliz snickered quietly and Amos snorted but Boyd was barely listening as his gaze slid disinterestedly across the compound. It was almost like a miniature city inside, with named streets that spread out before him, parking lots near the larger buildings, and more people striding around than he would have expected could fit in there. A large building sat to their left, the entrance dominated by a sign that read 'Johnson's Pharmaceuticals' with the company's maroon logo next to it.

"You taking him to Entry?" Garrett asked Amos idly.

"She wants him in her office," Amos said with a shrug.

"Really," Garrett drawled in an intrigued tone and although Boyd didn't look over, he could feel that dark brown stare burning into the back of his head. "Interesting. There must not be a long shelf-life on this one, huh?"

"Who knows," Amos said dismissively. "I don't make the rules; I just follow them."

"Don't we all," Garrett muttered, then turned away. "Later."

Amos nodded and tugged on Boyd's arm to get him moving. Boyd had barely paid attention to the conversation and expected to be brought to the Johnson's Pharmaceuticals building, but was led around another building and down the main street instead. Together, they headed toward the tallest building that towered off-center of the compound.

The building was a skyscraper that looked as though it held well over a dozen floors, and although there were high-rises in the city that were taller, this one was massive in its girth as well. The windows were reflective and black, making the place

look like a modern monolith placed in the middle of the compound. There were no signs designating the name of it or even an address that Boyd noticed, yet it seemed like the majority of the people walking around the compound were heading in or out of the front doors.

Hardly anyone gave them a second glance and when Amos and Boyd went through the large double doors of the building, Boyd glanced past the lobby that opened before them.

A huge staircase dominated the room straight ahead of them while hallways opened up to the left and right. A main desk with a short, circular wall surrounding it sat in middle of the room, where three guards were sitting behind a small set of monitors. Two of them looked up and nodded amiably at Amos, who nodded in return and led Boyd around the set of stairs to an elevator bank just through a hallway behind it.

Four double-wide elevators in a row lined the wall with a large, open space in front of them, with another elevator at the far end that was smaller and looked to be the only place without a group surrounding it. About ten people waited there in varying moods. Lit signs above each elevator flashed ever-changing numbers, with an arrow next to them pointing up or down. Boyd got more than one odd look when his green visitor's pass was noted but no one said anything once they glanced at the guard holding his arm.

Boyd found his gaze tracking the people around him. A wide variety was represented, from ethnicities and ages to personalities. Now that he and Amos were stopped, he distantly noticed that something was starting to bother him.

The press of people gave him a strange sense of anxiety. He hadn't been around this many people for years. He'd spent every moment he could inside his house, barely thinking or moving, and had only left when he'd needed items he couldn't find a way to have delivered. He'd never been claustrophobic but the crowd of people milling around him came as close to that as he'd ever felt, and it took him a moment to understand why.

He felt exposed in this position. So many eyes all around him, seeming as though they were watching him. Hands that could touch him and potentially hurt him. It seemed more apparent to him in here, where the space was smaller and the people were closer.

Although he didn't care what anyone thought, it still felt incredibly strange to be noticed at all. He'd felt for so long like part of the woodwork in his home; like a painting that blended into the wall. These people reminded him that wasn't the case and it was an uncomfortable feeling. He shifted closer to Amos, unconsciously seeking some sort of protection.

Bits of conversation flashed around him; some of it making no sense to him and some of it seeming so mundane. Abbreviations and unfamiliar terminology mixed with people chatting about what sounded like routine business. What they planned to do tonight; where they planned to go. Projects they were working on at home. Lamentations of being tired and wishing the day was already over.

After years of being in stasis, it was like being thrown into a world on fast forward. He felt alienated by this everyday life even as a part of him wondered what those terms meant.

He'd been on autopilot for so long. He'd learned to shut everything down and feel nothing in a blank setting and it had worked well for him. It was almost alarming to feel that comforting nothingness bow with the pressure of such an alien environment. Feeling anything at all was a disturbing prospect and yet even when he looked straight at the wall and tried to ignore everyone around him, he still distantly noted their gazes and their words. The third elevator over finally dinged with the sign flashing 'G.' The doors opened and a crowd of people exited. Amos led Boyd into the elevator along with many of the other people waiting, although some of them hung back and seemed as though they planned to wait for an emptier elevator. Small, nearly-hidden cameras discreetly watched their every move from the upper corners of the elevator.

Boyd stared expressionlessly at the metal doors as different people pressed the button for their correct floor. He was acutely aware of everyone around him and how close they were. He couldn't help noting the way their bodies jostled each other, growing closer and closer.

At one point, a larger man shifted back to let someone in on a new floor and Boyd was pressed up against the wall behind him. The heavy weight of the body against his front and the cold, unyielding surface at his back made his heartbeat spike and his skin pale. He shifted, the movement not particularly abrupt but still just sudden enough that Amos looked over at him oddly. Boyd ignored him and moved until he was no longer being held in place. Even then the tension didn't leave him, and he found himself darting his eyes toward the door each time; calculating how many people were entering and how many exiting, and whether he had to move to not be caught again.

Amos didn't press any buttons. As the elevator ascended people entered and exited at different floors, stopping at seemingly every floor except the sixth and eleventh as they moved up. One odd thing he noted was that the floor options skipped the number four. The elevator ride felt like it took twenty minutes when it was probably only three.

Boyd assumed Amos hadn't hit a button because their floor number was already pressed. It wasn't until they reached the fifteenth floor and the last few people were getting off yet Amos didn't move that Boyd realized it was because Amos was waiting for something.

He looked over just in time to see Amos press the button numbered '17' and pull out his ID card, swiping it along a small device next to the buttons. A little red light flashed green once his card passed through and the last person getting off the elevator looked over in interest once he saw the number. He looked between Amos and Boyd with an intrigued expression but when Amos gave him a narrow-eyed, hard look, the man simply gave a rolling shrug and stepped onto the fifteenth floor. He turned around and briefly watched as the metal doors slid shut and then Amos and Boyd were alone. Seventeen was the highest number listed and Boyd didn't know why it was

apparently intriguing that they were headed there. Once the elevator stopped and the doors slid open, he saw that this floor seemed to have higher security than the others. While every other floor had opened up to hallways and the occasional large, open room behind the elevator bank, this one had a wall with a single heavy door and another code box next to it. Amos swiped his keycard and the light flashed green, allowing them entrance. Although there was a foyer and a large room opened up to the right, Amos brought Boyd down a hallway ahead of them and then took a left turn. Full glass walls separated what appeared to be a waiting room from the hallway, while another wall of floor-to-ceiling windows to the right looked out on the compound below.

Amos calmly walked into the room and Boyd followed.

A reception desk sat off to the left with a heavy-looking mahogany door behind it. A woman who seemed to be about thirty years old sat at the desk, light brown hair pulled back. Her hazel eyes watched Boyd with mild interest, although it was only distinguishable by the discreet arching of an eyebrow.

A small name plate resting on the desk read 'Annabelle Connors' and she continued to scrutinize Boyd before she slid her gaze over to Amos. "Is that the ten-thirty?"

Amos shrugged and dropped Boyd's arm. "I don't know, Ann. I was just told to bring him up here." Ann nodded and she pushed something towards the edge of the desk, looking at Boyd expectantly. It was as thin as a regular clipboard but was actually a thin flat panel computer. It appeared to be used specifically for logging data that would typically be found on a sign-in sheet.

Without bothering to speak or look up at her, Boyd used the stylus to sign his name on the panel and stepped back beside Amos.

Ann looked at the panel, taking in his name-- most likely his last name and the fact that it was the same as her boss'. Her eyes flicked up to him again, wandering over his form in an almost clinical way before she finally went back to typing on the sleek keyboard on her desk.

The moments ticked by slowly and after a while, when the minute hand struck thirty minutes after the hour exactly, Ann picked up the phone and dialed a short number. Her tone was professional and respectful when she spoke. "Inspector, Boyd Beaulieu is here for an appointment."

There was a brief moment of silence before Ann nodded. "Of course, Inspector." She hung up the phone and then looked at Boyd evenly before pressing a button. A small device similar to the one in the elevator made a quiet beeping noise and flashed a green light next to the mahogany door.

"You can go in," Ann said unnecessarily and Boyd didn't look at either of them as he approached the door. He had not seen his mother in years and the last time they'd been in the same room had been under exceedingly stressful circumstances. He walked into the room and shut the door behind him, feeling doubt shift within him.

She was just the way he remembered her. Pale blond hair pulled back, making it look smooth and straight from the front. Ice blue eyes that didn't miss a flicker in his expression. Lips that seemed perpetually pressed together and drawn down at the edges just so; as if she disapproved of anything he would say or do before he even did it.

Looking at her made it harder to avoid some memories. It made flashes of pain and utter desperation feel like they were closer to today than they really were. It was a feeling that clenched his stomach and caused a hint of hesitation to enter his movements.

Still, he did his best to ignore it all because he knew his mother would not approve of any unnecessary emotions. He built a wall against those memories and told himself they didn't exist. To distract himself from that intense stare, he glanced around the room.

The office was spacious and minimally decorated; a large, heavy desk sat across the room with an office chair situated in front for visitors to use. Two tall bookcases flanked the desk along the wall behind it, although they were half empty. A small, worn

leather bound book was nearly hidden between several normal sized books that had half-fallen over as they leaned against each other. A flat panel also sat on the right bookshelf; Boyd suspected it was one used primarily for reading materials based on its size.

A comfortable-looking chair next to a small table sat to the left along the wall but it didn't look as though it had ever been used. The entire right wall was covered floor to ceiling with windows, affording a phenomenal view of the compound and city below, the buildings looking like scattered toys from this height.

There were no personal effects: no pictures of family; no items of sentimentality. The table and desk spaces in the room were immaculately clean and anything that sat on them clearly had a practical purpose. There were office supplies, files currently in use, and a sleek, thin computer that was currently turned off.

Boyd's mother sat in the tall-backed, rolling chair behind her desk, hands interlocked and resting on the desk. Her gaze flicked along the length of him before her eyes narrowed in distaste. "You walked through the entire compound with that appearance?"

Boyd moved closer to the desk but did not sit down. His arms were loosely crossed and low, almost absently covering his stomach. His shoulders were slouched a bit, as if to somehow hide from her gaze. Still, his expression remained steady even though that this was nearly the first thing his mother had said to him after years of silence.

"Yes."

The disapproval in Vivienne's eyes only strengthened as she met Boyd's gaze. "What could possibly have deterred you from looking presentable when visiting my place of employment? I am well aware of how useless your life is now yet you show up like this? You appear as though you have not combed that abominable hair in days."

"I apologize, Mother. I have no excuse."

Her lips tightened slightly. "I already invest a disproportionate amount of money in your existence for the usefulness you provide. When I contact you, I expect you to put effort into the meeting. Do not disappoint me again."

"I won't."

Even with cotton muffling his emotions, he felt a distant twinge at the knowledge that once again he had done something wrong in her eyes. She was all he had left and he still couldn't seem to avoid disappointing her.

She watched him for a long moment, lips pulled down slightly at the edges, before she tilted her head toward the chair. "Sit down."

Boyd followed her order, sitting with his back straight in the chair and hands resting in his lap as he watched her. She didn't speak immediately and silence fell between them as she scrutinized him with an even more unreadable expression than usual.

"What was your impression of the compound?" she asked at length.

Boyd didn't answer at first. He didn't understand why she had invited him to her workplace for the first time. And he didn't understand why she would ask that when she typically seemed to believe that his opinion was worthless. He was hesitant to give her the wrong answer. He did not want to provide more reason for her to be disappointed with him or give her reason not to call him next time. Yet he was more hesitant to remain silent, so he considered the question seriously.

"The compound is large and well-guarded," he replied after a moment. "I received strange looks in relation to your name and this floor. There are more employees, buildings and vehicles than I would expect for the sole purpose of manufacturing and transporting pharmaceuticals."

Her gaze drilled into him, as if she could see right through him, while he couldn't read what she was thinking at all.

One of her eyebrows quirked slightly. "And it did not occur to you to question any irregularities?"

"I lack the necessary information to compare this pharmaceutical company with others, so I haven't formed an opinion."

She watched him with narrowed eyes. This time, he could tell that something was happening behind them. She was thinking deeply. Silence fell between them once more and at first it seemed as though she wouldn't speak. Then, she leaned back in her chair.

"If you were to visit the other locations of Johnson's Pharmaceuticals, you would find that the compounds contain multiple laboratories as well as a central administrative building, and little else." Her ice blue gaze was intense on Boyd as she spoke.

Although she didn't speak further, it was clear from the way she scrutinized him that she expected a response.

"That doesn't seem to fit with the security and size of this compound," Boyd replied. "There are a large number of buildings, many of which don't seem consistent with a typical laboratory design. Several of the people who I observed on the way to your office didn't appear to be administrative staff or lab technicians and their terminology didn't reflect either job description. I would also question the heavy security across the entirety of the compound rather than grouped around key points." He paused and then concluded, "The implication is that the valuable assets here are something other than pharmaceuticals."

Vivienne stayed still for a long moment, watching Boyd in contemplation, before she finally sat back in her chair. "That would be an accurate assessment. Johnson's Pharmaceuticals is a legitimate company with complexes located across the nation; however, in this case the assets have nothing to do with pharmaceuticals. This particular compound is a cover for a government-sanctioned organization that is so highly classified that even the majority of the elite government entities are unaware of its existence. The CIA itself does not even have a file, although the Director is aware that it exists."

Boyd watched her for a moment. He felt a mild moment of interest at the information but it slid away fairly quickly. Ultimately, the existence of such an organization did not affect him enough for him to care. It simply made him consider the information with what he had seen on compound and conclude that something of that caliber certainly fit the profile more adequately than a pharmaceuticals headquarters. The fact that his mother worked for such a place was not uncharacteristic for her. She had worked in the CIA for many years, although he had never been clear on what her job description had been other than that she had dealt with public relations on some level.

"I see," Boyd said at length. "What would be the purpose of such an organization?"

She studied him, her eyes narrowing. "If you cannot even venture a guess with such information then you have allowed yourself to lose your only useful quality." Her blond eyebrows rose slightly. "Have you become entirely incompetent since your little drama? I was under the impression you had taken the opportunity to rid yourself of that unnecessary behavior."

He felt something shift inside him, something deep and buried that stirred to life at those words. Her icy gaze was fixed on him, the same way it had been years ago as she had distantly watched him struggle and scream. The memories he'd felt earlier returned more strongly; a vivid memory that had stained the world around him those years ago.

Lou's clear blue eyes flashed through his mind. The tousled blond curls that had dangled down his forehead and that easy smile that had always seemed so close to the surface. The indignation on Boyd's behalf any time Lou had felt that Vivienne had been too harsh or unattainable, and the warmth of someone close to lean against.

He remembered nights balanced atop concrete pieces that felt just on the verge of falling beneath them and clouds back-lit by moonlight reflected in dull green water. He remembered the warmth of a hand wrapping around his and tugging, and looking up

to eyes focused solely on him in a way he'd never otherwise experienced. His mother had always seemed to look past and through him, and his father had often seemed half caught up in thoughts even when he'd turned his attention on his son.

Yet those blue eyes of Lou's had seen Boyd as a person. They'd accepted him and they'd never strayed. They'd looked at him, truly looked at him, and they'd believed in him.

But flashes of a smile and laughing eyes were immediately overrun by concrete up close and creeping red. By memories of terror and pain and screaming desperation that had dragged the deepest part of him to the surface to be sliced open.

Boyd's face paled and his heartbeat pounded in his chest. The vivid jolt of images were more than he'd experienced in months, maybe years. It was impossible to ignore and it hit him hard with a physical feeling of nausea close behind.

Yet throughout it all, his expression remained blank.

He kept the remembered fear of the violence from his eyes and stayed still as stone. He was a statue. He was the background. He wasn't where he once had been. He didn't have to remember the past. He didn't have to remember that pain.

He told himself that until he could make his heartbeat recede and that brief moment of panicked memory subside. He told himself that until he was able to latch on to the present and the room surrounding him.

The information she had provided created a suitable distraction from the memory of soft blond curls splayed against the ground.

He considered what she had to say, taking into account what he had seen on the walk over, as well as other information he'd gathered from the individuals on compound. "The precautions of secrecy coupled with the excessive security would lead me to believe that this compound contains information of vital importance. If it were purely a matter of national security, one would expect the CIA and other entities to be involved."

His honey brown gaze was steady on her. "So I would assume that the need for the secrecy stems from the fact that what occurs on compound or due to this organization can't technically exist according to the government-- perhaps due to constitutional violations or actions that the public or policymakers would find unacceptable. I would assume that the secrecy and lack of documentation is necessary for the government's plausible deniability."

She watched him at length. Whatever was on her mind, she apparently reached a positive conclusion because she nodded once, curtly.

"This organization does not have a name you will ever hear aside from the Agency. The employees on compound are a combination of support staff, research agents, and field agents. The purpose of the Agency is to protect national security and support the government by ensuring the safety of the community at large."

Boyd considered that. The safety of the community was in danger every moment due to the scavengers and gangs who preyed on the weak in the city as a whole. The protection of national security should not be necessary from a separate entity when such groups already existed in the government. So who would they need protection from?

As if sensing his question, she continued coolly, "There have always been terrorist and insurgency groups who have sought to undermine the foundations of Western democracy. However, since the war the number of groups have increased, threatening the stability of the government and the safety of the citizens."

One blond eyebrow lifted. "This is a war that must be fought in complete secrecy on an international and domestic level, and the Agency is the entity designated to handle such a role. The covert quality is a necessity due to the fact that we do not always follow internationally-accepted sanctions such as the Geneva Convention. Our methods are vastly different from any other government organization in that regard; however, they are more efficient and as such accomplish far more for the greater good

than any other entity has the luxury to do. It is precisely for these reasons that no one can know that the Agency exists, let alone be aware of what we do."

There was a beat of silence before Boyd asked, "If the existence of the Agency is so highly classified, why was I invited here?"

Her gaze was steady on him. "You will audition for an open position."

She didn't ask him if he wanted to do this, she didn't suggest it-- she simply ordered him. This was unsurprising to him, as she had been that way for the majority of his life, but he did find what she said to be unexpected.

"A position?"

"An agent has recently been released from imprisonment and he requires supervision."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched slightly, the first expression he'd shown. "Imprisonment?" he echoed, gaze subtly sharpening on her as he tried to understand the situation.

"The agent in question is an adept assassin," she said calmly, as if it were normal to be speaking of such things. "However, he has shown extreme levels of aggression in the past. He was deemed unfit for service and has been sedated for several years, until he was recently cleared to be reinstated."

Boyd was silent a moment. "What does the position entail?"

"There are a number of undesirable qualities that the agent in question has shown in the past. He has been known to go on rampages, to compromise the mission's success by reacting poorly to certain stimuli, and to completely ignore mission parameters. He must be watched and controlled at all times."

Vivienne summarized the situation with very little inflection. "The open position is for his partner, who will act in a mediatory role, ensuring that he does not cause further

issues for the Agency by engaging in unwanted activity. His partner will have additional roles aside from this, which will be disclosed at a later date."

"Based on the description, I have no qualifications for such a position." Boyd's eyebrows drew down slightly. "I don't understand why I would be chosen."

"You have been nominated, not chosen," she said coolly, her eyes narrowing and mouth tightening. He couldn't tell if she thought he was imbecilic for the comment or if there was another reason she seemed displeased. "You and a number of other candidates will go through a rigorous process of testing to determine if you have the assets necessary for the position. Should you be hired, you will receive further information at that time."

Boyd had assumed, based on the position of authority she seemed to have, that she was the person in charge. "This decision isn't yours to make?"

"No."

She was looking at him in distaste and he sat back slightly in his chair, not knowing what he had done to receive such an expression. It was possible it was a sore topic for her. He knew she was devoted to her job above all else and her aspirations had always been to move up within her profession. Having to admit that she was not the highest authority likely did not sit well with her. It was equally possible she thought he was an idiot who should have understood this all from context from the beginning.

"I am here to ensure the Agency remains a secret," she continued after a moment. "I ensure that Agency activities do not find their way into the public realm by way of the media. My jurisdiction primarily falls along those lines as well as anything to do with the public or external interactions. My position as the Inspector leaves me second-in-command to the Marshal and it is he who will make the ultimate decision."

Boyd watched her for a moment before he inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Would I return to this compound for the tests?"

"The process begins tomorrow morning at seven-thirty," she said evenly. "You will remain on the compound in temporary quarters overnight."

His distant, golden brown eyes focused on her a little more clearly at the unexpected development. The same anxiety as before resurfaced. He hadn't slept anywhere but in his house for years, nor had he been around other people on a consistent basis. The idea was disturbing. "I'm not allowed to leave?"

"That is not a problem," she replied curtly, speaking with the strong confidence that a person typically reserved only for their own lives, not presuming to speak for others. "You have no reason to leave the compound. I am well aware that your life is meaningless."

Boyd was silent. He couldn't argue with that assessment.

"Do you have any questions?" Vivienne asked after a moment but once again Boyd didn't respond. She quirked an eyebrow. "You do not wish to even know the name of the agent?"

Boyd shook his head faintly; just enough that his hair shifted against his shoulders. "That information is useless unless I'm hired."

There was the briefest flash of what may have been satisfaction in her eyes. However, the emotion was there and gone in the blink of an eye and Boyd wasn't certain he'd seen it at all. There were so few times in his life that he could recall his mother showing anything resembling positive responses to him that he was inclined to believe it had been a trick of his imagination.

"Very well," Vivienne said briskly, already flicking her gaze away as her mind moved on to other matters. "Guards will be in the waiting room shortly to bring you to your next destination. You will stay there until you are contacted in the morning. I trust you will have no qualms with doing nothing for the remainder of the day."

The way she said it made it clear she felt he did nothing with his day regardless so it would not be new to Boyd. He could tell it was a rhetorical comment so he didn't respond. A short breath of silence passed before she said coolly, "Dismissed."

Boyd quietly stood and left her office, automatically taking care to silently close the heavy mahogany door behind him. He didn't glance at Ann or look around before he headed to one of the sleek-lined and not entirely comfortable chairs along the glass windows. He sat there and waited, not looking at anything in particular.

It didn't even occur to him to take the time to consider whether he would do this or not. He had no reason to refuse. Being on this compound or at his house was the same thing to him. Whether he joined a covert government agency or whether he had continued his life having never known of its existence were equally unimportant.

He had nothing and no one to exist for; he'd given up his desire to live years ago and with it had gone all sense of hope or belief in a future that was anything but numb and pointless. Whether he lived or died, whether he was here or there, whether he was healthy or hurt-- it meant nothing to him.

Memories had become like vivid ghosts around every corner of his house. Perhaps the worst were in his bedroom, which was silent now but once had held the quiet breathing of two who cared more about each other than anything else, and their hesitant, questioning movements for more. For a long time when he'd lain in his bed, if he hadn't experienced terrible flashbacks then he'd been caught by haunting memories. The feel of warm, bare skin against his and of blond curls sifting through his fingers. Blue eyes hovering over his and a smile playing on lips that moved down to press against his own. Touches that had made him feel alive in a way he hadn't felt since. If there was a hell beyond what he knew, he would welcome it. He had no reason not to.

After all, a life without living was simply a death without dying. What more was there to fear or hate but life, endless life, with no respite?

## Chapter 2

The general population within the Agency tended to expect Sin to act psychotic. That fact was evident enough by the looks he received when Officer Gerant came to escort him from the Fourth floor to the upper levels of the Tower.

Gerant unwisely chose to take the elevator. To say the Agency staff that had occupied it reacted strongly would have been an understatement. Some gawked at Sin, some fearfully avoided his steady green gaze and others looked on with outright hostility. He ignored them impassively, not reacting visibly to the stares. He felt nothing more than irritation about the spectacle that his appearance created everywhere he went.

Sin supposed that it was inevitable. With the vast majority of the Agency staff believing that he was a psychotic murderer, it wasn't particularly shocking that many of them were displeased with his reinstatement as a field agent.

The elevator emptied quickly but whether or not people were actually getting off at their designated floors or were simply trying to get away from him was unknown. He assumed the latter.

Within two stops the elevator was empty except Sin, Gerant and two men that Sin recognized as lower level field agents. He'd never spoken to them outright but long ago Sin had made it a point to memorize the names, ranks and addresses of as many Agency staff as he could. It was best to find out as much information as one could about potential enemies. And in the hostile climate of the compound, Sin considered everyone to be a potential threat.

Agents Angelo Morales and Adam Blake stood side by side, both dark-haired and wearing dark clothing; the unofficial uniform of new field agents who used to watch too much television. They seemed to think covert agents wore black suits and leather jackets. All that was missing were twin pairs of black sunglasses.

They stared at Sin and Sin stared back blankly, unimpressed by them. Although, he typically wasn't very impressed by much.

Adam looked at him with an intrigued expression on his pale face while Angelo glared with outright contempt.

"They should have kept you locked on the Fourth, you fucking freak," Angelo spat with disgust, casting a black glare at Gerant as though it was his fault specifically for Sin's presence.

Gerant just shrugged, looking awkward, Sin raised his eyebrows at Morales, saying flatly, "It was a pleasure to meet you as well, Agent Morales."

Angelo blanched at the usage of his name and took a step back, which wasn't much considering the elevator was only about two yards wide.

Sin's lips turned up at the side but the expression didn't make it to his coldly glittering, pale green eyes. "Tell me, how is it living in Residential Complex B? Unfortunately I've been locked in a box on the Fourth floor for the past six months so I've become quite unfamiliar with typical accommodations. Not that I've ever had any, mind you."

All remaining color drained from Angelo's face but Adam just shook his head, not appearing at all surprised.

"How did you know--"

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open. Adam dragged his partner out of the elevator before he could complete the sentence and Sin leered at them as they retreated. The elevator once again lapsed into silence until their destination of the next floor.

Gerant waited for Sin to exit and followed closely behind as Sin walked past offices and hallways, ultimately arriving in the lobby area of General Carhart's space. Sin was vaguely aware of the small remote in Gerant's hand and he debated causing a

scene just to test how quickly the collar could be activated before he broke the guard's hand and crushed the remote. The test on the Fourth floor weeks ago by Inspector Beaulieu would have given him a full minute to confiscate the remote but they'd altered the collar since then and likely made the voltage higher.

Sin reached up and idly ran his long, slim fingers along the collar. The metallic coldness resting against his skin felt unnatural but after two weeks he was nearly used to it. He was also becoming accustomed to the idea that the collar was a tracking device as well as a control mechanism.

The lobby wasn't deserted by any means. Two field agents, a Research and Development agent and Carhart's receptionist were in the immediate area. Once again, every one of them stopped what they were doing to stare at Sin.

This time he didn't bother to antagonize anybody and waited impatiently for Gerant to knock on the door and for the General to admit them access.

When the door opened, Sin stepped inside gratefully, glad to be out of the watchful gaze of every single person he came across even if it meant dealing with Carhart.

"You can go, Officer Gerant," Carhart said to the guard although his cerulean blue eyes focused on Sin and didn't move. His handsome face was as youthful as ever, his form as impressive and fit as it'd been in the half year since Sin had seen him last. It wasn't too surprising. In the thirteen years Sin had known the General, the man had aged very little physically.

"But, Sir--"

Carhart looked away finally and focused his eyes on the guard. "I said, you can go," he said flatly in a tone that allowed no argument.

Gerant nodded uncertainly and held out one hand, studiously avoiding Sin's gaze. "The remote, sir?"

Carhart's expression was quickly turning to one of impatience. "I don't need it. Take it and go."

Sin smirked at the General. "Pretty confident, aren't you?"

Carhart didn't respond, obviously not willing to rise to the bait. "Goodbye, Officer Gerant," he said pointedly.

The guard shot him another worried look, obviously concerned about leaving the third-in-command of the Agency alone with a psychopath, but obediently left the office and shut the door behind him.

Sin sat in the armchair opposite Carhart's desk and shifted, making himself comfortable on the soft plush cushion. He leaned his head back against the soft microfiber and let his eyes drift closed.

Carhart sat back in his own chair and shook his head, the corners of his mouth rising slightly as he watched Sin. "Have I bored you already?"

"Mm." Sin opened one green eye lazily, looking at the General with a cold smile. "No. But after sleeping on linoleum for the past six months, I may just doze off from the sheer opulence of your chair. Or maybe it's the fucking horse tranquilizers you pumped me full of for those six months that are still slowing me down?"

The amusement faded from Carhart's expression and he looked down at his computer, expression hardening. "Holding a grudge, Sin?"

"Fuck you," Sin said tonelessly, closing his eyes again. He heard a low sigh and the squeak of the general shifting in his chair.

"Are you hungry?"

"No. After six months on a liquid diet, I'm watching my figure."

This time the sigh was one of exasperation. "How many more 'after six months' retorts do you have left in you? You weren't nearly this witty after spending four years on the Fourth on your previous incarceration."

Sin considered the question and arched one black eyebrow. "Well that was before the box and before I was left in a stupor for the entire period," he replied flatly. "And speaking of the box, I still have to mention the abusive guards, my emaciated condition and this gorgeous piece of jewelry you gifted me with. I heard the medics talking. Apparently that little gem was all your idea."

"Because it was the only goddamn way I could convince Marshal Connors and the Inspector to let you out of that cell," Carhart snapped. "An opportunity arose, a way to get you off the Fourth but they didn't want to. They wanted to keep you in that box. The only way I could get around it was by suggesting a way to control you, for insurance."

"To control me," Sin repeated dully, opening both eyes to gaze across the desk at Carhart. "Interesting choice of words."

Carhart shook his head, frustration evident by the tension in his broad shoulders. "After what you pulled with your last four partners, what the hell do you expect? They paint you in the role of the murdering psychopath and you play the part while I try to be devil's fucking advocate every time you get into trouble."

"It's not my fault you designated complete morons for my babysitters," Sin replied, his eyes narrowing as he sat up in the chair and leaned forward. His black and red hair curtained his face, temporarily shading his eyes and shadowing his exotic features.

Carhart stared at him silently as a dangerous smile slid across Sin's full lips.

"Maybe you shouldn't have chosen 'partners,'" he said the word with obvious distaste, spitting it out as if it tasted terrible, "who thought the word partner meant handler and that I was their fucking pet."

"The choices made were unfortunate," Carhart agreed at length, blue eyes flicking away briefly from Sin's steady gaze. "After much debate, the Marshal and the Inspector both agreed on that note. They went over the files, the reports and debriefings and agreed that perhaps we hadn't made the most suitable choices..."

"And I see you didn't feel it necessary to share this news flash with the staff." Not that it would have mattered, Sin answered his own comment silently. His reputation and existence on the compound had been tarnished and despised for years.

Carhart ignored the comment and asked again, "Would you like coffee? Something to eat?"

Sin made a face, annoyed by Carhart's incessant habit of trying to feed him whenever they came face to face. "Will you shut up with the eating?"

"You're skin and bones," Carhart said pointedly, indicating Sin's lanky body that looked lost in the loose threadbare clothing that he wore. "If you're going to be reinstated you have to get your weight up and start rebuilding muscle. We have a specific timetable that we're working with."

"Fine. Get me a chocolate milk and a donut."

Carhart stared at him.

Sin shrugged.

Shaking his head but not appearing overly surprised by the request, Carhart pressed the intercom on his desk. "Amy, can you bring in a coffee, some donuts and... a chocolate milk?"

There was a pause and a very uncertain sounding, "Right away, sir," in response.

Satisfied, Sin crossed his arms over his chest and threw his legs out in front of him.

The amusement appeared on Carhart's face once again and he shook his head. "You're going to need to develop better eating habits, Sin. You're about thirty to forty pounds underweight. That sweet tooth isn't going to help you in any way. I don't even know where you get that from. Certainly not your father."

Sin went very still in the chair and his eyes narrowed. "Don't."

Carhart frowned slightly. "I was just sayi--"

"Don't," Sin repeated in a warning tone. "Leave it, General."

The sudden tension in the room was palpable and only broken by the appearance of Amy with a tray full of donuts, a mug of coffee and a large Styrofoam cup presumably filled with chocolate milk. The receptionist seemed mildly alarmed by Sin's icy glare and Carhart's stiff posture but she didn't comment, instead offering Sin a flexy straw before she hurried away.

Sin looked down at the neon pink straw in bemusement and the moment was broken.

"So," Carhart said with obvious relief, grabbing his coffee from the tray. "The opportunity I spoke of. Any clue as to what it is?"

"Mm." Sin took a bite of half a chocolate donut and nearly closed his eyes at the delicious taste of sugary icing. "Either you're in desperate need of my wonderful assassination abilities or your super elite unit is still short a high-ranking fieldie due to your relative lack of high ranking fieldies?"

"Precisely. My options are limited to you and Senior Agent Trovosky."

"So go with Trovosky. I'm sure he'd come in his pants at the opportunity to be on your extra special team."

"Ha ha. Funny." The General looked at the donuts and selected a plain one without icing. "As I was saying, my options are limited to you and Trovosky since you're

my only two level 10s and he's been sent away on an extended undercover op so my choices are down to, well, you."

"It's so nice to be needed." Sin's voice practically oozed with sarcasm.

"Janus activity has been rearing up again and they're getting stronger with each passing day," Carhart said seriously, once again trying to impress the importance of the unit to Sin. It wasn't the first time he'd made the effort-- that had occurred six months ago when Connors had arranged the unit whose sole purpose existed to get information on and stop the ever-expanding rebel organization.

"We need to act now before they induct every single ragtag rebel group into their fold. They've swallowed insurgent groups here and overseas and their influence is spreading."

"Sounds dire," Sin replied blandly, grabbing a Bismarck donut that looked to be filled with some kind of custard.

Carhart glared at him. "Can you take this seriously?"

"No."

"This is your job, Sin. Your job--"

"Fuck my job." Sin smiled around a mouthful of custard, the sticky white filling smearing on his wide lips. "If you think I'm still here because of loyalty to the cause, you're more delusional than I thought. I'm here because it's too much trouble to bother trying to escape Connors' tentacles."

A long suffering sigh answered him. "In any case, the conditions of your release are to retrain, to become a full-fledged member of the Janus unit as well as taking on your previous duties. And once again we will be inducting a second field agent to the unit, a level 9 who will be--"

"Fuck that."

"--trained specifically to be your partner."

"No way in hell." Sin was already standing up, his back stiff with anger at the mere suggestion of going through that again. "I'd rather go back to the Fourth."

Carhart's patience seemed to have reached the end of its rope. "But you won't just go back to the fucking Fourth, Sin. You'll go back to the box and this time, you won't be getting out. They're not just using it as a temporary punishment anymore, Agent Vega. That's your fate if this doesn't work out. Now you tell me-- which do you want to choose?"

Sin grit his teeth and looked away, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the city's broken skyline, at the destroyed suburbs that lay beyond the city limits. Evidence of the war. "I won't play somebody's power games. I won't let some idiotic thick-necked field agent treat me like an animal. I don't care what you do to me."

"And I'm telling you it won't be that way this time!" Carhart slammed his hands on the desk in frustration, causing coffee to slop out of the side of his mug and splash on the files that rested beside it. "We're going through a very extensive process to find a suitable match for you, Sin. Psych profiles, background, personality assessments-- and this time your input will be included. It won't be like it was before."

Sin frowned slightly and looked down at his cup of chocolate milk. He stared at it moodily, weighing the pros and cons. "Why bother?" he asked finally. He looked up at Carhart with a grim smile. "You know I'm damaged goods. You know what happens with me, what always happens with me. I'll always end up back up on the Fourth."

"Well I'm not prepared to give up on you just yet," Carhart snapped impatiently, wiping at his files in obvious aggravation. "You're the best we have and even if they hate you, everyone knows that. Now shut the hell up, drink your chocolate milk and stop being a pain in my ass, Sin. For God's sake."

Sin allowed his gaze to slide out the window once again, watching the smoke-colored clouds drift across the oppressively bleak sky. "I'll agree to it. For now."

Carhart opened his mouth to express his relief but the dark look Sin speared him with after a moment stopped him cold.

"But if you pick the wrong person," Sin said quietly. "It's his fucking funeral."

The General dropped his eyes and focused on his desk once again although his expression had stilled considerably. "Believe me, Sin. I know."

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Sin's battered combat boots left dark smudges against the plain white wall of the small, darkened conference room but he didn't shift his position. He remained reclined in the black office chair with his feet propped against the drywall.

Strands of jet black hair fell across his forehead, mixing with the dyed red that was slowly growing out. His face was the picture of boredom, almond shaped green eyes half closed and long black lashes practically resting against his cheeks as he stared through the two way mirror blankly.

"This is boring," he drawled, looking over at Carhart with a frown. "Unless you're completely moronic, it should be clear that the last two candidates are a complete and utter disaster. Who exactly narrowed down your short list?"

Carhart sat on the edge of the table and touched the computer panel, bringing up a holographic image of the information. "Connors did," he replied gruffly. "He insisted on throwing in as many level 9 candidates as possible to save the time and money spent putting a lower level field op through the intensive level 9 training."

Sin smirked. "Since he likely doubts they'll last the initial trial missions, I can't say that I blame him."

Carhart typed something into the touch screen keyboard and Agents Eddy Baxter and Jenny White were marked as unacceptable. The former was a flame-haired level 9 agent from the Counter-Terrorism division who seemed to perpetuate the characteristics that had gotten Sin's previous partners killed. Agent White was a level 9 valentine

operative in Intelligence who seemed to think she could use her feminine wiles to tame Sin.

"And Agent Alvarez backed out at the last minute," Carhart scoffed, not hiding the irritation in his face as he marked off Michael Alvarez's name. "General Stephen said he's too frightened of you to be a realistic choice."

Sin shrugged uncaringly although he felt that it would have been fun to torment the man for a few missions before it was deemed a failure.

"So we're left with two level 8 agents and a civilian prospect with no training whatsoever who would be starting off as a level 1 trainee." Carhart grimaced. "Connors won't be pleased."

"How unfortunate." Sin looked at the list finally and noticed Agent Adam Blake's name on it. He instantly recalled the incident in the elevator and wondered at the odd coincidence. "Have them do Blake next."

James Waldon, a well muscled and towering interviewer from Human Resources who looked more like an insurgent than a civilian staff member, disappeared from the small windowless room on the other side of the mirror and reappeared after a moment with Adam.

Now that Sin was looking at Adam's face directly, he realized that the man was actually attractive in an incredibly pale, vampiric kind of way. Adam's thick black hair hung down to the nape of his neck and contrasted starkly with his wax like complexion. His dark, bottomless eyes did the same. There was a hooked scar on his right cheek that was likely the result of a mission and another scar that marred the otherwise flawless skin under his mouth.

He was a striking individual and Sin wasn't surprised to look at the file again and see that Adam was also marked as an undesignated valentine operative. The most attractive field agents usually were; seduction was one of the oldest and most lucrative ways of getting information and turning a suspect into an informant.

"He's arrogant," Sin observed idly, studying Adam's expressions and body language as James began the interview.

Carhart nodded his agreement but gave Sin a wry look. "Let me guess-- you're thinking how fun it would be to knock him down a peg or two?"

Sin looked at him from under his eyebrows. "I said no such thing."

"Right."

Most of the interview process was boring since it was the same questions asked again for the third time in the past two hours. James explained the position, Tactician in an elite and very confidential unit in the Insurgency division, and then proceeded to grill the candidates on everything they knew about Sin and his past.

Sin examined Adam's eyes and analyzed every flicker of emotion, every nearly concealed flash of doubt. Yet in the end he couldn't find a reason to entirely loathe the man except for the fact that he was arrogant and predisposed to negativity regarding Sin just like everyone else on the compound. In Adam's case, he was especially likely to because of the company he kept, Morales being one of them.

However, when James began to talk about infamous city center massacre of 2012, Sin's opinion of Adam lifted a bit.

"After the incident with the scavengers and police," James began, blue eyes trained on Adam although his face was entirely expressionless, "news stories circulated about Agent Vega being behind many of the rapes and murders that had plagued the city during that time. The Agency stamped out the publicity effectively enough, as we know Inspector Beaulieu is quite efficient at quieting such things. However, the stories leaked anyway and people remember, specifically Agency staff."

James stopped speaking and stared at Adam with a small empty smile, not asking a question but clearly waiting for a reaction of some kind.

Adam's eyes flicked to the mirror, likely knowing he was being watched, and for a moment his eyes met with Sin's even though the lower ranked agent couldn't see him.

"Well," Adam began, his low voice thoughtful and considering. "As far as I remember, there were also reports during that time of widespread corruption in the police department as well as an embarrassing amount of ineptitude to solve certain crimes due to staff shortage after the economic collapse."

James raised a thick eyebrow and waited so Adam continued, folding his hands in front of him and looking more confident as he continued. "So despite the fact that the incident in the city center was unfortunate, I think it's more likely that the chief of police used Agent Vega as a scapegoat for every unsolved crime in his jurisdiction. Especially considering the shocking nature of the incident and the public's horror and desire to accept an answer as long as there was one."

Sin looked over at Carhart. "He's possible."

The General looked surprised. "I agree but I'm surprised to hear you say it."

Sin shrugged and sat up straight, scooting the chair forward and looking through the mirror seriously. "At least he's not a total fucking idiot."

The next interviewee wasn't as successful. Agent Allen Carson didn't appear overly hostile but he also was quite obviously feeding James rehearsed lines and trying to say what he thought the interviewer wanted to hear. It was obvious that he wanted the job likely for the accolades that came with it. Yet Sin could read naked fear in Allen's eyes when the subject of Sin's past crimes came up. In the end, Carhart marked the man off the short list.

Carhart frowned as Carson disappeared from the room and Carhart ran a hand through his short blond hair, grimacing at the only remaining name on the list.

Boyd Beaulieu.

"I suppose you're going to have no choice but to do the trial with Blake," Carhart said as he flicked through Boyd's file on the touch screen. His mouth turned down into a scowl.

"No faith in the Inspector's opinion?" Sin asked with an arched brow. "Shocking. I'm sure she'd be quite unhappy to hear how scathing you are about her candidate."

"Well I'm not in the business of wasting time vetting civilians with nothing in their backgrounds but a few college credits in psychology," Carhart replied acidly. "And he's just a kid, at that."

"I was fourteen when I was inducted as an agent," Sin replied, flashing his teeth in something more frightening than a smile as his green eyes bore into Carhart. "He's four years older."

Carhart's eyes focused on the mirror as James brought Boyd into the interview room. "You were fourteen going on thirty-seven and trained by one of the best assassins the Agency ever had. It's hardly comparable."

Sin jerked his gaze away from the General, unwilling to get on the topic of his father. Sin could tolerate Carhart for the most part as long as the subject was left alone.

He looked through the mirror again and for a moment he stared blankly at the individual on the other side of the glass. His eyes traced the features, moving over the black clothing, before once again going back to the face as Sin took in the boy who represented androgyny in every possible way.

He was average height and thin, although unlike Sin the slender build didn't appear to be deceptive. He sat straight in the chair, hands folded in front of him loosely as fine golden blond hair fell past his shoulders and around the lines of his face, half shielding it from view. But Sin supposed, as he eyed the boy, that was probably the point.

Boyd's face lacked the masculine angles so typically found in a man and his features were softer but not overly feminine. He was expressionless, his full lips naturally down-turned in what could almost be described as an unintentional pout.

When his uninterested gaze briefly slid around the room, glancing past the two way mirror, Sin was able to see him more fully. His heavy-lidded eyes were a startling golden brown that momentarily captured Sin's attention to the point that he missed the first few exchanges between the two individuals on the other side of the mirror.

Interesting and not at all like the typical field agents who littered the compound.

Sin's lips pursed and he turned the name over in his head. Boyd Beaulieu. He could see the resemblance in the boy's features if not in his personality-- because as the interview wore on, it became abundantly clear that he didn't actually have a personality.

Boyd's expression remained blank throughout the interview, his eyes empty, his mouth moving only long enough to give answers in a toneless voice.

At a point it became irritating and Sin began to wonder if this was an act. An attempt like so many young people who liked the idea of personifying the bleakness that had encompassed the world after the war. But when the murders were mentioned, Boyd's lack of reaction persisted. Irritation turned into intrigue as Sin abandoned his previous running commentary with the other candidates and focused entirely on the boy.

There was no fear in Boyd's eyes when James began to show images, no flash of disgust or horror when James whipped out stills from the autopsies. And most interesting of all, Boyd seemed to be completely unaware of the incident in the city center. He had no recollection of a suspected serial killer being mentioned on the news, however brief that time may have been. It hadn't been long before the images of an olive-complected teenager with pale green eyes were confiscated by Agency staff as Boyd's mother had demanded a retraction from every form of media who had covered

the story. None of it seemed to mean anything to Boyd. Sin's face, his name, his crimes - none of it sparked recollection, fear, or even interest. The boy just didn't seem to care.

Sin looked up at Carhart, his expression completely serious for the first time in the past few hours. "Him."

Carhart's blond eyebrows rose as he studied Boyd through the mirror. "I had a feeling that would be your opinion. It seems Vivienne had a point after all."

Sin looked at Boyd again and willed the boy to react to James' words but there was nothing there. Interest blossomed in Sin as he sat back in the chair. "Getting him to break will be fun, at least."

The General looked at Sin in consideration before he turned off the computer and the hologram disappeared from view. "We'll see."

### Chapter 3

Boyd walked through the mostly empty hallways of the training complex. His steps were measured and echoed faintly around him as he headed toward his latest session with David Nakamura, the man who had been assigned to train him in physical combat.

Given the summarized job description he'd been given by his mother, he hadn't known specifically what to expect when training started. The situation was strange to him at times. He was in essence in classes or training for most of the day, which gave something of a collegial feel.

That impression was enhanced by the fact that he was confined strictly to the training complex; a large building with multiple levels that contained everything from a cafeteria to high tech training rooms to what amounted to dorm hallways. The rooms were small and minimally furnished and all lacked even a single window. With only the artificial light day in and day out, at times it felt like time had ceased to move. Rather than learning about art history and psychology, however, here the subjects were much more dire and, at times, macabre.

He'd come to realize that there were other people in the training complex who were training to be rank 9 but he was separated from them entirely. His training had to be much more intensive in order to be completed within the allotted time frame, especially since basic initial training was lumped in as well. Compared to his training, he gathered, the level 9 trainees had a leisurely walk through the subjects.

The classes he took were all one-on-one. He was taught about the Agency's goals and directives. They repeatedly stressed the importance of secrecy and success, and the consequences for the greater good if the Agency failed. Or, more accurately, if the agents in question failed.

He had deportment training as well. Those sessions focused on his behavior but also the way he looked. Over time, he concluded that the Agency took great stock with the idea of the physical perfection of the agents and staff. He wondered if that was why

his mother seemed to continually note if he ever did not adequately meet her standards, or whether it was unrelated.

His main concern with deportment was that he hadn't interacted with anyone on any sort of consistent basis for years, and he'd always been a quiet person who preferred to be left alone if given the choice. Still, there had been a time when he'd wanted to fit in and he was used to observing people and their interactions. He learned quickly and didn't find it difficult to mimic others when necessary; he simply found it onerous.

There were other subjects and other sessions but what was the most time-consuming and labor-intensive was being taught how to fight. Prior to stepping on the Agency compound, he had never been a particularly physical person. His primary exposure to any type of combat had been through the button-mashing combos in video games.

He had never felt the need to learn any sort of martial art or even really exercise for that matter. As a result, physical training was the most difficult for him. He was unaccustomed to such intensive sparring that lasted hours at a time; at times the majority of the day. He typically went to bed exhausted but almost too sore to sleep, and when he was woken early in the morning there were times he wished he could tell them to leave him alone.

The training had so far proven to be extremely trying at times. It was especially difficult to keep himself disconnected from everything and everyone else when he was constantly being thrown into situations where it was impossible to do anything but interact. The combat training put him constantly in close physical proximity, with hands touching him and bodies sometimes pinning him to the floor. He varied between finding it alarming, disturbing, and simply uncomfortable.

David had noticed the way he had unconsciously shied away in the beginning and, apparently with the intent of driving that out of him, he'd then taken to touching Boyd more often than was necessary. It was all very professional or casual, with David's

hands wrapping around his arm or casual thumps against his shoulder from behind; unexpected touches that had made Boyd jump at first. David had used it as a teaching tool to show him not to react, which gave his opponent an advantage by showing what could get to him, and also to hone his perceptive skills.

When David would hit him on the back, or shoulder, or arm, he would say things like, "This could be a knife. This could be a gun. You would be dead now."

It had taken Boyd a few weeks before he'd grown accustomed to it enough that it no longer made him want to pull away. It had taken longer before he'd been able to start noticing David before he approached.

He turned the corner and slowed as he approached the training room. There was a man and a woman standing outside, leaning against the wall. The man was slightly taller than Boyd with shaggy brown hair and dark stubble that was slowly developing into a beard and goatee. He had on training gear and was leaning closer to the woman than was necessary.

She didn't seem to mind. She was grinning at him as if in on a joke and batted him away when he grabbed her long blond braid and tugged it.

When Boyd came close to the door, they both looked at him.

"I wouldn't bother going in there yet," the woman said with a shake of her head. "Nakamura is on the phone with Doug and that always takes forever. You know how Doug is."

Boyd stopped, looking in the training room although he couldn't see much from his angle. He nodded. He assumed the Doug they were talking about was Instructor Douglas Ferguson, the man who was typically involved in all high rank training sessions. When Boyd had first begun training he'd been informed that the infamous Instructor was out of the country which was why David was filling in.

"Alright." He moved so he could lean back against the wall while he waited. "Thank you."

The girl continued looking at him with a puzzled look on her face. "What training are you here for, anyway? I haven't seen you around."

"It seems to be specialized training so I've largely been separated from everyone else," Boyd answered, looking over at her.

The two gave each other baffled looks.

"Huh. That's odd. I've never even seen you on compound, and you look so young," the girl went on curiously.

The guy rolled his eyes. "He doesn't look that young, babe. I'd say at least seventeen or eighteen. Right?"

"I'll be nineteen in a week," Boyd replied with a nod. He paused, looking at the two of them thoughtfully. "Why? How old are people typically recruited?"

"It depends," the guy responded with a shrug. "If you're a military or government recruit it's usually older but no later than mid-twenties. They like to get them young. But if you're a jail recruit or something else civilian-oriented, it can be basically any age. If you have the qualities they want, they'll take you whenever."

"A lot of R&Ds and analysts get recruited pretty early, I hear," the girl added with a nod. She was still observing Boyd closely as she absently fluffed her bangs. She had a strangely innocent quality to her face. "Mostly because a lot of them are like Mensa-smart. Once they go through testing, all kinds of Agency flags probably go off telling them to go run and recruit the smarties."

Boyd nodded. That seemed to fall in line with how he understood the Agency worked. He supposed it made sense to go younger for certain areas. Most mathematical leaps of understanding had been discovered by young men. It followed that analysis and computer-related fields would have similar trends. Still, he didn't know how early 'pretty early' was.

"I'm Cecilia, by the way. And this is Dover. What's your name and rank, anyway?"

"Boyd," he said and then paused, his eyebrows twitching down faintly in thought. "I'm not positive what my rank is."

Dover stared at him strangely. "That is beyond strange, dude. Are you a probie?"

Probie was the term for probationary agent and one that Boyd had learned fairly quickly. Higher ranked agents seemed to enjoy using it.

"I've been here about two months but I believe they're planning to see how I do through training. I think at the end I'll be assigned a rank if I pass but prior to that I haven't been told what I am."

This did not seem to be how things were typically done because Dover pressed, "Well where'd you come from? Why did they recruit you? Sometimes rank changes based on your background."

"I didn't come from anywhere in particular," Boyd said with a shrug. "I'm one of several people being tested to potentially be Agent Hsin Liu Vega's partner. I suspect they're waiting to assign an official rank until they see whether I would work as his partner in the first place."

Dover's eyebrows drew together, eyes narrowing slightly. "Why the fuck would a new kid with no background in anything in particular be training to be Vega's partner? That position is way fucking up there. That's beyond most people's rank and classification."

"Yeah," Cecilia chimed in, not looking too happy with this development herself. "Did someone recommend you for some reason? I mean, are you sure it's the Monster you're getting trained to be with?"

"I'm positive," Boyd said, his eyebrows drawing together as he looked at them. "My mother summoned me and explained the position. During the interview, they specifically stated his name."

"Your mother?" Dover asked, confused. "Well, who in the hell is your mother?"

"Vivienne Beaulieu."

They stared at him at first in uncomprehending wonder and then slowly, in twin looks of irritation and hostility. Cecilia actually backed away a step, her mouth turning down into an ugly frown as she looked him up and down in sudden distaste.

"Ah," Dover said flatly. "Now it makes sense."

The obvious shift in their demeanor made Boyd wary, causing his expression to automatically turn more neutral. Given that they'd changed after hearing his mother's name, the position of Vega's partner was apparently one of note, and he knew that his mother was in a position of power, it was not difficult to draw some conclusions as to their thought process.

Even so, the looks of hostility made him wonder if he was missing something.

"How so?"

"You're off the street with no background in anything and they're giving you that position?" Cecilia asked rhetorically. "Do you know how hard we had to work to even become eligible for rank 9 training and you're just being handed it?"

Dover scoffed and shook his head, looking away. There was disgust in his expression as well as bitterness. "Forget it, Cecilia. It's not even worth it. She'll do whatever she wants."

"But it's not fair," Cecilia insisted, glaring at Boyd with obvious dislike. Gone was the friendly girl who had been trying to teach him the ropes. "It's so not fucking fair."

Boyd was silent, watching them. Their argument made sense. If they'd worked hard to get where they were at, it followed if they would be upset by him appearing without any credentials and being given an opportunity due to his mother's word. He didn't know what to say to that. They had good reason to feel spurned but at the same time, it wasn't his decision.

"I don't know what to tell you," he said after a moment. "I've just been following orders. Perhaps you should talk to one of your superiors about it."

"Yeah," Cecilia said scornfully. "I'll get right on that but oh wait-- your mom is second in command of the Agency and obviously she doesn't give a fuck about protocol or hard work or people who deserve promotions. Obviously she doesn't give a fuck that I've been here for six years and am just now in rank 9 training and even then, I'm not guaranteed promotion. But I wouldn't expect some PR bimbo who's never trained or worked in the field to understand hard work anyway. All she is, is a talking head."

Dover shifted and looked uncomfortable, his brown eyes flitting around as if he was afraid of her being overheard. "Alright, alright-- let's just forget it for now."

But Cecilia didn't seem to want to forget it. She was flushed angrily now, her eyes narrowed into slits as she ranted. "Six years-- always having to work twice as hard as the men, always having to prove myself three times over while trying to escape valentines and you get to skip all that and get the second highest agent rank in the Agency. It's just like, mind fucking boggling that this is even allowed."

Dover grabbed Cecilia's arm and tugged her away from Boyd. "Don't be stupid. Just forget it-- he can just go running to his mother if you keep running your damn mouth."

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly. He didn't know what to say in response to her anger but the implication that he would tell on them irritated him. Being brought in by his mother didn't mean that he'd asked her to or that he planned to rely on that.

"I won't tell her anything," he said evenly. "We may be related but that is where the connection ends."

"Right. That's why she made sure her boy outranks 90% of the field ops in the Agency," Cecilia spat, flipping her braid over one shoulder. "Must be nice to get top pay and clearance right off the bat. Do you have any siblings that she's going to stick in here? Maybe she'll make the next one a captain."

This time Dover rolled his eyes and jerked her away, walking away from Boyd. "He probably won't live out the next few months anyway. He'll be gone before you know it. I can't believe you're getting all riled up over some faggy little twerp. I didn't even know the bitch could conceive, though; that's the most shocking part of that whole..."

His voice trailed off as they disappeared around the corner.

Even after they were gone, Boyd stared at the corner with a cold, closed off expression. The interaction had soured the day for him and made him wish not for the first time that he could go back to being removed from others.

He couldn't help feeling frustrated and insulted. He thought they had the right to be upset but why was it his fault? Why did it have to become a personal affront to him when he hadn't said anything insulting to them?

He was only doing what he was told. His connection with his mother was not an enviable one and barely even existed, even with their shared blood. She had never been a particularly good mother. For most of his life, she had been gone more than she'd been around. When she'd been there, she'd often ignored or occasionally hurt him.

Although he felt compelled to make her approve of him, it was because she never really had. It was because he had no one else in the world and the thought of being left completely alone was alarming when he thought about spending the rest of his life with ghosts. It hadn't mattered before she had contacted him because he'd nullified his emotions but now if he had to go back he would have to build up to that all over again.

Apparently she was disliked at the Agency which seemed as though it was going to be reflected upon him but that only served to frustrate him further. Cecilia and Dover had seemed friendly before they'd found out who he was. Was everyone going to take out their frustration with his mother's decisions on him or were Cecilia and Dover special cases?

When he looked in the room, he saw that David was in there stretching and getting ready. Boyd walked in, frustration making it into the set of his eyes and the slight tightening of his jaw.

David quirked an eyebrow, looking him up and down as Boyd dropped his bag to the side. He walked straight over to the weapons rack and picked up a pair of expandable tonfa. When he strode back over to David, he still hadn't said a word and David's dark-eyed stare had sharpened on him.

"Well. I was going to point out you're late but now I'm wondering why." He shook his arms at his sides to loosen them. "I didn't even know it was possible for you to look pissed."

Boyd didn't answer, staring him straight in the face with cool brown eyes. He flipped the tonfa up to protect his arms and then got into a fighting stance.

David straightened, looking unimpressed. "I've got news for you, kid. You don't get to ignore your trainer just because you don't feel like talking." His eyes flicked to the tonfa. "And put those down. We're doing hand-to-hand today."

Boyd's lips tightened into a frown. He would have preferred to work with something more complicated so he could get his mind off the twin shifting of expressions from confused and helpful to disgusted and angry. Even so, he complied. He flipped the tonfa up, caught them by the ends and transferred them to one hand. He was just leaning over to set them on the mat when David suddenly came at him from the side.

Off-balanced with the tonfa taking up his hand, Boyd tried to drop to the mat and brace himself against the floor but David was too fast. Boyd was thrown down to the mat on his back, his breath whooshing out of him. David moved to pin him but Boyd recovered quickly, twisting out of the way and throwing himself back up to a stand.

Boyd danced away, his gaze flicking down to the tonfa as he considered reaching for them, but David hooked them on his foot and kicked them clear across the

room. They rolled and clattered but Boyd didn't have the chance to see where they ended up because David came at him again.

They continued to spar, with David striking hard and fast and painfully throwing Boyd down to the mat more than once. For his part, Boyd was growing faster and he was good at slipping away. His thin form was harder to hold onto and he knew how to manipulate his attacker's joints so they were forced to let go.

As they fought, David continued to talk.

"What made you angry?" David struck at Boyd's side.

"I'm not angry." Boyd blocked and whirled out of the way before David got a grip on him.

David snorted. "Could've fooled me." Silence except the sound of their feet across the mats and their harsh breaths, and then: "Did it have something to do with those trainees out there?"

Boyd punched David harder than usual, although David blocked it and redirected the momentum.

"No," Boyd said firmly, twisting and jerking his arm back as David tried to capture him.

David smirked and didn't respond for a minute as they traded blows and dodges. The fact that David had seen Cecilia and Dover and was pressing the topic was serving to irritate Boyd. Especially since he wanted to use the sparring as a way to forget his frustration in the first place.

"Let me give you a piece of advice."

David was suddenly in Boyd's personal space and dropped down, swiping Boyd's legs out from beneath him before he had the chance to react. Boyd slammed back onto

the mat and David dropped onto him immediately, pinning him down with his face near Boyd's.

David's eyes were alight with adrenaline and a reflection of what often seemed like his obsession with training. The man could often be found in the training room, working out religiously and honing his skills. He was almost fanatical about it yet most of the time that intensity didn't make it to his expression. Inches from Boyd's eyes, it did then.

"Probie mistake number one: letting emotions control you in a fight. It makes you easier to compromise." David shoved Boyd harder against the mat, his heavy body not letting up even when Boyd tried to get away. His eyes felt like they were burning twin holes through Boyd.

"You think your enemy doesn't notice when you're distracted?" David demanded. "You think just because you pretend to be an expressionless doll it makes you one? When you're at the job as long as I've been you get to know people. And you would've gotten yourself killed just now, worrying about whatever petty issue you're having. Because when it comes to life and death, that's all those issues ever are: petty and not worth dying over."

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he tried to shove David off him but David accounted for the movement, easily holding Boyd down.

"What's the matter?" David asked keenly. "You don't like this? You want me to let you up?"

Boyd's heart was starting to thunder the longer he was held down; the longer he couldn't get away. "Get off me," he said lowly, struggling harder.

David raised an eyebrow and didn't relent on his hold. If anything, his hands only tightened. His body seemed to grow heavier and more oppressive. Boyd's breath quickened, his chest heaving from more than the spar, and he grit his teeth. He tried to

use the strength of the floor beneath him to escape but David held him as easily as a cat would a mouse.

Boyd started to feel the distant claw of panic, growing closer and stronger and making his heart beat so hard he could feel it resounding in his chest.

"You've become adept at dodging and escaping," David was saying in the background. "But I think it's for a reason. I think it scares you to be like this."

Boyd jerked against David's hold and had to clench his jaw to keep himself from making a sound. His entire body was taut with tension and suppressed fear. His eyes squeezed shut and he tilted his head back, trying to will himself to calm down. To settle down and think about this rationally; to simply relax and breathe.

But the words meant nothing against his shaking limbs. It wasn't working. It was never going to work. David was too heavy on him. He couldn't move-- he wouldn't be able to get away--

"Why is that?" David's voice asked distantly.

Behind Boyd's eyelids there was a flash of cement and a puddle of water. Confusing clips of voices; laughter both cruel and happy, and the twisted sound of a scream sounding far away and at the same time too close. Buildings reaching to the sky and a street growing too small.

Red curling into the puddle, inch by inch changing it forever from clear water. And through it all being pressed down, harder and harder, lungs stilling with the feeling of suffocation--

Warm breath and a voice curling in his ear: *I want you to remember this forever.*

Boyd didn't hear the strained noise he made or realize when he abruptly switched to mindless, panicked struggling. He threw himself into getting away, into ripping the heaviness off him and getting free. He didn't know exactly what happened; the next thing he knew he was standing back from David, his body arched defensively. His

mouth was open as he panted harshly and he stared wildly at David as he expected some sort of attack.

David stood there calmly, watching Boyd without surprise. "Probie mistake number two; letting those same emotions show. Creating a weakness."

Boyd didn't answer, still trying to calm himself down from the heart-fluttering panic. His heartbeat pounded in his chest, making him feel shaky from adrenaline and the aftermath. David studied him with narrowed, serious eyes and lips that turned down into a frown. He crossed his arms and then jerked his head to the side.

"Take five. After that we're going to weapons. You have an appointment at 1400. Since we'll have to stop early today, I expect you to work harder than usual."

If Boyd had been capable of thinking clearly he would have questioned the appointment since he knew nothing of it. But he didn't want to talk at the moment and the short break sounded better than quenching any curiosity. David disappeared into a back room.

Boyd walked over to the wall, the shakiness refusing to leave his limbs, and he dropped down. He pulled his legs in close and rested his elbows on his knees. His fingers dug into his hair as he leaned his head forward. He closed his eyes but that only caused a flash of blue eyes widening and turning red.

"Damn it," he hissed quietly to himself, his voice harsh and a little strained.

He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on the rise and fall of his breath, and on calming his heart. He felt unbalanced and distracted and he knew neither feeling was going to aid him in sparring. He pointedly ignored every unwanted image that flashed behind his eyelids, and harshly shut down every emotion that rose in response.

He wondered if the interaction with Cecilia and Dover had tainted him; if the anger from that had compromised him. He thought it had. Which meant he'd failed by feeling anything after their conversation. He shouldn't have listened to them. He shouldn't have cared.

What did it matter what they called him? What did it matter whether anyone hated him for something that wasn't his own doing? What did it matter if anyone on compound wanted him to die because his circumstances were abhorrent to them? He should have ignored them all. He should have let it wash over him. He should have known better than to react. It had been weak of him. It had been unacceptable.

He didn't like how often he'd had sudden hints of memories and flashbacks ever since he'd come to the Agency. He thought it was because he was around too many people at once for long of periods of time. He'd been able to silence and deaden everything in his home.

Here, he was already taxing a lot of energy dealing with all the eyes on him, the unfamiliar environment, and the new stimuli. It was tiring at times and he thought it could have been contributing to the disconcerting slips in his control.

It took him a little while but he was finally able to return to the comforting darkness that allowed everything to pass him by unheeded.

When he opened his eyes again and looked up he saw David across the room, seemingly ignoring him as he picked out some weapons. Even so, his head tilted just so in Boyd's direction. He strode across the room and swiped the tonfa off the floor along the way.

David stopped at Boyd's side and held the tonfa to the side, holding out his other hand. Boyd stared at him a moment and then reached out, gripping David's outstretched hand. David's strong, blunt fingers wrapped around Boyd's hand and yanked him up to a stand. When they were facing each other, David silently held out the tonfa. He didn't break eye contact even when Boyd accepted them.

There was a long moment in which they stared at each other. David's gaze broke away first, taking in Boyd's neutral expression and stance before he nodded in satisfaction.

"Alright," he said as he strode toward the center of the room. He stopped and turned to face Boyd, picking up a staff called a bo and holding it in front of him. "I'm going to attack. Disarm me."

They spent the next few hours sparring. David made it increasingly difficult, attacking Boyd more quickly and less predictably. Boyd ended up getting hit more than once, but he also disarmed David multiple times.

In one move, Boyd stopped David's attack by alternating blocking with each tonfa and got close enough to kick David hard in the solar plexus. David flew back, the staff falling out of his hands to clatter in front of Boyd, who kicked it back out of the way and dropped into a defensive pose. David was grinning when he stood from the floor and told Boyd it was well-played. It was one of the times he seemed truly pleased with Boyd's progress.

They were in the middle of a particularly heated spar when Boyd noticed movement at the door. It distracted him and David took advantage of it, twisting the tonfa out of Boyd's hand and flipping him over to throw him down onto the floor. He dropped onto Boyd, using his own tonfa against his neck. Boyd panted heavily, staring up at David who didn't linger. After he'd proven his point about Boyd's fear of being held down he hadn't bothered to push it again.

David stood, absently flipping the tonfa back toward his forearm as he looked over at the doorway. A young man with ginger colored hair, wearing a guard uniform was standing on the outer side of the mat. His name tag said Officer Luke Gerant.

"Oh, you're here," David said calmly. He jerked his chin toward Boyd, who was just pushing himself to a stand. "He's ready unless you want to give him a chance to change."

Luke glanced at his watch and shrugged. "If he's fast, I don't care."

Boyd took the opportunity to change out of his sweaty workout clothes. He didn't take long and on his way out he told David he'd be back to pick up his bag with his dirty

clothes in it. He didn't see the need to drag it around with him when he didn't even know where he was going. He fell in step behind Luke, trying to get a gauge on their destination based on the direction. He was not very successful.

"Where are we going?"

"To the Fourth," Luke said as they started walking. "I'm not sure what they have planned for you but I figure it has something to do with Agent Vega."

"What's the Fourth?" Boyd asked. He had vague understandings of a place that a person didn't want to go but he didn't know much about it.

Luke glanced at him and up close, he appeared not as young as Boyd had initially thought. He looked to be at least in his mid-twenties and had a more open face than most of the other people Boyd had come in contact with so far.

"It's officially called the Fourth Floor Detainment Center. Very high security, can't really get there on your own..." He shrugged as they left the training facility and went into the outer courtyard of the compound. "There's different wings for different classes of people. Everyone from detainees to staff who are being punished temporarily or indefinitely."

Boyd considered that a moment. "Is that where Sin Vega is kept?"

Luke's mouth turned down slightly as he nodded. "Yeah. He used to be kept on maximum but now he's just kept in a holding cell until they decide what's going to happen with him."

The situation seemed a little excessive to Boyd. Then again, based on the impression he'd gotten from others, Sin was apparently a very dangerous and volatile individual so maybe it was necessary.

"If he is as dangerous as I have been led to believe, why are they releasing him?"

The question was met with a shrug as they began making their way across the compound. There weren't very many people around although the people he saw all seemed to be headed to or away from the Tower, the same as he'd noticed the first time he'd set foot on the compound. It seemed that the place was the hub of activity on the property with the exception of the group of residential buildings. Everything else seemed still and damp as the cold wind whipped through the barren trees that surrounded the gates.

"I don't know, really," Luke said. He sounded so genuinely thoughtful that Boyd glanced at him again. The guard looked as puzzled by the question as Boyd was and his ginger eyebrows had drawn together over his warm brown eyes. "He's a scary guy. The first time I met him he-- well, I guess I shouldn't talk about that... But I guess he must be a really good field agent and I'm not sure if everything they all say is true exactly how they say it."

Boyd studied Luke as they walked. Luke was the first person who hadn't seemed to immediately dismiss Sin, although David also hadn't seemed that interested in perpetuating any rumors. Any time information had come up about Sin that had seemed alarming, David had watched Boyd with an unreadable frown, given a noncommittal answer, and had typically changed the subject. The only exception had been his emphasis of how important it was that he knew how to fight because being Sin's partner was liable to be very dangerous.

It left questions in Boyd's mind, some of which he didn't care enough to ask. Others surfaced again and again, in variations of the same theme, and by the repetition made him wonder the answer. This was the first time the idea that not everything was as it seemed had been raised in so many words, and it made him wonder what caused it.

"You have seen something that leads you to believe the rumors aren't all true?"

"No," was the honest reply. "I've seen him kill before and I think he's too dangerous and unstable to be put back on active duty. But then again, I don't know

everything the big dogs know so that's just my personal opinion. A lot of the actual rumors though don't entirely make sense. I basically only believe what I see for myself. He can be dangerous but he can also be pretty calm and semi-normal acting from the way he's been on the Fourth lately. I guess it's all about circumstance which is still pretty dangerous with the type of work you guys do."

There was a pause and Luke glanced at him, frowning slightly. "I shouldn't be talking about this with you, by the way. Well, I don't think so. But being a probie and all, it doesn't seem fair that you don't get told anything. "

"Is there an unspoken rule against giving that sort of information?" Boyd asked, mildly perplexed. "I have noticed that it's difficult to get straight answers. I don't know how much of it is due to the inherent secrecy of this place and how much is because of the position I'm nominated for."

A gust of cold wind shot past them, pulling at Boyd's hair and cutting straight through his clothing. He briefly regretted not having stopped by his room to pick up his coat, but he hadn't expected to be leaving the training complex. It was the first time he'd been out of the building since he'd first arrived, and he found himself glancing around at the changes.

The leaves were gone and the grass was tinged brown. Although he was only wearing a long-sleeved shirt, most people were wearing coats. He wondered if the guards got cold, having to wear their uniforms even in this chill. Even as he thought that, he noticed that a few of them had coats that matched their uniforms. He guessed that probably the ones who weren't wearing coats were the ones who were usually stationed inside a building and were simply on an errand at the moment, like Luke.

"I think it's due to the position. Most people are pretty biased against Vega because of all the rumors. Maybe they like you being a blank slate."

Boyd nodded thoughtfully but didn't have a response. In some ways they seemed determined to keep him a blank slate by giving him little factual evidence. Yet at the same time that left him with only the rumors and the interview for the position, which

had included questions which could, to an extent, taint him on their own. Given the choice, he would have much preferred unbiased facts which allowed him to draw his own conclusions.

Luke didn't say anything and the two of them ended up finishing the walk to the Tower in silence. They stopped in the elevator area but they went to a smaller elevator around the back corner of the main elevator bank. It had a red sign above it that said in large block letters 'Restricted.' There was a small device to the side for swiping cards that was similar to what Boyd had seen Amos use the first day he'd been on compound.

Luke swiped his ID through the device and a green light flashed to the side, allowing him to press the up arrow button. The doors slid open. The inside of the elevator was stark but there was a design built into the back wall of the elevator. It took Boyd a long moment to realize it was hiding a tiny camera at about eye level, which he suspected was an extra precaution for this restricted elevator. It made sense to have a camera at eye level so a full face shot could be caught of anyone entering the elevator if the cameras in the corners of the ceiling could not get a clear shot.

The only button said '4' and as soon as Luke pressed it and swiped his card again on a similar device inside, the doors shut and the elevator started to rise.

"The floor is heavily restricted," Boyd observed, wondering if that was what Luke had referred to when he'd said Boyd couldn't really get there on his own. "Is this separate elevator the only way to access it?"

"From an elevator, yeah. The main ones don't even have an option for the Fourth. Even the main stairwells don't have access-- the entrances have been completely blocked off and the only one with access is separate and requires specifically coded access on your key card."

The light flashed across '2' above the doorway, showing what floor they were passing.

Boyd considered that. "If the clientele is so dangerous why is it in the main building instead of a separate one?"

Luke shrugged. "No clue. But it's not like they can escape so it doesn't matter."

The light flashed past 3 and ended on 4. The doors slid open with a quiet whoosh.

"Who all has access to the floor?" Boyd asked. He followed Luke as he walked out onto a stark white, tiled floor. Two other guards entered just as they left and Luke grimaced, not bothering to greet either of the two muscular men. He didn't answer until the door had slid shut and the other guards had gone.

"Officers, doctors, special ops staff who work up here..." Luke tapped his own keycard. "And the guards assigned to this floor. There aren't a lot of us. Those two guys, Harry Truman and Dennis McNichols, have been here the longest. They don't let a lot of people up here, usually. They just rotate the same people."

Boyd nodded. That made sense given the security. He wondered briefly about the location of the floor; why it wasn't in another building or why, being in the Tower, it wasn't on a higher floor.

As he thought about it further he determined that perhaps the reason was because of the location of the Tower. It was near the center of the compound. If a prisoner got away from this floor and headed downstairs, they still had a long trek in any direction to escape. Whereas if the facility was placed higher in the Tower, it would take them longer to get out but it would also place them that much closer to the seventeenth floor, which housed the administration. This floor had probably been chosen to maximize the buffer in both regards, in keeping prisoners from escaping from the compound or taking control of the organization by taking the administrators hostage.

Not to mention, he mused, the amount of security was quite high in order to enter the first hallway; even more so than what he'd seen when visiting his mother. Chances of escape were probably fairly low.

The fluorescent lights glaring down across the white floors and walls made the place feel sterile, like a hospital. The thought made Boyd unconsciously cross his arms across his stomach, feeling uncomfortable.

"Keep up," Luke said, glancing over at Boyd. "It's easy to get turned around up here. Everything looks the same from the outside in every wing."

The way they wound through the place would probably be confusing for most but Boyd had a talent for remembering directions. He often imagined the blueprint of a place around him based on the directions they took.

They stopped outside a room that looked just like every other room they'd passed. Luke slid his keycard through the door and opened it. When Boyd entered, he saw that it was a relatively small room. Several chairs faced a wall with a large window looking into a brilliantly white room beyond. A blond man Boyd had never seen before was sitting in one of the chairs.

Boyd glanced at Luke, who was nodding respectfully to the man. Something unspoken must have passed between them because Luke glanced at Boyd with a reassuring smile as if to wish him luck and immediately exited the room.

When the door was firmly shut, Boyd hesitated and turned his attention to the man.

He looked to be in his mid-thirties although there was a quality about his face that made it difficult to discern his actual age. His wheat colored hair and blue eyes added to his boyish features. Boyd didn't know who the man was and wondered briefly whether he was another possible partner for Sin.

"Hello Boyd," the man said calmly.

Boyd remained standing, watching the man and not knowing what to do. He wondered why the man knew his name and, because he was sitting in the back of the room, whether he was an officiator of some sort rather than a participant.

"Hello." The older man stood and walked closer to Boyd. "I'm General Carhart. You could say that I am the one closely overseeing this endeavor. I would have introduced myself to you sooner but your training is more vigorous than most and so I didn't think it wise to interrupt your regime."

"Oh," Boyd said blankly, then thought to add a polite, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Carhart observed him for a moment, his intelligent gaze raking over Boyd thoughtfully. "Agent Blake will be here shortly. It's down between the two of you now."

That bit of information was of mild interest to Boyd because he hadn't thought he would be a serious candidate with such little background. "Did many people apply?"

"It wasn't a matter of applying so much as a matter of being invited to the trial," Carhart replied. "Since it has come down to you and Agent Blake, whoever successfully completes the trial will serve as Sin's partner and the other will serve as back-up in case the original choice dies," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

The thought didn't bother Boyd; he was more focused on details of the trial he was in the midst of but knew little about. "What are the requirements of successful completion? Will there be a test?"

"No." Carhart looked towards the two way mirror that spanned the wall of the room. There was nobody in the room on the other side; just a Spartan looking space that resembled an interrogation room.

The General didn't show any signs of answering Boyd's first question but just when it appeared that he wouldn't, his eyes turned on Boyd again. "The purpose of this endeavor is to find someone whose personality can adapt to Sin's. He is valuable material to the Agency but his behavior can be extreme. We need someone who he cannot mentally eviscerate, to say the least. Someone strong enough in mind to handle him and the tasks that he refuses to perform."

Boyd was silent a moment as he considered that in conjunction with what his mother had told him the first day he'd arrived on the compound. "Are those tasks related to mediation?"

"At times but you will find that in our line of work, there is very little mediating with insurgents and terrorists. More often it will be conducting oneself with contacts, double agents and tasks that require going undercover. These are things Sin does not excel at. He excels at being a living weapon. For my unit, I need both."

"I see."

The information was not particularly surprising to Boyd; it fell in line with what he had heard of Sin so far. He supposed working with double agents and such must be the additional duties his mother had mentioned.

He could only assume the further training they would give him would include some sort of instructions regarding how to mediate or work undercover. The conversation felt, in some regards, one step removed. He may as well have been reading a spy novel about someone getting inducted to a secret agency for all that he felt personally invested in the situation.

"So you would be my supervisor," Boyd observed.

"Your commanding officer," Carhart corrected tonelessly. His brow quirked as he looked down at Boyd and for a moment a shadow of dismay crossed his face before it was gone. "Your role in the Agency exists within the confines of my unit. The purpose of that unit will be disclosed to you when you are chosen as Sin's partner or upon Blake's death if he is instead."

"Then whose unit would I be assigned if Blake is chosen?" Boyd asked. "As I would be functioning as back-up I assume the Agency would retain me in some function until the point I may be needed."

Carhart leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest as he went back to calmly observing the teenager. He didn't seem irritated by the questions and in fact, appeared to have expected them.

It was possible that he had arrived before Blake specifically for this purpose; to finally give Boyd the details about the job he would possibly be performing. Considering the General would serve as his commander, it made sense that he was taking charge of this aspect personally.

"Despite the fact that your training would be considered grueling by a civilian, it is not at all proportional to the training a real field operative would receive to achieve the rank you will be given if you are chosen. In that way, you would be stunted and could not perform as a regular agent. It works within my unit because you have a specific task and are not expected or needed to be much of a fighter so much as being able to defend yourself if need be. Outside of my unit, that would not be the case."

Carhart's cerulean eyes flicked away to the two-way mirror again. "If Blake is chosen, you would function in a menial civilian role on the compound until you are needed. Unless of course, you were to eventually consign yourself to the months and years of proper training to make it as an agent of rank who can perform independently."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding. He looked at the empty room through the two-way mirror, and although his expression didn't change he was inwardly frowning at the thought.

He didn't relish the idea of being a menial civilian employee. He didn't care for the idea of being stuck in a job he had to do simply to do it; he had the sort of personality that strove to better himself. If he was stuck doing something meaningless like mail delivery, he suspected it wouldn't take terribly long before he grew tired of the position and wanted to leave.

As far as that went, he would rather simply leave the Agency and return to his former life than take on a menial position. Not to mention, he doubted his mother would

appreciate him failing the trial and being given such a pointless role. Would she think he'd failed her?

Still, he wasn't surprised by Carhart's answer. He hadn't expected that the Agency would let him leave after all the work they'd already put into him.

For those reasons, he felt somewhat invested in this whole process. But he didn't particularly care to be an agent either, he had to admit. Nor did he really care whether or not he ever ended up as Sin's partner aside from the fact that it would potentially make his mother pleased.

The thought brought to mind what he'd thought his whole reason for being in the room was in the first place. He wondered idly what the man labeled a monster was like.

"I was told I would be receiving a glimpse of Sin."

"Perhaps a bit more than a glimpse," the General said vaguely before looking at the door which had opened just as the sentence left his mouth.

Level 9 Field Agent Adam Blake entered the room. His eyes, onyx-colored and dull, moved between Boyd and Carhart briefly. There was surprise evident in what Boyd had come to recognize as his typically somber face.

"Am I late, sir?" He asked, addressing Carhart.

"No." The General didn't bother to explain any further and nodded his head at the seats. "Both of you can sit down. You will be observing a psychiatric session between Sin and an Agency doctor. It's an evaluation. You're not the only ones being tested during these few months."

Boyd glanced at the other two briefly. He hadn't expected to be privy to Sin's psychiatric sessions, yet it made sense. Since a significant portion of the assignment as Sin's partner would rely on working with his personality, it seemed as though it would be of use. Psychology had also been an interest of his during school.

Even so, it did briefly make him wonder what would happen if Sin failed the tests. Adam would probably return to his current assignment and Boyd would probably receive that menial civilian position Carhart had mentioned. As for Sin, Boyd didn't know or particularly care what would become of him.

He sat down in one of the chairs toward the right side of the large one-way mirror. In his peripheral vision, he saw Adam take a seat as well.

They spent several minutes waiting, some of which were interrupted by Carhart speaking to someone briefly on his comm unit. During this time Boyd didn't speak and Adam, as usual, acted as though Boyd were not in the room. Adam stared at the mirror in the same morose fashion that he seemed to stare at everything. The man never seemed very thrilled to be doing whatever task was assigned to him although from what Boyd had seen, he completed them with neat efficiency.

After ten minutes Carhart flicked the lights off and within moments, the door on the other side of the mirror opened.

The figure that appeared was not what Boyd expected. After hearing ominous warnings and rumors for a month regarding the monstrous qualities of the man in question, the image Boyd had unconsciously formed was of someone who looked more... alarming. He'd thought the man would have a wild look to his eyes, perhaps be heavily scarred and look more like a prison convict than anything.

Instead, Sin was tall, well over six foot, and almost perilously thin for his height. There was a slim metallic collar clamped taut around his neck but Boyd was unsure of what its intention was. The worn cargo pants Sin had on were practically hanging off his narrow hips but the sleeveless t-shirt he wore displayed sculpted arms. Apparently the weight he did have on him was crafted entirely into muscle.

He moved in a manner that showed the extraordinary control he had over his own body. Every movement seemed naturally precise and simultaneously predatory. Every movement had a purpose but he didn't seem to consciously be giving that

impression. It wasn't surprising; after all, Carhart had said the man was a walking weapon.

Sin unceremoniously sat down on one of the chairs beside the plain table in the center of the room. Almost immediately, he looked up at the mirror and stared. It was obvious that he knew he was being watched. Perhaps he even knew who was watching him.

Now that his eyes were unwittingly locked with theirs, Boyd had the opportunity to see the man's features clearly for the first time. They were strange and contradictory. He had a straight aristocratic nose that sat above well sculpted and full lips. His cheekbones were high and his complexion looked like a caramel tinted tan. It was his eyes, however, that truly made his appearance out of the ordinary. They were almond shaped, heavy lidded and a startlingly vivid green. Thick, long lashes framed the pale green hue that contrasted starkly with his olive skin.

It was not immediately clear what his ethnic background was despite the fact that the name Vega would imply he was Hispanic in some form. He could have passed for South Asian as well.

Boyd had planned to expend only the cursory amount of attention on the session but the man's unexpected appearance intrigued him for a reason he could not initially identify. It was probably because Sin had such unique features that Boyd's automatic reaction was to consider him more carefully. He ran his gaze briefly along Sin's face, studying him. There had been a time when Boyd had been interested in art, when he had drawn for fun. Sin's was the sort of face even a former artist couldn't help observing more closely.

The contradictions created questions in the back of his mind that he didn't fully pay attention to; questions that were fueled on a purely intellectual basis. What was Sin's background; how could he supposedly be so strong with a body like that; why was he known as such a monster when he appeared relatively calm? Then again, some of

the best serial killers had seemed not only perfectly reasonable, but charming and attractive as well.

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly, almost as if he heard Boyd's thoughts. Sin's gaze was intense; hawk-like. It was the glower of someone who could very easily reduce someone to a mass of shaking limbs if he chose. It made it abundantly clear that he was not pleased.

For a moment, Boyd wondered why Sin seemed displeased before it occurred to him that it was possible Sin had not been aware this session would be observed. He couldn't blame Sin if that were the case; Boyd wouldn't want a psychiatric session of his to be watched either. But then, he didn't have a reputation as a psychotic killer, to the point that someone had to watch over him.

One dark eyebrow arched and Sin scoffed quietly. "Well let's get on with it, then," he said out loud, still glaring at the mirror.

In the darkness, General Carhart chuckled quietly.

Boyd shifted his head just enough to glance over his shoulder at Carhart. Strangely, the General had an almost... fondly exasperated expression. He seemed more amused than anything and the implication was that he was used to Sin acting like that. If anything, Carhart looked more approachable in that moment than he had since Boyd had met him.

When Boyd glanced past Adam, he saw that the agent was looking back at Carhart as well. Adam looked thoughtful as he considered the General, but he didn't seem surprised. That made Boyd uncertain of whether this was an example of typical interaction between General Carhart and Sin or if Adam even knew.

It all only added to the oddity of the entire situation. Rather than try to analyze it since he didn't have enough information, Boyd returned his attention to the other room.

Sin continued to look through the mirror unflinchingly. Even when the psychiatrist entered the room, he didn't tear his eyes away.

The psychiatrist introduced himself as Dr. Osland and sat down across from Sin. He appeared to be in his mid-forties and had a distinguished look about him. There were silver streaks through his hair. His form appeared as impeccably fit as most people seemed to be in the Agency and his clothing was well made for the cold climate while still managing to be stylish.

For the most part the Agency staff appeared sophisticated, a step emotionally removed in one way or the other from typical civilians and notably blasé about what they did at the Agency. At first glance Dr. Osland seemed to fit that mold perfectly but a closer look at his expression when he sat across from Sin showed otherwise.

Despite the fact that he should have appeared objective towards the man who he was supposed to be evaluating, a perceptible look of dislike crossed Osland's countenance. His lip curled down as Sin's eyes finally focused on him but the doctor smoothed out the expression quickly. There was still, however, animosity in his brown eyes.

Boyd wondered idly if there was bad blood between the two men on the other side of the mirror but he found it unlikely. If Osland felt the need to introduce himself, it was obviously the first time they had formally met. Perhaps even the Agency doctors shared the contempt and disgust that the general population of the Agency appeared to have for Sin.

The evaluation began with formalities. Sin had a history of incarceration on the Fourth that dated back nearly fourteen years when he had apparently been inducted into the Agency as a teenager. He had an equally long history of psychological examinations. Despite this, Osland made it clear that Sin's difficult behavior made it unlikely that there would ever be a clear diagnosis made for whatever his mental problems allegedly were.

Sin calmly agreed. It was clear throughout the first fifteen minutes that he found the entire thing to be a charade and a crock. He appeared quite aware of the doctor's

dislike of him and didn't seem to be making any pains to change the other man's opinion.

"Why don't we just get to the point," Sin said flatly after some time had passed. He was leaning back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest and shoulders thrown back. He was the picture of defiance and his eyes examined the doctor like he was something unpleasant that had fallen out of the trash.

Osland's lips pursed. "Suits me fine," he returned in a clipped tone.

Sin arched a brow. "So get to it."

There was a pause as Osland flicked his thumb over the hand held panel computer that sat in front of him. It was likely Sin's file. "You have spent a significant portion of your career here locked on the Fourth. One incident spanning four years that began in 2012 and the latest that kept you there nearly a year."

The brow remained arched. "Your skills of detection are quite unparalleled, doctor."

Osland's lip curled again but he continued briskly. "The incident in 2012 which led to your first major incarceration in the Fourth Floor Detainment Center--"

For the first time there was something in Sin's expression other than disdainful animosity for the man before him. Something dark washed over his face and sharpened his stare.

"--also led to you being kept in isolation for two years. Upon completion of that term you were put into intensive psychiatric care with Dr. Lydia Connors in the hopes that you would be proven to be stable enough to return to active duty so that your... talents could once again be employed." The last part of the sentence sounded droll, nearly sarcastic.

Dr. Osland tilted his head slightly. "You then proceeded to once again act out violently--"

"Perhaps you aren't intelligent enough to have reviewed that entire case file," Sin replied stonily, his gaze black and hateful.

The doctor went on as if Sin had never spoken. "--and found yourself incarcerated for another two years. Once again, your talents were needed and you were evaluated, deemed able for active duty. But not even two years later you found yourself on the Fourth and in isolation once again for the deaths of four agents who had been assigned to be your partner."

This time Sin's full mouth turned up into a mocking smile although his eyes still promised murder for the doctor.

Osland stopped speaking briefly and shifted in his seat. There was a moment when his eyes flicked around before his fingers drifted from the panel computer and curled around a small innocuous remote that was at his side. Only then did he go on.

"Why should now be any different? You have made it clear that you won't cooperate with doctors-- you will not alter your behavior. You will continue to behave antisocially and compulsively."

Sin shrugged his broad shoulders, taut under the too-small shirt he wore. "I never said it would be different. This wasn't my brilliant plan, in case you missed that. The Marshal decided that their would-be replacement for me sucked enough for me to be drug out of my cave or some such thing."

"But you don't want to return to that cave. Am I incorrect? So you do have something invested. And I assume, to avoid the aforementioned conditions of your failure, you will now make an attempt to not fail abominably."

This time Sin didn't even bother to reply and several moments of the assessment followed in silence. They looked at each other, the doctor with an almost condescending kind of patience and Sin with ill-concealed dislike. He seemed resentful of the entire thing and his eyes flitted to the mirror on more than one occasion.

The doctor began circling the issue again, but Sin never budged. He never agreed or disagreed that he would play nice with his new "babysitter," as he called it.

Nearly ten minutes later, the doctor began tackling Sin's past incidences more directly.

"Your previous partners. I'd like to discuss what happened with them," Osland said as he ran one hand through his black and grey hair.

Sin's lip curled, giving him the scathing expression that seemed almost permanently etched into his features. "Don't you have a file somewhere with this information, doctor? Complete with snapshots of their corpses? Well-- the ones that were recovered anyway." Sin's tone was darkly amused but the smile on his face looked like more of a grimace.

"Yes," Osland replied without blinking. "But I'd like you to tell me what happened. Something other than, in all of their cases, it was 'self-defense.'"

"Not all were killed in self-defense," Sin retorted, the smile relaxing into a more natural-looking half smirk. "Some died out of sheer stupidity alone."

"This amuses you?"

Sin scoffed, pale green eyes rolling. "Would it matter if it did? Stop pretending like any of this even matters."

The doctor frowned. "Meaning?"

Sin's hawk-like gaze focused on Osland yet again but it slowly slid to the two-sided mirror this time. "Meaning this whole thing is a charade. Even if I said I'd hacked them all to pieces with a dull knife before pissing on their bodies, it wouldn't change a thing. If Connors wants to use me for something, he will."

Osland's expression lighted with irritation and he appeared to be fighting a scowl.

It was unsurprising that the comment would displease him. It made the assumption that his position and job at the Agency wasn't anything more than a mere formality required by the powers that be. It implied that whether or not the doctor thought Sin should return to the field, it may not matter.

"On the contrary, Agent Vega," Osland said stiffly. "If I deem you unfit, you will return to your quarters on the Fourth Floor Detainment Center and will likely be terminated if you do not become fit for duty any time in the near future. In your current state, you are a waste of resources. A being that must be fed and looked after while not providing a use to the Agency. If I believe you will cause the failure of missions, Connors will listen to what I say."

The words got an almost immediate response from Sin. Once again there was a moment of almost violence. The man projected such an aura of danger that even Carhart shifted slightly from his place in the corner as if he were ready to rush into the next room.

Osland's fingers caressed the remote and Boyd watched Sin's eyes focus on the movement.

The tension stretched on for nearly a full minute before Sin relaxed against the back of his chair and looked bored once again.

"So. Your partners?"

"Evan and Michelin thought being my partner meant I was their pet," Sin replied coldly, not looking up from his examination of his fingers. "Not surprising considering the fact that the Marshal treats me like some kind of wild dog. A behavior that has bled down to the rank and file individuals of this organization."

Osland nodded minutely. "And they, I assume, were killed in self-defense?"

Sin shrugged again, tilting his head to the side briefly. "Laurel was too stupid to be saved. She tried to negotiate by pointing her gun. I wouldn't have attempted to involve myself in that colossal failure even if I'd been planning to initially. She was killed

on a mission, not by me. I simply didn't save her. Coral wasn't any better. For all of his level nine training, he was a complete failure in a storm. He put together a ridiculous plan and, unsurprisingly, it failed."

"You didn't attempt to rectify his mistakes," the doctor observed.

The green-eyed agent smirked coldly once again. "No. Why should I?"

"Because you are meant to work as a team."

"If the team is doomed to fail, why bother? I'll die eventually but it won't be by someone else's stupidity. If they aren't capable of respecting me or my experience as a senior agent, then obviously the partnership would fail. I don't give enough of a shit to try to salvage it."

The comment was the end of Sin's cooperation but the brief exchange was the most important one of the entire interview. Cold and callous, maybe. Antisocial, definitely. But it seemed that Sin nearly always had some kind of reason for the things he did. And he appeared to wait for someone else to give the reason to actually act.

His temper had been showcased more than once in his exchanges with Osland but it was also obvious that he was more than capable of reining it in. It made Boyd wonder what had happened to cause Sin's previous two incarcerations and what had caused him to exhibit, in Osland's words, "psychotic" behavior.

The evaluation ended and Carhart flicked on the lights. "Comments?"

Boyd shifted so he could look over his shoulder at the general. Since he didn't have anything in particular to say, he simply shrugged and shifted his gaze to Adam.

"Is he actually mentally disturbed?" Adam asked with a hint of doubt in his low voice as his dark eyes remained on the vacated room on the other side of the mirror. "He appears normal to me. Extreme and quick tempered, but not as out of control as everyone says."

Carhart nodded. "For the most part he is. However there are times when he snaps and does behave psychotically and violently," the General said vaguely, obviously not planning to go into detail about either event with the two candidates.

"Are there commonalities in what causes his psychotic breaks?" Boyd asked, watching General Carhart. "Something in particular that we should look for?"

"Not that I am aware. In one case it was a threat that wasn't even directed at him and in another, it was in response to commentary that I would have thought would have normally rolled off his back."

Adam's eyebrows rose. "Interesting that missions would be entrusted with such an unstable individual. If his triggers aren't even known, how can he be trusted at all?"

Carhart shrugged although it did not appear that he disagreed. "He can't. That's why the two of you are here. To ensure that he does not act rashly and in the case that he does, that the situation is controlled and rectified. His skills as a fighter are too valuable to be lost completely. You two are expected to make up for where he fails."

The idea of being adept at aspects of the position that Sin was not adept at did not particularly bother Boyd. By the time he was done with all the training, he assumed he would be versed in the basics of any skills needed. However, what he didn't understand was the other part.

"How are we to control or rectify his behavior when we clearly would be outmatched in strength and skills?"

Adam gave him a dull look. The man likely did not appreciate being associated with the extent of Boyd's lack of strength and skills. Boyd wasn't bothered by this. As far as he understood, Sin was superior to everyone. He suspected that no matter the amount of additional training, Adam would lose in any altercation against his possible partner.

Carhart's eyes moved away from them briefly. There was a pause before he spoke again but when his gaze returned, his expression gave nothing away of what he

was thinking. "Implements have been put into place to ensure that the two of you have a mote of self-defense against so skilled a killer. There is the collar, for one."

Another brief pause. "It serves as a highly modified Taser and tracking device. One that can only be removed from his neck surgically. If activated by the remote control, it has the ability to completely incapacitate Agent Vega. However whether or not you are able to use it before he takes it from you, is entirely in your own hands. No method is completely fail proof," he said without compassion.

There was a brief silence.

"Am I correct in assuming that for some reason he is more invested... in making this round of trial partnerships work?" Adam asked finally.

"You are correct. He claims that he will make the effort this time to avoid a return to the Fourth if his partner is acceptable. The circumstances upon his incarceration have been made considerably harsher the last time he was put in."

"How so?" Boyd wondered exactly how motivated the man would be.

Carhart looked at them with carefully constructed detachment. It wouldn't have seemed out of place if it weren't for the fact that he hadn't appeared so impassive and emotionless up until the point where torture devices had entered the conversation.

"I will not go into specifics except to say that Sin has a weakness and they have now decided to exploit that weakness when he is incarcerated. He now has reason to fear the Fourth. It is in his best interest to not return there."

Boyd inclined his head in a slight nod and looked away, his gaze drawn toward the empty room. The question briefly crossed his mind of what Sin's weakness could be. Since he had nothing to say in response to the information General Carhart provided, he remained silent.

"If I may ask a question, General?" Adam asked. His voice was low pitched and nearly always sounded glum although his expression didn't necessarily seem overtly unhappy about anything.

"That's why I'm here."

"You know him fairly well. What do you anticipate being the most challenging aspect of this aside from possibly being killed during one of his... fits?"

"Not reacting to him the way he wants you to," Carhart replied bluntly and without hesitation. "Sin will bait you and he won't do it in the same way every time. He will try sarcasm, cruelty, intimidation-- whatever he thinks will get a rise out of you. He expects the worst from people and he trusts no one. If you don't show overt hostility towards him, he will only expect that it's something that will come later. He is used to both physical and verbal abuse from the people here. He is used to being condescended to and treated as though he has lesser intelligence. He is used to not having an ounce of respect from anyone. He will be waiting for you to prove yourselves to be like everyone else and if he sees that, he will react to you exactly as he reacted to the others. It is your job to not let that happen."

When Adam didn't seem suitably impressed, Carhart shrugged his wide shoulders. "Whether or not you heed the warning is entirely up to you. But just let it be known, even if you think you're fully capable of not letting him get under your skin you may be in for a surprise. What happens after that depends on how you react to him."

Neither of them responded.

The meeting ended fairly quickly, with Adam leaving without a word and Boyd being escorted back to the bunker.

The next few weeks passed uneventfully. Training continued to consume Boyd's days; from physical sparring with David to mental exercises in classes. He listened and took notes where needed but otherwise didn't spend much energy on the endeavor. If he'd had anything else to think of he would have found his mind wandering. He had a

tendency to learn quickly, especially anything academic, and that didn't change even with the drastically different subjects.

He had settled into a routine after a point. For that reason, he wasn't expecting to be pulled aside by a guard after department training one afternoon. He was told he was to see General Carhart right away. He didn't question the order.

When they arrived at Carhart's office, they stopped at the waiting area. A desk sat to the side, a woman typing at the computer until she noticed them enter. She looked up at them. Boyd didn't pay much attention as the guard explained who they were and the woman eventually used the intercom to announce their presence. The door opened soon after and the guard left Boyd to walk in alone.

The office was larger than he would have expected it to be but not as large as his mother's wing on the upper administration level. The General had it sparsely decorated - there was a single picture frame on the desk facing away from Boyd. Black and white stills of the former city skyline were in small frames on the wall. They contrasted with the wide floor-to-ceiling windows that spanned the back wall. It showed the fractured cityscape that lay below the Tower and the wasteland beyond that had once been suburbs.

"Boyd," Carhart greeted him calmly.

"General Carhart," he said, shifting his gaze from the window to Carhart. He paused near the desk and heard the guard shut the door behind him.

"It seems that you're going to be our man."

Boyd stared at Carhart. He hadn't been expecting that, especially since as far as he knew the trial wasn't over. "Did something happen to Adam Blake?"

Carhart gave him a wry smirk. The slight narrowing of his cerulean blue eyes contrasted the quirk of his mouth. "Agent Blake lost interest in finishing the trial. He decided that dealing with Sin would be too much effort for very little gain."

"Ah." Boyd stared at Carhart for another moment. "When do I start?"

"When your training is complete. Afterward, you and Sin will be introduced and a meeting will be held for the unit so that you can meet the other members."

Boyd watched him. "Okay."

There was silence and for a moment disappointment was easily read in Carhart's expression. His face was an open book to Boyd, who was used to being able to read even the least expressive of people. The General didn't want some skinny unskilled child to be in his elite unit. He'd wanted the man who'd already put in years as an agent; the man who knew what he was doing and didn't have years' worth of training crammed into months.

But Carhart seemed kinder than most people at the Agency and he didn't say any of this out loud. Possibly to spare Boyd or possibly because it didn't matter.

"Well. Good luck to you."

Carhart looked at his computer again and the brief discussion was already over.

Boyd left the office and returned to training. He couldn't help wondering what his mother thought about his progress and whether she was following it at all. He couldn't feel particularly accomplished about becoming the new partner for Sin since he was chosen by default. But that knowledge wasn't going to stop him from attempting to excel at training. He knew no one expected much from him but it was even more for that reason that he at least wanted to avoid those disappointed stares.

## Chapter 4

The clock on the wall silently flipped numbers. The digital read flickered slightly now and then, an almost imperceptible detail. The lights buzzed quietly and the chairs they sat in made the occasional squeaking noise when one of them moved.

Carhart and Boyd sat in the small conference room, neither speaking nor looking at the other. It wasn't a purposeful avoidance yet it was welcome, since Boyd wasn't interested in small talk and he knew Carhart wasn't either.

They had been sitting there for eight minutes. Time dragged slowly. Boyd was used to silence so it didn't bother him. For the most part he relaxed his thoughts, sitting perfectly still as he awaited his soon-to-be partner's arrival.

Thirteen minutes passed before the doorknob finally rattled and several guards escorted Sin into the room.

There were six guards surrounding him, wearing full body armor. They looked prepared to go on a full storm and siege rather than simply escorting a single man to another area of the building. In addition to their own safety measures, they had both Sin's hands and ankles shackled. It seemed like overkill but according to the files Boyd had been given access to, Sin had managed to create mayhem under similar conditions on more than one occasion. It didn't seem that much would stop him once he decided to fight.

"This is fucking stupid," was the first thing out of Sin's mouth as he glared from Carhart to Lieutenant Taylor, the head of the guards who was standing next to him.

Carhart's brow furrowed and he stared at Taylor. "Necessity?"

Taylor shrugged and didn't look apologetic. "Marshal Connors stated that all precautions will remain until the Beaulieu boy's training has completed and the final psych evaluation is put through on Vega. It's a lot of red tape but he hasn't been able to roam free for years and Connors isn't taking any chances until everything is in the

computer. If Vega causes another mess in the middle of the compound, the Inspector will flip her shit. She still has to conjure cover stories for dead staff with civilian ties."

"Ah." Carhart flicked his eyes over at Sin who looked beyond irritated. In fact, he looked downright deadly.

Despite the fact that the guards seemed more overtly muscular, Sin towered over them. He looked easily 6'4" and despite the fact that his build appeared relatively thin for his height, there was an aura of violence emanating off of him at the moment. The guards appeared to be agitating him and his green-eyed glare focused more than once on two of the larger men in the escort. Boyd recognized them as the two guards he'd briefly seen leaving the fourth floor when he'd arrived with Gerant-- Dennis McNichols and Harry Truman.

"Well I have authorization to use the collar at will, so your presence and the presence of the shackles won't be necessary any longer," Carhart said after another brief pause.

"Considering the fact that his evaluation should be processed within the hour, I don't think they were necessary in the first place unless it was a mere desire to create a spectacle of him in the last possible moment," he added dryly.

Taylor shrugged again, looking unconcerned with Carhart's opinion. His orders had come straight from the top. Carhart was third in command but in this case, his words didn't make a difference.

Harry began unshackling Sin's wrists and Boyd couldn't help noticing that when the guard locked eyes with Sin, his expression looked cruelly amused and he jostled the Senior Agent around more than was absolutely necessary. Sin didn't respond other than a narrowing of his eyes but he looked like a coiled spring that was ready to snap at any moment.

When the restraints were removed, the guards stepped back almost immediately. They looked more on their guard now that the man known as the Monster was released.

Harry was the only exception; he continued to smirk. Boyd wondered briefly what the reason was for Harry's attitude but he decided it wasn't important enough to take the time to consider.

"Good day, gentlemen," Carhart said pointedly when the guards lingered.

Taylor nodded but a look of hesitation crossed his face. Only after his eyes moved across Carhart's desk and rested on the activation device for Sin's collar did he turn and exit the office, signaling the other guards to do the same.

"You can sit, you know," Carhart said patiently as Sin glowered at nothing in particular.

"I prefer to stand," was the flat reply. Sin leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest, gaze focused on the window. There was something ill-fitting about his clothes-- the shirt seemed too tight and the pants too loose. They hung on his hips precariously due to the absence of a belt but Boyd supposed that he wouldn't have been allowed one on the Fourth.

"If you play nice, you will be able to avoid scenes like that in the future. Your cooperation in this project will ensure that your situation will change for the better. Indefinitely."

Sin scoffed at that. He appeared to be in a very dark mood although it wasn't immediately clear why. It seemed unlikely that a man who was typically kept locked up would react so strongly to being restrained. From what Boyd had heard, Sin was more often than not kept restrained when escorted around the compound. It made Boyd wonder if it had something to do with Harry and his attitude, or the way Taylor had escorted him over.

Carhart leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. He appeared completely at ease when dealing with Sin. He was the first person Boyd had encountered who seemed unfazed by the ominous-looking man.

It was another oddity about the entire situation. From what Boyd had been able to gather from overhearing others, Carhart had a strange affinity for Sin. It was unknown exactly why but some speculated it had something to do with Sin's father, who had been Carhart's partner and who had died years ago.

Even so, one would assume that over time Carhart would have seen Sin for who he was. Did Carhart know something about Sin that others didn't? If Sin was the unrepentant, psychopathic killer everyone made him out to be, why would Carhart put so much effort into him regardless of how strong the past friendship may have been?

"The arrangements have already been made for you to have your own quarters contingent on the success of this trial," Carhart was saying.

That comment seemed to draw Sin's interest and his oddly pale green eyes finally focused on Boyd. One dark brow rose doubtfully as he took in the teenager.

"He looks more frail and pathetic up close. When he dies, they'll blame me anyway."

"Likely," was the flat response from Carhart. "So you should see that he doesn't."

Having already accepted that his lifespan would likely be very short, Boyd simply watched Sin in an unmoved manner. His expression remained neutral; a blank-faced stare that took in details of Sin to store and potentially analyze later.

Although he was looking specifically for clues, he couldn't read much in Sin's expression or body language. He didn't usually find it so difficult to get an idea about a person and their personality when he watched them specifically for that reason and didn't particularly care for the fact that he couldn't now.

"The purpose of this is for the two of you to meet before being suddenly thrown into a mission together. Introductions aren't necessary-- you know all about one another by now. Boyd, you will meet the rest of the team in a more formal unit meeting tomorrow morning."

Carhart had mentioned a unit before but never said much about it. He looked over at Carhart, focusing on the man for the first time. "Will I receive more information about the unit?"

Sin's gaze switched back to Boyd and remained there. It was intensely penetrating and hawk-like. The average person would have been unnerved by such an unblinking stare even without the violent history that trailed behind the man. For the most part, Boyd ignored it.

"Yes." Carhart shifted in his seat to access the touch pad that was embedded into the table beside him. "Information about the unit has been withheld until now because although every aspect of the Agency is highly confidential, what we do in my unit is even more so. The sensitive nature of our operations can be sabotaged if the wrong word gets out and there is always a chance of betrayal. Even within our own ranks."

It seemed as though there were many layers to the Agency, which did not come as a surprise to Boyd. A place that fashioned itself after a real pharmaceuticals company in order to be out in public while carrying out highly secretive government missions was likely to have multiple levels of confidentiality.

"What is the nature of the unit?" Boyd asked.

"Are you familiar with the terrorist organization called Janus?"

"No."

"Considering your psych profile states that you have been isolated from the world for quite some time, I cannot say that I'm surprised," the General replied although there was an acrid quality to his tone.

One of Sin's dark brows rose at this statement but otherwise, his intense but inscrutable stare remained unchanged. Carhart flicked something on the touch pad and a holographic image appeared above the table between them. It was detailed and very sharp just like the life-like holograms that Boyd had practiced shooting in training.

The images that appeared were set up similar to a slideshow. They were photographs from the carnage that had occurred during World War III. They showed explosions and bombings in the United States, Europe, Russia, Asia... evidence of once-powerful countries and former allies slaughtering one another for what had turned out to be a ten-year war.

"After the Three Treaties were signed and peace," the word rolled off Carhart's tongue somewhat blandly, "was established between the three different sides, not everyone was satisfied. Millions of people all over the world actually protested the treaties. Rallies were held everywhere with the general consensus that after ten years of carnage and millions of people dead, the three powers were essentially brushing their squabble under the table because nobody was winning. The people were expected to go back to business as usual as if none of it had ever occurred despite the somewhat damning evidence of mass graves, a destroyed environment and internationally poor economy."

A ghost of a smirk appeared on Sin's full mouth.

Carhart flicked something on the pad again and the images changed to show the rallies that he was talking about before finally settling on one. It appeared to be the memorial park in Washington DC but it was a scene of chaos. There were dead or unconscious people strewn around a rectangular area with the remains of a monument in the middle of it all.

"The concerns of these individuals were ignored worldwide. The end result were thousands of groups internationally forming in protest with the goal of either removing the leading government of their countries politically or in most cases, by force. These insurgent groups have grown over time and have actually become a danger to the governments they oppose as they draw in more and more followers. Janus is one of those groups. They started as a small organization of protesters and eventually grew into one of the largest insurgent organizations we have seen so far in history. Their power has spread beyond focusing on the United States and they now work side by

side with groups in Europe and Asia to form an army that is dedicated to uprooting the administrations that they deem are unfit."

"Tell him the part about how they're all nothing but terrorists," Sin interjected blandly, his eyes still on Boyd. "Let's not forget all of that Agency propaganda. Otherwise he may just start sympathizing with the bad guys."

Carhart gave Sin a level look before swiveling his cerulean stare back to Boyd.

"Despite their self-proclaimed nobility of wanting to change things for the good of the people, both their method and their intent has changed over time. Perhaps their words were true at the start but now Janus has become very similar to an overgrown and supremely dangerous political party. They want power and they will go about corrupting, infiltrating and murdering until they get what they want. At this point, they have such powerful allies that it is possible their aims will come to pass."

The General indicated the image floating between them. "What you see here was their very first message of opposition. In 2009, on the one year anniversary of The Three Treaties, they bombed the WWII monument in the National Mall. It turned into a massacre of government officials, military personnel and civilians alike."

Boyd studied the image, looking at the dead bodies strewn around. A woman's arms were stretched in death toward her child lying two feet away and she was missing her lower half. Couples and families and individuals, different ages and races all alike in death.

He considered Janus and the other groups' premise. The war had certainly destroyed a lot, including families. At one time, maybe he would have sympathized with them. After all, the war had stolen his father and Lou's parents. In a way, maybe it stole Lou and his mother from him as well. Maybe without that war his life would not have gone in the direction it had and he wouldn't have spent years closing down bit by bit until there was nothing but a shell left.

Boyd thought about what his mother had said, regarding protecting the world from terrorism and supporting the US government. He took into account the fact that Carhart had said his unit was especially high clearance. His mother had said that the Agency carried out the missions and goals that the world at large could not know about or else it would be taken the wrong way.

It would follow that a group that could garner civilian sympathy against the government would be considered a higher threat, and that any unit aimed at working on that would need higher clearance due to the more sensitive topic.

He looked over at Carhart again, meeting the older man's eyes. "I see," he said without inflection. "And your unit exists to deal with this threat specifically."

"Precisely. We are Janus-oriented, along with any other organizations that orbits around them. This unit requires the agents within to perform in every role. Field agents are typically categorized based on their skills and distributed as needed once they are assigned a division. The Janus Unit encompasses every division and requires you to perfect every skill. You will not just be doing storms or gathering Intel or going undercover. This unit requires you to do everything."

"How many other field agents are in the unit?" Boyd asked.

"None. You and Sin are the only field agents. There are two Research and Development agents and an analyst."

Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly, briefly; the most reaction he'd shown so far. He shifted his gaze to settle on Sin, who was staring in boredom into empty space. He understood that Sin was supposed to be a one-man killing machine but if it was such a high level unit it seemed as though it should have a larger group. What could two people conceivably accomplish against an international organization?

He returned his stare to Carhart. "Why?"

"Because the Agency lacks people with high enough classification to perform in this unit. We only have two level 10 field agents, one who is currently abroad and the

other who is currently in this room and cannot work with others. But Sin is necessary because he can do what in normal cases would require an entire team."

"Good to be needed," Sin said flatly.

"And as I said before," Carhart continued, unperturbed. "It is necessary to keep the confidentially limited to as small a number of people as possible. People talk. Things leak."

"I see." If Boyd had not seen videos of Sin on missions he likely would not have believed that all the rumors about his abilities were true. As it was, he could see how it was possible having Sin as one of two people would be like having a much larger unit.

Carhart seemed satisfied that Boyd had grasped the necessity for discretion but Sin was just starting to look increasingly uninterested by the proceedings of the meeting. Despite this, Sin gave Boyd another one of his penetrating stares and said in the same bland tone he seemed to use for most things:

"You speak as though you actually believe he will survive the first assignment. I've never seen a more helpless looking being."

"I should think you of all people understand that looks can be deceiving," Boyd replied, meeting Sin's stare head on without flinching.

Sin smirked at him, pale green eyes glinting beneath the bright lights. "Am I to believe that there's a fierce fighter lurking beneath that effeminate exterior?"

Boyd shrugged. "Whether I am or not is irrelevant. Considering how little you know about me it's foolish of you to make assumptions based on my looks alone."

"Assuming I know little of you is foolish all on its own. They have a whole file on you. On every minuscule detail of your unimpressive existence. If I really thought you were going to last more than a day, I could very easily go look at it and then I would know things that you don't want anybody to know."

"The existence of the information is meaningless unless you looked at it prior to commenting," Boyd said unconcernedly. "Which you've as well as admitted you didn't."

Sin just shrugged, not appearing very impressed or interested in the debate. "Why don't we just see him fight without the training wheels and it can be seen whether or not my assumption was correct?"

Carhart opened his mouth as if to deny such a thing but he seemed to think better of it because he paused. After a brief moment he looked at Boyd with raised blond eyebrows. "Do you oppose the suggestion? It does have some merit. You've seen what he's capable of but not vice versa. At this point all Sin knows is that you received what should have been two years minimum of training within a span of a handful of months. Assuming you're completely incapable, in that context, isn't too surprising although it's due to no fault of your own. Showing your partner that you are capable of defending yourself may be helpful in terms of him taking the partnership seriously. You were selected largely based on your personality and psych profile. However if he truly believes we are sending a lamb out to be slaughtered, he won't even--"

"Have you forgotten that I'm sitting in the room?" Sin asked drolly, eyeballing the General with obvious irritation.

"--attempt to make the effort to aid you."

"Assuming I would regardless."

Carhart gave Sin another of his level stares before looking at Boyd once again. "Thoughts?"

"It's fine," Boyd said impassively. "The logic is sound. I can fight."

He had little doubt in his mind that Sin would win any spar, assuming they went against each other, but he knew he had at least the basic capabilities of defending himself. If it would benefit the partnership to display this fact via a fight of any sort, it was fine with him.

"Good. Let's go down to the training room."

The trek downstairs was largely uneventful, although they must have been a spectacle of some sort because they drew attention from several people along the way. It wasn't too surprising given that their trio was made up of the third in command of the Agency, the widely disliked second in command's son and the most infamous agent.

Whatever the case, Boyd didn't pay much heed to the extra eyes on them. He followed behind Carhart and Sin trailed behind him at times, walking alongside him at others. His soon-to-be partner didn't speak but his eyes were often on Boyd, observing silently without giving away anything of what he thought.

When they arrived at the training room there were a few people sparring in the main area. Most, if not all, stopped to look at the three of them. Carhart gave the gawkers his level eyed glare and they immediately appeared to go back to what they'd been doing prior to the entrance.

Boyd didn't see David around which was atypical for the man that Boyd had come to believe may even have a cot hidden in a room somewhere nearby. David nearly seemed obsessed with training and sparring. Or maybe he had a very strong passion for it and truly enjoyed it. Both concepts felt foreign to Boyd in recent times.

Carhart led the two of them into one of the single session sparring rooms off to the side and shut the door behind them. It was a quarter of the size of the main room and equipped with its own weapon rack and a padded floor.

"Are we disrobing for this affair?" Sin wondered out loud, eyeballing Boyd's long black trench coat dubiously.

Carhart moved back against the wall. "Not necessarily. This isn't an official training session. Although I would hope there will be no maiming. Sin."

Sin raised his dark brows and crossed his arms over his chest, not bothering to respond as he stared at Boyd once again with his penetrating gaze.

Boyd ignored Sin at first as his even-eyed gaze swept the room, taking in the weapons that would potentially be available for him to use. He moved to the wall and took his trench coat off since it would give him better movement; a small difference when paired against a man who would no doubt win within seconds, but a difference he took advantage of nonetheless.

He absently folded the trench coat and set it on the floor before he turned back to Carhart and Sin. He was left in his typical all black outfit; a long-sleeved lightweight black shirt, black pants, and black combat boots that were scuffed with age, the same as his coat. He met Sin's eyes evenly for a moment before shifting over to Carhart. "What are the parameters for this?" He didn't look away from Carhart, although he did tilt his head minutely toward the weapons rack. "Are weapons involved?"

"If you want to use one, by all means."

Sin didn't even give the weapons wall a glance. He was fiddling absently with a loose string at the edge of his frayed shirt, eyes still on Boyd.

Boyd nodded slightly at Carhart and turned his gaze onto Sin. For the first time since they'd met, he put all his focus on the other man. He studied the way Sin held himself, looking with his still amateur eye for any signs of weakness. There were none that he could see.

Given the fact that Sin seemed uninterested in weapons, he was clearly going to use hand-to-hand combat, which fell in line with what Boyd knew of him. It would be foolish and for pride alone that Boyd would go into the fight without a weapon. Since he was feeling neither prideful nor foolish, he turned and walked to the racks of weapons.

He had his choice of just about anything. He naturally shied away from all the knives without having to think about it. Other weapons would require skill he hadn't perfected yet, like nunchucks that he would be more likely to hit himself with than the enemy. He gravitated toward the blunt weapons and the ones he'd so far shown most affinity for: a pair of expandable tonfa. He liked them because they worked well in

defense, for protecting his arms and body, and could easily switch to effective offense even without expanding the full 29 inches.

He held the tonfa by the knobs on the sides, the comfort of the length of the tonfa along his forearms, and he walked back over, stopping once he was in front of Sin.

There was no official start to the spar; one moment they were three people standing in a room and the next it was two sparring with a spectator to the side. Sin dropped into a fighting stance, watching Boyd with those luminous green eyes that didn't seem to miss even the barest of movements. For his part, Boyd scrutinized Sin's stance before he moved in for an attack.

It started with quick, darting movements on Boyd's part. Although he'd been training for a few months and had significantly improved upon where he'd started, he'd started without any experience at all. His build was not one that lent itself easily to heavy muscles and so what he had at most was a toned body. However, he made up for that in speed. He was quick and light on his feet and had found a certain skill in dodging and escaping. There was no brute strength in any of his attacks; rather, he tended to use what resources he had intelligently.

He started by striking at the main spaces that made a person falter; key joints and Sin's throat and face. From there he attempted the vulnerable spots on the torso where organs lay beneath that could be bruised or ruptured. He even tried to get Sin in the groin because David had taught Boyd to be brutal if need be, as the enemy would do the same in return.

In this case, Sin didn't have to. He danced around Boyd maddeningly, a leaf just out of reach that tumbled on the wind. He let Boyd strike but he deflected easily, with no more effort than it took to swat a fly. When Boyd started putting more strength into his strikes and Sin stopped them, he could feel the powerful strength of the other man as it rebounded up the tonfa and into his arms. Sin had the steadiness and strength of a mountain combined with the speed of a predator and although Boyd had known before this he knew for certain now:

This was a man who could kill him. Easily.

Despite that, and despite Sin's reputation as a bloodthirsty psychopath, he didn't actually appear to be trying to harm Boyd during most of the fight. It was a strange contradiction and something that caught Boyd's attention early in the sparring.

It would have been easy for Sin to hurt him and make it seem like an accident or Boyd's incompetence, and Sin clearly hadn't hesitated to eliminate his previous partners. So why wasn't he being more ruthless? Was it only because he was trying to follow the rules this time? Or was there another reason?

Boyd didn't know the answer to the questions and for the moment he largely ignored them. Still, even when he tried to dismiss the contradiction as a pointless distinction, it tickled the back of his mind.

They moved around each other in the subtle dance of a fight. Boyd kept his tonfa flipped back against his forearms for protection when he would hop back, his honey brown eyes completely serious and constantly searching for any sign of weakness or any falter.

The tonfa made whirring noises as they sliced through the air, a blur that flickered between the two agents. When it became apparent that was going to get nowhere, Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly. Without looking he used the momentum of his arm to casually flick the tonfa out, extending them the full amount before they clicked in place.

He went at Sin again, striking while trying not to project ahead of time his intentions. Still, Sin's eyes were faster than Boyd's muscles; he always seemed to know just in time what Boyd intended and how to stop it. Boyd tried to strike at Sin's knee and Sin moved to the side. Boyd tried to move behind him to slam him in the back, aiming for the kidneys, and Sin spun away. Sometimes he didn't even appear to be focusing entirely on the fight. Even so, his reactions were immediate and he deflected with effortless grace.

Soon, Boyd was trying double strikes; both tonfa extended, swiping at Sin one after another, trying to catch him off guard. He could feel the impacts of hitting Sin's defenses all the way up to his shoulders and although Boyd had good stamina, he could feel the fight wearing at his body. A river of exhaustion and futility ate away at the granite of his mind.

As a sheen of sweat started to show on his skin, pale blond strands began to catch at the sides of his face and on his lips. With both his hands occupied he couldn't do anything about it and it soon became a nuisance, making him wish he'd tied it back. The long-sleeved black shirt was stifling despite the light weight of it and it too clung in places to his thin frame. His boots seemed heavy and he thought about how he should have removed the extra weight prior to going into this.

Then again, he hadn't expected it to last this long. He tried his best to find some hole in Sin's defenses but they were flawless and more than anything the older man seemed to be studying him. A hunter watching prey or a child playing with a toy, it was hard to tell.

Every harsh release of breath as Boyd struck, every knee-wrenching stop, every twist to the side and maneuver away, they watched each other closely. Two stares scrutinizing the other; Boyd's cool and collected, and Sin's penetrating and unreadable.

Boyd didn't know how much time passed with the routine of Sin avoiding and deflecting everything he did, but analytically it seemed like at most a few minutes and, for his confidence, it felt like hours. He was just thinking it was a good thing he didn't go into this seriously thinking he'd win or he may have lost all hope, when Sin broke the routine.

Fast as a snake unfurling itself and striking, one moment Sin was watching Boyd with the same nearly bored expression as before, and the next Boyd felt a violent twist at his right arm.

He couldn't hold onto the tonfa before Sin wrenched it away to clatter and nearly hit Carhart's feet. Boyd tried to pull the other tonfa up as defense but Sin was too fast;

Boyd's arm had barely started to move before Sin reached over to snap his weapon away.

Boyd tried to hold on but the angle at which Sin attacked him made it impossible and he abruptly released the tonfa, hoping to distract Sin while he moved to strike at his face. He was aiming for his throat, wanting to cut off his breathing, but Sin moved nearly faster than the eye. It was an impossible speed for a man who had impossible strength packed into his lanky frame.

Boyd's arms were jarred to the side and before he could do anything, a large hand snapped around his throat and lifted. Boyd felt his body leave the floor, his feet hanging and entire body dragging down on the one point. It made his head pound and throat close even more from the pressure of gravity. When Sin squeezed, his windpipe was almost entirely cut off.

Breath left him in a painful, clawing rush that his body automatically fought against. His chest strained for air, his lungs dragging out against a near vacuum. His mouth could have fallen open; he could have kicked viciously at Sin and struggled like a worm trying to dislodge a fish hook. He could have clawed at the hands around his throat and he could have stared in desperation and fear down into Sin's eyes.

But he didn't.

His mouth was open no further than it had been before and though he still tried to draw breath in, the minute trickle of air Sin was allowing him was not nearly enough. Still, he didn't panic. His eyes were even as he stared down at Sin, his legs and arms loose. He couldn't stop the automatic reactions of his body, the straining chest and pounding heart, the little nibble of uncertainty that ran in the back of his mind that asked: *Is this it? Will I die here?*

But the eyes that met Sin's showed no fear.

As if to test what he saw, Sin's hand squeezed, completely cutting off all of Boyd's breath, not even allowing the minute amount of air as before. Although Boyd's

hands automatically twitched and his lungs automatically screamed for air, he otherwise remained motionless.

He understood that the idea of dying should be frightening but the feeling wasn't there the way it should be. He stared at Sin, his vision slowly going black on the edges. He couldn't ignore a thought that flashed through his mind: Would it all be better anyway if he wasn't forced to continue existing? Was this simply the way it would end, with his mother nowhere around to stop it?

Sin looked up at Boyd from where he dangled limply and tilted his head slightly to the side. His pale green eyes narrowed and his full mouth twisted up slightly in a way that wasn't quite a smile. There was a challenge in his eyes and the dark smirk on his mouth twisted further when his fingers dug in harder.

Their eyes remained locked, positions unchanged and Boyd suffocating in grim silence until Carhart's voice cracked out like a whip.

"Sin. Enough."

Sin's hand abruptly opened and he allowed Boyd to fall to the floor like a discarded rag doll. Boyd caught himself with painful jars against his arms and pushed himself up to a stand. He coughed, dragging in deep breaths. His head pounded painfully. Sin's eyes remained fixed on the blond teenager for a long stretch before he shrugged and looked over at the General.

"I suppose he isn't entirely without skill. He's possibly better than the average new field agent," Sin commented tonelessly.

Boyd concentrated on steadying his breath. In the back of his mind he wondered whether Sin would have really killed him had Carhart not been there. He doubted it, since it would have sent the man straight back to a place he didn't want to be. But he couldn't be certain, as there had been nothing in those green eyes to tell him what Sin had truly been thinking.

When Boyd could draw in a breath without feeling like it was more effort than it should be, he fully straightened and looked at the other two.

"Good work," Carhart said, appearing genuine. His lips were set in a pleased smile and he nodded at Boyd. "There was no expectation that you would actually defeat him. On the contrary, you exceeded my expectations as far as your skill with the weapon. David was correct in saying that you learned quickly. I think you would have been a good match for the average agent."

Boyd nodded his acknowledgment, feeling somewhat pleased by that.

"How well do you understand your role in the unit?" Carhart queried after a moment. He was watching Boyd in an analytical way, as if he was adding this new bit of information into what was already filed into his head.

Boyd studied Carhart, trying to determine how to answer. When he spoke, his voice was rough from the abuse of his throat.

"I understand I'll primarily be a counterpoint to Agent Vega to ensure the smooth execution of missions and that the Agency remains secret. Judging by training, it seems I'll also be expected to adequately defend myself, be capable of basic to intermediate offenses, negotiate on behalf of an entity which I assume is the Agency or your unit, have a basic understanding of how to infiltrate an area undetected, and deceive others in a convincing manner."

"Good." Carhart looked at Boyd before turning his gaze sidelong at Sin. "Right now you are considered largely a glorified babysitter. However if you play your role well, I guarantee that you could become more than that. I see potential in you. But keep in mind, your success or failure depends entirely on your partnership with Sin. That is your starting point. That is why you are here. Don't forget that-- his previous partners did and they paid for it."

Sin shrugged at the comment but neither man said more than that on the topic of Sin's former, and now deceased, partners.

"The only way a partnership can be successful," the General added after a brief pause, "is by trusting one another, which is--"

"A big fucking stretch at this junction in my career," Sin said dully, raising an eyebrow at his commanding officer skeptically.

"--not going to be something that comes quickly," Carhart spoke over him. "But the relationship that develops between the two of you will determine how this plays out. If you don't get along, you will both fail. And I am sure neither of you desires failure for your own very different reasons."

Neither of them answered but Carhart didn't seem surprised. In the end, what he said was the truth. And regardless of how well they would or would not get along, Boyd suspected that neither of them wanted to see the consequences of failure.

## Chapter 5

Boyd glanced at the room identifications as he walked down the hall in Artillery, looking for the room that housed the blunt weaponry. He was a little lost, not knowing where to go specifically since no one had told him. Although there were a few other people walking around he didn't bother to stop any of them. The rooms were labeled well enough so it was a simple matter of walking past the right one.

It was the first time he was on a mission so everything was new to him yet he was resistant to bothering with asking unnecessary questions. His fingers curled absently around the comm unit he'd been given at check-in and his footfalls were quiet as he strode down the hall.

It was early morning but a person would never know it down here, underground with no windows. Boyd had learned that the typical procedure for a mission included a briefing with the unit, followed by a visit to Artillery to arm himself. The building had been innocuous enough from the outside and when he'd walked in to discover a modern-looking lobby with clean lines and a pleasant feel, he hadn't been surprised. Nothing was what it seemed at the Agency; a lesson he'd learned quickly.

He'd already been given the remote to control Sin's collar, although he didn't see the need for him to have it and had no intentions of using it. After that, when he'd checked in with the staff at the desk, they'd given him a miniature microphone and ear bud set that they called a comm unit. He'd been told that the comm unit was standard equipment for all agents but that if he needed something more sophisticated he could find it downstairs.

The entire set was very discreet. The ear bud was nothing more than a thin flat disc that would be nearly invisible in the ear and would be hidden beneath the fall of his blond hair. The wireless microphone came in a variety of types but the default was a small pin that would be easy to clip on clothing and hide. He could turn the transmitter on and off at his convenience but he'd been told that typically on missions with a partner

the transmitters were left on unless it would be a distraction. Whatever the case, he didn't see any need for anything more sophisticated so he didn't bother looking.

With the amount of information he'd been absorbing in the past few days, additional learning about unnecessary equipment was not something he was interested in pursuing. The information he had been expected to memorize regarding the unit was more than enough to keep him fully occupied.

The insurgent groups that orbited Janus, as Carhart had put it, had turned out to number in the hundreds. Not all were relevant anymore but they were all related in some way and he was expected to learn the key players of all groups, even ones that had been defunct for some time. He'd been given a palm sized touch screen panel at his first meeting with hundreds of pages of data that he'd managed to get himself acquainted with in the few days that had passed since he'd met the other members of the unit.

There were a large number of hostile factions in North America, many with names the Agency wasn't fully aware of or names that were incredibly similar. Whether or not this was due to lack of originality or a general sharing of ideas between insurgent individuals was unknown. But to simplify matters, the Agency had assigned a number known as a 'faction' to the hostile group.

The current mission's target were members of faction 53, also known as True Democracy Movement or TDM. It was currently headed by a man named Warren Andrews who had built the group from the ground up with another man, Jason Aarons, who had since left the faction. It seemed fairly frequent that leaders were usurped or loyalties changed in these small factions. It was another reason the Agency assigned numbers; sometimes the new leaders changed the name entirely even though the same people were in it.

Sin hadn't shown at the briefing which hadn't seemed to be a big surprise to anyone but certainly hadn't put General Carhart in a good mood. As a result, Boyd had been the only one to be told the mission overview.

The objective was for them to infiltrate an abandoned building that a fraction of 53's members were using as a safe house. Newly gained Intel alleged that information regarding the location of 53's main base would be found inside and they were expected to retrieve it.

As such, he figured he probably would want a weapon of some sort and planned to get one of his preferred type. When he found the blunt weapons he was satisfied to find expandable tonfa like he preferred, in a lighter weight version than he was used to but that still had the strength.

He looked around at a few other rooms to see if he needed anything else and in the process walked past what appeared to be the main area where guns were stored. The walls were lined with sophisticated displays for more pistols, rifles and shotguns than he'd even known existed but that wasn't what made him slow down and head into the room. Instead, it was Sin's unmistakable figure clad in a black long sleeved t-shirt and his usual frayed black cargo pants. He was half turned away from the door as he surveyed his options.

Boyd walked over and stopped near Sin's side, idly turning his attention to see what Sin was looking at. He didn't know the precise name of the model but it appeared to be a .45 ACP of some kind.

Sin examined the gun and cocked it, appearing to not even acknowledge Boyd's existence. It was a fact that was undermined when Sin said without looking over, "That's it?"

"What else is needed?"

"If there's a gunfight, I suppose you could always throw it like a spear and hope it takes out multiple shooters," Sin replied with complete disinterest in his tone. He walked away from Boyd without waiting for an answer and began surveying the rest of the weapons although he continued to hold the .45.

Boyd idly looked at the selection in front of him. It was a fair point.

He picked up a 9mm, expression neutral as he studied it. When it came down to it, though, he wasn't particularly comfortable with guns and he was still perfecting his aim. The gun would simply be a hindrance that could also be stolen and used against him. And if it came to needing one in a theoretical gunfight he could obtain one there. No doubt he could steal one on location or from one of the hostiles. Ultimately, he set the gun down, deciding the potential inconveniences outweighed the potential convenience. He turned to look where Sin was to see if was ready.

Sin just raised his dark eyebrows and made no comment although his full mouth crooked up very slightly at the side. He gave Boyd a brief once over and turned back to what he'd been doing, collecting ammunition for what Boyd now saw was a .45 Ruger.

Boyd watched Sin, trying to determine what he was thinking. Perhaps he thought Boyd wouldn't last long without a gun or without taking his advice. It was hard to tell and that was what made Boyd watch him just a little longer than he normally would. He didn't particularly like that he couldn't discern Sin's thoughts. He preferred to have a good idea of what the people around him were thinking, especially in a situation like this.

Although he wondered, he didn't ask. He simply stood to the side waiting for him to finish.

He couldn't tell if Sin always chose his weapons this carefully or if he was just taking his time for no particular reason. Perhaps he felt no urgency about the mission parameters which was likely since he didn't know them. Or perhaps he was hoping to irritate Boyd.

Another agent entered the room, a tall Asian man with bleached blond hair. His eyes swept the area and as soon as they fell on Sin, the man did an about face and left.

Sin's reputation certainly preceded him in every case on the compound. He'd been turned away from the other man so it couldn't even be a case of his glare and intimidating aura warding the agent away. In fact, Sin was remarkably thin-looking compared to the muscular field agents that Boyd frequently saw. His hair was

disheveled, his jaw stubbled and his clothes were obviously fraying and poorly sized. There was nothing overtly frightening about Sin that would be obvious from such a quick glance, but still the agent had fled. It was an interesting phenomenon.

Sin finally finished gathering his equipment and when he turned to Boyd, there was a darkly amused expression on his striking face.

"I'm fully at your disposal."

Boyd nodded and left the room without speaking. Sin wasn't far behind him and the two of them stopped briefly at the checkout point on the main exit. After that, it didn't take terribly long to get to the garage where they got a vehicle. Boyd automatically took the driver's seat and soon they were on their way. It wasn't until they were in the car that Boyd finally bothered to fill Sin in on what the mission was even about, since the older man hadn't asked yet.

"We are to infiltrate a building with people from faction 53 and retrieve information about the main headquarters for purposes of a follow-up mission," Boyd said calmly after they passed the check out point at the gate and drove away from the Agency.

"Exhilarating."

Boyd fell silent briefly. He slowed to a stop at a red light and looked over. Sin was looking out the window and Boyd couldn't see much of his face. He could tell from Sin's clothes and the way he was sitting that he wasn't wearing any sort of armor, not even a bulletproof vest or bodysuit.

It seemed odd to Boyd. Was Sin that confident or was he simply arrogant? Did he know something Boyd didn't? Why wouldn't he use anything at all when he'd been the one to bring up the idea of a gunfight? It would seem that one would want to have protection just in case. Boyd was wearing a bulletproof bodysuit himself, beneath his clothes and the fall of his trench coat.

Without the driving to distract him, he found himself noting that it was the first time they were alone together. The windows were rolled up and without the radio on, it was silent except for the muffled sounds of the car itself and any quiet shifting of their clothing.

He watched Sin out of the corner of his eye, trying to get a feel for the man. He couldn't decide if Sin simply didn't have any particularly deep or moving thoughts when he was silent, or whether he was hiding everything from everyone around him. Boyd suspected that Sin was simply guarding any of his thoughts from outsiders but if that was the case, what was he thinking? Did he expect that Boyd would be dead by the end of the day? No one seemed to have much hope of any of Sin's partners lasting indefinitely and Boyd had to wonder how transitory this seemed to Sin.

With such close quarters, other details stood out to him. Sin seemed freshly bathed; Boyd could faintly smell some sort of body wash or shampoo that lingered on him. It smelled like coconut. It was one more detail that seemed just so slightly in discord with the man's reputation.

Boyd had to wonder how much of it was orchestrated to throw people off, or whether Sin simply didn't realize or care what varied impressions he gave others. And if that was the case, were these bits of some other aspect of Sin's personality that were showing through or did Sin grab whatever was available and didn't put any thought into any of it?

The questions ran through Boyd's mind for a few moments before his eyes narrowed faintly and he looked away completely, out the driver's side window while he waited for the light to turn green. It irked him that he was wondering any of this in the first place. He didn't care whether Sin liked coconuts or not, yet the fact that he couldn't get a grasp on the man's motivations even when he put effort toward that goal served to provoke him into analyzing everything.

The light turned green and Boyd turned his attention to driving again. He hadn't determined an answer to any of the oddities Sin represented and it was mildly vexing.

Without warning, Sin leaned well into his personal space. The motion was abrupt and nearly alarming but it turned out that Sin was merely reaching over to turn the heat down low enough to be completely useless.

"What are you doing?" Boyd asked, distracted by Sin and the already cooling air. "It's cold." He reached out to turn the heat back to its original setting.

"I thought you weren't as delicate as you look," Sin replied blandly and smacked Boyd's hand.

Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly and shifted over to Sin. He couldn't believe the man had just smacked his hand. "Turn the vents away from you, then. Not all of us are apparently frost-bitten across our entire bodies." He flicked his gaze along Sin's attire, which was entirely too thin for the cold, and reached to turn up the heat again.

"What would you do if we became stranded and had to camp out?" Sin wondered, resting his head against the window and regarding Boyd. "I will certainly not share my body heat."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Who said I would want you to?" He looked back at the road but his attention was on Sin. "And for the record, having normal reactions to the cold does not make me inferior or weak as you seem to be implying. Perhaps it is you who would need help were we stranded. You could be at risk for hypothermia."

"I've survived a winter in Siberia when I was ten."

"What were you doing in a Siberian winter at ten years old?" Boyd asked dubiously.

"Searching for Santa Claus."

Boyd shook his head but was unsurprised by the answer.

Sin flicked the slats to his vents down with a decisive click and went back to looking out the window.

Feeling a tiny sense of victory at that, Boyd didn't stop the briefest hint of satisfaction in his eyes. It was silly, yet this showed him that Sin wouldn't necessarily win everything. Even if it was a disagreement over something so minor that it didn't matter anyway.

They fell into mutual silence and Boyd continued to half pay attention to Sin even as he absently navigated through the city. His mind turned toward the mission ahead of them and he realized they hadn't finished discussing it. Since Sin had been interacting on some level, Boyd thought it may not be a bad idea to attempt to bring it up again.

"Regarding the mission, we don't have blueprints of the building so the layout will have to be determined upon arrival," Boyd continued as if the incident with the heater hadn't broken up the conversation.

"Number of hostiles expected?" Sin didn't sound particularly interested in the information. His face remained turned, eyes likely focused on the shattered city that Boyd was navigating through.

Although ground zero of the main attack had missed the city center, portable explosive devices had erupted inside not too long after. Even now, decades later, only certain districts had been fully restored. Other areas had turned into havens of crime, poverty and were policed vehemently by the authorities.

"Twenty," Boyd replied.

He started to slow at another red light when he noticed Sin leaning in toward the passenger window, opening his mouth and breathing on it so fog curled against the glass. Despite the fact that it was April, the ever present cloud coverage prevented any rays of sun from warming the Earth. It may as well have been January.

It was such a child-like thing for Sin to do that it distracted Boyd and he looked over. He never would have expected to see the man known as an psychopathic assassin do something a ten year old would do. The impression only grew when Sin reached up with one long finger and started drawing on the window.

Boyd automatically looked at the lines to see what Sin would even draw. He couldn't make anything out immediately so he started to respond. "It's expec--"

He cut himself off when through the lines Sin was drawing he saw the sign on the building near them.

First Bank.

Boyd hit the brakes harder than he'd intended, rocking the car faintly as they came to an abrupt halt at the light. His eyes widened and his face turned ashen, making his pale skin look even more washed out next to his blond hair.

His gaze automatically darted around. The street sign on the corner, proclaiming Dauphin Street. The half broken buildings. The alleyway and the relative obscurity of the place--

*The sickening spray of blood, hot against his face. Screams that choked off with a gurgle and pavement grinding against his skin. Heaviness on his back and that desperate, clawing terror--*

His breath hissed out of him and he looked away from the bank, from that terrible moment caught in time. It was so much more vivid than it had been for a while. It hit him hard; so intense that he could almost feel the stickiness of dripping blood--

He was taken completely off guard. For a moment he was overtaken by the strength of it all. Briefly, so very briefly, he forgot where he was; who he was with. He felt breathless. How had he gotten here? How could he have driven this way--

"And suddenly you look quite taken aback," Sin's voice noted when the moment stretched. He had looked at Boyd after the abrupt stop and his oddly colored eyes continued to watch his trial partner as he spoke.

"What?" Boyd's voice sounded distant even to him.

Boyd didn't look over, wouldn't look anywhere near that building again, but he didn't know where else to look. Nowhere was safe on this street. His mind hadn't quite caught up to the moment. His face was still pale and his fingers were tighter on the steering wheel than necessary.

"Oh look, the light is green again."

Boyd looked up, grasping at some sense of normalcy. He was relieved to see the green light shining down at him. He eased off the brake and started driving again, making sure not to look anywhere other than straight ahead. As the car moved inexorably further from that street, he realized his heart had been pounding and only now was starting to slow.

He felt confused and off-balanced. As soon as that sign was gone, as soon as the building was no longer there as a monolithic reminder, he could feel the weight of it leaving him and the fuzziness starting to slide back in to take its place. The shakiness of his scattered thoughts were given the chance to start to realign. Any bits of curiosity he'd felt before had blown away in the face of that innocuous sign.

"What would your mother say?" Sin wondered out loud, his voice full of fake scandal. "Bringing attention to our fancy Agency issue car in the middle of one of the most rundown parts of the city. Of course if a police officer did stop us they'd turn back around as soon as they saw the plates which take us so far out of their jurisdiction that they wouldn't know who to contact. But even so, screeching to a halt wasn't exactly full of discretion."

Boyd barely heard most of what Sin said. His mind was sidelined by the offhanded, *what would your mother say?* His fingers tightened on the steering wheel and his eyes narrowed, his expression doggedly turning neutral again although the color had not fully returned to his face.

He pointedly did everything he could to not think about what she might do. He forced every errant thought down where it wouldn't bother him anymore.

"Maybe you're having a panic attack," Sin wondered aloud. "We can always turn back, you know. They'll understand."

"No," Boyd said sharply before he could stop himself. His eyes narrowed and his expression closed off completely. Any vestigial emotions that had been there disappeared as if they'd never existed.

He hadn't intended it to sound so forceful, yet the very idea of turning back, of standing in front of his mother and telling her he'd never actually made it to their destination because he'd ended up on Dauphin Street along the way... His back was tight with tension at the thought.

"It may be for the best. I just can't be certain of your mental or physical state with such sudden attacks occurring at random."

The bland commentary was starting to vex Boyd, who was still trying to return to the safe equilibrium of an unfeeling mind. He let out a low breath to calm his nerves and looked at Sin with a firm, even stare. A look that was meant to assure Sin that he was fully in control again. "It won't happen again."

"Maybe." Once again, Sin's expression was difficult to read. On one hand he looked amused by the situation but on the other hand, it could be that the amusement was a front for something far more devious and manipulative. "How could I be sure unless you tell me what the problem is?"

Boyd's expression didn't shift, although his eyes narrowed faintly. "The reason is unimportant and does not concern you. They did a full evaluation of me during training. They would not have sent me off as your trial partner if I could conceivably pose any type of threat to you."

"Believe me, sweetheart, I feel anything but threatened." Sin stared at him, hawk-like gaze taking in every minute detail of Boyd. "But how could such a seemingly innocuous area produce such a strong reaction in a boy who appears to pride himself

on showing nothing? There wasn't a soul in the street except for the usual beggars. Would you like me to describe the extent of your reaction?"

Boyd's eyebrows ticked down and he looked away, staring out the windshield with a studiously blank expression. He wished Sin would leave the topic alone. "That won't be necessary."

"Are you sure? It was quite visceral. If any other agent were here they would likely be concerned about taking a trial recruit into a red zone who was obviously having some kind of emotional issue."

"Leave it alone," Boyd said with a stronger edge, looking over at Sin with a warning in his eyes. He was getting frustrated by the conversation and the fact that Sin wouldn't let it go. Frustrated that he couldn't cope the way it had always worked best for him: by pushing it to the side and ignoring it.

"There is no 'emotional issue,'" he continued firmly. "If you would stop focusing on unimportant minutiae, we could prepare ourselves better for the mission. At this rate, you're more distracted by any of this than I am."

Sin scoffed at that. "Actually, having a half-trained newbie freak out before a mission and refuse to explain why warrants me calling in an early abort. They prefer that to a mission failed."

Boyd shook his head, his jaw set while he leveled a sharp-eyed stare that bordered on a glare at the road. "Do what you must but if the mission is aborted, it should not be on my account. I am perfectly capable of doing my part. Whether or not you feel entitled to information that is none of your business is not my concern. I assure you that none of this will affect the mission. That should be all that matters."

"Oh, but it would be held on your account and even if you won't deign to fill your partner in on your sudden stricken attacks of fear, you would have to fill in mother dearest." Sin raised his eyebrows and leaned back against his seat. "She can figure out why her little boy feels that he doesn't have to answer to his senior agent. If I were

someone who actually gave a shit about this mission, well, or any mission, you'd have trouble."

Boyd's heart thumped at the thought of his mother finding out; of answering to her. He looked out the driver's side window so Sin wouldn't have a chance to see any vestiges of alarm that may make it to his eyes, but he couldn't stop the tension in his shoulders and back. He was afraid of her finding out. If he let himself really think about it, he was terrified. He didn't want to lose whatever tenuous chance he had at being worthy in her eyes, but more than that he didn't want to see what she would do if she became displeased.

He didn't know what to say to Sin.

He didn't want to have to keep talking about First Bank, forcing him to continually dance around why the place had upset him in the first place. He wanted it all to disappear back into the fog he'd fought so hard to gain over the years. The deadened emptiness that had made it possible for him to be in that house, that bedroom, without terrible or longing memories suffocating him.

In the silence that dragged, it became obvious that he didn't plan to answer. He instead focused solely on where he was headed. There weren't really any other places in the city that would be as devastating to inadvertently pass as Dauphin Street, although at the moment he had to admit to himself he didn't want to go anywhere near Crater Lake, either.

He worked on reorienting himself to their position. He saw the old Miller building up ahead and realized with frustration that he'd let Sin engage him in a conversation he didn't even want to have, to the point that he hadn't realized how close they were to the destination. They had less than five minutes before they would arrive and they hadn't even discussed the plan yet.

"It would behoove us to have a plan prior to entering," he said without looking away from the road. "And we're nearly at our destination."

Sin didn't bother to respond, seeming to have already lost interest in Boyd.

"We don't know exactly where the information and the hostiles are within the building. However, if the building is like many of the others in the area it is likely to have two main exits, one in front and one off the alley. Given that many of the buildings in this area used to be for commercial use, it is also likely to have a number of rooms in back which once functioned as offices while there would be a larger showroom or lobby in front."

Boyd's expression was as impassive as his voice as he slowed the car at the last intersection before he had to turn onto the street that would take them by their target. He stopped at a stop sign and since the street was abandoned and they were still a few blocks away from the target building, he turned to face Sin fully.

"Obviously this information will not be known until we enter. However, to speed the completion of the mission I suggest we split up, one entering in each entrance. If you have a preference for alley or street side entrance, you're welcome to it. We'll keep our comm units active and whoever is able to obtain the information first will alert the other. We can then both retreat and meet at the car."

Sin flicked his gaze over to Boyd, nodding. His full mouth stretched into a mockery of a smile and he inclined his head to Boyd as if in deference to his plan.

Satisfied that there didn't have to be a prolonged discussion about this, at least, Boyd nodded. He drove them until they were a block away from the building and around the corner out of sight. He parked the car and then looked at Sin. "Is your comm on?"

"Sure."

Boyd shook his head at the noncommittal answer and quietly opened the door. "I'll see you back here," he said calmly. Sin didn't respond, which was unsurprising. Boyd shut the door and moved toward the alley without looking back.

He approached the building slowly from the side, making sure to keep an eye out for cameras or lookouts. It wasn't the type of building that would have had cameras

installed back when this area had been successful, prior to the war, and it appeared that the hostiles hadn't installed their own system. He did see someone in the second floor with a shotgun, leaning against the window and peering down. It looked to be a light-skinned man in his mid-30's but that was all Boyd could tell.

He paused at the entrance to the alley and waited, watching the man. It seemed as though with so few people in the building, there weren't enough people to fully man all the positions. Or so he assumed when he saw the hostile yawn tiredly and, after another scrutinizing look into the alley, walk away. Boyd could see his figure faintly appearing and disappearing in the windows along the second floor as he headed toward the front.

Boyd waited again, searching for any less telltale signs that someone was watching, and he only moved forward when he was satisfied no one was. He moved quickly and silently to the back door and ducked down behind a garbage dumpster, waiting again to ensure he hadn't been seen.

After a few moments he slipped out from the hiding spot and moved to the door, peeking in the windows. No one was inside within view. He tried the door and was unsurprised to find it locked. He pulled out a lock-picking set and he set to work on the lock. It didn't take long before he heard the faint click of the tumblers shifting. He paused again, patiently waiting for any signs of discovery, and moved forward when he didn't hear anything.

The door opened with only the faintest squeal which, after another long pause, he determined hadn't attracted anyone's attention. He shut the door quietly behind him and looked around. He was in a small area that in a house would have likely been termed a mudroom. There was nothing in it but at one point it had probably held storage of some sort. Off the room was a back hallway that hadn't been maintained in years. The floor was uneven and the walls had water damage trailing down what had probably once been white paint.

There were a few doors within view; two on each side and one at the end that he presumed opened up to a larger space in the front of the building. There also looked to be another hallway that intersected this one at the end. He moved along the wall, keeping an eye in front and behind him for anyone. A few of the doors were partially open and he headed to the first one on the right. He didn't hear anyone inside and peeked in. The room was empty; literally. There was nothing inside at all, not even a single chair. Obviously the information wasn't there so he went to the next room across the hall. That one housed a partially broken old desk. He searched through the room quickly and didn't see anything of use.

He moved on to the next room with little result and was just about to head toward the fourth when he heard movement on the other side of the main door that he presumed went to some sort of lobby. He'd been half paying attention to his comm unit for any updates or warnings from Sin. He hadn't heard anything at all, which he'd assumed meant Sin had not run into any problems yet. If Sin had gone in the front like planned, he should have run into people which would have made noise, and may have alerted Boyd to the situation up there.

Since he hadn't heard anything, he wasn't prepared when the door abruptly opened and four faction 53 hostiles walked in. Boyd ducked back into the room immediately but he wasn't quite fast enough to avoid being seen. He heard them call out in surprise and within seconds the staccato burst of gunfire ripped into the open doorway. Boyd kicked over the dilapidated desk and crouched behind it but he knew it was going to be little help in the long run.

He heard the door to the main room bang open and more people flow in, and when he tried to peek over the desk he had to duck down right away when bullets shot by his head. He was only able to get the briefest glance which told him he was surrounded. There were hostiles to the left and right of the door and at least one who looked like he was setting up in the room across the hall. It was only going to be a matter of minutes if not seconds until they realized no one was shooting back and they moved in to execute him.

His heart was thumping despite himself and he could feel adrenaline start to sing through his system. With the showering of gunfire, he wondered how long he could stay here before even the meager cover he'd managed to find would no longer be enough. His eyes narrowed as he realized that he should have brought the gun after all.

"South hallway," Boyd said into the comm unit. "I need backup."

He didn't hear a response but he wasn't expecting one. He had to crouch down as more bullets zipped past him. He could feel the impacts of the bullets against the desk and knew it was only a matter of time before they weakened the structure enough to start shooting through it.

There weren't a lot of hostiles but there were more than enough for Boyd to be unable to handle them on his own, especially without a gun.

When there weren't any immediate signs of Sin showing up and when Boyd heard the hostiles moving closer, his eyes narrowed and he tried to get as far away from their aim as possible. He heard the door open and a new voice enter the fray, barking orders above the gunfire for an update. It sounded like a man in charge had arrived. When Boyd heard one of the hostiles say that so far they'd only seen one intruder and there hadn't appeared to be return gunfire yet, and that the intruder was caught in the room, Boyd felt fairly certain that Sin wasn't coming. Still, he hissed into his comm unit just to be sure, "Where are you? They have me cornered."

There was no answer and he knew there wouldn't be one. Sin wasn't in the building. He had probably never left the car. Boyd couldn't even be sure the man had bothered to turn on his comm unit, given his lackadaisical 'sure' earlier.

On some level, it made him angry. What gave Sin the right to lecture him about protocol and being reliable for the mission when he didn't bother doing anything himself?

The man in charge said loudly, "Cease fire! Stop wasting ammo!"

The gunfire stopped and Boyd knew he was too outnumbered to successfully complete the mission. He could take on one or two people but not a whole group, even if they weren't shooting at him. Without any backup, he was forced to retreat. He had a flash-bang grenade with him that he'd brought in case he needed a diversion. He pulled the pin and threw the grenade around the desk. He immediately squeezed his eyes shut, turning away and plugging his ears. A cacophony of light and sound crashed through the small room and startled sounds of pain chorused around him. He didn't wait for them to recover. While their senses were still reeling, he ran to the old window and broke the glass with his elbow. The small, jagged pieces left on the windowsill dug into his hands as he hauled himself up and threw himself out the window. He hit the ground hard, falling into a roll to distribute some of the impact. He'd barely stood when gunfire erupted from the second floor. The lookout saw him.

His eyes narrowed as he dodged and weaved between obstacles that he used as cover, and managed to run back the way he'd come. He knew it would only be so long until the men inside recovered and came after him so he ran as fast as he could.

The Agency car was still there. Sin was turned away, and didn't bother to even look over his shoulder at the sound of Boyd's running footsteps. It caused a renewal of Boyd's frustrated anger. He could have been killed in there, and the mission had failed, and Sin couldn't even be bothered to act as though he'd noticed.

When Boyd came up beside him he grabbed Sin's shoulder roughly, already demanding, "What the hell were--"

Before he could process what was happening, his arm was wrenched violently and he was spun around and pinned against the side of the car. For the second time since they'd met, he found himself face to face with Sin as the other man locked his long fingers around Boyd's throat.

Green eyes narrowed as Sin looked at him darkly. His fingers flexed slightly, briefly cutting off air as the senior agent leaned in closer. For a breath they were nearly

nose to nose as those intense eyes bore into Boyd. But then the grip relaxed and Sin released him, allowing him to crumple against the side of the car.

"Do not put your hands on me."

Boyd caught himself before he could fall. He glared at Sin, feeling more spurned by the reaction than afraid. He could hear the sounds of pursuit closing in on them, echoing faintly in the alley but growing louder. With a tightened jaw, he turned his back on Sin and stalked around the car, opening the door with more force than necessary. He barely waited for Sin to get in the car too before he sped off down the street, the tires squealing in protest.

The high-pitched whip of bullets ricocheted off the pavement around them and he heard the dull thud of one of the shots catching the back of the car. They turned the corner and Boyd twisted the steering wheel to immediately catch the next turn. In the rear view mirror he saw the hostiles swarming around the corner as they ran.

Cold frustration continued to stain Boyd's thoughts even after they'd made it another two blocks and it seemed evident that no one was planning to pursue them in a vehicle. He turned a sidelong, hard stare onto Sin.

"Don't put your hands on me like that, either," he said flatly.

Sin didn't bother to reply, once again looking completely disinterested in his existence.

Boyd wasn't ready to let this go, however. "What the hell were you doing back there? Didn't you have your comm unit on?"

"What do you think?"

Boyd turned his narrowed eyes back to the road. He could feel tension settling into his shoulders as they grew closer to the Agency. "Why didn't you even try? The mission failed and we'll both be held accountable. Doesn't that bother you?"

Sin raised his dark eyebrows slightly. "The mission didn't need two people. Perhaps you should have brought a gun."

"What difference would that have made against so many armed hostiles?" Boyd retorted. He didn't feel like acknowledging that Sin was right in any way when he was so irritated with him. "It may have helped but it wouldn't have fixed everything."

At that, Sin turned and actually looked at him directly. "My, my," he drawled slowly, shaking his head. "Who exactly was it that trained you, out of curiosity? They should put termination down on their day calendar if you are their final rank 9 product."

Boyd's glare turned icy and shifted back to the road. "Not all of us were born superhuman," he said coldly. "It's my first mission and I expected my partner to be where he said he would be. Apparently that was a mistake."

"Relying on anyone is a mistake. If you weren't taught that, you are more misinformed and ridiculous than I thought. This mission was a joke. If you aren't even capable of performing adequately on it, you won't last much longer whether it's me who snaps your neck or not."

"Is that what you want? Another failed attempt at a partner to stain your record?"

Sin scoffed at that, green eyes moving over him scornfully before sliding away. "Don't speak as though you know anything about me. And this partnership will fail regardless, judging from what I've seen today. You have the amazing ability to be both arrogant and completely stupid simultaneously."

"How am I stupid?" Boyd asked with an edge.

"When have you shown intelligence?" was the flat retort. "No gun. The bizarre notion that you have superior knowledge on how to approach a mission. The assumption that withholding information from your partner and senior agent is acceptable. The even more ridiculous assumption that if anyone else was here, they would have allowed any of this to go on. If someone were here who actually gave a fuck

about these missions, I assure you, they would have handed you your ass before calling in an abort and writing up a detailed report of your ineptitude."

Boyd's fingers dug into the steering wheel. He couldn't fully discount Sin's points and that annoyed him even more, along with the reminder of what had happened on Dauphin Street.

"And you plan not to?" he challenged. "So far you've spent your time mocking me, ignoring me, or threatening to kill me. If you have such a problem with me I'd think you'd love the chance to tell your superiors."

"You'll die regardless. What's the point."

Boyd looked at him sidelong. Without anything to respond, he let the moment fall into silence.

The rest of the ride felt at once too long and too short. When they returned, Sin walked away without a word and Boyd went in and wrote the mission report alone. There wasn't a good way to word that he'd failed on his first mission so he was unsurprised when he was called up to his mother's office within the hour after the report was submitted.

Ann announced his presence and let him into Vivienne's room, shutting the door behind him. He stood back by the door, his back straight and face expressionless, although he felt a worm of doubt inside him at the ice cold stare she leveled at him. It felt like she could see through him, right down to the depth of his soul, and she didn't see anything worthwhile in the process.

"Sit down." Her words were clipped.

Boyd obeyed immediately. He walked further into the room and silently sat in the chair across the desk from her.

Her lips were thin and eyes narrowed. She sat forward, her fingers interwoven and clenched as they rested on the desk. "I had low expectations of you yet even I did not anticipate such a resounding failure."

There was the briefest lull that told Boyd he was supposed to respond. He felt the doubt expand into uncertainty. "Mother, I--"

"Inspector," she corrected him shortly, her stare narrowing into a glare.

"Inspector," he amended. "The situation was such that it required two people. I did request backup but I didn't receive it."

"A convenient explanation," Vivienne said dismissively with a faint hint of disgust. She leaned back and turned ice blue eyes on her laptop, typing a few short, quick keys with one hand and briefly glancing at whatever came up on screen. "You did not bring a gun on the mission."

Boyd hesitated the briefest moment before he agreed. "No."

"Were you not advised to bring one prior to the mission?"

"I was," Boyd had to acknowledge.

"Was the reason for the recommendation not in case of a gunfight?"

"It was," Boyd replied tonelessly.

He watched her with no particular expression even though he had to wonder how she knew all this. Then again, she'd probably found out through checking the artillery records and, if they had it, surveillance.

"And was a gunfight not what caused this catastrophic failure?"

"It was," Boyd replied, and forged ahead before she could say anything else. "However, it should be noted that even if I'd been armed with a gun I still would have been forced to retreat without backup. I was vastly outnumbered."

"Ineptitude is not an acceptable excuse," she said shortly. She turned to him, her hand moving away from the keyboard to rest on the desk. "What was the nature of your incident prior to the mission?"

Boyd's heart jolted and his stomach clenched with dread. There it was; the question he'd been fearing. His expression remained closed off, although tension moved into his back. "I don't--"

"What could possibly have upset you to the point of causing a distraction?" she continued sharply.

He watched her evenly, not knowing what to say. If she knew about the incident she probably knew what it had been about. Still, he wondered how she knew. Sin obviously hadn't written a report and he hadn't said anything about it in his own.

She gave him an unimpressed look. "All Agency vehicles are equipped with surveillance. There is always a thorough investigation following a failed mission, in part because agents have been known to lie to obscure their own mistakes." The last part was said pointedly.

Boyd's jaw twitched but he couldn't say anything in response to that. Sin never had to write it in a report; Boyd damned himself by just being in the car. No doubt if they had surveillance they also had GPS. There was no point in trying to pretend that the incident had happened anywhere other than by First Bank.

She waited a heartbeat for him to respond with excuses that never came. Disappointment and distaste were clear in her eyes and she leaned back in her chair. "I was under the impression that you were past that. Are you so pathetic that you are incapable of ignoring something so irrelevant to the present? Must you continuously be so weak as to cause embarrassments?"

"I apologize, Inspector," he said tonelessly, his stomach clenching at her words. "It will not happen again."

"Are you so certain?" she asked coldly, arching her eyebrows. She leaned forward, her attention zeroing in on him intimidatingly. "I have my doubts that you are trustworthy in that regard. You have already proven yourself weak and susceptible in the past. I nominated you based upon the impression that you were suitably emotionless, yet you have proven already that you are incapable of success. It lends the question of what I should do with you."

The words caused a spike of distress from deep down inside him; a guttural reaction that he couldn't quite stop from making to his face. His skin paled and his eyebrows twitched down. He suspected a flash of fear made it to his eyes and the way her eyes narrowed told him it had.

"There are options available. We have facilities that would be ideal to give you an opportunity to recover from your lapse. Time need not be a factor. Is that what you wish?"

His breath caught briefly as he automatically thought back despite himself. Expanding darkness and eyes glinting in the corner. Wounded ghosts hovering over him and chafing pain. Screaming until the metallic taste of blood was familiar in this throat.

"No," he said quietly.

"Then I suggest you put more effort into this or I will enact a solution that you will find to be very undesirable," she said coolly. She arched an eyebrow. "Is that understood?"

"Yes, Inspector."

"I am watching you," she said, her tone only turning colder. "I will be quite disappointed if you continue to embarrass me. My reputation in part will be affected by your performance. If you are incompetent, it reflects poorly on me. I have worked too hard in this organization to have a child bring me disgrace simply because he is unwilling to function as expected. Do not make me regret the nomination."

"I won't, Inspector," he said more quietly. He wanted to look away from her but he didn't; her ice blue eyes seemed to suck him in. Or maybe it was simply that she had looked at him so infrequently in his life that he felt unwilling to look away first on the few times when she did.

She stared hard at him, scrutinizing every bit of him. His eyes, his expression, his body language, his posture... As if she were assessing him for some sort of test in which he didn't know the criteria for passing. It was disconcerting.

At length, she leaned back and looked away from him, focusing on her laptop again.

"Dismissed," she said curtly.

He left, a non-expression on his face even as he felt dread gnawing at him nauseatingly. He didn't want her to have to follow through with the threat. He only hoped that it wasn't tied in solely to failing missions but rather making certain he didn't let his own weakness be the reason for the failure.

Even though he had to acknowledge that much of the failure of this mission was his own fault, he still felt somewhat angry with Sin. Although it was true he should have brought a gun, in truth it wouldn't have mattered. There was no way he could have finished the mission on his own without any sort of distraction or backup. He'd been training for a few months to be an agent but a few months couldn't create miracles.

It wasn't surprising to have failed the first mission. In fact, David had told him the vast majority of people did. It was not uncommon at all and yet Boyd was the sole person being blamed.

How was it all his fault?

The brief moment of fear on Dauphin Street hadn't carried over into the mission. He'd put it behind him so it shouldn't have been used against him. It was frustrating. He had to acknowledge that some of his anger was tied into the fact that because of this, he could be sent to a fate he wanted to avoid at all costs.

His eyes narrowed faintly and as he strode out of the Tower, he made a vow to himself not to make a similar mistake again.

## Chapter 6

Boyd fell, the cement hard and cold against his knees. He let his hair cover his face, keeping his expression carefully blank despite the way the handcuffs were making his arm muscles seize up after staying in the same position for too long. A door slammed shut behind him and there was the very decisive echo of a lock falling in place.

He sat back on his feet, shifting so he could sit against the wall and lean his head back. His fingers dug into his back but he ignored it as he stared blankly at the ceiling, considering his options.

Although Sin had accompanied him on the mission, he knew not to expect any reinforcement.

Even after a month, he didn't trust Sin.

He was still completely unable to figure anything out about the man. He'd concluded that a great amount of the attitude Sin displayed was an act, but exactly to what extent was still murky.

He didn't like that he couldn't understand what Sin was thinking because it took away some of his own power from the situation. Without Sin's motivations being clear, he would always have the potential to be unpredictable which meant he couldn't be trusted. If or when Sin may determine that his interest in this entire partnership had waned he could abruptly decide to end it on his own terms.

There was nothing at the moment to imply that was necessarily going to happen. Sin was as uncooperative as ever but over the last month there had been minor shifts. Lately it seemed to intrigue or at least amuse Sin to follow Boyd's progress. Boyd shifted and stretched his legs in front of him. At least the missions had been going a little more smoothly, in that he had been succeeding more than he'd been failing. A lot of that had to do with the nature of the missions in General Carhart's unit. Much of it so far centered around stealth, undercover work or Intel gathering; all things Boyd excelled

at. The first time they were assigned to storm a base, his luck would run out. Until then, he had vowed to do his best and since his mother had not brought him in for another lecture, it seemed to be working. As long as he could continue down this path until the inevitable day he died, that was all he could hope for.

Still, this mission especially was one he didn't want to fail. It was a follow-up, making up for his abysmal failure of a first mission. The small offshoot of faction 53 had relocated to a larger base in an abandoned recreation center in the middle of a park in Carson, the next city over. The goal of the mission remained the same: retrieve information with the intent of locating the main base. The difference was there were at least twice as many people here and they were more actively recruiting. And it was harder to infiltrate; a fact he'd known from the start but had been thoroughly underscored once he'd gotten captured. The concrete was cold even through his clothing and he wondered how long it would be until they came to interrogate him. No doubt they expected him to be terrified by now. He was wary and uncertain more than anything, although there was a tinge of fear involved in the unknown. His weapons were all taken from him and although he would be able to get free of the handcuffs, he wasn't versed in fighting multiple hostiles at once. He could probably handle two to three people at most if they came at him and were not extremely adept. But most of his training had been one-on-one combat and most of the missions so far had ended with him having to only sporadically engage in combat, primarily on his way out.

He hadn't been captured before and he didn't know what to expect. Would they attempt to torture him? Would they simply kill him outright? What were their plans? How much did they know? Did any of them recognize him from the first botched mission? He hadn't seen anyone he recognized but then he'd barely seen anyone on that first mission since he'd spent most of the time ducking and dodging. They, on the other hand, would have had a better chance to see him as he ran away.

Even if he got his hands free, what could he do if several of them came at him at once? What if they discovered he was free and just bound him again; better this time?

This situation created doubt in the back of his mind. It made him wonder if he was potentially in over his head, and whether this would end up failing. And what, exactly, the Agency would do if he failed two missions with the same goal. Would his mother follow through with her threat?

His eyes narrowed and he looked away, tension strong in his shoulders.

He needed a plan.

If they were going to appear in the doorway with machine guns they leveled at him, for instance, it would be nice if he were no longer in the cell. Although he wore a bullet-resistant bodysuit beneath his clothing, it didn't make him impervious to rapid and repeated fire. Especially not at unprotected areas like his feet and head.

Disguising it as rolling the kinks out of his neck, Boyd carefully looked around the room for any surveillance equipment. The room had probably once been a storage room of some sort since it wasn't insulated. Faction 53 appeared to have retrofitted it so it would work better as a jail.

Unless faction 53 discovered how to hide cameras in a smooth concrete floor, metal door, or a single old pipe run across the ceiling near the door and brick walls, then he was currently not enough of a threat level to warrant supervision.

That was good. They distrusted him but, like most people who judged him based on his looks, they underestimated him. Since that worked to his advantage, it never bothered him when people did that.

Even knowing that he was unwatched, Boyd shifted his weight against the wall and still held some pretense in case he was simply unaware of it. The hostiles had removed his weapons, but what they didn't realize was that Boyd held such blatant weapons as a gun and tonfa in a normal place like a belt holster for a reason. It deluded people into thinking that it was all he had. If he hid things, they would be more likely to do a thorough search, expecting him to be devious.

For instance, they left the safety pin inserted beneath the belt on the back of his coat, as well as the one behind a button at the top. And, secure in his seeming lack of strength and the fact they were throwing him into a cell, they'd used single-locked peerless handcuffs. It took a little maneuvering to remove the safety pin from the belt, but he managed it after a few seconds of fumbling. He popped it open unseeingly, all the while watching the door for any sign of movement.

Finding the little hole near the lock on the handcuffs took some maneuvering, since he couldn't see what he was doing. Eventually, he felt the pin give way and slide into the mechanism, between the cuff and the teeth. He shoved it in with his other thumb and, with more fumbling and shifting of the pin, the handcuff clicked open. He let that cuff hang open on his wrist and, being sure to keep his back against the wall to hide the movement, he popped open the other cuff the same way.

Sliding the safety pin back onto the inner part of his coat's belt, he heard movement echoing down the hallway outside the room. He made sure the handcuffs were unlocked but still loose around his wrists so it wouldn't be obvious he'd freed himself.

The door opened, a man standing in the doorway with two hostiles backing him up. They were fanned behind the man for cover and they had their guns drawn. As soon as they saw Boyd sitting calmly against the far wall, arms behind his back and seemingly still under their control, they lowered their guns.

The man in front looked to be in his mid-forties, with dark brown hair and eyes that matched. He didn't look away from Boyd from the moment the door opened. His eyebrows rose a hint, his lips lifting on the edges.

He strode into the room and stopped in front of Boyd, staring down at him while Boyd simply stared up in return. The two guards left the door open but they didn't move, watching with sharp eyes. Boyd determined he would do best to bide his time for the moment.

"Stand up," the man ordered.

Boyd didn't move and the man didn't seem surprised. Without warning, he kicked Boyd violently in the stomach, causing Boyd to release a pained hiss and slouch forward. Fingers grabbed a chunk of his hair and he was dragged to a stand.

He'd barely straightened before the hand switched to holding his throat and shoving him against the wall. A fist slammed into his stomach where he'd been kicked. Boyd grit his teeth and let out a pained moan; partially because it hurt but mostly because he knew the man expected it. He would do best to appear weak and nonthreatening.

"I told you to stand up," the man growled near Boyd's ear when Boyd slouched forward.

The man hit Boyd again a few times in quick succession, apparently intent on exerting his domination of the situation right away. Boyd took the punches with pained gasps and made sure to slump in the man's hold. At length, the man unceremoniously dropped him to the floor. Boyd hit the cement with a groan and made sure to keep his hands tilted toward the wall.

He heard movement and slit his eyes in the direction of the door, watching through a messy fall of long blond hair. One of the hostiles was looking at his watch with a frown and then peered down the hallway. A quiet and quick conversation passed between the guards and one of them started to pivot as if to leave.

"You gonna be okay, John?" the guard asked and the man in the cell nodded, looking down at Boyd.

"No problem. Shouldn't take me too long with this one."

The guard nodded and left. The one who stayed behind started to shut the door. "I'll be out here, then. Let me know when you're done."

John chuckled darkly and glanced over his shoulder. "What's wrong? I thought you were over being squeamish."

The guard just grimaced.

John smirked and turned back to Boyd while the door swung shut behind him. He didn't seem concerned with the idea of being stuck in a cell with Boyd. It didn't take a lot of courage to be unafraid of a man half his weight, seemingly shackled and weaponless, Boyd thought darkly.

"So," John said with quirked eyebrows, looming over Boyd curled on his side. "Who are you?"

Boyd didn't answer and John kicked him so hard in the stomach that his body hit the wall. Pain exploded across his torso and arms and Boyd coughed when he fell to the floor again.

"I said, who are you?" he repeated dangerously.

"James," Boyd wheezed, grimacing and using that to cover that he was watching John through his eyelashes, determining when he should strike. He thought it would be best to wait since the guard outside was mostly likely going to listen for trouble at first and, hearing none, would eventually relax.

"See, that wasn't so bad, was it?" John stepped closer, pushing Boyd onto his back and pressing one heavy, booted foot on his stomach. The pressure was in the area he'd been punched and kicked; his bruised muscles ached sharply with the weight.

"But it wasn't what I meant. What are you doing here?" he continued, staring down at Boyd darkly.

Boyd shook his head and didn't answer.

John lifted his foot and slammed his heel down into Boyd's stomach. Boyd gasped in pain.

"Are you going to make me repeat myself every time?"

Boyd grit his teeth and shook his head again, although he made it unclear as to whether he was responding to John's question or just trying to deny the situation.

John smirked, seemingly pleased by Boyd's lack of cooperation.

"What's your affiliation?" John demanded, punctuating his questions with quick kicks that didn't let Boyd catch his breath in between. "Who sent you? What are you doing here?"

When John paused, Boyd coughed violently. Pain was sharp and distracting but he ignored it. He let himself fall on his side in a position that gave him some leverage. He calculated that enough time had probably passed. When he looked at John through his hair he judged by the man's body language and expression that he felt fully in control and didn't expect Boyd to fight back.

Boyd struck before John even knew what hit him. Bracing partially against the wall, Boyd suddenly snapped his foot out, knocking John's legs out from beneath him. The larger man let out a startled noise and started to topple, and Boyd was on him immediately. He flicked the handcuffs off his wrists and dropped on top of John, smothering John's mouth with one hand so he couldn't cry out.

John's eyes widened for a fraction of a second but he immediately started to fight back, trying to throw Boyd off him. Boyd braced himself against the floor, flipping John over onto his stomach and cinching the handcuffs tightly around his wrists. He didn't bother asking John any questions because he knew the other man wouldn't answer. It would only give John clues as to his whereabouts once he left the room.

Instead, he grabbed John by the back of the head and slammed his face straight into the floor. There was a cracking sound and blood spurted out, combined with John's growled, "Fuck!" Boyd guessed he'd broken John's nose.

Without giving the man a chance to regain control of the situation by using his heavier weight, Boyd jerked John up and braced himself against the floor again, this time holding John up just enough for a choke hold. John jerked and struggled, trying to

roll or buck Boyd off, but Boyd compensated for the movements and only dug his arm harder into John's windpipe. It wasn't long until John's struggling became more sluggish and, ultimately, he slumped in Boyd's hands.

Boyd let him drop to the floor unconscious and then rolled him onto his side so he wouldn't drown in his own blood. He searched the man's body for anything of use. He grabbed some keys, a radio, and the red band on his upper arm that identified him as a faction 53 member. He took a moment to tie the band around his own arm and then walked to the door and knocked.

"Done already?" the guard called out, his voice muffled through the heavy metal door. Boyd heard the clanking of the key turning and the door opening. He stood at an angle that would give him the best advantage and waited until the right moment: when the man had opened the door enough for Boyd to get out and just as he was looking inside. Just before he would see his fallen comrade.

Boyd moved in close and struck with quick, precise movements, slamming his palm up into the guard's jaw and following up with a strike to the side of his neck. The older man started to stumble back and Boyd moved with him, stealing the rifle slung across his back and slamming the butt of it against his head.

The guard slumped and Boyd caught him before he made too much of a noise in the hallway. He dragged the guard's body into the cell and stole anything that looked of use from him as well. Then, he walked out of the cell and firmly shut the door behind him, making sure it locked.

With a glance up and down the hallway to reorient himself and ensure no one was around, Boyd took off in a half jog, half stride. Fortunately he'd memorized the blueprints of the area, since the building had been renovated from a rec center for the abandoned park. He was displeased that they'd stolen his tonfa and was disappointed that the guard hadn't had anything suitable to replace it. Too many people relied solely on guns.

It wasn't hard moving relatively unseen through the building even though it wasn't terribly large. Something he'd learned quickly as an agent was that people tended not to question someone who walked with purpose and seemed like they knew exactly where they were going.

With the red band around his arm and a gun at his back like everyone else, and with his black clothing that hid any blood or bruises, it was a simple case of casually turning his head or letting his hair hide his face as he moved through the hideout. There were more people here which worked to his advantage; the likelihood of them knowing everyone was diminished compared to the small safe house he'd tried to infiltrate on his first mission.

It didn't take him long to find the computer room. They had partial information from an informant regarding the layout of the place. There was only one person inside, since the building was supposed to be on lock down and news of a prisoner likely hadn't traveled that fast. Even if it had, he hadn't received any indication yet from the radio or the behavior of the hostiles around him that implied it had been discovered that he'd escaped.

Boyd walked into the room and when the woman glanced over her shoulder at him he smiled and made an inane comment to disarm her, acting as though he was in there on business. She started to look away and he hit her hard on the head at an angle to incapacitate her quickly.

She didn't even let out a startled noise; she simply slumped to the side. He caught her before she could land on the equipment, and he sat her back up in the chair so if anyone walked in it would seem at first glance that she was just sitting there.

He moved quickly, rolling her out of the way so he could crouch over the computer and access the information he needed. He copied it all onto a memory card and kept an equal eye on the door, making sure no one else was coming. The network the hostiles had wasn't as fast as it could have been but even so it wasn't a long wait until a window on the screen informed him that the copy was complete. He erased all

indication that he'd been there and rolled the woman back in front of the computer. Then he secured the memory card back in the hiding spot in the back of his belt buckle and left.

He was calm as he walked through the building, acting perfectly casual, as if he had every right to be there. He only received one or two odd looks but the confidence he displayed caused the people's gazes to inevitably slide away with only the faintest quizzical furrow of their eyebrows. Intel suggested that faction 53 had been recruiting a decent amount of people lately so a new face certainly wasn't unusual.

Boyd was just passing through the front door when someone suddenly yelled that a prisoner had escaped. It would be obvious that something was wrong if he walked right out after such a declaration, but he wasn't about to push his luck by running around all night pretending to be a hostile until someone realized he really wasn't who he said he was.

He slipped outside and at first thought he may have gotten away. But as he moved quickly across the expanse of open space before he reached the trees that surrounded one edge of the property, he heard commotion inside. He moved faster but didn't start to run in case he was under surveillance and they didn't know yet who he was. Just as he was disappearing into the shadows of the trees, he heard the main door open and someone yell out that a person who matched the description of the escapee had just left the building.

Boyd immediately slipped into the forest, using the trees as cover. He broke into a run, no longer having need to be casual. He could hear people shouting orders to look for him and knew that the forest would be a place they would look pretty quickly.

Soon, he heard pursuit behind him. It only sounded like two or three people but when one of them shouted that they thought they saw him ahead, Boyd's eyes narrowed. Sometimes his pale skin and blond hair did not work to his advantage.

Boyd ran as fast as he could but the woods were unfamiliar to him and, being unaccustomed to forests, he also found it more difficult to navigate at night. There were

too many dips and bumps hidden by foliage and on a half moon night the amount of light that filtered through the canopy was minimal.

He realized at one point that he wouldn't be able to outrun them when they had probably traversed these woods many times. When he concluded that he couldn't take entirely evasive actions, he decided to go about this a different way. He slowed to a stop and hid in the shadows to see if they would pass him by. It was worth a try but they stopped right around where he had, likely having noted the lack of footsteps ahead of them. Boyd knew it would only be a matter of time before they saw him lurking there and they'd notice movement if he tried to slip away, so instead he made noise as he broke into the small clearing they were in.

Two men were there. Guns were leveled at his head and chest immediately.

Panting for breath, Boyd raised his hands to show he held no weapons. The rifle remained hanging over his shoulder. "What the hell's your problem?" he demanded breathlessly. "I saw the intruder running this way so I came after him. Don't aim your guns at me; go after him instead."

"Nice try," one of the men said with a sneer.

"You're the intruder," the second man said firmly. "And you're just lucky we've been told to bring you back alive or you would've been dead twelve times over by now."

Boyd stared at him for a moment, as if he thought him stupid. "Are you an idiot? I joined a month ago. Look." He tilted just enough so they could see the band on his arm.

"We know what you look like," was the unmoved reply. "I saw you being dragged down to the prison in handcuffs half an hour ago."

Considering this, Boyd figured there was no point standing there arguing. The rest of the hostiles could be on their way and he knew he wouldn't be able to get away once they appeared.

Without warning, Boyd dropped to the ground, where the darkness of the night helped cover him. The two men clearly hadn't been expecting it because one of them made a noise of surprise and the other started to look down.

Not waiting for them to get their act together, Boyd rolled to the side and swiped one man's legs from beneath him. As the man crashed to the ground, Boyd slammed him on the head with his rifle butt. The man groaned but didn't fall unconscious. Boyd had to scramble away just as the second man shot in his direction.

Twirling, Boyd jumped up behind him and kicked him squarely in the back, knocking him forward enough that he stumbled and lost his balance. Boyd was in his personal space in a blink, his rifle swinging around and slamming into the gunman's face so hard that his head snapped to the side with a crack.

The man fell to the ground and Boyd twirled around just as the first man was staggering to his feet. Boyd kicked him back against the tree and hit him across the head with the rifle again. When the man started to fall, Boyd dropped the rifle and followed it up with a hard chop against the back of the man's neck. The man collapsed, unmoving.

It was all over relatively quickly and silently, aside from the single crack of gunfire which could draw attention from other hostiles. The sound had been muffled by the forest but he didn't know if it would have muffled it enough. He grabbed one of the rifles just in case and took off running.

Even running, it took him a few minutes to navigate successfully through the woods, a task made more difficult by the dark of night. He'd been born and raised in this city and as a child he'd wandered around many areas with his best friend. He had no problems with buildings and streets and remembering directions in those settings. He could be in a building one time and remember directions. He could see blueprints before he went into a building and know how to properly navigate, building a 3D image in his mind that he could spin around and turn and always know where he was.

But when every direction seemed to be filled with the same view of tree trunks and leaves that blocked out any reference points beyond, he got confused.

It was stupid and he wouldn't admit it to anyone, but he actually felt a spike of uncertainty as he felt like he'd been running and running with no end in sight. He started wondering if he'd gotten turned around. Was he running straight back toward enemy territory? Would he burst right back out into a clearing and find hostiles surrounding him with guns he couldn't evade this time? He couldn't be that confused, could he?

He was starting to grow worried when he finally ran through an area with thinner canopies, affording him a much-needed glimpse of the half-broken buildings rising beyond the park. He reoriented himself in his mind based on the angle of the buildings and kept going. It wasn't long before he burst out of the park area and back into the more familiar urban streets.

He hadn't actually been that far off, which was a relief since he didn't want to have to run another few blocks because he got stupid when a bunch of trees surrounded him.

This area of the city was largely abandoned, although there were still lights flickering in windows here and there. Faction 53 had likely chosen this location because of that; because it was removed from the general populace and gatherings would be less noticeable. The kind of area where gunfire went unreported.

Once he was back in urban territory, he had no troubles easily navigating to the meeting point. As he reached the vicinity, he slowed down. He approached the corner and checked around first to ensure he wasn't being watched or followed.

He was breathing so hard that he couldn't even hear his thundering heartbeat, and his limbs tingled. His torso ached furiously, something he noticed more when he'd stopped running and he was less focused. His ribs burned and his fingers felt less strong than usual. He tried to be as quiet as possible until he determined that no hostiles were around. Satisfied, he slid through the shadows and approached the vehicle.

As per their new routine, Sin was sitting in the driver's seat waiting. On a larger mission with a bigger team, it would be customary for the team leader to wait in the vehicle to run the mission and make sure everyone was on point. It didn't apply for their partnership since there was only two of them; Sin was needed in the field not the van.

Vivid green eyes flicked over Boyd's disheveled form as he climbed into the van. "Surprisingly impressive," he commented idly, starting the engine.

Boyd shut the door and paused as he was about to toss the rifle in back. He looked over at Sin with faintly narrowed eyes, trying to determine if that had been some sort of veiled slight. Judging by Sin's expression and tone, it had been a simple statement with no negative undertones.

That caught Boyd off-guard, since it was the first time Sin had said anything positive to him related to a mission. It had never been something Boyd had been clear about as to whether Sin simply sat in the vehicle the whole time waiting or whether he got out to explore.

"Were you watching?" Boyd asked after a moment.

Sin didn't answer immediately and glanced in the rear view mirror briefly. His gaze narrowed before sweeping back to the windshield as if he sensed something or was looking for something. Despite the fact that he didn't accompany Boyd on the assignments, he was always diligent about ensuring that they were not followed upon leaving whatever area they had been in. As cynical he was about the trial partnership and his own future as an agent, Sin still protected the integrity of their covert nature.

He shifted the car into drive and guided them off the street. His gaze remained intent on the darkness that pressed in on them from the outside. Streetlights in this forgotten neighborhood had long since died out.

They returned to the highway with no signs of a tail. For several moments it seemed as though the question had been ignored and forgotten.

Boyd went about ensuring the safety was on the rifle before he twisted to stow it out of the way behind his seat. His torso screamed at the movement and he winced briefly, thinking that he should have been more careful about that. He was belatedly fastening his seatbelt after having returned to a normal sitting position when Sin spoke. "I was observing."

Boyd looked over, absently tightening the belt across his lap. His eyebrows twitched down faintly. "Why?"

"To observe you."

"Obviously," Boyd said mildly. "You didn't initially observe me, though. What changed?"

"I figured you'd be dead by now. It's surprising and I'm very rarely surprised."

Boyd watched Sin for a moment, trying to get a read on the man and, as always, coming up with so many conflicting signals that he may as well have drawn a blank. He didn't think he would ever get used to the enigma that Sin represented.

Since it was one of the few times Sin seemed to be talking to him in some form without it being laced with barbed insults or sarcastic pet names that irritated Boyd to no end, it made him consider the comment a little more seriously.

"What do you think, then?" Boyd realized that he actually was curious about what Sin thought of his performance.

Conversation was a relatively new development, especially since little had changed between them since the first mission. Still, Boyd had realized quickly that if this partnership was going to function on any level, he had to put in more effort to at least appear to be reasonable.

In truth, Sin couldn't be blamed for having thought poorly of Boyd based on that first mission. After his anger had cooled, he'd realized he hadn't performed impressively. So Boyd acted more social and agreeable, even during times when he felt like being

contrary instead. It seemed to be the best course of action to encourage Sin's cooperation.

"I think that you're less likely to die as easily as I first thought," Sin replied cryptically and unhelpfully. That seemed to be the end of his analysis until a smirk crossed his full mouth and his green eyes flicked over to Boyd. "Until we're assigned a mission that requires a lot of combat, anyway. The likelihood of you surviving a storm on your own is slim to none."

"It's possible I would surprise you on storms as well," Boyd replied, mostly as a reason to keep Sin talking. "Although, the difficulty of such missions *is* why we're supposed to be partners..."

Sin returned his stare to the road and didn't reply.

Boyd waited a few moments to see if Sin would respond and it quickly became obvious he didn't intend to say anything. Still, Boyd didn't look away. In the past he may have let it drop but the fact that Sin had been talking to him at all made him reticent to give up this chance to understand at least something about the other man.

"Why are you still so resistant?" Boyd asked, eyebrows drawing down slightly while he searched Sin's expression for any hint of what he was thinking. "The issues that arose on the first mission haven't been repeated. I understand that we didn't have a good first impression and you haven't had the best track record with previous partners but I'm not them. I don't understand what I've personally done to warrant you being so unwilling to cooperate."

This time when Sin's vivid green eyes flicked over to him, there was a definite surprised element to his typically bland expression. His lips parted slightly, dark eyebrows drawing together slightly. After a moment he shrugged his broad shoulders. "Oh, I don't have a reason. I'm just making this up as I go because I'm insane and all of that."

Boyd gave Sin an unmoved look. "We both know that isn't true. If you don't want to answer the question, say so. There's no need to lie."

The other man's mouth quirked up slightly. He seemed to debate not answering because he was silent for a long moment, his long fingers loosely wrapped around the steering wheel as he drove. In the end, he seemed to find no reason not to reply although his expression had quickly returned to its typical unreadable state.

"For someone who allegedly was content to stare blankly at people and not talk for the better part of their training, you are certainly chatty at the moment."

Boyd shrugged. He shifted his feet in front of him, stretching them out and trying to readjust his position so it put less pressure on his pained ribs.

"I don't see the point in talking for the sake of talking, and prior to today I had little to say to you." He tilted his head enough to look over at Sin sidelong, his expression impassive and tone simple. "You seemed content to ignore or belittle me and I had nothing to contribute to that."

"Well, I still don't particularly like you, if that helps you in shutting up."

"That's fine. I don't particularly like you, either," Boyd said, unperturbed.

His back was continuing to bother him and he finally reached down to let the seat fall back into a more reclined position. It helped a little bit but he was going to have to visit the med wing just to make sure he hadn't acquired anything more than unpleasant bruises.

"However," Boyd added idly as an observation, "for someone with a reputation of being unafraid of confrontation, it's interesting that you keep evading simple questions."

Sin scoffed and accelerated as they moved into a higher speed limit zone. "I don't need to answer to you or explain my reasoning to you. I don't have any desire to even have a conversation with you. It's not my problem how curious you are."

Boyd looked at Sin sidelong, studying his features. Sin looked wholly unimpressed and when it became evident that he wasn't going to say anything further, Boyd looked away. He tilted his head back against the seat and closed his eyes, letting silence fall between them.

He thought about how Sin had actually talked to him for a change and then how obvious it was that he was no longer interested. He still didn't understand the man. But this was the first time he'd had a glimpse of something that he thought, given enough information, he could eventually figure out. And while on one level it only created more questions, it also showed that maybe there would eventually be some answers involved as well.

The rest of the nearly hour long trip was spent in silence which neither of them bothered to break. Boyd had no interest in forcing conversation on someone and he had nothing to talk about anyway. The few times Boyd glanced at Sin out of the corner of his eye, the senior agent's expression wasn't any more readable than it typically was and it didn't take long for Boyd to stop looking at all.

When they returned to the Agency, the usual routine played out; Sin left without appearing to have any intentions of writing a report, and Boyd wrote and submitted his report immediately. Boyd visited the med wing and was told that there was nothing permanent; just some bruises and stretched muscles.

When he left the med wing and started across the courtyard, he got the usual curious and sidelong stares. As he left, he received notice that the debriefing would be in a few hours.

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The room was surprisingly comfortable, with high-backed chairs that didn't squeak no matter the abuse they took. An opaque dark glass table commanded the center of the room, shining in the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. There was a touchscreen computer embedded at the head of the table which was used for typical functions as well as control of the projected holographs that at times erupted from the

center of the table. It was a useful tool and one that was utilized in the discussion of specific people, locations and maps.

Five people sat around the table, the same who had attended each debriefing before. The unit Boyd and Sin were involved with was highly confidential, to the point that other than Marshal Connors, Boyd's mother and Sin, there was probably no one else other than those in the room who even knew what truly happened on the missions. While the entire organization was clandestine to the highest degree, the Janus unit was cloaked even from other operatives for fear of a double agent giving information to Janus' elusive leaders. While the other divisions in the Agency dealt with terrorism, Intel gathering and other special operations, the priority of the Marshal and the powers that be was clearly putting a stop to Janus.

Boyd sat up straight in his chair as he stared blankly at the screen. As usual, General Carhart sat at the front of the table, speaking to Jeffrey the analyst, whose black hair was always perfectly pressed like his suits. He always seemed to have a briefcase with him, which held his touch panel and sometimes stacks of paper when an analysis required it.

There were two people in charge of tracking the rebel movements, a formidable job on its own without counting the fact that with Janus being worldwide they had to have international as well as domestic contacts.

Ryan was as talkative as ever. He was easily the nerdiest person that Boyd had met at the Agency so far. During a briefing, he was not above making chit chat about the newest MMO he was playing online, hacker forums he frequented or anime series he liked. General Carhart often showed impatience with Ryan's apparent ADHD but despite that, there seemed to be a closeness between the two.

It wasn't surprising that people found it hard to find fault with Ryan. He was shorter than average at 5'5" and extremely skinny. With his unruly black hair that stuck out wildly in a mess of cowlicks and curls, thick rimmed square glasses and wide indigo

eyes, he looked more like a geeky teenager than a twenty-five year old genius who'd been born and bred on the compound.

At the moment, Ryan was typing away on a large, outdated-looking laptop while simultaneously sliding his thumb across a touch panel and diverting his attention between the two.

The other R&D agent, Owen, looked nearly a decade older than his counterpart. He always looked as though he had just woken up and forgot to put his clothes on properly. His messy, curly red hair was usually in danger of covering half his eyes and his shirts were perpetually wrinkled and untucked. He was leaning against the table looking extremely tired, yawning widely every few seconds. He rubbed at his dark brown, nearly black eyes and slumped down, as unprofessional as ever.

Carhart nodded at Jeffery and briefly glanced down at the touch computer. They'd just gone over the details of the mission and the debriefing was drawing to a close. They were never the most interesting of affairs, especially when there was nothing immediate for follow up.

"I'll have the analysis ready in a few days," Jeffrey was saying as he set his touch panel down and looked over at Carhart. "It will take some time to sift through all the data to find usable Intel."

"Is it possible there isn't anything of use at all?"

Jeffrey nodded. "That's always possible, especially when the enemy gets forewarning that they're being looked into by an unknown group." He didn't look at Boyd but his stiff tone made it clear that it was a slight against Boyd for the first mission. "But I won't know until I look through everything. They may have felt safe outside the city."

The General inclined his head and pushed his chair back. "Report to me immediately when you're done. We'll reconvene when we have more information unless something else comes up." That being said, he logged out of the computer and left the room as he typically did.

"Geez, he's always in a rush these days," Ryan commented, making a face.

"He could be outrunning a curse," Owen offered, furrowing his eyebrows and looking at Ryan with a frown. "Do you think that's what's going on?"

Jeffrey paused as he logged out on his touch panel, and shot Owen an annoyed stare. "That's easily the stupidest thing you've said this week."

"Just this week?" Owen asked, looking over at Jeffrey with mild surprise. "What'd I say last week? Was it something awesome and enlightening?"

"Stop being such an imbecile." Jeffrey glared at Owen and opened his briefcase with sharp movements. "I'll never know how someone like you made it into a unit like this. Some of us had to actually work for it." He looked at Boyd pointedly to include him in the comment before he looked down to shove the touch panel into his briefcase.

Boyd didn't respond. It hadn't taken long to determine that Jeffrey seemed to have a problem with a lot of things and that he didn't think Boyd had good reason to be in the unit. Other people seemed to share the sentiment as well, though luckily not Owen or Ryan.

"No really," Owen said, peering at Jeffrey with interest. He seemed to have woken up a bit with this topic. "Maybe I was sleepwalking at the time? I don't remember any cool conversations." He considered it seriously before adding, "Oh! Unless I was telling you the story about my dream, but if you actually believed I sprouted wings made of spatulas and could fly..."

Jeffrey only seemed to get further irritated by the answer and Boyd looked away as he went to gather his things. Those two seemed to bicker during most of the meetings, with Owen's seeming obliviousness only fueling Jeffrey's tense irritation. Still, despite the fact that Jeffrey seemed to think Owen was a complete idiot half the time, Boyd didn't believe it was the case.

Although Owen seemed slovenly and perpetually half-asleep, and although he often went on tangents that seemed disconnected with reality, he was good at his job

and seemed to truly know the information he presented. Boyd suspected that it wasn't really that Owen was an idiot or believed most of what he was saying; he may have just had an offbeat sense of humor. Sometimes Boyd thought he detected that Owen simply seemed to enjoy being odd or teasing Jeffrey, perhaps even more because Jeffrey always responded.

Either way, Boyd didn't have much interest in staying around for no reason so he moved to stand.

"I don't know, guys," Ryan piped up seemingly randomly. He was chewing on the end of a stylus and peering down into the panel with a frown. It almost seemed like he was continuing a conversation although he hadn't been talking out loud to anyone else in the past few seconds. But that seemed to be how Ryan's mind worked. Always going, even when he was talking about something entirely different.

"I mean, do you really think Warren Andrews is in league with Janus? I know they've been swallowing up all of these teeny groups and whatnot but his profile doesn't seem... to be what they usually scoop up. Know what I mean?"

Boyd paused and, since work-related topics were coming up, he settled back in his chair. Jeffrey and Owen stopped talking. "Janus *does* seem to go for the assholes," Owen agreed, tilting his chair back and frowning. "And Warren's not really their style unless he held up an old folks' blood bank for the poor when I wasn't looking."

"Faction 53 isn't as aggressive as they used to be but they still have power," Jeffrey said pointedly. "Janus could simply be expanding their selection pool. It wouldn't be the first time they shifted their targets."

"Yeah, but something dreadful this way comes," Owen said, waving a hand vaguely and looking over at Ryan. "Right? They've got the right hand slapping the left is what your source said. And once they break up they're gonna lose any power they held which makes them prime meat for the vultures." He paused and frowned. "Or I guess rotting meat?"

"I dunno. It's just a personality thing, is all I'm saying." Ryan shrugged and put down the panel, looking around at the other three men. "He doesn't seem the type to want to be controlled by some giant puppet master, or at least that's what my sources have been saying. I hope we end up negotiating rather than just wiping them out."

"The only indication so far is that he's thinking about it, correct?" Boyd asked.

Ryan nodded, messy black hair bouncing around with the motion. He shifted in the chair and arched his back in a stretch. "Yeah, from what I've found, he seems hesitant about it. But then again he's super paranoid about everything ever since the split with Aarons."

Boyd had read about the split on his panel. Shortly before he joined Carhart's unit as active duty, faction 53's two main leaders, Jason Aarons and Warren Andrews, had had a falling out. The group had initially formed because Warren and others had an issue with the way the city was policed in Carson, the next city over that shared some of the wastelands. Faction 53 felt that the lack of reconstruction in the poor neighborhoods, combined with what they felt was over-policing of the destitute, created an unfair environment. Eventually, 53 had taken to terroristic acts to prove their point, but Jason Aarons was more aggressive and took it further than Warren Andrews. That had ultimately caused friction between the two until Jason left abruptly and formed his own group, which was labeled 62 in Agency records. Aarons had taken about one-third of the followers with him but rumors among the other groups was that some were already debating returning. However some of the people who stayed behind in 53 seemed to be having second thoughts as well.

It left both groups in a vulnerable position, but especially 53 which was being recruited by Janus. Allegedly, some of the people in 53 wanted Warren to accept Janus' proposition. The fact that he was hesitant about it was raising questions about his leadership skills among some of them.

"He should be paranoid," Jeffrey said flatly, his stark features completely unsympathetic. "He can't keep his group together and he's letting enemy agents with little training infiltrate the compound. He's lucky there hasn't been a mutiny."

Owen raised his eyebrows. "Being kind of harsh on the dude, aren't you? He doesn't seem like too much of a douche. Also, I'm pretty sure half a year of hardcore boot camp isn't 'little training.'"

Jeffrey shot Owen a look of distaste and grabbed his briefcase as he stood. "I forgot; it's love the enemy day," he said sarcastically.

"Well, mark a calendar then," Owen said with a yawn, looking as though he'd used up whatever energy he had and was ready to fall asleep again. "I won't always be here to remind you."

Jeffrey scowled and left. Owen watched Jeffrey go and then looked at Ryan and Boyd, his gaze turning bleary. "It's way past my bedtime," he mumbled, even though it was barely 10 am. "'Night and bedbugs and all that." He ambled out of the room with a huge yawn that Boyd could hear even as the man wandered down the hallway.

Boyd stood to leave as well.

"Boyd, do you have a sec?"

Ryan had half stood up and was looking at him hopefully.

Boyd paused, looking at Ryan blankly. It was the first time the other man had asked him to stay behind. He sat back down in the chair, wondering if it had something to do with the mission and what had been bothering Ryan about it. "Yes."

There was a moment when Ryan just looked at him slightly oddly before the R&D agent just shrugged and sat back down. "Do you mind if I pick your brain a bit about your partner?"

Boyd stared at him, wondering at first if this was some sort of joke. But Ryan seemed serious and it left Boyd at a loss. "Why? Surely you know him better than I do."

"Ha! Not even close." Ryan reclined in his chair and raised his arms, threading thin fingers behind his head. The black jacket he wore over a faded anime t-shirt shifted with the motion. "I haven't had a conversation with Hsin since I was, like, I dunno... ten."

Boyd watched him for a moment. It was the first time he'd heard someone refer to Sin as 'Hsin' when they weren't using it in context of his full name. It was an oddity, considering Ryan apparently hadn't spoken to him for a long time. "Were you close prior to that?"

The other man gave him another confused, odd stare and sat up straight in the chair. "No... That was like when he first got here. He stayed with the Connors for a little bit because he was so young but it didn't work out and I never had direct contact with him again."

"Then why do you refer to him as Hsin? No one else appears to do the same."

"I dunno. Because that's his name? People just call him Sin because it was originally mispronounced so everyone started doing it." Ryan gave one of his huge shrugs, his shoulders nearly going up to his ears, and smiled. "Plus, I like his real name better."

Boyd considered that; even if it was Sin's real name, Ryan was the only one who seemed to care. It seemed like a somewhat familiar way to address a man who was not exactly approachable and he briefly wondered if Sin had a preference either way. He leaned back in the chair with a nod to acknowledge the answer.

"What did you want to discuss?"

"I'd just wondered what he was like one-on-one. He never shows up for briefings, even back when he had the other trial partners." Ryan's words were coming out casually but he was avoiding Boyd's eyes after he started talking.

Boyd's eyebrows drew down in confusion. "Why does it matter?"

"Because I want to know what he's like and you're the only person he's in contact with." Ryan frowned and started packing his stuff up. "If you don't want to talk about it, it's fine."

"I don't mind," Boyd said with a shrug, frowning faintly to himself as he considered the question. He shifted in the seat and crossed his arms. "I don't have much of an answer. This latest mission was the first time we spoke on terms that were equal in any way. Typically we don't converse much or, when we do, it's regarding the mission parameters or he's being sarcastic."

For some reason, the last part caused Ryan's lips to shift up into another grin. "The few times I have seen him in the past few years, he's always such a smart ass. It's pretty funny, I think. He just doesn't give a crap about anything here the way everyone else does."

"I find it to be irritating at times, to be honest," Boyd said mildly. "Especially since he seems to enjoy calling me sarcastic pet names such as sweetheart."

At that, Ryan's eyebrows shot up. "Why does he call you that?"

"To be obnoxious or patronizing, it seems," Boyd said, leaning back in the chair.

"Or..." The mischievous grin returned, making the other man look far more youthful than he already did. He seemed to be on the verge of saying something but stopped himself and hid his grin behind the case of his laptop as he put it away. "Well, anyway. He could just be trying to get a reaction out of you."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow, watching Ryan for a moment before he looked away. "I suppose it's possible. Did you speak to his previous partners? I assumed it was something he did with anyone he spent any amount of time near."

"The pet name thing? Nah, not as far as I can tell. None of them lasted very long. I mean Laurel made it probably a month before she got killed and she was the longest.

We actually had hope for her." Ryan made a face and said the last comment somewhat dryly. "But they never made it sound as though he really... joked around or anything. At any extent."

That was interesting. It brought to mind questions he'd had before, wondering how exactly his predecessors had failed.

"What happened with them?" Ryan stopped putting his equipment in the huge backpack he carried and tilted his head to the side. He studied Boyd for a moment, gave a little nod to himself, and began digging around in his backpack. There was an assortment of discs, flash drives, and memory cards in a large plastic bag but he seemed to have no trouble finding the one he wanted.

"Give me a sec and I'll set up a whole demo," he explained to Boyd.

He moved to Carhart's position at the table and popped a drive in before fiddling with the computer. He made various 'hrm' and 'ah-ha!' sounds before finally organizing whatever he was trying to do. After that it took only a brief moment before the hum of the holograph machine echoed in the room and an image popped up between them.

The man in question looked to be in his early to mid-thirties and had fiery red hair and explosively blue eyes. His expression was hard and unkind.

"That's Evan McCoy. He was bachelor number one and the mistake they should have learned from. At first they were hiring these big guys from Counter-Terror. Macho men with hero complexes."

Another image popped up, this one of a younger man with deep chestnut colored skin and surprisingly light hair. "Michelin was the same way. He was bachelor number two."

This time Ryan's fingers flew over the keyboard and two images popped up side by side. One was a thin looking man with long black hair who also looked to be in his early thirties. It seemed that most field agents were around the same age which caused

one to wonder what happened to an agent who passed his or her prime. The other image was of a youthful and attractive woman.

"Laurel and Coral. I wonder if anyone else noticed that they rhyme." Ryan grinned at his own joke.

Boyd studied the pictures and then looked over at Ryan. "How did they die? All Sin said was that they thought he was their pet and they were killed in self-defense."

Ryan shrugged hugely again, his indigo eyes flicking from picture to picture. "No one really knows. I mean, Hsin doesn't exactly put his information out there even if it's in his own defense. So there's like, no way to tell if it was legit self-defense or if he just murdered them himself, or let them die on a mission deliberately. I can see a couple of them instigating shit with him just because he's an easy target and they kinda thought they had him in his place but... I dunno."

"How long ago did all that happen?"

"The winter before you started, I think. That's when Laurel died and they locked Hsin back up again." Ryan frowned, his boyish face clearly troubled by whatever had crossed his mind. "I thought they were gonna terminate him. It really depressed me for a long time. I'm kind of a Hsin fan."

"Why?" Boyd asked, turning his gaze onto Ryan. "If you've hardly spoken to him and rarely see him, why do you care what happens to him?" Ryan rolled his indigo eyes and raised his hands up. "Why is everyone so dumbfounded just 'cause I like the guy? I just like the fact that he doesn't let them break him. I respect him. He's literally the best and most amazing op we have. And also, he's amazingly gorgeous if you didn't notice so I have a teensy crush on him."

"Hmm." Boyd studied Ryan. He had to agree that Sin's unique features were attractive. "Do you tell everyone all of this?"

"Which part?"

"Any of it, but particularly your crush."

"Oh." Ryan waved a dismissive hand and started stuffing things in his backpack again. "It's not like it's any big secret that I'm gay. I never date girls and I've been here since I was a fetus. Also, if anyone starts ragging on Hsin in my earshot I'll talk about stuff. People figure it out pretty easily."

Boyd nodded again. "I see." He fell silent for a moment and reached down for his messenger bag. He could have stayed silent but in some ways, Ryan reminded him of Lou, who had always been quick to defend the bullied. It wasn't something Boyd could think about in any way other than a passing glance, because remembering Lou was often too painful of an endeavor. But because the connection was there in his mind, he couldn't ignore it and he couldn't let the moment pass by without commenting.

"It's a commendable attitude to stand up for what you believe in regardless of whether it's widely accepted."

The comment seemed to please Ryan and his expression lightened some. He'd seemed somewhat on guard since the conversation had started, as if he'd expected ridicule or scorn for his outlook. "I'm glad you're not another asshole. A lot of that tends to go around here. It's like, in the air."

"I've noticed," Boyd said mildly. Ryan popped out the flash drive and stood up. He hiked his huge backpack over one shoulder. "Well I have to jam but let me know if you want to talk or if like, you want any advice about Hsin. I'm not best buddies with him but I'm kind of a Vega lexicon. I've studied him like a creeper for awhile. It's a little gross. This obsession should really stop sometime before they think I'm a stalker."

It wasn't entirely clear how serious he was about the last couple of lines and it seemed to amuse him to say them out loud. "Take care, Boyd. I hope we can talk more. You're not a bad kid."

Boyd quirked his eyebrows slightly. He had to wonder exactly how much Ryan knew about Sin, and how much Sin knew Ryan knew. "I'll keep it in mind," was all he said.

Ryan headed to the door and gave a little wave. "See ya around. And PS, you should try to get him to come to briefings!"

That being said, the skinny R&D agent disappeared out the door. Boyd watched him go. After a few thoughtful moments, he left as well.

## Chapter 7

The two trainees in the corner seemed to be watching Boyd's every move. It hadn't taken long to determine that. Between sparring, when they paused to wipe their faces with towels, they angled themselves so they could both watch him askance. Their lips moved subtly but he knew without doubt that they were talking about him. He didn't let his own gaze linger on them but once he'd noticed it, he felt their stares burning into him even when he was turned away. He didn't have to hear the trainees to know what they were saying. He'd continued to overhear whispers as he passed and feel stares on his back the longer he spent time on compound.

It was all the same as it had been since he'd joined. Indignant anger over his placement and the general consensus that it was due to nepotism and nothing more. Comments about his androgynous looks and derogatory debate about what that meant about him. Rumblings of whether he would make it as an agent. Mocking whispers about his prowess in the training room and his oddities, like how he always wore a long-sleeved shirt and never removed it no matter how hot it may make him. Rumors that exaggerated any of his failures. Scattered, joking bets about how soon he would die and how it would happen. As far as he'd heard, the bets were so far in favor of a gruesome death at Sin's hands but a few people held out that he'd be killed on a mission long before Sin snapped.

He let it all wash over him in the background but he couldn't deny that the words took to him on some level. Small seeds of doubt and resignation sprouted roots that wormed their way deep into him. But then, it had always been this way. Even before the Agency, long before anything had happened that had made him want to run away from the world and shut himself off completely, there had been whispers behind his back and slanted, taunting stares.

He sighed quietly to himself and pushed away wet strands of hair that had fallen into his eyes. Soon he wouldn't be able to use the facilities in the training complex anymore and he'd have to find a new place. David was letting him only because he was

still on probation and he'd been having troubles with gaining and maintaining the proper amount of muscle and weight.

That was part of the trouble; there was some truth in their whispers. Boyd had been trying to train hard but he came from a sedentary lifestyle. He'd spent years as a ghost in his own home, barely bothering to move between rooms. And before then, he'd never been particularly athletic. Trying to throw himself wholeheartedly into a workout regimen that had become a nearly daily event was tiring, even after several months.

His build was naturally lean and although he didn't have too much trouble maintaining that, the Agency seemed to want him to meet standards he wasn't certain made sense for him. But he couldn't say that to anyone so all he could do was come to the training rooms and workout tirelessly while whispers and mocking stares came and went.

Noon felt like it came quickly. He gathered his things and disappeared into the locker room, using one of the bathroom stalls to change in private rather than staying out in the larger area like most people did. It was yet another quirk of his that caused others to question him.

Over time he'd realized that Cecilia, the agent he'd met during training, had apparently not gotten over her dislike of him. She and a few of her associates seemed to go out of their way to badmouth him on a regular basis. An agent named Moua seemed to take particular delight in it, since he was especially at odds over Boyd's androgynous appearance.

Although Cecilia had instigated it, Moua had been the one to start the joke that Boyd probably stayed covered up because he was really a girl, or even a transsexual. He'd suggested to Cecilia and another agent, Miles, that one day they should follow him into the locker room, hold him still, and find out for themselves. Dover had been present that day, and despite the fact that he didn't appear to like Boyd much more than the others, the comment had seemed to disgust him.

For Boyd, the idea of anyone forcing him down and yanking up his clothes was highly disturbing.

It wasn't the first time anyone had commented on his appearance. When he was younger, a few of the kids used to tease him about it at school. He'd cut his hair short at one point, hoping to mimic the other boys who looked more normal. It hadn't made much of a difference. There was something indefinable about his features that would always lend an androgynous air to him.

It used to bother him. His mother was a striking woman when she wasn't glaring coldly, but his father had been solid and masculine. Boyd used to resent that he'd taken so much after his mother's build and features, like her full mouth and hair, and had gotten so little of his father. Adding to that the fact that he was gay, it had seemed a bit like the universe was playing a joke on him. For someone as private as he, his looks alone gave many people reason to make assumptions about his sexual orientation that, unfortunately, were true.

After a point, though, he'd become resigned and stopped caring about any of it. He couldn't change the way he looked and since having short hair didn't make a significant difference, he'd taken to keeping it long. At least then he could hide his expression if he ever wanted to.

Lou used to say he liked the way Boyd looked and had gone after anyone who'd said otherwise. He wondered what Lou would say about any of this and whether he would have stormed up to short but muscular Moua with the intentions of picking a fight. He cut the thought off immediately and buried it deep within himself the way he always did when Lou crossed his mind.

Today he was thankfully alone in the locker room and was able to change quickly into fresh clothes. When he left, the two trainees stared after him until their view was cut off by the hallway. He headed straight toward the medical wing, not wanting to be late for his assessment. They were checking him monthly so far to keep track of his weight and muscle gain, but he'd been told that once he reached the appropriate levels he

would be dropped down to a yearly check up like everyone else. He had to meet with a physician and a nutritionist and all the information was sent to David, who was still his supervisor for physical training.

Boyd didn't like doctors' offices in the first place but he especially didn't enjoy his trips to the med wing. Doctors seemed to think they had rights to their patients' bodies; they could push up or pull down a shirt wherever they liked, and demand anything else in the name of their profession.

For the most part, Boyd was able to stay fully dressed. Still, he always felt highly disturbed when they made him push up his sleeve so they could draw blood, or when they would slide a hand beneath his shirt to touch his skin or listen to his heartbeat. He spent most of the time staring blankly at the wall, trying to ignore the nausea that caught at the back of his throat and made his stomach clench. At least he had one doctor who was assigned to him, so he didn't have to deal with a lot of different strangers, although he never knew what nurse he would get.

"Agent Beaulieu," Doctor Hagerty greeted him with his typical wide, false smile as he stepped into the room. "Let's see how you're doing today, shall we?"

He always spoke boisterously and with great cheer but Boyd never believed the truth of any of it. He could see the calculation in the man's eyes and there were times that cheerful smile seemed aimed only to bare his teeth.

Boyd was tense and straight-backed as they poked and prodded him. His jaw was set and he focused on breathing evenly as Hagerty ran his large hand up Boyd's arm and pushed up his sleeve. The brush of calloused fingers against his skin was as unwanted as it always had been and he kept his face turned resolutely away.

He could feel Hagerty's gaze burn into his temple, as if the man was trying to see through his skull into his mind, or maybe he was studying the closed off quality of Boyd's eyes. Whatever the case, Hagerty prattled on about useless things and Boyd breathed in and out, focusing on some sense of calm despite how much he hated being

in that room. How much he hated those hands, clinical though they may be, taking liberties with touching him at will.

It seemed like it took forever but finally Hagerty was done with all his tests. Boyd barely paid attention as Hagerty explained at length his progress. What it basically came down to was he still needed to work hard because he hadn't yet reached the levels he was supposed to achieve.

A nutritionist came in afterward, giving him a detailed diet planned down to the last grape. She was kind enough but Boyd thought hers was a forced cheer as well. Although with her, it seemed more like she was distracted and making an effort at proper bedside manner rather than faking everything like Hagerty. She sent his dietary plan to his Agency account and assured him that in another month or so, he should be where he needed to be.

"I bet you've never been so healthy in your life," she joked with a small smile before she left.

The relief he felt once he could leave was as strong as it always was in the med wing. He straightened his clothing and stepped out into the hallway. As he headed toward the main waiting room he mused that the nutritionist was probably right but that he would take unhealthiness and privacy over all of this any day.

The main room was teeming with people; some seated and some standing in small groups talking amongst themselves. The receptionist was at the desk looking annoyed with two people speaking intently and quietly with her. The guard standing outside the door to the med wing seemed more interested in watching a very attractive woman in a very short skirt bend over while filling out a form than he was in watching the hallway beyond.

"Go fuck yourself, you amazon bitch!"

The shout interrupted the otherwise quiet atmosphere as a short, plump girl with curly black hair was escorted in by two guards. A woman who was her polar opposite in

every way physically came charging behind. She was tall, willowy but athletic, and had the fluid movements of a field agent. At the moment though, her nose looked crooked and was bleeding freely.

"I don't have to fuck myself, fat ass. One of the perks of being attractive."

The short girl reddened and actually tried to barrel past the guards to lunge at the field agent but she was hauled back.

"Relax, Wanda, you're in enough trouble as it is. Again," Officer Randazzo said blandly, shaking his head in obvious exasperation.

"Let her go," the field agent snapped, wiping blood on the back side of her black sweater. If her nose was broken, she didn't seem to mind the pain too much. "I won't get sucker punched this time."

"You shut up too," Randazzo snapped, casting a look of dislike at the agent.

Wanda yanked her arm away and ran a hand through her hair in obvious agitation. Her dark brown eyes were flitting around the room and when she turned her face slightly, Boyd saw that she had taken a few good knocks herself.

"You're both going to see medical, and your superiors are going to handle this. I'm sick of this shit and I have better things to do," the other guard was saying, looking quite disgusted with them both.

"Where's Bree?" Wanda demanded.

"And what the hell do you think she's going to do?" the field agent asked snidely. She looked quite dramatic with her blood streaked face and cascades of blond hair hanging over her shoulders.

"See, now that's the kind of talk that gets you in trouble with my peeps, Agent Podkalicki," a breezy voice broke in as the doors opened.

Boyd watched silently as a short woman with even shorter blond hair came in and forced her way into the middle of the crowd. She stood there right in the center, further blocking the exit and making it impossible for him to leave without barreling through the entire group. "Bree, this is total fucking cunt--"

"Bree, they're all yours--"

"She is not my super--"

Bree whistled shrilly and interrupted them all. She glared at each in turn through wide rimmed black glasses and crossed her arms over the multi-colored fringe vest she wore. "Lieutenant Kaplan, what the hell is going on?"

The older of the two guards, apparently Kaplan, raised his eyebrows. "According to the others in R&D, Agent Podkalicki stormed in blaming Wanda for faulty Intel and a mission gone awry, they exchanged words and Wanda socked her in the nose before Podkalicki jumped her. Are we through?"

"Yes. Go make the rounds of the deadly corridors."

Kaplan made a face and Randazzo smirked but the two men headed out the doors without a backward glance. The three women were left to themselves as Bree, whoever she was, regarded them both icily.

"Podkalicki--"

"You're not my superior," the haughty blond agent repeated, raising her eyebrows and managing to look down her broken nose at Bree.

Bree pursed her lips together. "Don't interrupt me again, little girl. You may be a fieldie, but I'm the head of R&D which makes me so far above you in classification and experience, that I could probably break both your arms and a leg and still only get a stern talking to."

Podkalicki leaned forward to say something with her finger pointed in Bree's face but before she could get the words out, Bree grabbed the field agent's wrist and twisted it back. It elicited a sharp cry and Podkalicki scrambled backwards.

"Don't get it twisted, sister. I may be R&D but I've been here going on two decades. That gives a lot of time to get myself trained to fight. Especially up against a third rate valentine who can't even hit level eight. Got it? And the next time you have beef with one of my peeps, you take it up with your superior who will take it up with me."

"Screw you," was the sullen reply.

Bree smirked and turned to Wanda. "And you-- next time you want to slug this biatch, just don't damage the face."

Wanda's face lit up with a laugh but before she could release it, the doors opened again and another person came in. He was tall, in his early sixties, and very slender. His nose was long and pointed and he had eyes that were a very pale blue.

"General McAvoy," Bree said coolly. "Handle your riff-raff. And I'll handle mine."

At that, the group dispersed into two separate ones and cleared the way to the exit finally.

Boyd watched them disappear and then followed the crowd that started heading out the door. He heard a few muttered opinions supporting either side of the fight and from that he understood that this sort of thing wasn't unheard of for Wanda or Bree. He wondered how they were able to get away with causing stirs like that without repercussions but even that thought was absent and easily forgotten. He didn't really care what anyone else was doing and he was just glad to see them all get out of the way so he could leave.

He spent the next few hours on errands around town picking up supplements for his diet. The Agency provided a certain amount of items but some of it he was responsible for finding on his own. Although there were a few places he knew for certain would have all of what he needed, they were establishments he didn't want to visit. Too

many memories hung cloyingly in areas of the city, nestled among buildings and alleys that brought bright blue eyes unbidden to his mind.

When he got home he fell into his usual routine of automatically making tea. When he had a mug ready, he walked to the living room and sat on the edge of the couch. The tea heated the mug until he could feel a light burn through his clothing as he rested the mug on his knee. He stared at nothing in particular, letting the quiet of the room reinforce the quiet of his mind. It was like his own brand of meditation to find his inner peace, except in his case it was finding the place inside him that let him shut down and ignore everything.

He sat like a statue in his home, occasionally sipping tea and doing nothing in particular. There were times he wondered whether anyone else felt as alone and isolated as he did. During moments like this, however, no thoughts entered his mind at all.

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Boyd's detachment could be most clearly felt in his home after years of working toward that goal. A routine had begun of working hard at the Agency where he was largely ignored and sometimes mocked and returning to his home to sit silently, at times restlessly, and wish for an end in sight. He could have been caught in that cycle for weeks if not for the missions. Then came the day that he was brought in for a briefing in which he was told that he and Sin would be going to Spain for a reconnaissance mission. Having to spend a week in close quarters with Sin was a little daunting, primarily because Boyd had come to covet his time alone again. He'd had to give it up during training and now he had it again, giving him a chance to find his balance again and try to let everything fall away. Being stuck around other people for too long, especially crowds or in unfamiliar situations, was still a little tiring to him. The only saving grace was that Sin, at least, didn't seem to mind periods of silence.

And a smaller part of him that he didn't fully want to acknowledge was somewhat intrigued by this mission. He still couldn't figure Sin out. Sin was like puzzle pieces

floating on a river; once a few were placed together, the current pulled the outer edges apart and scattered the pieces away once again. It left Boyd feeling like he could never get the full picture, let alone decipher between truth and lies.

The part of him that was curious and wanted the full truth of a situation before he made a decision couldn't let go of the fact that there was too much about Sin to dismiss him. That part made it impossible to ignore Sin or his own desire to know more. Even if it were to ultimately turn out that Sin was nothing more than how the people at the Agency generally presented him, at least for Boyd he would have been able to reach that conclusion on his own with all the facts.

Neither of them had spoken much on the plane ride over or as they'd navigated the streets of Barcelona. Boyd didn't know Spanish but parts of it were similar enough to French that he would have been able to get by. He was interested to see Catalan on the signs, with its strange confluence of Spanish and French. He had learned soon enough that Sin was fluent in Spanish, although his accent seemed to differ from the native Spaniards.

The hotel they were staying in turned out to be in the middle of a long row of buildings all built right up against each other. The lower level had a restaurant but once they took the elevator up and checked in they ended up in a hallway that was lined with a smooth wooden finish that ran the length of the hallway. The planks were wide and horizontal and probably faux, and the effect crossed the doors as well. If it weren't for the silver horizontal handles and the inconspicuous silver room numbers posted nearby, the doors would have blended in with the hallway.

Once inside they found the room to be medium sized, with two twin beds and a table pushed in the far right corner near a television. The bathroom was immediately to their left while a small closet with space for luggage was to their right. Like the rest of the hotel, there was a distinctive modern flair to the decor.

When the door shut behind them, they each moved into the room and dropped their bags. Boyd ended up by the far bed and took in the room thoughtfully. There was

enough space on the table for the multiple computers he would have to set up but it wouldn't leave much room for anything else. Still, it was their only option. He dragged the computer bag over to the table and unzipped it, getting to work unpacking and setting up the equipment.

Their mission wasn't to act; it was simply to surveil a location to ensure that Intel from a source was legit. That called for several days in a hotel in Barcelona while they kept an eye on the considerably more luxurious hotels that were not too far away.

They were trying to verify that members of the French group Révolution were actually in the area and they were supposed to identify who specifically was present.

Sin didn't show much interest in the surveillance equipment or his bag. He walked over to the window and looked out, his eyes narrowed slightly in contemplation of something.

Boyd glanced at him but then turned his attention fully to the equipment. When he was finished he shifted a chair so one of them could sit there observing all the screens at once and still keep an eye on the room and the door in case they had any unexpected visitors. The other chair was dragged next to one of the beds in the corner, to get it out of the way. After Boyd verified that the surveillance equipment was working and that it was recording successfully to the remote server, he looked over at Sin. The senior agent hadn't shown any more interest in the room, Boyd or the mission than he had since they'd first been informed of their destination.

They had stayed in silence for so long that when Sin spoke, it was abrupt.

"I'm going for supplies."

Boyd looked at him in consideration and then nodded. "I'll go with you."

Sin turned to look at him, green eyes flicking up and down before he turned away again. "Your call."

Boyd grabbed his messenger bag and a hotel key on the way out, then paused only long enough to slip a Do Not Disturb tab on the door. He followed Sin on the way out of the building and into the streets below. There was a fair amount of people in the area even at mid-morning and he took a moment to get his bearings straight. He thought about the maps he'd studied of Barcelona on the plane ride over and wondered what street would be best to check.

He turned around to ask Sin if he knew of any grocery stores nearby but Sin wasn't there. Boyd looked through the crowd quickly but the other man was nowhere to be seen. He had disappeared without a word.

Lips thinning, Boyd's fingers tightened on the strap of his bag. He couldn't help a moment of irritation with Sin for leaving so suddenly. If he hadn't wanted Boyd around, why couldn't he have said so in the room? Boyd could probably muddle his way through any interactions well enough but it was going to be difficult for him to do anything too complicated when he didn't know the language. And he was supposed to be keeping an eye on Sin to make sure nothing happened. That was his charge as Sin's partner.

Since he couldn't do anything about it now that Sin was gone, he decided to go about his own business. He headed toward Carrer de Mallorca to see if he could find anything there.

Tall buildings lined the streets, many six stories or more, with balconies off almost every window. The style was reminiscent of row houses back in the United States, with buildings built right up against one another and only occasional gaps in between.

Unlike the concrete sidewalks Boyd was accustomed to back home, most of the sidewalks were stone or at least had a design imprinted into them. It was the middle of the day and people were everywhere. The intersections were large and wide, and short cars seemed to be the vehicles of choice. People parked them haphazardly, sometimes double parking. Scooters and mopeds were driven up onto the sidewalks and parked diagonally like impromptu parking lots.

Small stores were scattered on the first floors of the buildings, while the upper levels largely seemed to be places for people to stay or live. The buildings were all different colors; tans and yellows and teal-greens. The architecture was intricate in some areas, with designs built into the building and trim work that was reminiscent of filigree. A few of the stores were closed with metal doors pulled down that were splattered with graffiti.

As he walked, Boyd found his gaze straying up the buildings, studying details here and there. It had been years since he'd thought about it, but he'd always had an interest in architecture and history. He liked to see the imprint of time on buildings, and the influence of the age on the construction itself.

He could see spires rising in the distance and at their sight, all annoyance with Sin was forgotten, as were his intentions to get supplies and head back as soon as possible.

The huge, intricate design of the Sagrada Familia rose like a sentinel in the middle of the city. Boyd's steps slowed as he approached and his eyes drifted up higher and higher, taking in the sheer size and presence of the Roman Catholic church. In some ways it was reminiscent of a castle, with several spires and a sprawling footprint.

People were crowded around it, craning their necks to try to stare up as far as they could. The building dwarfed everything around it. Every facade was completely covered with intricate details. Statues, reliefs and scenes were built into it and construction scaffolding could barely be seen on another side. The stained glass windows were made with shades of bright colors like teals, pale blues and near-yellows that stood out against the light brown building.

Boyd started walking a slow circuit around the Sagrada Familia, feeling a sense of wonder rekindle that he'd thought long gone. In school he'd once written a paper on Antoni Gaudí. As a child, repeated sickness had caused Gaudí to spend a lot of time alone with nature. Some people felt that such a connection had inspired his later architectural style.

To Boyd, there was no doubt that there was a lot more flow, interest and detail in Gaudí's designs than many others Boyd had seen. He enjoyed the way Gaudí made buildings seem like they came alive; perhaps because, to Boyd, whether something was living or not didn't change its presence. He'd felt the ghosts of his past haunting his home too often not to feel drawn to old buildings and places that felt like they were built for more than structure.

Walking around Sagrada Familia, Boyd was struck even more in person than he had been through the pictures with how complicated Gaudí's vision had been. Although Boyd was not religious and didn't care either way about that aspect of the work, he couldn't deny the magnitude of the design when he was standing there. It felt like there were hardly any blank places on the entirety of the building; everything was lines and movement and stories spelled out in figurines and symbols. Even the base of a column he passed had a turtle carved into it, as if it were supporting the column stretching high above it.

Boyd felt the weight of history. The church had been started back in 1882 and had originally been planned to be finished in 2026; in just a few years' time. It still amazed Boyd that the Sagrada Familia hadn't been affected by the war but despite that good luck, the war had still set the final construction back another few years. It had been Boyd's hope since first learning of the Sagrada Familia that he would live to see its completion someday. Since he'd joined the Agency, he didn't know if that hope was fruitless after all.

Still, standing there at the base of a monument of history, Boyd felt grounded somehow. How many people had stood there over the decades, watching those spires grow taller and taller? Watching those scenes get cut into stone? How many generations had been there, and how many more would there be to come even after it was finished?

He spent some time around the Sagrada Familia but after a point all it did was make an artist's itch in the far back of his mind wish that he had a sketchbook and charcoal with him. And for all that he was interested in this, it wasn't what he was here

for. After what felt like far too short of a time, he made himself regrettably pull away and go in search of supplies.

By the time he returned to the room, he had a bag of food that was as close to his special diet as he could manage. He also had picked up a bit of a headache from trying to converse with people in English and bits of Spanish he'd picked up while the other person rattled off Spanish as if they were competing for auctioneer of the month.

As the door swung shut behind him he glanced over and saw Sin sitting on the bed as calmly as if it had been their plan to split up all along. The senior agent had a bottle of chocolate milk on the end table next to him and a bag of pastries open on his lap. There was a canvas bag sitting on the floor by his bed that Boyd could only assume held the rest of the items he'd purchased.

"Took you long enough," Sin commented idly, as he chewed what appeared to be a cream filled fried pastry.

Boyd chose to ignore that and flicked his gaze along Sin's choices of sustenance instead. "Those are your supplies?"

Sin shrugged and licked some of the thick cream from where it had gotten on the side of his hand. "What should I get? Rations and bottled water? We're not exactly preparing for a battle in the trenches."

Boyd made a noncommittal noise and passed by Sin's canvas bag on his way to his bed. Inside the bag he saw some bottles of water and milk, chips, and a box of what looked like little sausages wrapped in pastry buns. They had a microwave and small fridge so Sin would be able to cool or reheat as he pleased, but Boyd still fought the urge to shake his head to himself.

He set down his own bag, containing milk for the protein shake powder he'd brought from the States, a rotisserie chicken, and a large side of rice. He'd looked over the menus at various restaurants and although he'd determined that he would likely end up buying paella and sarsuela at some point, the fridge wasn't large enough to keep

enough food for their entire time in Spain. Since he'd needed to get back to surveil today, he'd decided to go the easy route and hope to get something more interesting in the following days.

He put some chicken and rice on a plate he'd bought and put the rest away in the fridge. He then settled down in the chair by the computers so he could keep an eye on the hotel while he ate. Still, he couldn't help being distracted thinking about how completely unhealthily Sin was eating, and how thin he appeared to be.

"You weren't assigned a diet?" he asked when the question wouldn't leave his mind.

Sin took out another pastry and looked up. "Yes." A pause. "Why, were you?"

"Yes." Boyd glanced at the pastry pointedly. "Mine didn't include sweets, not that I'd have much interest in them in the first place."

"Obviously I'm not following their guidelines."

"Why not?"

Sin stared at him as he chewed, cream smeared across his mouth and smudged on the side of it. It shouldn't have been possible to glare and eat like a child at the same time, but somehow Sin pulled it off. It almost seemed like he wouldn't answer at all, but then after swallowing he did.

"I don't normally get to pick out any of my own food."

"Why not?" Boyd asked again.

Sin arched an eyebrow as if the answer should be obvious. "I'm not allowed off the compound."

Boyd's expression didn't change although he hadn't been aware of that aspect of Sin's life. It made him wonder what else he may learn during this mission. "You've been

off compound with me. Are you saying they don't allow you off compound alone or for reasons other than a mission?"

"That's what I'm saying," Sin said blandly. He sucked cream off his fingertips again.

"Why?"

This earned him a completely flat and unimpressed stare. "Are you fucking oblivious, or what?"

"No," Boyd said calmly. He took a moment to chew a piece of chicken as he considered Sin. "But I haven't been given much information despite the fact you're my partner."

"Huh." Sin shoved the bag of pastries to the side and sat up to retrieve his chocolate milk from the nightstand. "I thought it would be obvious that I'm considered too deranged to be free to roam the streets on my own."

"What is that assessment based on?"

"Surely you must have some clue."

"I know there are rumors and I've heard some of them," Boyd allowed. "As for how much is truth and how much exaggeration, I don't know. People often seem terrified of you for no reason, which leads me to distrust the validity of the rumors. So far, most of what I was informed of during training and what I've heard on compound is of little use to me."

Having finished his milk, Sin set the container down on the end table. He didn't answer for a stretch. He laid down on the bed and rubbed his hand over his stomach idly. His eyes drifted closed and once again it seemed that he wouldn't reply at all. But after a breath he spoke flatly.

"They're not all rumors."

And it was clear that the discussion was closed.

Boyd wondered what that meant. The comment did nothing to help him understand how many of the stories were false, or if any of them were false at all. If anything, it only generated more questions that he knew better than to ask. It seemed no one, not even Sin himself, was willing to give Boyd a straight answer when it came to the mysteries and misinformation that surrounded the man like smoke.

Rather than ponder something that would ultimately only frustrate him, he returned to his job. He finished his cooling meal while he watched the computer screens for signs of Révolution's movements.

The days bled into each other fairly quickly. Boyd's eyes began to burn from staring at the screens for too long but he knew he had to do it. If he didn't, Sin certainly wouldn't and the last thing Boyd needed was to fail this simple of a mission.

Because of that, he was hesitant to leave the room even to get food. When he ran low on chicken and rice, he asked Sin to pick him up some food and was surprised when the other man actually did it. While Boyd adhered to his strict diet, Sin continued to get whatever he felt like at the time. That seemed to be primarily snack foods, chips and desserts. Boyd didn't think he'd seen Sin eat an actual meal once since they'd stepped foot in Spain.

While Boyd fell into a routine of flicking his eyes between screens and trying to fend off growing headaches, Sin left the room at will. When he was around, he tended to be silent. One quirk Boyd learned fairly quickly was that Sin apparently liked to work out. He would spend hours every day working out tirelessly, doing push-ups, pull-ups using a bar in the closet and sit-ups. During the more boring times of nothing happening on the surveillance, Boyd found himself silently counting Sin's repetitions while he still kept his eyes on the screen.

After a few days Boyd finally had to look away from the screens. He'd noticed some activity so far that seemed to imply there was some truth to the Agency's suspicions but he didn't have enough yet to make a call either way. There had been no

interesting movement for hours and his eyeballs throbbed as if he hadn't gotten any sleep in days. Which he hadn't; not much, at least.

He leaned back in the chair and stretched, his fingers interlocking as he twisted his arms toward the ceiling. He rolled his neck and felt a few satisfying pops and then dropped back against the chair with a quiet sigh he couldn't quite stifle. The wooden chair hadn't been made for comfort for hours on end and it was starting to dig into his back uncomfortably.

He looked over at Sin, watching as he rose and fell during his pushups. His muscles stood out in stark relief along his otherwise wiry body, and sweat glistened on him like a second skin. His black and red hair fell in slightly wavy tangles that framed his face. Boyd found himself unconsciously looking along the length of Sin's body before he focused on his face.

Sin didn't seem to notice Boyd was in the room, which was nothing new. It didn't bother Boyd much since he preferred silence to slurs any day, and Sin at least didn't seem to go out of his way to mock Boyd unnecessarily. Or at least not when Boyd was leaving him alone.

Still, after days of staring at the same hotel in the same few angles, he found himself wanting to talk. As unusual an urge that was for him, he had to acknowledge that he was still curious about Sin. They'd barely spoken since the abrupt end of the conversation on the first day and studying Sin was a welcome respite to the monotony of surveillance.

"Is that a daily regimen back home as well?"

"What?" was the distracted reply. Sin's eyes rose to focus on him without pause in his movements.

"Your workout," Boyd said, gesturing to Sin as if the senior agent needed to look at himself for a visual aid. "You're very dedicated. Is it a habit from home?"

One dark eyebrow arched at the word home. "Why do you want to know?"

Boyd shrugged and turned the chair so he could look at Sin more easily without craning his already tired neck. "I just wondered."

Sin held his gaze without halting. His arms moved up and down without pause, his muscles flexing and extending like well-oiled machines. "I do it multiple times a day."

"You never grow tired?" Boyd asked, watching Sin thoughtfully.

Sin stopped his repetitions and pushed himself into a standing position. He wasn't wearing a shirt and the cotton pants he had on hung low on his hips before he tugged them up.

"Not particularly."

Boyd made a thoughtful noise. He got tired of working out after a couple of hours a day with breaks in between. Once Sin started he didn't seem to stop, and he was at it much more intensely and much longer than Boyd ever was. He didn't know where Sin got the energy.

"Your stamina is impressive," he commented.

There was a beat of silence and Sin said with a scoff, "I could say something, but I'll refrain."

Boyd's gaze lingered briefly on him, wondering whether that was a veiled insult. Regardless, if that was Sin's response to a compliment then Boyd assumed they were done talking for the moment. He looked dismissively away, turning his attention to the laptops once more. He noticed Sin moving around and heard the bathroom door shut, followed by the muffled rush of water, but didn't pay it any heed.

Many people came and went from the hotel but as had been too often the case, he didn't see anyone of note in the crowd. There was a brief moment in which he thought there was something of import happening. There was a stir in the crowd near an outdoor cafe in front of the hotel. Several people moved back and there seemed to be

some sort of fight occurring in the middle of it all. But when Boyd switched to another view, he saw that it appeared to be nothing more than a jilted lover's brawl.

A woman was sitting at a table looking shocked while two men grappled with each other. One of them wore clothes with a matching jacket on the chair still pulled out across the table from the woman. None of the people involved were on the Agency's list and he didn't see anyone using the fight as a distraction to slip by unnoticed. The police showed up fairly quickly but Boyd had already returned to studying the other views.

Nothing else of interest occurred so when the bathroom door opened to a cloud of steam, Boyd automatically glanced up. He'd intended to look away immediately but was unexpectedly caught by the sight of Sin, naked and still dripping with water from the shower.

He was holding a towel at his side but when he raised his arm, he used it to rub some of the water out of his hair instead of covering himself. His entire body was exposed, showing a variety of scars that marred his olive skin. There was a smattering of scars that were obviously gunshots, many thick welts, a nasty scar that Boyd could see across Sin's throat partially covered by the collar, and a startling scar that started at his pelvis and arced down to his groin.

Sin turned away towards the pack that lay on his bed and began going through it. When he did, Boyd saw that he also had a scrawled tattoo on the back of his shoulder. After going over it twice, he recognized the quote as one from John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*. 'So many and so various laws are giv'n; So many laws argue so many sins,' Boyd read silently.

He couldn't help taking in Sin's scars and tattoos along with his body itself. Although Sin often walked around shirtless and wore low-riding pants, it was the first time Boyd had seen the other man fully nude. He was thin in the waist but he was muscular, with broad shoulders that tapered into lean arms. When they'd been facing each other, Boyd also hadn't been able to help noticing that Sin was well-endowed. It all

fell together to blend well with Sin's deep voice and those striking green eyes, set in a well-balanced face.

None of what Boyd saw surprised him. Every part of Sin's body seemed to match what Boyd was starting to associate with Sin as a person: attractive, unique, and with a hint of mystery.

More than anything, he wasn't particularly thrilled with himself for noticing how attractive Sin was. It didn't serve any purpose to note that. It wasn't going to help him do his job. And considering the fact that they could hardly hold a conversation for longer than several minutes, whether or not Sin's smooth voice fit the rest of him was completely irrelevant.

So he dismissed his reaction to Sin's body, although he couldn't help looking at the tattoo on Sin's shoulder again before he made himself look away. That tattoo was curious. Did it mean that Sin enjoyed classics or had he found the quote somewhere and liked it? From what Boyd understood of Sin's situation at the Agency, the quote certainly seemed appropriate. He was also curious about the scars, the nasty one arcing toward his groin in particular, but he doubted he would get a straight answer if he asked. Sin didn't seem interested in sharing too much personal information most of the time.

Even so, Sin was more talkative now than he used to be, which led Boyd to believe that the best way to make their partnership function on any level was to try to keep talking to the other man. Keep showing Sin that he didn't care about anything except doing his job and treating Sin according to how Sin presented himself to him. If Sin ended up being an unrepentant sociopath then it may affect Boyd's view of the other man but for the moment he saw nothing to be afraid of. And certainly nothing to make him treat Sin differently than anyone else.

"Are you going out?"

Sin tugged on a pair of jeans without putting on any underwear. "Yes."

"Where are you going?"

Sin looked at him over his shoulder. He was wearing the same contemplative, narrow-eyed stare he always had when Boyd questioned him about anything. It almost seemed like he was debating whether it was a genuine question of curiosity or if Boyd was trying to get at something more.

"I don't have a definite plan. I like to wander."

Boyd nodded. "Have you visited any of the tourist attractions?"

"Not intentionally," was the slightly muffled answer as Sin pulled on a dark green t-shirt that appeared washed out and threadbare.

"Do you dislike tourist attractions or is there another reason you say that?"

Sin ran a hand through his hair after adjusting his shirt, and gave Boyd another one of his long considering stares. It was difficult to tell what he was thinking or why such inane questions gave him pause sometimes.

"What's with all of this small talk lately?" he asked finally.

"I get bored in the room," Boyd replied with a faint shrug. It wasn't even untrue, although he did have the ulterior motive of feeling out Sin. "There hasn't been much of interest on the surveillance and since I can't leave, it makes me curious about the city and what you've been doing. So far I only briefly had the opportunity to visit the Sagrada Familia."

"No one's stopping you from going out. The equipment records."

"If I don't watch it now I'll just have to watch it later. At least in real-time, if something happens I know if we need to do additional surveillance or tailing."

"Suffer then," Sin replied blandly. "Although I don't know why you're taking it this seriously. This mission is a joke. I'm not entirely sure why they keep babying you like this."

"I couldn't say," Boyd said unconcernedly. It wasn't the first time Sin had said that about their missions. His gaze tracked along some movement on the right monitor and a faint frown pulled at the edges of his lips. "But if such a non-intensive mission were to fail I can't imagine it would go over well. So regardless of the severity of the mission, I'm going to take it seriously."

There was a light scoff as Sin put on his battered boots. "Doesn't it bother you that this is all getting you nowhere?"

The comment caused Boyd to look up at Sin. "In what way?"

Sin's eyes flicked up from tying his boots, his lips pursed slightly as he looked at his would-be partner. After a moment he finished and stood, never taking his eyes off Boyd. "How do you think this is going to end?"

"My partnership with you? Or my time at the Agency?"

That earned him a humorless smirk. "Isn't it the same thing? You're here because of me."

Boyd had to acknowledge that with a nod. He leaned back and watched Sin impassively. "Then, to answer your question it will likely end when I die on a mission. Chances are that will happen sooner rather than later."

The smirk had already disappeared and the corners of Sin's mouth turned down slightly as his vivid green eyes narrowed. A flash of something crossed his face but it was difficult to discern if it was irritation, disgust, or something entirely different.

Whatever the case was, Sin turned away from him. He started for the door and paused with his hand on the doorknob. His fingers grazed it but before it turned, he looked back at Boyd again.

"Don't you have anything better to fucking do other than babysit and eventually get killed by some psycho?"

"No," Boyd said honestly. "I don't."

Sin gave him a long considering look before shaking his head and walking out the door.

## Chapter 8

The Agency gained a new light to Boyd as he walked across compound with Ryan, heading toward the R&D agent's apartment. As they started talking about his apartment Ryan complained that he wished he could paint the walls yellow instead of leaving them white. From there, the conversation shifted until Boyd learned about the sheer amount of Agency employees who lived on compound.

It wasn't mandatory to live there but for all intents and purposes, Ryan seemed to imply that the Agency preferred it, especially for field agents. Likely to avoid the inevitable questions that came when an agent lived around civilians.

They walked at a leisurely pace. What began as an explanation of where Ryan lived turned into an impromptu tour and history lesson of the compound. It was just like Ryan to go off on a complete tangent but he also had a wealth of useful information that no one else had bothered to share with Boyd.

There were four main residential buildings grouped on the opposite side of the compound from the Tower. They were fifteen floors each and contained lounge areas and mostly single bedroom apartments due to the unlikelihood of an agent ever having a family and continuing in their position. According to Ryan, about 90% of the roughly 250 field agents, analysts and R&D agents lived there except for officers and special cases who had separate living assignments in smaller buildings. Ryan also explained that Sin was one of those special cases. He lived in a small building that was usually used for people who needed extra surveillance such as new agents who hadn't yet been able to adapt to the lifestyle, agents with pending behavior or psychiatric issues, and sometimes even informants who needed asylum from the outside world after helping the Agency.

"A lot of the higher ranking peeps live off compound, though," Ryan continued as he shut the door behind them. "I don't think I know one rank 9 fieldie who lives in the dorms but I could be wrong. Most of them kind of grow out of the whole thing and the fact that they make a megaton more money than anyone else helps."

He tossed his backpack down on what appeared to be a royal blue and silver lounge sofa. It stood out vibrantly in a room that was full of mismatched furniture and eclectic knickknacks. There were three other chairs in different shades of blue, a grey and black shag rug and enough anime posters to fill a convention stand. His bookcase was filled to the brim and appeared organized completely alphabetically by comic book artist or mangaka. There were also a variety of graphic and science fiction novels mixed with huge tomes about mathematics, programming and computer languages.

"Sorry about the mess," Ryan added as he shrugged off his jacket and tossed it over one of the blue chairs. He absently wandered over to his desk and leaned over to turn on his PC. Like the bookcase, the desk was piled high with stacks of books, folders and CD cases. There was a small organizer full of flash drives and microchips.

"It's fine," Boyd said, glancing around.

The skinny R&D agent sat at his desk and typed in something, likely a log in code. "So, what made you want to find out more about him, anyway? I got the feeling you weren't really gonna take me up on that offer."

Boyd shrugged and found an empty chair near the desk. He sat down, his eyes straying across a poster along the wall nearby with some sort of mechanical robot that appeared to have wings. He briefly considered the logic of putting wings on a robot; wouldn't they just get in the way?

He dismissed the thought as he turned his attention back to Ryan while he considered the question. Truthfully, his interest in Sin had taken him a little by surprise as well. He'd planned to continue to work with Sin slowly, determining what worked with the older man and what didn't, while staying emotionally uninvolved throughout. But Sin kept doing or saying things that caught Boyd's attention.

One moment in particular had plagued Boyd as the week had dragged on. He'd expected Sin to be smug about Boyd's acknowledgment of his own impending death when that had come up but instead Sin had looked annoyed. Why was that? It was such a strange response, especially from a man who otherwise seemed to delight in pointing

out the flaws in others' plans and how futile everything was. He didn't seem to particularly care for Boyd as a partner either, so shouldn't he be pleased about that topic of conversation?

It was yet another oddity of Sin's. And somewhere along the line, during days of studying the other man both discreetly and openly between hours of dull, monotonous surveillance, Boyd's interest had been piqued. What was Sin thinking? What was the reason for those strange reactions? Why was he so distrustful of even completely innocuous questions?

What was the truth and what was misleading?

"I find myself growing curious about him," was all Boyd said aloud.

"Shittles," Ryan suddenly exclaimed, staring at his computer screen with a frown. "I forgot to send in my supply card! Anyway, why? What changed?" The last part was asked somewhat cautiously.

"Nothing dramatic." Boyd settled back in the chair and looked at Ryan thoughtfully. "He continues to be contradictory. I've been increasingly wondering which parts are true and which aren't." He paused and then added, "One comment in particular that he made caught my attention. When I asked about the rumors he said not all were untrue. It made me wonder what he meant."

"Ah."

Ryan reclined back in his chair and stared at Boyd through his thick black glasses. His mouth twisted to the side as he rocked himself back and forth thoughtfully. "If I tell you stuff, you're not gonna somehow use it against him, are you?"

Boyd frowned and lowered his eyebrows, one of the few true expressions he'd shown the R&D agent. "No. Why would I? It would serve me no purpose. I have no ill will against him; I'm just trying to understand him."

"Good." Ryan brightened and grinned at Boyd. "No offense, but I haven't met one person besides Zachary that actually wouldn't use something against him. I didn't mean like, you're an ass or something. I was just checking, especially 'cause he still hasn't been the best partner."

"Whether or not he's a good partner doesn't matter as long as it doesn't negatively affect me," Boyd said unconcernedly. He shifted, feeling something dig into his back. He sat forward, looking behind himself as he continued absently, "I don't really care enough about anything to be malicious about it."

"Right-o."

Ryan stopped rocking back and forth and steadied himself, leaning forward to peer at Boyd intently as Boyd pulled a small figurine out from behind the small of his back. He paused, his fingers curled around the figure and gaze catching on Ryan's face. At first he thought Ryan was eyeing him so seriously because he'd leaned against a well-loved toy. He realized after a moment that it wasn't that at all.

Ryan's indigo eyes narrowed and his youthful face looked almost comical as he scrunched it together to look serious. "So-- do you want to know a lot or a little? I may make lunch while we talk if it's a lot. I need to take my meds like, yesterday, and I'll puke if I don't eat first." Once Boyd realized he wasn't in trouble for the little winged robot in his hand, he relaxed minutely. It was probably silly to have been worried about offending Ryan over that but Ryan was one of the few people who took the time to give him any information and who talked to him like normal. He didn't relish the idea of losing that.

"I'd prefer more information rather than less," he said, setting the figurine on a pile of books nearby. Belatedly, the rest of what Ryan said filtered through his mind. Medication? He wondered why Ryan needed it. "So if you want to start making food that's fine."

"Coolio."

Ryan got up from his chair and moved across the room to the attached kitchen that was separated from the main room only by a counter area. "Do you want anything? I forgot to send in my supply card so all I have is like, sandwich fixings and junk."

Boyd tilted his body more toward the kitchen and considered asking if he had tea, but that wasn't a staple in everyone's kitchen. And since he wasn't particularly hungry or thirsty he didn't want to take more supplies from Ryan. "I'm fine, thank you."

The room filled with crinkling sounds as Ryan removed a large bag of pretzels from a cabinet. He put it on the counter and opened his refrigerator, digging around until he leaned back with his arms full of pre-sliced cold cuts. "Mike's has the best cold cuts, FYI. Anyway, what did you wanna know first?"

"Which stories are true?"

Ryan hesitated for only a moment before putting two slices of bread on a plate. "Well, what all have you heard or been told?"

"I know about his partners and that he's injured people on compound in the past. They told me during training that he was accused of some crimes in the city but the Agency demanded redaction. I don't know whether he actually committed any crimes or what specifically he was alleged to have done." Boyd paused, going over the different rumors he'd heard, and ultimately shook his head. "I suppose in general a clarification of what he's actually done would be of use. So many stories sound like exaggerations, but he's strong and fast enough that they could potentially be true. So it's difficult to know what sort of person I'm working with."

"Well when you put it like that, it makes total sense. They probably should have cleared that all up for you anyway but I guess they didn't wanna bias you one way or the other by going into detail about shit that they consider ancient history. But I dunno, that's kind of tardo if you ask me. 'Cause now you don't even know what to believe at all."

Ryan slathered his bread with mustard and slapped a few pieces of lunch meat on it. He glanced at the clock and opened an overhead cabinet which from what Boyd

could see was filled with different prescription bottles. Ryan took out two and set them on the counter next to his plate.

"So... let's see. Well, I guess-- I mean people were freaked out by him from the start just because when he came here he was only thirteen or fourteen and already like, better than everyone else at his job. He was always a little quick to react, always a little out of control when he lost his temper bad, so people always kind of treated him like he was a mutant. The first big thing that set everyone off though was the thing that happened down in Vickland like ten years ago or something."

"Vickland?" Boyd echoed. That neighborhood housed some of his worst and best memories. "What happened?"

There was a pause as Ryan chewed a relatively large bite of sandwich. Mustard smeared the corners of his mouth and he hastily wiped at it, glancing at Boyd with a self-deprecating roll of his eyes. "Uh--"

He swallowed and pulled himself up onto one of the bar stools. "He was coming back from a mission-- this was before the whole partner thing. Actually... it was the catalyst of the whole partner thing, I think. And he was walking through Vickland back when it was still a complete shit hole, you know? Back when the scavengers would be out in droves and stuff?"

Boyd nodded, remembering well the way Vickland had been.

Ryan jumped off the stool and went to the refrigerator again, removing a container of milk. He couldn't seem to sit still at all. "He came across this girl being raped in an alleyway and he killed her attackers. But the girl got so frightened of him that she started screaming and drew the attention of the scavengers nearby who then thought it was Hsin who started it all. They attacked him and he went nutso and took a lot of them out. Then the cops came but he was still in like, automatic defense kill mode and didn't stop. It was pretty bad."

Boyd's eyebrows rose slightly. They'd told him that Sin could get distracted by civilians and it was partially for that reason that a partner was necessary. But Boyd hadn't taken from that, or even Sin's attitude with the way he dealt with his partners, that he would care about a stranger.

"Why would he care what happened to her? Did he know her?"

"No, not at all."

Boyd gave Ryan a slightly strange look. "Then why did he interfere?"

Ryan raised his eyebrows, talking around a mouthful of food. "It was a young girl getting gang raped... any decent person would have interfered."

Boyd considered that, studying Ryan for a moment. He still didn't feel like he understood what the distinctions were for Sin; what made him stop one incident but let others pass him by without care.

He wondered why a man who'd seemed irritated and defensive over Boyd inquiring about his health and who kept reminding Boyd that he was likely to die soon, which probably would be in part because Sin didn't help like he was supposed to, would then turn around and stop someone from being hurt when it had nothing to do with him.

It wasn't that Boyd thought the girl should have been hurt or that the men had been right, but objectively speaking, she would have lived. What was the distinction for Sin between actively stopping something a person would live through but may hurt them, and passively letting others die or, in some cases, killing them himself? Death was more permanent than pain, which Boyd knew well enough a person could live through whether or not they wanted to. So what was the catalyst for Sin's actions? Why bother protecting a stranger?

"I'm trying to understand why someone who seems content with letting people die around him, and who doesn't seem to like anyone, would bother to stop someone from being hurt," Boyd explained, shaking his head slightly. "You say that any decent person would interfere but I don't know him well enough to understand his motivations

or what sort of person he is. So far it seems that his judgment of whether a person deserves death is based on whether they committed any wrongs against him or he feels it's karmic retribution. That implies he could be arrogant and feels that he can judge a person's worth for life or death based on his criteria."

Boyd paused, his eyebrows drawing down in thought. "But that seems incongruous with a person who would care about strangers being hurt. I haven't heard of him helping anyone at the Agency and I can't imagine there are never any wrongs committed here. So what causes him to help one person and not another? Is it based on the type of crime committed or the age of the victim? Has he ever helped other people aside from that girl or did something about her specifically speak to him?"

Ryan shrugged and held up a finger. His mouth was completely full and an attempt to talk around the food failed. He picked up his glass of milk and swallowed with a lip smacking sound.

"Well, I dunno. No one knows what makes him tick-- all I did was compile data and do a bunch of guesswork after he was assigned to the unit. But I do know that he considers just about everyone at the Agency his enemy so that doesn't help any would-be victims 'round these parts, know what I mean?"

He wiped his mouth and opened the pill bottles. "Like, except me and Zachary I don't really know anyone who doesn't consider him to be not... some kind of freak. And it's always been that way, even from the start. It's been years of people hating him and him hating epically in return. So yeah, I dunno. There's been conjecture by his doctors over that incident-- that he helped that girl because she was just a kid and was helpless and it brought up stuff from his own childhood. In the end, though, they think he went berserk because he was so outnumbered and felt super threatened."

"His own childhood?"

"Yep. All sorts of issues there."

Ryan hopped off his chair and began cleaning up the crumbs that had accumulated on the counter. He then stopped in mid-swipe, shook his head and instead began opening the pill bottles.

"What happened?" Boyd pressed when it became clear Ryan wasn't going to elaborate.

Having an extended discussion with Ryan apparently involved many interruptions and long pauses. He looked constantly distracted, as if he was supposed to be doing several different things at once and was having a hard time keeping them in order and getting them all done at the same time as talking.

Ryan paused yet again and began doling out pills for himself, taking them with large gulps of milk. When he was done with his routine, only then did he respond.

"There's a lot of conjecture 'bout it," he said around a half-gagged swallow of a large pill. "His earlier doctors thought he'd been badly abused as a young child whenever he lived with his mother. Then his father, Emilio, took him on and trained him to be a killer from like age eight, so I'm sure whatever method he used wasn't exactly... child protective services friendly."

Boyd was silent a moment. In that context, Sin's actions made sense to an extent. If he'd been abused since childhood he would likely have great distrust for anyone else, especially in the Agency where he'd been repeatedly treated poorly. He thought it could also make sense if Sin had identified with the defenseless young girl.

Still, although it had been referenced during training that Sin occasionally had psychotic episodes, Boyd didn't understand much about them.

"You said he went berserk and that he was in automatic defense mode. What does that mean exactly?" "Didn't they tell you anything?"

"No," Boyd said, shaking his head. "They told us that he occasionally has psychotic breakdowns and the triggers are unknown. We were given the remote for his

collar and were informed that it was because of his unpredictability that the Agency required that he have a partner."

Ryan made a thoughtful sound and studied Boyd for a moment, scratching his fingers through his unruly mass of black hair. "I guess it makes sense a tiny bit... they didn't want to make it all about what bad stuff has happened."

"Most likely," Boyd agreed. "But I want to understand what I'm dealing with. I don't want to only be given the convenient information."

The R&D agent made a noncommittal sound and moved around the counter to stand on the opposite side. He leaned against it, crossing his skinny arms over his thin chest as he watched Boyd thoughtfully. It was obvious that he still wasn't entirely trustful of Boyd which wasn't too surprising considering the previous additions to the unit. But at least Ryan seemed willing cooperate.

"So--"

He stopped, seemed to rethink whatever he was going to say and shifted slightly. "I'm going through everything in my head... And, as far as I know there are five documented occurrences of him having those episodes. Like, not him having them in general but it being documented because something bad happened as a result. I'm sure it's happened other times but nothing dramatic came of it. Anyways, two were before the Vickland thing and two were after. I mean there's a difference between him getting sick of someone and beating their ass and going into automatic kill mode, like I was saying."

"What's the difference?"

Ryan shrugged and walked over to finally sit next to Boyd. He crossed one knee over the other and swung his foot idly against the sofa. "One is the normal reaction of someone who has been trained to be a lethal weapon since like, before puberty but the other... the other is like, Hsin becoming someone else. It looks a lot like he completely shuts down mentally and only sees everyone around him as a threat and he starts just-- well, killing. Or torturing. Just going mental with violence until everything around him

stops moving. Usually it takes someone sedating him to get him to stop and when he comes to, he's fine."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched up faintly. The Agency truly must not care about Sin's partners to not specify that such unbridled violence was a possibility. Especially if the triggers were unknown. "You mentioned he targets those he sees as a threat. Does that mean he only attacks aggressors or does he attack everyone in the vicinity?"

This time Ryan stopped and rolled his eyes upward as though he were reading an imaginary panel screen as he searched for an accurate answer. After a moment he nodded decisively. "I'm not sure really. I'd think you'd be okay if you just stayed away, but there's no way to be sure."

"Interesting," Boyd said mostly to himself, and relaxed back into the chair. "And the other times? What happened?"

This time the hesitation was longer and Ryan fiddled with his pants, looking around the room as if for guidance. While he clearly didn't seem to think the Agency's tactic for leaving Boyd in the dark was the wisest, he didn't seem overly sure of himself about overriding their decision.

He stood up again and began pacing the living room, picking up his little robot figure and playing with the wings. "Well the first two happened, like, when he first got here. The first one was because some of the older-- well, you have to understand, Boyd. Even here, some people have a real stupid ass bully mentality. Some of the guards and lower ranked field agents are especially bad. They didn't like that this kid was an automatic rank 9, right? So they decided to mess with him one day after he'd been in the training room; push him around, surround him, see what he's made of-- meanwhile it's all on camera. He had a bad episode and put three in the infirmary and cracked two of their necks. He was fourteen and like almost a hundred pounds skinnier than any of those dudes easily."

That was the first concrete example Boyd had been given for why someone within the Agency may fear Sin. No one had likely expected Sin to be capable of such a feat. "Was anyone punished for the incident?"

"The guards were. That was the first time something bad happened and since they provoked him outright, it wasn't really his fault. But then everyone knew something wasn't right with him so that's when a lot of rumors started."

Ryan frowned and sat down again, this time on a little ottoman near the couch. He placed his robot on it and stared. "I remember when I heard about that, I got really scared of him. Connors at first didn't know what to do with Hsin. He thought since he was so young, maybe he should be his ward and live with us but after that he moved him out and put him in this room on the Fourth. Not a real cell but... a crappy room that was monitored all the time."

Boyd noted that between the information he'd been given by his mother and Ryan, that meant that Sin had spent the majority of his life at the Agency locked up.

Something else caught Boyd's attention from Ryan's explanation; an oddity that stood out. "You lived with Connors?" he asked curiously.

"Oh. Right." Ryan rattled off the story without blinking, as if it didn't bother him to speak of it. "My parents were a part of the Agency. My dad was a lab tech and my mother was an analyst. They both died from the lung sickness when I was young and Connors took me in. I'd grown up on the compound so he basically knew I'd always be a part of it in some way. It helped that by that time, when I was six, I'd already tested beyond high school level. So I was useful to him and stuff." Boyd's eyebrow raised. "Impressive."

Ryan made a face. "Not really. It's not like I worked for it. I was basically born this way. I could read before most babies learned how to speak."

"The fact that it's a natural talent doesn't make it less impressive," Boyd replied with a shrug. "It just means that you'll be ahead of others and have the ability to go farther than anyone else."

There was no response to that. Ryan didn't seem to want to talk too much about the fact that he was a genius or anything to do with his IQ. In fact the topic seemed unpleasant to him as a whole. So he just shrugged his thin shoulders and picked up the robot again, tossing it up and down.

He looked much younger than his twenty-four years at that moment, far younger than Boyd who was still a teenager. There was something about Ryan's animated face and small stature that made him look like an adolescent instead of a grown man.

"The next incident," he said, switching back to the previous topic, "was during his rank 10 training. It isn't as well documented because the training is top secret. I couldn't find video or specifics anywhere. Just that one of the people involved with the training got mangled."

"You never found out what started it?"

"Nope. Not one trace. It's referenced as a date in one of his doctor's files and I traced it to the time he was in his rank 10 training towards the end, but that's it."

"Hmm." Boyd wondered about the secrecy of that but ultimately decided it wasn't terribly surprising. Still, it was unfortunate, because he'd been paying attention to what had preceded Sin's episodes.

"And the other two times you mentioned?"

This time Ryan visibly squirmed. "I dunno if I should talk about it... It's pretty bad. I dunno."

That was an interesting reaction. "What are you worried about?"

Ryan sighed explosively and jumped up again, going over to the kitchen area and grabbing the bag of pretzels. "Nothing, really. I dunno-- it's just a sore topic. Most people super hate him hardcore for it."

"Without knowing what it is I can't say for certain, but I doubt it will drastically change my opinion." Boyd paused, watching Ryan thoughtfully. He wondered what was so much worse than Sin mangling people or killing a number of civilians. "If you have the information in some form you can simply give to me rather than having to tell me, that would work too."

There was a pause and Ryan shook his head. "No, it's better if I tell you. There's backstory involved and stuff. A real drama fit for TV. But, now that you mention it, I did compile all my data on a flash drive. Whenever he was put in the Janus unit, I started studying him a lot."

He munched on a pretzel and studied Boyd with round indigo eyes. "Well, it starts with Lydia Connors, really. She and her twin sister Ann are the Marshal's daughters." Boyd silently noted that Connors' daughter apparently was his mother's secretary, which was interesting. "They grew up here like me and both studied to be shrinks. Ann abandoned it but Lydia didn't. After the Vickland thing, Hsin was put in isolation on the Fourth for two years. When talk started about evaluating him to be let out, she pushed to be his doctor. Problem was, she had been infatuated with his dad back in the day and she kind of got infatuated with Hsin because he looked just like him."

That last tidbit of information stood out to Boyd; he hadn't realized that Sin looked like his deceased father. Maybe that fit into why Carhart seemed interested in supporting Sin.

He nodded, silently encouraging Ryan to continue.

Ryan finished chewing and extracted another pretzel, studying it. "So, actually Lydia wasn't all there herself. She used her position to put the moves on Hsin after

giving him drugs that made him loopy and he went berserk and, well, now she lives up in the Willowbrook home and is catatonic."

Boyd watched Ryan in contemplation as he took in that information. "Was she threatening or controlling just prior to his episode?"

"Nope. Just taking advantage of the situation. She was asking him questions about his childhood at the same time. There's a video and everything; I'm not sure what triggered it really."

Boyd considered that a moment and then asked the other question he'd been wanting to verify. "You said earlier that he was abused as a child. Was it sexual abuse?"

Ryan made a sour face. "Not sure, he never went into details but it was hinted at. His mom was a prostitute so anything is possible. Apparently when he first got here he implied enough to make it sound like most of the abuse had happened while he'd been with her."

He started to open his mouth to say more but before he could, his cell phone trilled. One slim hand disappeared into one of the many pockets on his green cargo pants and Ryan glanced at the screen of the phone.

"Ahh, I have to get back to the Tower."

Boyd nodded and stood. "Thank you for the information." He paused, wondering about the last incident as well as details on the others. "If you wouldn't mind, I'd be interested in borrowing your flash drive."

Ryan nodded, not looking surprised and went over to his desk. The drawers appeared to be full of assorted discs and implements just like the mixed Ziploc bag that he carried in his backpack. And just like with that bag, despite the disorderliness of the drawer, he somehow found what he needed without a problem.

"If you ever want to talk or hang out without Hsin being the topic, that'd be cool too."

Boyd looked at Ryan with surprise, his eyebrows lifting as he accepted the flash drive. He wasn't used to people being interested in spending time with him unless necessary. Most people ended up ignoring or disliking him. Since that had continued on a larger scale at the Agency, he'd expected it to stay that way. He'd expected that Ryan would forget about him after this aside from work or Sin-related interaction.

Having not anticipated that response, he answered without thinking to hide that he was caught off guard. "Oh. Alright."

The response brought a loud laugh from Ryan. The shorter man beamed, looking pleased with Boyd's reaction. "I'll get you to loosen up. We can watch Gundam together and eat nachos. But I have to jam at the moment so I'll talk about that more later."

It was probably just as well that they ended up parting after that because Boyd didn't know what to say to that. He didn't know what Gundam was, although he'd seen the name written on one of the posters. Whatever it was, he couldn't imagine sitting around eating nachos watching it. Things like that seemed so far removed from him that he didn't even consider them.

He didn't know what to make of Ryan, or even Sin for that matter despite the additional information he'd been given. As far as he could tell, Sin seemed to overreact, often psychotically, if he felt threatened. But were the threats real or were they imagined? It was so difficult to know.

He could be at the thought all day long and still not come to a conclusion so he decided to leave it be for now. Maybe he would understand more once he'd seen the information Ryan had gathered. Or, more likely considering the enigma that was Sin, he would only have more questions.

With the flash drive securely in his messenger bag, Boyd headed toward the library on the fourteenth floor of the Tower. He'd discovered it on accident when he'd first started exploring the Tower to determine what was where.

There was a library and report room that most people seemed to frequent in the lower levels, but fourteenth had the original reference library. It had everything from research material to a breadth of genres for casual reading, no doubt kept up for agents on their downtime.

He had discovered that the library on the fourteenth floor was usually empty and when it wasn't there tended to be at most a handful of people there. It was a quiet place to get away from the constant press of people that sometimes wore away at Boyd. And although most people opted toward digital books and information, Boyd liked having a book in his hands when he was reading or studying.

When he walked into the library, he thought it was empty aside from a man who appeared to be around Ryan's age. His light brown skin was offset by dark, uncombed hair. He had a stack of books in his hands and was gathering others that had been left on the tables. He kept pausing, setting the stack down and lifting parts of it to insert the new books in the correct order.

Boyd assumed the man worked in the library and was putting them in alphabetical or numerical order so he could shelve them. When Boyd entered, the man glanced up and then stared. Hazel-brown eyes shifted across Boyd and along his face before their eyes met. The man jerked guiltily and looked away abruptly when it became clear Boyd had noticed the stare. He almost knocked over part of the stack of books in his haste to return to his task.

Boyd didn't pay much attention to him and walked further into the library, perusing the aisles. He'd borrowed the first part of a series so he first returned that and picked out the next one. Bookstores and libraries had always appealed to him and they were one of the few places that could still suck him in even when he'd shut down his interest in almost everything else. He liked the peace and quiet of libraries, and the history contained in the books surrounding him. He liked the smell and feel of old books the most.

He lingered especially in the architectural and art areas, grabbing one of the larger photo books that he wanted to flip through but didn't want to haul all the way home. He decided to look through it while he was here, since it was quiet enough that he didn't have to feel like people were staring at him as so often seemed to be the case on compound. He wanted to be in the area where he would be least likely to be disturbed so he headed toward his favorite table, which was in the far back, as far away from the door as possible.

When he rounded the corner of an aisle he was surprised to see Sin sitting there at the table, reading a book. Boyd stopped and stared at him for a moment. It was strange and a bit startling seeing Sin so abruptly after he'd just been prying into the man's life.

Sin looked up at him, his expression instantly wary and kind of annoyed. "What?" he demanded.

"You're sitting at the table where I intended to sit," Boyd answered, then looked down at the mostly empty table. There weren't any other good choices of tables that were as tucked away as this one so Boyd was reluctant to leave.

Pale green eyes regarded him skeptically. "You're randomly here of your own accord?"

"Yes," Boyd said, setting the books down so Sin could see. "I came to continue a series and look through art books. I prefer this library. It's quiet, which is also the reason I prefer this corner. Fewer people come back here so I can spend time without being bothered."

"No shit," Sin said flatly, gaze continuing to bore into Boyd distrustfully. He slammed his book shut and Boyd saw that it was a collection of post-war poems. "I find it odd that you're here. I don't believe in coincidences."

"Well, that's unfortunate because that's what this is," Boyd said impassively. "If I'd wanted to track you down, why would I do something so obvious? Accidentally running across you would be a ridiculous excuse when this is such a quiet and removed area."

The other man gave him a flat look and began stacking two more books on top of the one he'd been reading. "I was thinking more along the lines of someone sending you here for some purpose but thanks for the speech."

"No one sent me." Boyd looked down at Sin's stacked books and then up to meet Sin's eyes. "Are you planning to leave?"

"Didn't you say you wanted the table?"

"You don't have to leave for that," Boyd replied, pulling his books closer toward him. "I was only hoping to take one side of the table but if you don't want me to, I'll leave instead. You were here first."

Sin gave him another one of his long blank stares, shook his head and opened the book again. "Whatever."

Boyd pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table from Sin and sat down. He set the reading books to the side and opened the large photo book. It was a compendium of some of the most well-known buildings, cities, and styles across the world, with a portion of it devoted to the history of different movements and architects. Boyd liked it because the size of the book afforded larger, higher resolution photographs that he could look at more closely, while the history provided context.

He flipped through the pages but he couldn't help paying partial attention to Sin. He felt a gaze on him and looked up, meeting Sin's eyes. Sin dropped his gaze back down to the book in front of him but Boyd forgot about the photo book for a moment.

Boyd couldn't help feeling perplexed by Sin. Was the distrust and sarcasm that bordered on rudeness his true feelings or were they a defensive reaction to others? Where did truth end and deception begin when it came to Sin, or was it all an act

regardless? Sin seemed reasonable enough now but he didn't know whether Sin was acting this way for a particular reason.

But what was of particular interest to Boyd and what he hoped he may end up finding more information on within the flash drive was the quieter side of Sin. The person he was at moments like this, when he didn't seem like he wanted to push Boyd away immediately. When there was the indication that there could still be more to him.

The books he'd chosen were interesting enough on their own. Poetry, albeit post-war, and classic literature hinted at a deeper intellect or at least a person who may be thoughtful. And the fact that Sin had dropped his gaze rather than staring defiantly into Boyd's eyes was just another moment to consider.

Sin seemed to have so many aspects that were deeply or partially hidden and if Boyd had felt the strength of emotions he once had, he would have characterized his interest in Sin as fascination. As it was, he found himself growing almost grudgingly intrigued by the older man.

He leaned against the table with his arms partially crossed, and studied Sin more closely for a moment before he flicked his gaze down to the poetry book.

"How is that?" he asked, his voice a low tone for the library but cast with a faint hint of curiosity.

Pale green eyes flicked up instantly. "What?"

"The book," Boyd said, gesturing at it. He didn't look away from Sin's face. "I haven't read anything by that poet. I was curious if it's good."

There was a pause where Sin stared at him mutely but then his eyebrows drew down and his full mouth twisted slightly, giving his face more animation than it had had since Boyd arrived at the library. The expression was at once incredulous and confused but then a silhouette from the nearby aisle shifted and Sin's face smoothed back into his usual bland look.

He looked over as the library attendant shelved a couple of tomes before hurrying back the way he'd come. It was only then that Sin answered.

"Rather dull, actually."

"Hmm." Boyd leaned back in his chair. "Do you read a lot of poetry?"

Again, green eyes leveled him with a suspicious stare. It seemed as though Sin couldn't figure out why any of this information would be of value to his partner. "I don't really read a lot of anything. Until recently, I haven't had access to books since very early in my childhood."

The response was spoken curtly but then after a breath Sin added, "However I enjoyed classics and epic poems at that time. After enjoying Milton as a child, the word play here seems relatively amateurish."

Boyd studied Sin with increasing interest as it became apparent that the intellect he'd thought was there did exist. After all, there weren't many children who would enjoy Milton. "You had advanced taste for a child," he observed. "I used to read well above my grade level as well."

"And look where we both ended up in the world," was the dry response. "How far our good taste has gotten us."

Boyd's lips faintly twitched at the edges. "Intelligence doesn't always equate to common sense. Or, for that matter, the ability to fully choose one's path in life."

Sin watched him for a moment and leaned back in his chair, pushing unruly strands of fine black hair out of his face. The constant fall of it seemed to irritate him and it was obvious he wasn't used to having so much. He seemed to be considering something, perhaps whether or not he should say something, but in the end he just looked back down at his book.

Boyd debated going back to reading but he was loathe to give up one of the few times Sin seemed relatively approachable. "Is your love for Milton why you got that

tattoo?" he asked curiously. "Initially I thought you simply enjoyed the irony of the quote."

The other man made a face at the word 'love.' "It was both. Milton's use of language was extraordinary. Especially considering it's a nearly four hundred year old text but the subject matter manages to still be applicable now." There was a slight pause and Sin raised his eyebrow. "I'm surprised that you recognized the quote."

"His wording is memorable," Boyd replied simply with a shrug.

"Indeed."

Before any more could be said on the topic, the silence of the library was broken by a loud voice towards the front. A slightly disjointed conversation floated to the back where they were sitting. Although the context meant nothing to Boyd, he noticed that Sin's eyes had narrowed slightly and his posture had stiffened.

There was no immediate indication as to what exactly had made him so tense until heavy footsteps came closer to them and Harry Truman appeared next to the table. The muscular dark-haired man leered down at them, his mouth twisted in a mocking grin.

"Study date?" His thick eyebrows lifted, brown eyes going from Boyd to Sin. "Mind if I join?"

"I do, actually. I only give reading lessons on Sundays."

Harry's eyes narrowed slightly but the smirk didn't leave his face. "You're a real smart ass when they let you out of your cage, aren't you?"

Sin just stared at him flatly.

"Is there a reason for your interruption?" Boyd asked, watching Harry impassively.

Heavy lidded eyes swung over to Boyd. His eyes flit over Boyd's thin build and his smirk widened. "We're meant to check on Vega here from time to time. I volunteer for the job. He's like a pet of mine."

Harry's smirk spread into an outright grin as his brown gaze moved back to Sin. "Aren't you?"

The tension seemed to be steadily building and Sin's fingers had curled loosely around his book. His eyes never left Truman's even as he slowly began putting his stack of books together. "I hear word that there's a sixteen-year-old in the training complex, Harry. Perhaps you should go see if he's your type. A bit old but you seem open to variety lately."

The guard's face flooded with color and he jerked forward instantly as if to swing. Sin didn't move an inch; he didn't even flinch as Harry's clenched fist stopped only centimeters from his high cheekbone. Harry's mouth had pulled back into a snarl at that point but he retracted his fist as Sin stared at him with the same chill in his vivid green eyes.

"Are we finished?" Sin asked, voice quiet and deadly.

Harry didn't answer as he seemed to struggle to control his flaring temper. Sin stood, picked up his books and walked away as if the incident hadn't even occurred. Despite the fact that the guard had come with the intention to provoke, he was the one who looked the most upset by the incident.

His eyes dropped to Boyd and turned into slits as if he hated Boyd as well for witnessing the interaction.

Boyd returned Harry's glare with a largely impassive stare, although his eyebrow ticked up faintly. What little emotion was visible on his face showed that he wasn't particularly impressed.

There was definitely an especial amount of tension between those two. The implications of the conversation shed some amount of light on it, including the slightly disturbing way Harry had addressed Sin.

Harry finally seemed to relax, rocking back on the balls of his heels and rolling his shoulders. He ran a hand through his thick brown hair, gave Boyd another assessing glare and then turned without a word.

Boyd watched the man go, his eyes narrowing faintly in thought. After he was alone again, he turned his attention back to his book. However, at that point the silence was almost distracting. He found that he felt it was unfortunate that Harry had arrived since he'd finally been making some amount of conversational progress with Sin.

He kept thinking about what Ryan had said, and the implications of Sin's past, and the familiar way Harry treated Sin. In the end he found that the questions clamoring in his mind did not allow him much respite for looking at photographs of architecture. No matter how detailed they were.

He sighed and shut the book. He wasn't sure whether he was more discontent with the fact that the interaction had distracted him from being able to concentrate when alone and had effectively ruined any chances of a quiet few hours... Or whether, instead, he didn't mind that Sin had been there and he was more displeased that Harry had interrupted them.

It was odd to consider the idea that he could have been, on any level at all, enjoying Sin's company. Still, now that Sin was entrenched firmly in his mind again he decided he may as well look into the information Ryan had provided him.

He ended up putting back most of the books and only brought with him the continuation of the series. When he got home, he opened his father's old office which he hadn't touched in years. He could almost feel the presence of ghosts, shifting just out of his perception.

When he turned the light on it flickered dully. Many of the light bulbs had burned out long ago and he hadn't bothered replacing them. The bombs had affected the electricity and some rooms had stronger currents than others.

He didn't pay heed to the ambiance and booted up the computer. It was old and unused and took a long time to load, with labored whirring in the process. He ended up leaving it to load to go make himself some jasmine tea, and when he returned it was finally ready.

For so many years, this room had been off-limits; partially due to an unspoken rule of his mother's to not disturb anything that had been his father's, and partially because he hadn't wanted to be reminded of old ghosts anyway.

He remembered from childhood sitting quietly in the living room, reading a book or drawing on paper and looking up every time he thought he heard movement that indicated his dad was done. He used to long for those moments when his father would abruptly open the door and appear, tired lines etched into his face from hours of working on the computer.

Even so, his brown gaze used to dart around immediately and the second he saw Boyd, he always broke into a grin.

Boyd remembered the way his dad had swooped down on him and picked him up, hugging him against that chest that had felt so broad and inviting and safe, and the affectionate way those large fingers had ruffled his hair or held him closer. The obvious happiness and excitement in his voice as he'd proclaimed he was done with work and asked Boyd what he wanted to do.

That moment when his father had appeared in the hallway had always been Boyd's favorite. Although there were sometimes hours if not entire days prior to that when his father would rarely appear, the moment he had entered the room he'd always lit it up. Walls had seemed too paper thin to contain that grin. Dismal days had seemed brighter.

His presence had always seemed larger than life and the sparkle in his eye had so often seemed genuinely happy or mischievous. The smell of ink had seemed to linger on his father's clothing as well, although Boyd had never known specifically why. It had just been his scent. That, mixed with old books and newspapers and generic soap.

Perhaps that was why Boyd felt an affinity for old bookstores and libraries. Aside from the ability to disappear into a corner, it was a comforting place the way his father's arms had once been.

After his father's death, the room had been used occasionally; oftentimes by Lou to play a game, although Boyd had also utilized it for schoolwork. Some of their use had been important and some frivolous. When he thought of pulling up an internet browser he imagined the search engine still displaying a search for Latin phrases.

The thought made his stomach clench and expression shut down, and he looked away from the familiar background to stare at the wall. He ignored every thought that went through his mind until he was certain he could stay on task.

The times of his father or Lou using the room were long ago and those memories were best left untouched. None of it held any relevance or meaning for his life anymore. If it weren't for the fact that the office held the only computer in the house, he would not have even opened that creaking door.

He sat down at the desk, brushing off the thick layers of dust that were in the way, and set his mug on an old jewel case to the side. Although his mother never came home anymore and his father was long dead, he still automatically followed etiquette to keep from staining the furniture.

Once the flash drive was inserted and a window popped up on screen, he saw that Ryan had collected quite a bit of information. There were many folders and files, and judging by the extensions Ryan had compiled videos, images, and documents.

Boyd clicked through a few of the images first. They appeared to be pictures of Sin over the years. Most were still frames from security or surveillance cameras. One picture was what appeared to be a mug shot from jail and another appeared to be a picture taken for identification purposes for the Agency.

Sin's appearance hadn't changed much over the course of the years; every image portrayed the same penetrating green gaze and unruly black hair although that had taken on streaks of red at some point. The progression in age was interesting, not because of his physical appearance, but because of the slight change in demeanor as he'd grown older.

The image of Sin at the age of fourteen showed a thin, sinewy boy with almost delicate features. Long black eyelashes framed his pale green eyes. As intelligent and calculating as those eyes seemed to be, teenage Sin's face was completely void of any expression or emotion. Several pictures of him over the subsequent years seemed to follow that trend. It was hard to imagine that scrawny, striking child going on assignments and taking lives, but Boyd knew Sin had.

At some point his mannerisms appeared to have gradually begun to change. His face became extremely expressive and often the look in his eyes was challenging, hostile and accompanied by the mocking smirk that Boyd was familiar with now. The change could imply that Sin had found the ability to express himself over the years by rediscovering emotions he hadn't been able to have as a child assassin.

Boyd's experience with Sin, however, told a different story. He suspected the opposite was true. Sin's provoking manner seemed like an act or defense mechanism to keep others at bay until he could discern their motives. What he was truly feeling was something only Sin knew.

He returned to the main folder and watched the videos. The first video he saw seemed to be the one Ryan had referred to with the girl that had been attacked.

Grainy footage from what appeared to be a surveillance camera filled the screen. From the angle, Boyd guessed that it was fixed on a streetlight as it hovered above a

street he recognized in Vickland. The date at the bottom of the video was seven years old, which explained why the area had not been cleaned up yet. This hadn't been long after the second major wave of bombs that had devastated the country.

After joining the Agency, Boyd learned that prior to the peak of the war all those years ago, paranoia had been high. Cameras had been installed nationwide in concealed vantage points to watch high traffic areas and the sections of the cities that were known to house criminal behavior.

It had been an attempt to catch terrorists in the act. In order to avoid losing anything, the footage had been routed through heavily protected wires and casings to automated facilities that could record for years even without a single person present to monitor. Several of the cameras were destroyed during the war, despite all precautions taken, but many had survived.

Boyd doubted that many of the people on screen knew they were being recorded, if any at all. He had grown up in Lexington and had visited Vickland with Lou many times, and he didn't remember ever noticing any cameras. It was possible, of course, that any that had remained in Vickland had been removed in the years between the second wave of bombs and when Boyd had been old enough to be wandering that neighborhood with Lou.

At one time, Vickland had nearly been an extension of the Financial District. Since the bombs, it had fallen into disrepair. And, for people like the girl running across the screen, it had become dangerous.

Boyd watched as the scene played out. A young girl of thirteen or fourteen ran across the screen in terror, three men who dwarfed her petite form running after her. They caught her quickly and began tearing at her clothing before they forced her down within view of several scavengers who didn't pay much attention to the affair. Her mouth was wide open and her face was twisted, showing that she was screaming loudly in panic.

Sin appeared, walking calmly down the street. He didn't seem to be startled by the scene before him but he did stop and observe. The men halted their activity and words were exchanged, but the camera didn't pick up any sound.

Sin appeared to be staring at the young girl with a blank look on his face as she sobbed and struggled, but there was something in his eyes that made it obvious that the disinterest was only on the surface. The slight curl of his mouth, the way his hand slowly balled into a fist; they were all telling signs that Sin felt something else as he looked at the scene. It was not an expression that Boyd was familiar with and it inspired curiosity in him as he watched.

Without transition, Sin abruptly looked at the men with an expression of wild fury. The look was deadly, frightening and Boyd wondered if this was what Ryan had meant when he'd said that Sin could 'lose it' sometimes. The expression on Sin's face had the ability to send a shiver down a person's spine and it was painfully obvious that in that moment he was not entirely sane.

What happened next was a blur. One second Sin was standing there facing off against three considerably stronger looking men and in the next, he was slaughtering them. His movements were almost graceful, decisive-- he killed effortlessly and with a skill that was startling.

They truly hadn't stood chance.

The carnage was over seemingly within seconds. Afterward, Sin stood there covered in blood. He stared, wide-eyed and snarling. The girl unsurprisingly began screaming in terror. This time it caught the attention of the scavengers and for some reason, the entire scene erupted in chaos.

Boyd could only assume that the scavengers had thought Sin had murdered three men and was now attacking a girl. It was the only reason he could think of to explain what happened next.

They swooped in on Sin with pipes, bats, bricks-- whatever was in the debris that lay in piles in the area, and he responded with lethal force. Everyone who came near him fell to the ground. No matter what they threw at him and how many jumped on him, his lanky form managed to overpower them. It wasn't long before police arrived in droves and he was finally taken down.

Boyd frowned slightly at the screen in thought and moved to the next file in chronological order.

The video was the same night but apparently several hours later. The picture was sharper and showed Sin sitting at a table in a small room. He was still covered with dried blood but the wild look was gone from his face. Instead he looked withdrawn and dismayed. He kept looking at his hands and scrubbing them against his pants, his full mouth turned down deeply at the sides. After awhile he got up to pace the room, scratching at the dried blood that clung to him and raking his hands through his hair at random.

Boyd could hear the brush of fabric and realized this video had sound.

It went on that way for awhile until two men appeared in the room. One stayed by the door and one approached Sin, telling him to sit down and be still. He introduced himself as Detective Lyons and his partner as Detective Valdez. The next several minutes passed with them attempting to question Sin about the incident. Sin answered vaguely and then ceased to respond at all when Lyons became increasingly aggressive.

The man seemed intent on ignoring the way the incident had actually begun and instead labeled Sin as a rapist and mass murderer. The interview went on a downward spiral from there as other crimes were brought up; crimes that had happened in other parts of the city but which Lyons appeared to be trying to implicate Sin as the perpetrator.

"You're a fucking moron."

It was the first time Sin had spoken in several minutes on the tape-- nearly fifteen Boyd saw when he looked at the timer. The response was immediate. Lyons snatched Sin up by the arm and slammed his head down onto the table with a resounding thump. Boyd knew without even having to think twice that Sin had allowed himself to be manhandled. But the detective was not so intuitive-- he twisted one of Sin's arms behind his back and leaned down to hiss something in his ear that was inaudible.

Valdez remained generally expressionless as he maintained his position by the door.

The abuse went on for some time. It seemed that Lyons was prepared to beat a confession out of Sin and for some reason, Sin was letting him. Perhaps he didn't want to cause any more trouble by lashing out. Perhaps he was just waiting for the Agency to arrive and get him out like Boyd knew they eventually did.

Maybe it was something else entirely. Judging by the darkly haunted look that had been in his eyes prior to the interrogation, it seemed that Sin had been affected by the incident that had led to him being there. Maybe he felt some sense of guilt or responsibility? Maybe he even thought he deserved to be roughed up?

Boyd wound up skipping through a lot of the interrogation. The physical abuse and Sin's lack of response was uncomfortable to view.

The detectives kept him there for over three hours while repeating the same redundant questions in the hopes that Sin would crack and agree to confess to the assortment of crimes. By the time Boyd resumed viewing, Lyons was panting and covered in splatters of blood. He was visibly frustrated and it made him more violent as Valdez kept guard by the door.

Through it all Sin had remained aggravatingly passive and it wasn't until Lyons straddled him on the floor that he had a visible reaction. Before then, he had stared blandly into space as though the abuse was boring to him. Now, his pale green eyes locked with Lyons'. Boyd didn't know what passed between the two men but Lyons stiffened and his hackles rose.

"You're mine, you piece of shit," he said quietly, his voice intense as he whispered into Sin's face. "You killed civilians, cops-- who knows what else you've done. You're going to own up to it, boy."

"I'm not going to own up to anything," Sin said flatly. "Now get the fuck off of me."

Lyons sneered and removed his gun from the holster. "Do you really think you can give me orders? You do what I say when I fucking--" He slammed Sin's head against the floor for emphasis. "--say it. If I say open those cocksucking lips and blow my gun, you'll do it. Won't you?"

Sin's lips curled back into a sneer.

"Won't you?" Lyons repeated, pushing the barrel of his gun against Sin's lips.

In the space of a second, Lyons went from straddling Sin to flying across the room with savage violence. He slammed against the wall but almost before he'd made it, Sin was on him again. The gun flashed in Sin's hand just as Valdez shouted and drew his own gun.

A shot was fired and Valdez crumpled to the floor, blood pooling beneath him.

Sin growled, dark eyebrows drawing together. He looked pissed off and frustrated and murderous but not insane like he had earlier. His breath was coming faster although Boyd doubted it was from exertion. At that point, Lyons climbed to his feet and threw himself at Sin in a stumbling blind rage.

"Fuck it," the younger version of Sin said flatly and raised the gun. He unloaded it into Lyons head until nothing remained but pulp. He stared at the body for a moment, tossed the gun down and walked out of the room.

The video ended shortly after, leaving Boyd to stare at the screen blankly.

He wondered about the violence in the two connected videos. It seemed from the first one that Sin hadn't been in his right mind when he'd killed the civilians and cops,

and yet he hadn't attacked until he'd been attacked first. Or, in the case of the three men, the girl had been attacked. Yet he'd allowed the detective to abuse him for hours and didn't react until he was on the floor.

Was that because Lyons had pinned him down?

He didn't have an immediate answer to that so he continued to sift through the information that Ryan had meticulously cataloged. After that incident, the Agency covered up what had happened and locked Sin away for two years. He was kept in a cell on the Fourth Floor Detainment Center and away from the general population.

The next documented information was that Lydia Connors was acting as Sin's newest psychiatrist. Apparently they intended to release him to active duty if he could pass psych evaluations. As Ryan had referenced, that also ended in failure for him.

There were scant amounts of scanned documents from Lydia's files as well as some files that had been taken from her computer. None of it was very helpful or conclusive due to the randomness at which they were included and it seemed likely that Ryan hadn't been able to recover the majority of her files.

The main thing of note in the file of Lydia Connors was how she came to land in Willowbrook Home in a catatonic state. Boyd found a video of the infamous session.

The clarity of the video instantly allowed Boyd to recognize it as Agency quality. Sin was there, as was Lydia-- he recognized her immediately as the identical twin of Ann Connors. The video was not long compared to the interrogation video with the detectives. It lasted only forty-five minutes but those minutes were disturbing in more ways than one.

From the nature of the conversation it seemed that during his incarceration, guards reported that Sin had been having nightmares. To pursue this, Lydia claimed she wanted to give him something to relax in order to discuss them further. This immediately seemed wrong in Boyd's mind but the woman carried it out anyway, instructing Sin to take an unknown quantity of unknown pills. He seemed hesitant but

ultimately looked resigned to the process despite the fact that it seemed he did not expect it to work.

Within the next few minutes, the effects of the drugs were clear. Sin's pale green eyes drooped, his voice slurred-- she encouraged this, telling him to shut his eyes and relax. To remember what his nightmares had been. He answered sluggishly, clearly drugged, and she coaxed things out of him. No matter how disturbed he seemed or how resistant-- no matter how his breath became labored and sweat began to trickle down his brow-- she continued. That alone disturbed Boyd.

She moved closer to him, stroking his face, cooing that he should relax. Murmuring how much he looked like his father. All the while, Sin seemed caught in one of the nightmares she'd begun questioning him about.

"No," he uttered in a low strained voice. "No--"

He twisted his head, full lips parted and overgrown messy black hair hanging around his face as he half slumped over the table. Muttered words in a different language escaped his mouth but they were too low and whispered for Boyd to hear.

"It's okay, baby," she whispered, light brown hair tumbling loose from its clip as she knelt beside him. Lydia began rubbing his neck, running fingers through his hair.

Boyd's eyes narrowed on her before he focused on Sin's fingers, the way they were gripping the edges of the table with a white knuckled grip. The table began to slowly cave beneath it and Sin's breath became audibly more ragged, his voice more distressed. Lydia didn't seem to notice.

"Shh," Lydia said, pushing his hair back and crouching beside him.

Boyd thought she had to have noticed how much it was making Sin's condition worsen. It seemed so evident to Boyd the way Sin seemed to cringe away from her touch. The way she was stroking him was obviously worsening whatever was happening but Boyd could only assume she didn't care. It was surprisingly irritating for

him to watch. He wanted to be able to tell her to stop; to think about Sin and his mental health. He wanted to demand what she thought she was doing.

It was around that time that Lydia began kissing Sin. She seemed utterly incapable of stopping herself as she stared at him with ill-concealed desire. It was a feverish look; at once worshipful and obsessive. She either ignored or didn't realize how badly he was reacting to her probing tongue and groping hands. She slid one hand down, rubbing against his crotch as she continued to rape his mouth.

That was when he reacted.

His eyes snapped open. They seemed completely devoid of awareness or recognition. It was the wild-eyed look from the incident in Vickland and he reacted with the same violence.

He was obviously out of control and completely unaware that she was Lydia Connors rather than whatever he'd been seeing behind his closed eyelids when she'd begun touching him.

This time the attack wasn't as decisive as the last; it was tinged with a frantic angry madness as if he wanted her to feel pain. Whatever he'd been remembering or dreaming about in the drugged stupor had driven him further over the edge than usual. She paid for it with broken glass used to slash her face and body before the guards charged in and stopped it all.

The video was brutal and violent, with blood spraying and Lydia screaming in terror. Sobbing and begging Sin to stop. There was a small part of Boyd that felt uncomfortable watching it on her behalf, but the larger part of him couldn't believe she had pushed it so far. It disgusted him that she had so obviously taken advantage of someone in such a vulnerable position, all for her own gain. Especially since Sin had been known to react violently before then, so mentally compromising and then sexually assaulting him was an even stupider thing to do.

The disturbing way she'd seemed incapable of stopping, apparently getting off on his resemblance to Emilio, was only matched by Sin's seeming inability to stop himself once he'd started attacking her. It was a situation which was unfortunate on both their parts but Boyd couldn't feel any sympathy for Lydia. She was supposed to be Sin's psychiatrist, a position that needed to inspire trust since people were at their most vulnerable when discussing their issues. Yet the first chance she got, she was all over him. If that hadn't happened, what would she have done in the future? How often would she have drugged and raped Sin, adding to the abuse he already received, all so she could get off on her own delusions?

Boyd's face shifted, turning cold and displeased with the thinning of his lips and narrowing of his eyes. He replayed the video and paused on Sin's expression, studying his face. He wondered about the difference between episodes and what could cause it.

That prompted him to skip to the last recorded episode of Sin's. This one was only a year old and had been captured on surveillance of the Fourth as he was escorted upstairs after the death of his last partner.

For the most part Sin seemed silent but his eyes were brimming with impotent rage as Harry Truman was seen on the video hauling him down the corridor. They were accompanied by Dennis McNichols and Luke Gerant. There was another guard there whom Boyd had never seen and a man whose badge marked him as a lieutenant in the guards. There wasn't audio in the surveillance cameras in the halls but the interactions were clear.

Harry and Dennis were taunting Sin, getting in his face and touching him in an overly familiar way that made it obvious that this treatment of him was the norm. Luke was the only one there who looked uncomfortable with what was happening but he didn't say anything to intervene. The lieutenant, if anything, seemed amused and pleased by the entire exchange as he offered his own unheard comments. He kept grinning at Sin smugly, even when Harry pinned Sin to the wall outside of his cell and got very close to his face before saying something in his ear.

At this point, Boyd could now pinpoint the signs of Sin's episode approaching. He was shaking visibly, his face pale with rage and eyes widening slightly. Anger seemed to build in him before his face snapped into the blank mask of indifference and he erupted in a blind rage.

Harry threw himself back just in time but the lieutenant wasn't lucky enough to escape. Sin grabbed him and yanked him back into the cell right before Dennis frantically slammed the door shut. He locked the door with the keypad, his fingers shaking visibly.

There was a brief argument between the guards after that before they began calling for reinforcements. From what Boyd read afterward, it had been too late for the guard captain and he died of his wounds. Apparently Sin had ripped open the man's jugular with his teeth.

There was an interesting mix of punishment and forgiveness when it came to Sin's episodes which made it seem as though the Marshal dealt with them with some mote of logic. He punished Sin for the civilian incident which had compromised Sin's identity in the city and resulted in many deaths, which had drawn more attention than wanted. But Boyd was unsure if the time spent on the Fourth for that was an actual punishment or a way of keeping him isolated for a couple of years until the public forgot that they'd ever seen his face.

The two years of incarceration following the Lydia incident, however, was clearly a punishment. This wasn't too surprising considering she was the Marshal's daughter. Even then, Connors must have viewed the tape if Sin had been briefly jailed rather than terminated for the attack. There was no denying that Lydia had brought it on herself as she took advantage of Sin and used her position to get what she wanted. If the Marshal was anything like Boyd's mother, he would have had very little tolerance for her behavior or sympathy for what had followed.

The final incident had also seemed to be forgiven, or so it appeared. Sin was initially put on the Fourth due to his failure to comply with his partners but no extra time was tacked on for the death of the guard captain.

In fact, Sin had been released sooner than ever. Was it possible that these deaths meant nothing to the Agency in the face of Sin's skills? Or was it possible that the Marshal viewed these same videos and came to the conclusion that the attack had been provoked? If so, why didn't they share this with the majority of the populace instead of allowing Sin to be labeled as a monster and alienated as a whole as if he were someone who killed at will for enjoyment?

The entire situation was baffling.

Even when Boyd thought of his own interactions with Sin, his thoughts were inconclusive. Sin seemed to react based on threat level but that wasn't always necessarily the case, even during times when Sin was in his right mind. After all, how much of a threat was Boyd truly to Sin? And yet when Boyd had touched him on that first mission Sin had slammed him against the car and cut off his breath. Yet if Sin had truly wanted to kill him, he could and would have. So how much of Sin's behavior was threatening bravado, how much was insanity, and how much was a defensive reaction he may not be able to control?

The only thing Boyd could conclude with any certainty was that Sin was mistreated on the compound. He suspected that such treatment added to the issues but he didn't know to what extent. Maybe Sin was simply this way on his own regardless of how others acted. Maybe others acted that way as a result of how Sin had treated them all previously. Or maybe it was the systematic dehumanization of someone who made no effort to do anything but live up to their poor expectations of his behavior.

Whatever the case, Sin was as much a mystery now as he ever had been. Especially when Boyd thought about the moments when it seemed like there could be more to Sin than initially met the eye. Which was the lie? The quietly sarcastic man who

read poetry and Milton in the corner, or the crazed person who could literally rip people apart and who killed in cold blood?

Or was either a lie at all?

## Chapter 9

The hallways were long and dark, and every noise echoed tellingly around Boyd. He had to be especially careful when he moved, because even the slide of fabric could give away his location. Jeffrey had decoded the information on the location of the headquarters of 53, and it had come time for Boyd and Sin to follow up.

The place was located twenty miles outside of Carson. It was ideal for escape into the thick forest near the Wastelands following 53's repeated attacks on the city. The large, abandoned underground bunker 53 had chosen for their headquarters had steel so thick that signals could not penetrate it. Not cell phones and not GPS. Leaving Boyd completely cut off once inside.

It took him awhile to discover where Warren Andrews was hidden in the maze of hallways and floors. He managed to narrow it down to a corridor but the electricity was faulty this far underground and the lights were flickering into darkness more often than they were on.

It was the second assignment he'd had since Ryan had given him the flash drive and the second time that Sin was actually participating to an extent. While he limited his cooperation to playing lookout or offering opinions on tactical aspects, it was more than it had ever been in the past. It was a big difference to actually work together for once, and so far everything was going well. Sin was watching the outside of the bunker to see the movement of the hostiles as well as generally checking out the area.

Boyd had slipped into the base itself to observe the set up from the inside. He wanted to get an idea of what may have changed from the blueprints and to see if there were any specific security vulnerabilities he could take advantage of the next day when they would actually carry out the mission.

Boyd spent nearly an hour inside the base, slipping from one shadow to the next in silence. He was very careful to tread so his boots made no noise. Unit 16 had provided him with clothing that allowed him to blend in with the hostiles and had replicated their signature red armband. He wore the armband over a dark green long-

sleeved shirt and black fatigues, and his hair was pulled back in a low ponytail at the base of his neck.

The temperature was rising as summer rolled in, but it wasn't unbearable. Still, he could feel the heat trapped by his hair against his skin. The shirt he wore would have felt stifling if it had been just 5 degrees hotter. The heat was made worse in the bunker where there was little air flow, although the ground helped mediate some of the intensity.

He heard footsteps treading heavily toward him, the scuffing of soles against concrete. It echoed so much that Boyd could hardly tell which direction it came from. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small hand held radio that he'd found in one of the supply rooms. From what he saw, the men guarding the perimeter were not the only ones to carry them.

Two men turned a corner and walked toward Boyd down the hallway. Boyd fumbled with the radio, turning it around and trying to click it on and off as if he had no idea how to work it. The men were talking quietly about something and the words bounced around them. It was nothing of consequence, but he kept it all in his mind anyway.

As they came up beside him Boyd looked up, visibly startled, and stood to attention. The radio was gripped in one hand and hit his thigh, causing him to seemingly accidentally press a button. It blared static and he dropped it on the floor with a resounding clatter.

"Sorry," he said, frazzled. He knelt down and fumbled with the radio. In his peripheral vision, Boyd saw one man roll his eyes. They walked past without incident. Boyd made sure to make noise fumbling and cursing softly with the radio until their footsteps were long gone. When he no longer heard them he flipped the radio off and left the facility without anyone else seeing him.

Boyd made it out to their agreed upon meeting place and leaned against a tree waiting for Sin to arrive. He examined the radio so he had an excuse in case someone walked by and wondered what he was doing.

It didn't take long before Sin appeared, as silent and undetectable as always.

"Two exits other than the one you used," he said flatly. "One to the North and another to the East. They are guarded by two hostiles at all times. Beginning at approximately 0900 hours they switch shifts every eight hours. It is done efficiently with no opening, however at half past the hour, five hours into each shift there is a thirty minute meal break for each man. When one leaves, the entrance is guarded by one guard for this time and there are brief, three minute openings at intervals as he paces back and forth to observe either side of the forest." He looked at Boyd. "When you sneak in tomorrow, that would be the best opportunity."

Boyd nodded. He noted the term 'you' and was unsurprised to realize Sin had no intention of accompanying him on the mission the next day. Pushing himself away from the tree, he put the radio in his back pocket and walked away from the base.

"I believe I've located the leader. There's a corridor on the main floor in the Southwest corner that seems likely to hold his rooms. It's in the best position to be defended. The lighting is faulty in places and every sound echoes considerably, but there are few checkpoints once one is inside the building. They put too much faith in the lack of entrances and the heavy guarding."

Sin nodded sharply and looked away. He looked more tense as the time for the assault on the bunker came closer. "If you are able to speak with Andrews, they will most likely immediately disarm you."

"I have some hidden weapons and if nothing else I can attempt to steal some from them. Still," he continued, looking at Sin with faintly narrowed eyes and a serious cast to his features. "Do you really not plan to come?"

This was a mission that would be too difficult for him to undertake entirely on his own. He would be going into a base filled with hostiles. Then, without backup, he would be expected to negotiate with the leader or, barring that, kill him. His comm unit didn't even seem to work properly in the bunker. There were so many variables involved that it was practically a suicide mission to go in alone.

Pale green eyes met his for a long moment but Sin kept his face perfectly unreadable. In the time they'd known each other Boyd had come to realize that Sin was a master of masking his thoughts and that had not changed over time. His body language, however, was a different story. He fidgeted when he was agitated about something and when he ran a hand through his black and red hair, it was an indication of how much the question aggravated him.

His full lips parted as if to reply but then his eyes narrowed into slits and he abruptly turned away. There was a beat of silence and then all he said was, "Let's get back."

Boyd watched Sin's back and didn't immediately move. It had been obvious since the beginning of their partnership that one day a mission would occur that they both had to be on or it would end in disaster. Having been inside the bunker for reconnaissance, Boyd knew that if anything went wrong, even a small part of the mission, he would have no chance of egress.

Even if he did manage to negotiate successfully with Andrews, there was no guarantee that the dissenters would not determine it to be the last sign of weakness on Andrews' part and simply kill Boyd. He would be outnumbered, likely have his weapons taken from him, and almost positively have no way of contacting Sin to ask for backup.

If Sin didn't come, the likelihood of Boyd dying tomorrow was very high; nearly to the point of certainty. He couldn't tell from Sin's response whether he would help in the end or not but he wasn't particularly hopeful. It seemed the discrepancies and tension in their partnership had finally come to a head. Despite everything Boyd had done to make it clear that he had no biases against the other man, nothing had really changed.

As the gravity of the situation grew clearer to him, he wondered what his mother would say when she found out the inevitable had happened: that her son had finally died. Would it bother her? Or would she simply dismiss the messenger and return to her work?

Would anyone remember that he'd ever lived?

Boyd followed Sin silently as they headed back to the cabin they were using as a temporary base, and wondered if this would be his last night to live.

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Boyd didn't know how long he'd been asleep before he heard it, or even whether it was a dream. He only knew that an unfamiliar sound caught his attention and that he felt mildly disoriented.

Opening his eyes, he listened closely with his eyebrows furrowed down slightly. When he realized what direction it was coming from, he rolled his head discreetly and peered through the darkness. It took him a few moments to discern what it was.

When he realized it came from Sin's bed, the surprise jerked him awake.

Sin was curled in a tight ball on his bed as though he were trying to protect himself. Despite that, the muscles in his face and body were twitching oddly. A soft, incoherent exclamation fell from his lips and he unwound himself from the ball abruptly.

He extended one of his arms away from his body and one hand dangled off the bed, the fingers twitching and tensing. He muttered in Chinese softly in his sleep, his voice low and strained.

Boyd shifted and pushed himself up on one elbow, his eyebrows drawn down as he stared. Sin so often seemed silent and still, like a statue, that it was disturbing to see him so obviously distressed.

"Sin?" he asked loudly, hoping to wake him.

The word did nothing. In fact, whatever nightmare Sin was having only seemed to progress in intensity. His head turned back and forth, black hair splaying across the white sheets of the bed. His face turned towards Boyd and moonlight shone across it, showing a vulnerable, naked expression that bordered on fear.

Boyd sat up, looking at him with actual concern. He didn't know what to do; it was almost alarming to see Sin in this state. The man was usually so controlled that Boyd never knew how many layers there were before his true opinion would show.

But in this case, with Sin asleep, Boyd knew everything he was seeing was the truth. The fact that Sin sounded terrified made Boyd get out of bed. Even if Sin hadn't been making noise, Boyd wouldn't have been able to go back to sleep in good conscience.

Boyd threw his legs over the side of the bed and padded across the room toward Sin's bed. He'd seen the way Sin hadn't seemed to react much to Lydia when reliving a nightmare but he'd been drugged at the time.

"Sin, wake up," Boyd said loudly, lightly touching the hand dangling in front of him.

The reaction was immediate.

Sin's eyes snapped open; wild and filled with madness. Seemingly without transition, Boyd was suddenly thrown across the room. He smashed into a table so hard that it flew a few inches off the floor, crashed against the wall and fell over. He crashed into the floor; his vision clouded and he couldn't properly breathe. Everything that was on the table clattered around him in a spray that peppered his body. His bag fell down next to him, spilling its contents.

Before he could even understand what had happened, violently strong hands were on him. He was yanked back and flipped ruthlessly, slammed onto his back. His head cracked against the hardwood floor and pain shot down his neck.

Boyd's eyes fell shut of their own accord. When they snapped open a breath later, Sin's face was less than an inch from his own, and there was no recognition in it at all. Fear and surprise overcame Boyd. His heart stumbled. Green eyes blazed at him with the same uncontrollable fury he had seen in the surveillance videos. As the words 'automatic kill mode' moved through his mind, he realized that Sin's hands were now wrapped around his neck.

"Sin," Boyd yelled as Sin's fingers started to tighten. "Hsin! *Stop!*"

The response was unexpected. The heart-pounding moment, feeling like it had been on fast-forward, suddenly stilled. Tension made the shadows in the room zero in on them while Sin faltered. Long, powerful fingers loosened slightly on Boyd's neck. That shadowed face stared down uncomprehendingly.

Boyd didn't know if it was the use of Sin's real name or the plea that had got his attention but either way he took advantage of the moment.

"Stop," he said urgently. His body was so tense it felt locked in place. He kept himself perfectly still, as nonthreatening as if he were dealing with a wild animal. "I won't do anything-- Just stop, Hsin. Don't hurt me."

Pale green eyes met honey brown and Sin's brow furrowed as he absorbed the words. His hands remained poised on Boyd, ready to snap his neck in an instant. A long, tense moment passed in which the only movement was their chests rising and falling with their breath. Then sluggish awareness seemed to creep back into Sin's eyes. The manic wildness slowly drifted out of his face and was replaced by an expression of confusion.

At first it seemed that Sin wasn't even aware of what had happened but then his eyes widened and he scrambled backwards, lowering into a crouch. Panting and tense, his body was coiled tighter than a spring about to snap. He still didn't look entirely back to himself and his green eyes flitted around quickly. He didn't speak but appeared to be bracing himself, waiting for something to happen.

Tense and unwilling to move, Boyd came to two conclusions in quick succession. One, he still had no idea whether or not Sin would attack him. Two, he was almost positive that Sin had only stopped when he had made it known that he was not a threat. There was only one thing he had that could possibly be considered a threat, and it was what Sin seemed to be waiting for.

Moving as fast as he could so his motions were not misunderstood, Boyd pulled the small remote out of his nearby bag. Sin tensed, eyes narrowing but his face turned into a study of complete shock when Boyd threw the remote at him. Sin caught it in midair, the action almost an unconscious reflex as their eyes stayed locked.

"Take it," Boyd panted roughly. "I don't want it-- I'm not here to hurt you."

For a long moment the only sound in the room was both of their labored breathing as they stared at each other. For the first time since they'd met, Sin's expression was completely open and his thoughts were clear.

Emotions Boyd hadn't even been positive Sin ever felt were aimed at him. Shock, guilt, and fear dominated his slightly widened green eyes and his parted lips. The moment stretched as they stared at each other, the chaos of the last few minutes adding to the panting of their breath and eyes locked on each other. But it didn't last long and everything snapped back to normal speed.

Sin abruptly ran out of the cabin. He was there and gone so fast that it seemed like he'd disappeared within the blink of an eye.

Boyd stared blankly at the door, his mind still struggling to fully understand what had just happened. At length he pushed himself up, grimacing at the bruises that pulled at his body. Sin had taken the remote with him and Boyd was glad to be rid of the thing.

A faint sense of shock remained in his system for several minutes even as he went into autopilot. When he shut the door, he realized his arm ached. When he looked down at it he could see red marks. Sin must have grabbed him by the arm when he threw him across the room.

When he walked back to the other side of the room and righted the table, he felt his back pulling painfully. And when he put his belongings back in his bag and put it on the table, he could feel all the aches and pains in his torso. A shock of pain sped down his neck if his head was tilted just so.

He didn't know why he straightened up part of the room, other than because the adrenaline was still moving through him and he felt jittery and wired. He kept half expecting Sin to burst back into the cabin and finish what he'd started, and half expecting to never see Sin again.

In the end, he moved around doing meaningless, mundane tasks until he finally laid down. His body was as creaky and achy as his bed, and when he closed his eyes he was hyper-aware of everything in the room.

Sleep was a long time coming.

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Boyd didn't change the schedule for the following morning even though Sin never reappeared. The one thing that was clear was that Boyd was alone for this mission. And with that, he felt a grim sense of acceptance.

Every action he took seemed like it would be the last time it occurred. The last time he pulled his hair back in a ponytail. The last time he straightened the clothing he'd been given by Unit 16. The last time he walked out of the cabin.

The last time he headed to a mission.

Boyd infiltrated the base easily; Sin's observations of the guards the day before were invaluable. He was able to slip into the base in the three minute period and avoid nearly everyone.

He walked with a purpose but was casual about it so that the few people he saw in passing barely even glanced at him. He was especially careful to do everything

perfectly. It was imperative they catch Andrews before he defected to Janus; he was their strongest chance for an ally right now, and they needed it.

It barely took ten minutes to make it to the Southwest corner, and another five to wind through the hallways to the specific area he believed Andrews would be. The radio remained tucked in his back pocket, flipped on with the volume set very low so from afar it would not sound as though he were masking his presence. Many of the hostiles, Boyd had noticed, did the same thing, and it was one more way to blend in. He noted as he strode down the hall that many of the doors were closed. A few remained open, however, and he glanced in each as he passed. He found that most were empty.

Unfortunately, the one room he needed to be empty wasn't. Halfway down the corridor he planned to use for egress, an open door revealed four men crowded around a table playing cards. One of them yelled loudly when his hand was beat and the other three burst into raucous laughter.

They would be difficult to get past if he made any noise at all when dealing with Andrews.

As he moved further into the base he listened intently to his radio. There was no alarm about an intruder; nothing amiss at all.

As he passed down another hallway, he came upon the area he'd earlier determined was most likely to house Warren Andrews. He paused at an intersection. He didn't want to give away his position so he finally shut the radio off completely. He looked around, ensuring that no one was in view. When he was positive he was alone, he continued forward as silently as possible.

A door was closed toward the end of the hall but he could hear voices emanating from it. He slowed and listened closely, standing to the side of the door. He couldn't understand what they were saying and the voices fell silent seemingly naturally.

He couldn't hear anyone coming and didn't feel anyone's presence. Even so, simply walking in with complete confidence would be foolhardy. So far, the mission was

going more smoothly than any of the previous ones, and yet this should be the most difficult.

That was dangerous, in Boyd's mind, but he couldn't deny the fact that nothing was exactly amiss. It was bothering him, actually; he remained on high alert, but there was nothing to be alert about.

Suddenly there was a loud noise and something was flying around him. Boyd didn't know what it was at first, but he threw himself to the side and tried to scramble away. His legs must not have been under him properly because he slipped and hit the floor with his shoulder. His bruised torso ached at the movement but he scrambled up and got out of the hallway.

He crouched just inside a nearby open door while making relatively little noise. He felt awkward and unbalanced but was too focused on the hallway to determine why. He peered out as best he could from the shadows and was able to just make out wooden shrapnel scattered across the floor and a huge hole in the door. He realized belatedly that they had shot through the door with a shotgun, and what he'd seen had been the shrapnel from the door.

"Did you get him?" a voice asked quietly.

Boyd saw a man with dark skin appear in the hole, looking around. "Well," he said, looking down at the floor, "there's some blood."

Boyd looked down in surprise, and noticed one black-clad thigh was shining wetly in the dim light. His eyes narrowed and he pressed down on it immediately, checking for the extent of the injury.

Judging by the fact that he could still place his weight on it, most of it was probably superficial. Still, it had cut deep enough for him to bleed which meant it could compromise him in some fashion. And he could have left a trail of blood straight to his location.

He looked around but there was no other exit in the room. He'd been lucky to find cover at all so quickly. And he couldn't shut the door without bringing attention to himself. The door opened down the way and the dark-complexioned man stepped calmly into the hallway. His hair was in cornrows and held back by a white band in back. Boyd recognized him as Daniel Jones, the second in command of 53.

Andrews appeared beside him. He looked exactly as he had in the stat file: smooth, dark caramel skin and black hair in loose waves. He was holding what appeared to be a hunting knife. "Don't let him get away."

Boyd knew it was only a matter of time before they found him. He was barely a few feet away and this was the first place they would look. His face set grimly and he let out a low, silent breath. He thought quickly, then reached into his pocket and pulled out what he needed. Jones had a gun but Andrews only had a knife.

He waited just long enough for the footsteps he heard to draw up alongside the room he hid in. Before Jones could look around the corner, Boyd threw a small round pellet out into the hallway and looked away with his eyes squeezed shut.

He heard Jones say, "What--?" before the pellet hit the ground and released a bright flash of light that would briefly blind anyone watching. Jones let out a startled yell and Boyd used the distraction to scramble into the hallway. Momentarily blinded, Jones didn't even notice Boyd in front of him before Boyd slammed into the other man. A shot went off, embedding into the ceiling and the gun clattered to the floor. Boyd ran, swiping the gun from the floor as he passed so no one would use it against him. In the same movement he pulled his tonfa out and slammed it against Andrews' machete. The knife slipped from Andrews' fingers and hit the floor. Boyd was there within a second, stopping just behind and to the side of Andrews as he held the cocked gun against his head. He had to put the tonfa away so he would have a free hand to deal with Andrews.

"Believe it or not," Boyd said calmly, trying to control his breath as he caught it. "I'm here to negotiate. Call off any reinforcements you have coming and this doesn't have to get any messier."

Andrews held his hands up, staying very still. He said nothing at first, and Boyd pushed the gun against his head. He grabbed Andrews' arm and started to drag him back toward the room with the broken door.

"Call them off," he repeated as an order.

There was another hesitation as Andrews and Jones locked eyes.

"You won't get out of here alive," Jones said, dark eyes narrowed into slits.

"Let me worry about that," Boyd said unconcernedly. "You call everyone off." He shoved the gun harder against Andrews' temple, his expression deadly serious. "I'd rather not kill him but I will."

There was another beat of silence and it was clear that Andrews didn't want to give the order.

"Stop stalling," Boyd warned dangerously but it was too late.

He could hear footsteps echoing in the distance so he yanked Andrews back with him. He didn't have a good plan but he did know of a possible escape route through the back hallway. If nothing else, he could run with Andrews and hide in a room somewhere.

He could try to run from the bunker with Andrews but that would be nearly impossible, especially with the place on high alert. The only choice he really had was to flee with the man and try to convince him to call off the search.

Jones watched Boyd sharply as he pulled Andrews back with him. Boyd knew he had to do something about the man. If he didn't, Jones could just follow them and tell the reinforcements exactly where to look. Boyd turned the gun on Jones, planning to shoot him quickly. That quick shift was all Andrews needed.

Andrews twisted and grabbed Boyd's arm, slamming it away from him. Boyd started to jerk away, reaching for his tonfa, but Andrews was fast and efficient. Within

the space of a second, Andrews had forced Boyd's hand at an angle where it was impossible to hold anything. The gun slipped from Boyd's suddenly nerveless fingers.

So fast that it practically happened at the same time, Jones was on Boyd, using Andrews as a distraction while he snatched the tonfa from Boyd's waist. Boyd jerked his hand from Andrews' hold and turned his attention on Jones. But the two of them were not at the head of a rebel faction for no reason; they'd obviously fought together in the past.

They moved in tandem so quickly that Boyd didn't have a chance. He was slammed back and hit the floor hard, trying to scramble back to a stand. Jones violently yanked Boyd back to his feet and pulled his arms behind him.

Within seconds, Boyd went from being in control to being the one with the gun aimed at him. Jones held him securely from behind, nearly cutting off Boyd's blood circulation. Before Boyd could take any other course of action, the hallway filled with hostiles and he found himself surrounded.

"Search him," Andrews ordered one of the hostiles who'd arrived as reinforcement.

Although Boyd jerked and twisted and attempted to kick the man away, his weapons were ultimately taken from him. The man stepped back with them in hand, getting well out of Boyd's reach and back into the protection of the circle of men with guns.

Seeing that Boyd was disarmed and surrounded, Jones let go of Boyd and stepped back over to Andrews' side. Boyd saw Jones sliding the gun back into his holster.

Boyd straightened, his eyes narrowing as he took them in. He didn't see an opening and there were enough of them that there was no chance of escape. The hostiles were armed and Andrews' aim didn't waver from his head. They'd been

thorough enough to find all his weapons and there was no way he could fight all of the men at once.

After looking around and seeing no immediate solution, Boyd's even gaze slid back to meet Andrews' eyes. He kept his arms loose at his sides and paid attention to his surroundings in case an opportunity to escape or flip the situation would present itself.

"I take it you're the one who's been causing so much trouble lately," Andrews said conversationally, casting his eyes around at his men before finally resting them on Boyd.

"Trouble?" Boyd echoed, as if he had no idea what he was talking about. "Have you been having problems?"

Jones turned slightly away and said something into his radio but it was too low to be heard over the din of noise that had been created by their reinforcements. Andrews didn't look over, keeping his eyes locked with Boyd. He didn't seem particularly impressed by Boyd's denial.

"A skinny blond boy attempted to infiltrate two of our locations recently. It seems you finally found what you were looking for but still fail at not getting yourself captured."

Boyd shrugged unconcernedly and didn't bother to reply.

Andrews looked at his second in command expectantly.

"Nothing," was all Jones said.

This was apparently acceptable because the 53 leader nodded. "So, who are you? One of Jason's new recruits? I wouldn't be surprised-- he doesn't give a shit about his people enough to stop them from going on a suicidal quest for nothing significant. I don't know what you aimed to accomplish here but you'll save yourself a lot of trouble by telling me now."

Boyd took in his surroundings again, his impassive golden brown gaze moving along the hostiles. He looked for any change, any break in the circle surrounding him.

There was nothing. They had him thoroughly surrounded and the bunker's few and highly guarded entrances gave him no delusions of escape.

He was going to die here.

He only wondered whether they would do it right here or whether they would bring him somewhere else first. He wondered how painful it would be and how long Sin would wait around before he left. Assuming he hadn't headed back to Lexington already.

Boyd met Andrews' eyes evenly. "I have nothing to say so you'll save yourself trouble by not bothering to ask."

"Foolish move but as you wish."

As soon as the words left Andrews' mouth, one of the men approached Boyd and slammed the butt of a gun violently into his temple.

Boyd was unconscious before he hit the floor.

Time passed, or at least he thought it might have. Nothing made sense. Pounding that accompanied his heartbeat only belatedly translated as a headache. It took him several seconds to realize his eyes were open again.

He saw feet around him; moving and running and jerking back and forth.

There was a flurry of motion that Boyd could not follow through his hazy hold on reality. The thumping of a man's knees against the floor caused him to slide half-lidded eyes over.

A young man with bright blond hair was staring ahead with a surprised look. He stayed there and, in a moment that seemed to stretch, he tilted to the side and fell to the floor. Boyd stared at him with darkening vision, realizing in a distant sort of surprise that

the man was dead. Sounds echoed around him, people yelling and guns going off. Stray bullets flew past him and Boyd struggled to keep his eyes open. He didn't even know his eyes had shut until he realized it was black all around him when he heard frantic shouts.

"Shoot him!"

"Jesus Christ, kill him!"

"What the *fuck*--"

He struggled to open his eyes again and he saw a flash of red; Sin stood there in a moment suspended in time, his back to Boyd while he stood calmly amidst the chaos. Boyd could barely see someone aiming a gun at Sin.

Boyd's eyes fell shut again. Even the sounds were getting muffled, as if wrapped in cotton and covered in a blanket, but he tried to claw his way back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, barely enough to see just through his lashes, and Sin was nowhere to be found. The place was empty and someone was standing over him with a gun aimed at him. He closed his eyes again, then opened them and the person was gone.

Confusing flashes surrounded him and he didn't even know if he was awake or asleep.

Vaguely, he realized that he had just dreamed Sin was there. He didn't know why he had. Sin was long gone and wouldn't return. Boyd was alone and they had killed him or were about to kill him. Apathy mixed with his throbbing head. Eyelids that felt too heavy fell shut and didn't open again.

## Chapter 10

Boyd became aware of reality in parts. Darkness surrounded him. He drifted with that for awhile, the darkness and he coexisting together; symbiotic, calm. After awhile, he realized that he heard nothing and that seemed strange. When he remembered that he could hear he realized he could feel.

Something light and soft covered him; he could feel it on his skin. He focused on that and tried to understand what it was. There was something beneath his head and beneath his back. It took awhile, but the words filtered into his brain. *Pillow, bed* and *sheets*, and the image of a cabin came to mind. He tried to understand what that meant, and then he realized he was breathing. That shouldn't have been something he noticed but he did. His chest rose and fell, and the soft sheet was rearranging itself each time. His fingers twitched and then he felt the pain.

His head throbbed violently. It felt like it was in sync with the blood pounding through his brain. After he noticed the headache, he realized his side hurt; mostly his shoulder. Then the aching of his back joined the clamor, followed by his thigh. Little pains and big pains joined together to make him wholly uncomfortable and unable to return to the serenity that had sheltered him just seconds before.

His sense of time was warped, so it could have been seconds or centuries before he remembered why it seemed strange that he was having any thoughts at all. Flashes moved behind his eyelids; disjointed scenes as if someone took film and cut it apart and put it back together haphazardly.

The crystal clear image of Sin's back to him while people fell was strong in his mind, and with it came the memory of being surrounded. The strike against his head and him falling to the floor. The pain of a limp body striking concrete.

His mind started to drift again but then the image of Sin persistently returned and with it came sudden understanding. Followed by delayed disbelief.

He was alive.

At the understanding, Boyd's abruptly eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling.

It wasn't the same ceiling as in the bunker and come to think of it hadn't he thought he was on a bed? Confusion muddled his mind and he sat up before he thought about the fact that he could be captured and it could be in his best interest to feign sleep.

Boyd blinked in dumbfounded confusion when he finally took in his surroundings. He was in the cabin outside 53's rebel base, just as he had been the night before. Had it been the night before? He glanced at the windows but the curtains were drawn. What time was it? How many hours had passed? Was it more than a day?

Strangely, Warren Andrews sat in the corner. He was tied up, glowering around him, and cloth was tied in his mouth so he couldn't make a noise. Boyd stared at him for a long moment, unable to comprehend what he was doing there or why. He looked away rather than overwork his mind trying to interpret the oddity in the environment.

Leaning against the wall was Sin, his arms crossed and expression blank. But he was staring at Boyd, and he didn't even blink when Boyd looked over and met his eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment; Sin intensely, and Boyd too confused to even know exactly what was happening.

Had that memory of Sin's back to him been real? Had Sin been watching the whole time the way he had on previous missions? Had he actually saved Boyd? And if so, why? Sin didn't save his partners; that much had been made clear. Had the guilt from the previous night been so strong that he'd deviated from his routine this one time? And why in the world was Andrews tied up in the corner of their cabin?

"Sin," Boyd said finally, blankly. Unable to form any other words.

"Boyd," Sin replied flatly. He looked at his prisoner. "I took the liberty of bringing him here for further... negotiation." Boyd looked at Sin a little strangely, his mind still scattered as the pounding of his head vied with the oddity of waking up like this. His

eyebrows dragged down and he brought one hand to his head as if it would quell his headache or make his thoughts make more sense.

He looked down at the sheet that was pooled in his lap and blinked. He wore a loose pair of drawstring pants that he didn't remember putting on. When he touched his left thigh he could feel bandages beneath the fabric.

He stared at his leg and then looked up to study Sin with eyes narrowed faintly in confusion and thought.

The only explanation was that Sin had somehow saved Boyd, brought him to the cabin, secured Andrews, and taken the time to bandage Boyd's wounds and give him a fresh pair of pants. It was such a thorough and thoughtful thing to do that it struck Boyd on several accounts. The least of which was that Sin had bothered to help Boyd and also ensure that the mission could be completed. That had to be why he'd bothered to bring Andrews in for negotiation.

It was bizarre. Sin had never cared about failed missions before. Why did he care now? Why had he bothered to save Boyd in the first place? Beyond that, why had he taken the extra step of giving him even minor medical care? Even if somehow the guilt from the night before had forced his hand into saving Boyd, there had been no reason to do anything more.

Boyd didn't understand at all and although he had any number of questions he wanted to ask, he didn't think it would be a good idea to ask them in front of Andrews. It was best if he did his job as negotiator first and then, when they were alone, asked Sin what in the world was going on.

He drew in a low breath that he let out lowly and then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He was a little dizzy when he stood and his body ached in annoyance with his insistence on moving from a prone position. Still, none of it was enough to impede his ability to function.

He walked over to Andrews and stopped in front of him, looking down at the man expressionlessly. Andrews glared up at Boyd but he seemed distracted, his attention repeatedly returning to Sin with something akin to fear or wariness.

After a moment, Boyd crouched in front of the rebel leader. His body felt like it creaked in the movement, his head and thigh particularly unhappy and shaky, but he ignored them.

"I'm going to take the gag out but if you start screaming or still refuse to cooperate, we may run into a problem," Boyd informed Andrews. "So I suggest you work with us and make it easier on everyone."

Andrews coughed and shook hair out of his eyes once the gag was removed. His face was red with anger and his eyes focused on Sin with obvious loathing. Sin just gazed back, looking completely unconcerned.

Boyd noted the exchange but didn't react to it. He kept his calm stare centered on Andrews. "We've been following your progress and we've noticed that recently you've been in a bit of a bind. We're offering a solution."

At first his only response was a low scoff as Andrews' eyes continued to burn into Sin. But then he set his jaw and dragged his gaze away. "If you want to talk, he goes."

"Why should he leave?"

"He slaughtered half my men."

Boyd considered that. He wasn't surprised by the information; if his memory had served him correctly, it followed that many of the hostiles had been killed. Intel had shown that Andrews truly cared about his men so arguing the request would only be counter-productive.

Boyd looked over at Sin, his blond hair falling over his shoulder in the movement. His honey brown gaze moved along Sin's face briefly before meeting his eyes. "Do you mind stepping out for a minute?"

Sin raised an eyebrow briefly and said nothing. He looked from Boyd to Andrews and let his gaze flick over the tied up man, resting briefly on the flexicuffs he was secured with. Only then did the senior agent give a short nod and leave the cabin, letting the door shut behind him.

Once Sin was gone, Boyd looked over at Andrews again. With Andrews flexicuffed to a chair, Boyd was not at eye level by crouching and yet if he stood and towered over the man, it wouldn't be conducive to negotiation.

One thing he had learned was that in interviews or interrogations, people tended to mimic the interrogator without realizing it. The signals an interrogator gave could subconsciously affect the responses he or she received. The principles were just as important in negotiation, if not more.

Crossing his arms would be a defensive position, for instance, and were Andrews' arms loose he may have found himself unconsciously crossing his arms in return. Andrews may have also subconsciously viewed Boyd as being distant and may have been, in turn, less open to negotiation.

The subtleties of human interaction were even more important in negotiation. Boyd wasn't about to cut the man loose. So Boyd pulled another chair over. The chair legs dragged against the wooden floor, making faint vibrations and bumping sounds when they occasionally caught on the space between planks.

When he was seated in front of Andrews, choosing the distance carefully to be close enough to create subconscious intimacy but far enough away that it wasn't inappropriate or distracting, Boyd met Andrews' eyes.

"Rather than waste your time, I'll get straight to the point. We've noted the pressure you've been under between Janus' recruitment and the expectations of your men. As of now, it's put you in a precarious position. Unfortunately, Janus will swallow up your group and give you little in return. We have a solution to your dilemma."

"We'?" Andrews repeated scornfully. He grimaced, showing teeth that looked bloodstained. "I don't know who sent you or who you're with but obviously it's someone just like Janus or worse."

"Better or worse are subjective terms that I can't help you with," Boyd replied neutrally. "But although our strength rivals Janus, we don't indiscriminately attack innocents and targets alike. The innocent casualties to their attacks have been high in the past and are likely to only grow as they attempt to further strengthen their army. As a man who started down this path by trying to protect innocent bystanders who had to pay the price of being caught in the middle of a war, I'm sure you can see how this is a worrisome trend. And why we would want to stop it."

Andrews shook his head and cut his eyes away, staring out one of the windows. His features were set grimly, eyes narrowed into distrustful slits.

"You people are all the same. You think you can use us to get at your goals. We didn't form the True Democracy Movement to be pulled into your political wars. We don't give a fuck about what you want. Our concern is the people of Carson and the bullshit politicians there who do what they want, when they want, and treat the people who elected them like scum."

"Unfortunately for you, you've already attracted Janus' attention and they aren't simply going to go away because you want them to." Boyd shifted forward in the chair, his forearms resting on his knees. "What we're prepared to offer you is this: You join Janus as our spy. For your protection, you will not tell anyone in True Democracy Movement about it."

He raised his eyebrows slightly to ensure Andrews understood the importance of that point, and continued speaking. "You give us information on Janus from the inside and in return, when we no longer need your services, we will provide protection for you and your men. We have no interest in interfering with your fight with Carson's government so you would be free to continue with your mission statement. In addition, the fact that you formally join Janus will look good to your men so you will no longer

need to fear defection to Aarons' side. Working with us will ensure you security for your men and goals while simultaneously solving the dilemma of your current perception among the ranks."

This time Andrews released an ugly bark of a laugh. "Who do you think you're fooling, boy? You think you're doing us a favor? You forgot to add on that it will also ensure that we're under another big organization's thumb. We aren't mercenaries. We don't work for other people, no matter how powerful they are."

Boyd watched Andrews evenly for a moment and then sighed and leaned back in the chair. "Very well. I'd hoped to avoid this but you're pushing the matter." He watched Andrews seriously. "Today, a vehicle will be waiting outside Kaysen's school. It will be driven by a very friendly woman who will tell him she's a friend of his mother's and she's there to bring him home. It's possible he never makes it home."

His gaze was neutral and didn't waver. There was an unspoken threat in the intensity as he calmly listed what could happen to Andrews' two kids and ex-wife. "It's equally possible that Lily drowns when she goes canoeing at Camp Erickson next Wednesday at 1 pm. The counselor who will be with her group will be frantic when he realizes they lost her along the way. When they later find her body, it will be deemed an accident. And as for Jaime, everyone knows your ex-wife smokes, especially when stressed. Sometimes she smokes in bed. Following the family tragedies, no one would blame her for it. Unfortunately, that habit would be hazardous to her health if she fell asleep with a cigarette still burning and lit her house on fire."

Boyd continued, "It's equally possible that instead of any of this, they could be brought in for rigorous questioning until you agree to work with us." There was little doubt that what he meant, in fact, was torture. "Personally, I think the accidents would be more humane."

The threats were met with silence and a look that could have murdered Boyd on the spot if it were possible. Andrews had gone ashen and his teeth were grinding together as he strained against the flexicuffs that dug into his wrists.

The 53 leader looked as terrified as he was furious. This was a man who loved his family, even his ex-wife no matter how messy the divorce had been. This was also a man who would do anything for them; his psych file had made that clear.

"I'm not surprised," he said finally, voice raw and choked. "Anything that would employ a man like that--" he jerked his head to the door. "--would do anything."

Boyd didn't bother commenting on Sin since, from Andrews' perspective, Sin probably had seemed terrifying. After all, Sin could easily kill dozens of men and hardly seem worse for the wear the next day. Boyd didn't think he'd seen a single wound of note on Sin.

Instead, he said reasonably, "It doesn't have to be that way. If I can assure my employers that you'll work with us, none of that will happen. Of course, we'll have to keep your family under surveillance in case you decide to warn them about anything, which would be a very poor decision that would end terribly for all of you. Or if you decide to betray us, we would have to reconsider the decision to leave them be. I don't think you would care for those consequences so my suggestion is you cooperate and avoid these tragedies altogether."

"So it's all up to me," Andrews said, smiling humorlessly.

"It is," Boyd agreed calmly. "I do have some other questions. That can give you some time to consider the offer."

"Questions like what? What else can I tell you that you don't already know?"

"To your knowledge, is Jason Aarons and his group also being pursued by Janus?"

Andrews shook his head, looking slightly relieved at the question. "No. My Janus contact works only with me. Jason wouldn't know how to get in touch with them."

"Who is your Janus contact?"

This time Andrews wasn't as quick to reply. He shifted in the wooden chair, twisting his arms in the flexicuffs. "What does it matter?"

"The manner Janus contacted you or came to know about True Democracy Movement is of interest to us," Boyd replied simply. "Especially since you said the contact only works with you. It would seem there's a reason for that."

There was another stretch of charged silence as their captive seemed to roll this around in his head. Andrews was being careful and they were putting him in a difficult spot. Exposing his sources without having it fall on his own shoulders would likely be difficult. But in the end he just shook his head and looked resigned.

"Thierry Beauvais is my contact. I have a cousin, Sarabeth, who lives in England and rubs elbows with a lot of rich people who have dirty hands." Andrews smirked. "She's a much in demand... call girl, if you want to use the term. So in demand that she's pretty much courted by the kind of people that Thierry deals with. She met him at a party and they became friends. When she found out that I was looking for someone to buy arms from, she pointed me in his direction because he has contacts internationally who can set something like that up long term."

Boyd nodded in understanding. He didn't know who Thierry Beauvais was but he filed the information away for later when he would put it in the report. "How long ago was your first contact with Thierry?"

"About a year. Maybe more."

"And Janus learned of you through him?"

Andrews shrugged. "I'd never had contact with them beforehand. He said they were looking into expanding and liked our style. They liked the fact that we were going toe to toe with the politicians of Carson and fighting back. When they found out that he had dealings with us, they came knocking."

"What has your response been to them so far?"

"They know I have reservations."

Boyd inclined his head in acknowledgment. He let the silence stretch between them for a long moment as he studied Andrews closely. At length, he spoke.

"Have you made your decision?"

Andrews scoffed and continued to stare out the window. "What do you think, boy? You're not giving me any choice."

Boyd nodded once more and stood. "I will make the arrangements."

It didn't take long to get everything squared away. He retrieved Sin, who hadn't been that far away from the cabin, and after they figured out all the details they drove Andrews into the woods. The rebel leader glared hatefully at Sin nearly the entire time and seemed uncomfortable with being in the same car as him. For his part, Sin didn't seem to notice or care.

They cut Andrews loose and dropped him off where he would be able to return to his men without it ever being known where he'd been or with whom. After leaving Andrews behind, Boyd navigated them toward the major highway that would bring them back to Lexington.

Sin was silent in the passenger seat and at first Boyd was distracted with making sure he found the right twists and turns in the countryside. Once they were safely on the highway and the drive started what would become a rather boring stretch of time, Boyd looked over and studied Sin with the same intense and thoughtful stare he seemed to find himself turning on that man more than most. But then, most people didn't perplex Boyd as much as Sin did.

He remembered the way Sin had looked at him and had studied the flexicuffs before leaving Boyd alone with the Andrews. Boyd noted that along with all the other oddities of the day and now that it was silent he finally felt that he could ask all the questions he'd had to stifle earlier.

"Why did you save me?" he asked, his voice breaking into the quiet.

Up until this point, Sin had been leaning against the door with his head tilted against the window. Now he looked over, eyebrows drawing down. "Does it matter? You're alive."

"It matters to me."

Sin sat up straighter, causing the setting sun to cast muted rays against his face. He looked tired and paler than usual which was possibly due a night sleeping in the forest. The woods were considerably cooler once the sun set. His black hair was hanging around his face messily and he pushed it aside with impatience.

His full lips parted, pressed together and finally he just scowled. "It's pointless for you to die. That is basically what I decided."

"Why?" Boyd pressed, his curiosity heightened by the reply. "I'm easily replaceable. Agent Blake could take over for me immediately, no doubt, and it's unlikely anyone would have been surprised to find I hadn't made it back from this mission."

"Well, maybe I don't want Blake to be my partner," was the testy reply.

Boyd considered Sin, watching him for nuances of his expression. He couldn't deny that he was somewhat surprised by this entire situation. He hadn't expected an answer that in any way implied he could be a preferable partner above someone else. It was a curious thought since Boyd had felt for most of their partnership that Sin would have been glad to be rid of him.

"His temperament seemed relatively similar to my own," Boyd mused aloud. "I imagine after a day or two you'd hardly notice the difference."

To that, Sin didn't bother to respond.

Boyd fell silent, turning his attention to the road as one of the signs flashed by that estimated the amount of miles to various cities. They were still a good sixty-five miles from home.

"Thank you." He looked over at Sin with an expression that was a little less neutral and a little more approachable than usual. "For helping me."

At first his only answer was a stiff shrug as Sin turned back to the window. He was fidgeting again-- absently yanking at a loose string that was hanging out of a rip on his cargo pants. His long fingers pulled at it insistently until the rip began to get slightly wider.

"Did I answer your questions the way you wanted me to?" he asked finally, still keeping his head against the window.

Boyd looked over with eyebrows that drew down. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said." Sin's eyes had closed at some point and his dusky eyelashes rested against his face. He went on without opening them. "Because if I answered adequately, I'll expect adequate responses to my question in return."

The reply caused Boyd to watch him more closely before he had to turn back to the road. "I do have additional questions," he admitted.

A low sigh. "Which are?"

Boyd took a moment to consider how to formulate the two questions that were foremost in his mind. He started with the one he hadn't already asked in some fashion. "In the past, you seemed unconcerned about whether the mission was a success. So why did you make the effort to bring in Andrews so we could negotiate with him?"

Sin frowned as though he hadn't expected that question. "There would have been no point in saving you if I'd let the mission fail. They would just terminate you and lock me back up when we returned to the compound. I'm not unaware that this mission is important."

Boyd nodded, taking that into account. He was silent for a long moment as he considered that before he spoke again, his tone thoughtful.

"I still don't understand why you saved me. I've been trying to determine the reason. I thought about how you bandaged my wounds even though you didn't have to and how before you left me alone with Andrews it seemed that you verified he was adequately secured."

His eyebrows furrowed and his fingers shifted against the steering wheel. "That implies either a concern for the success of the mission or, potentially, some level of concern for my safety. You've verified that the success of the mission mattered to you on some level so it could have simply been that. But the fact that you don't seem to prefer the idea of a new partner and that you had to fight so many people to extract us implies that in some way, at least for a portion of today, it mattered to you that I was okay."

Boyd paused, frowning faintly in thought before he looked over at Sin who still had his eyes firmly shut. "I wondered what the reason was for the change, if that was so. Why would it have been fine a few weeks ago if I'd died but now it's pointless? What's different?"

Sin made a face and finally opened his eyes, turning his head so that he could face Boyd. He studied him for awhile, mouth turned down in a slight frown before giving his broad shoulders a shrug. "I hadn't expected that you would actually... make a good partner. I didn't think this would work."

Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully. After a moment, he returned his attention to the road. There was hardly any traffic but what little sunlight could be seen was angled almost directly into his eyes.

"And at some point something made you believe it would?"

"Obviously," Sin said blandly, starting to look impatient.

Boyd nodded, feeling no need to push it any further. It was interesting to hear that Sin thought he could be a good partner. He had to admit that he was pleased since for weeks it had felt like no matter what he did it didn't get him anywhere.

"What did you want to ask me?"

Sin crossed his arms over his chest and reclined in the seat further. He hadn't bothered with a seat belt this time. "Why didn't you just use the remote and activate my collar?"

"Because I didn't feel it was necessary," Boyd said with a shrug.

"Ah."

Boyd looked over but couldn't read what Sin was thinking; his expression hadn't shifted. It occurred to him that Sin may not feel that was answer enough. "And I truly have no interest in harming you."

Pale green eyes flicked over to him at that but Sin's face still gave nothing away. He looked as intense as ever but just as eerily impossible to figure out.

"I didn't--" A pause. "You should never touch me when I'm sleeping. I react in a manner which I would not if I were fully... aware."

Boyd was quiet, watching Sin before shifting his gaze back to the road. He wondered what Sin had been about to say and whether he was, in his own way, trying to apologize. Or whether he was simply laying the ground rules. It was so difficult to tell with him.

"I'll keep that in mind," Boyd said with a faint nod. He hesitated, his eyebrows drawing down. "You seemed upset. I thought you were having a nightmare and you didn't seem to hear my voice. In the future, how do you prefer I wake you?"

This seemed to startle Sin. He looked over abruptly, eyebrows shooting up. "What?"

"You were clearly upset," Boyd replied, frowning with slightly narrowed eyes as he remembered the way Sin had twitched and sounded distressed. "I touched your hand to wake you. If it happens again, I'd like to know of any alternatives for waking you."

This earned him another long stare from Sin before the man sighed disgustedly. "Well that's just beautiful." He shook his head, eyebrows drawn together as if he had a headache. "And I don't know. Just leave me be, I suppose. It's safer."

Boyd wondered about Sin's response and what had seemed to disgust him. The fact that he'd had the nightmare, the fact that Boyd had witnessed it and tried to wake him from it, or the fact that in doing so one or both of them could have gotten hurt? Was it a combination?

He didn't know the answer to that but he did know that it was highly unlikely that he would leave Sin asleep if it happened again. He simply nodded and didn't verbally respond.

Sin didn't say anything and for a period of time the car fell back into silence. Traffic picked up a little once they came toward a stretch of the highway that led to a number of larger cities via intersecting interstates. The number of vehicles diminished but did not disappear once they were on the stretch that headed primarily to Lexington.

They were still thirty miles out when Boyd realized he hadn't told Sin what Andrews had said.

"It will be in the report but in the event you don't read it, Andrews named his contact with Janus. His name is Thierry Beauvais and the connection was gained through Andrews' cousin, who's an escort in England."

The reaction to this was unexpected. A long suffering sigh escaped Sin's full lips and he visibly grimaced. "I hate that little French fuck."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "You know him?"

"I've had to meet with him twice before. He tantalizes the Agency with information and makes us jump through hoops to get it. I fail utterly at dealing with him. It would be best if I didn't see him ever again."

"I see," Boyd said after a beat of silence. That was certainly interesting. "Did something happen when you saw him before?"

There was a brief, almost uncomfortable silence before Sin said shortly, "You could say that."

Boyd looked at him sidelong but didn't have a response to that. It made him wonder what had happened but he didn't get the impression that Sin would answer. He supposed he'd pushed it enough already, getting the answers he had.

They ended up falling into silence again and this time neither of them made any effort to interrupt it. The rest of the trip passed without incident, although Boyd noticed that the sheen of sweat on Sin's face seemed to grow more pronounced over time. When they reached the Agency, Sin left for his apartment without another word.

It didn't take Boyd long to submit his report and he headed home immediately afterward. He ended up making some tea and then realized he didn't know exactly what he wanted to do. He debated it for a few moments and then decided to finish looking into the information Ryan had provided him.

At first, a lot of what he found was similar to what he'd seen before. There were excerpts from reports, some more images, some video clips from missions, and more background. One thing Boyd noted was that there still wasn't a lot about Sin's early life.

There was nothing on his mother and all it really said about his father was that he'd been a well-known, well-regarded agent. Boyd suspected there had to have been more on a man who'd apparently spent years at the Agency. He wondered whether the lack of it was due to information being on lock down. It was also possible Ryan simply hadn't been interested in gathering any of that since he'd grown up on compound and likely already knew anything he wanted to about Emilio Vega.

Whatever the case, Boyd still had a few folders to go through when he ended up clicking on one of several files with extensions he didn't recognize. They were named variations of 'cam01' and it quickly became apparent why.

An image of an empty apartment came on screen; the walls were white and the furniture was plain but looked as though it would be comfortable enough. He heard sound over the speakers and realized that this was a video. He didn't see anything happening but there seemed to be shadows passing just on the edge of the screen.

He closed down the file and clicked on the others, flipping through a bedroom and a kitchen until Sin's face was abruptly on screen. It was startling and a little alarming, since Sin was staring seemingly straight out the screen at Boyd. It took Boyd a moment to realize based on clues in the background that this appeared to be a camera of some sort in a bathroom mirror.

At first, Boyd thought these were videos but he realized as he watched that they weren't. This appeared to be a live feed to cameras that Ryan had hacked into.

He didn't have much time to think about those implications as his attention was instead caught by what Sin was doing.

Sin was very pale, his naturally olive complexion ashen. His lips were parted as his breath came out labored and choppy, eyebrows drawn together as he tended to himself with trembling hands. His eyes were glazed slightly, his full lips pressed into a tight line.

It was startling to see such a stoic man show pain and it made Boyd's attention zero in completely on the screen. He forgot about the tea, he forgot about the other files. He couldn't look away from Sin and the glimpse of an open expression such as he hadn't seen since Sin had run out of the cabin.

On the screen, Sin shifted and looked down until black and red hair hid part of his face. He appeared to be taping up his arm with a bandage that was already stained crimson. Now that Boyd could see his chest and arms, he also saw that there was a

variety of lacerations and bruises on Sin aside from whatever wound he was tending to - including a bruise that was an intense shade of purple and covered his entire left side. Judging from what Boyd could see of the sink, the arm wound was more serious than the rest. Blood was everywhere; running down his arm and leaving small puddles in the sink. Boyd then saw the pliers, peroxide, and the unmistakable sheen of a bullet coated in blood.

Boyd's thoughts stilled and he stared in muted surprise and a hint of discomfort.

After a moment of gripping the sides of the sink with his long slender fingers, Sin stepped back. All he wore were loose jeans that hung precariously on his thin hips. He grabbed a small pill bottle from the counter with a grimace, opened it and swallowed a handful dry. He tossed the bottle back into the sink and stood there for a moment, looking at the mirror.

He truly looked terrible and for a moment, Boyd wondered if the other man had gotten some kind of infection. He'd suffered with blood loss and an exposed wound for hours. It would explain the sweat and his pallor.

After a moment Sin took a long deep breath and seemed to be trying to get himself together. He stood up straight, ran a hand through his unruly black hair and wiped sweat from his face. But the movement caused him to grimace again, his teeth flashing as he clenched them. It wasn't obvious if it was the arm wound causing him such tremendous pain or the entire collection that he'd accumulated during the mission.

He stayed that way for a moment longer before a resigned look crossed his striking features and Sin climbed into the tub. He curled up in there, facing away.

Boyd couldn't drag his eyes from the screen, even when Sin lay there for a long time. He had obviously been hurt saving Boyd. With the amount of gunfire that had been flying around, at least as far as he remembered, it was a testament to Sin's skill and speed that he didn't have more wounds. But then, the fact that he'd been hit at all showed how difficult it must have been.

It caused a flash of guilt in Boyd. At the same time, it made him wonder why Sin had hidden it. Was it simply ingrained to show no weakness to anyone since it seemed like so many people at the Agency preyed on him? Or had it been something specific to Boyd? It had seemed like Sin thought of him a little more as a partner but perhaps he still didn't trust Boyd despite the fact that he'd saved his life. Whatever the case, something about seeing vulnerability in a man who otherwise exuded such strength caught Boyd's attention in a way he hadn't expected. That glimpse of Sin seemed so elusive compared to the way he conducted himself on a daily basis.

Something in Boyd reacted to it; something that felt a connection and made him want to see more of that side of Sin. It made him not want to look away from the screen so he wouldn't miss another fluctuation; another moment of openness in an otherwise guarded face.

At length, Sin stilled and it seemed as though he could be trying to sleep. When it was apparent nothing was changing in the bathroom, Boyd flipped back to the other files, paying more attention this time. It appeared to be an Agency apartment, which was unsurprising since this was probably where Sin lived.

If that was the case, Sin apparently didn't have privacy anywhere.

There was a camera view for seemingly every angle of his apartment. The fact that Boyd would be able to see Sin in his bedroom, in the bathroom, in what seemed to be every inch of an apartment... His eyes narrowed and lips thinned, and he leaned back in his chair.

He didn't like it. As a person who valued his privacy, the idea of everything being on display was disturbing. Especially in the shower, since he didn't even look at himself in the mirror when he was in the bathroom. He always looked away and didn't feel comfortable with the air hitting the bare skin of his torso even when he was alone. It was mildly nauseating to put himself in Sin's place and think of everything being bared without his permission.

Did Sin know about the cameras?

Was any of this with his consent? Doubtful. Did he know he was being watched? Maybe he did but again, Boyd doubted he'd known about the one in the bathroom. A man who had ridden in silence with a gunshot wound wouldn't have let pain show so easily if he'd known anyone would see it.

It made Boyd wonder who all had access to these feeds. Who may be watching now as well, analyzing Sin and noting any vulnerabilities.

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The next morning seemed to come too soon. Boyd had ended up going through the rest of the information and then watching Sin sleep for an extended period of time. He didn't know how long he was up and he didn't know why he'd watched Sin for so long.

He couldn't forget Sin's pained expression or the glimpse of emotion before Sin had run from the cabin. Those moments contrasted with so many of the other times he'd been around Sin and it made him wonder what had been happening behind those sarcastic looks all along.

He found it to be distracting and tried to push it out of his mind.

He may have been successful if it hadn't been for the fact that when he walked into the conference room for the debriefing, Sin was there. It was the first time Sin had shown for a debriefing and it was surprising enough to Boyd that his steps slowed when he walked in.

Sin looked up at him steadily, eyebrows rising. "Late."

Boyd couldn't help staring at Sin. If he hadn't watched the live feed, he would not have believed that Sin was injured, nor that the vulnerable look he'd seen would ever be on that face. At the moment, Sin had more of a silent 'I told you so' look than anything.

It took a moment but Boyd got himself to move again, continuing toward the chair he typically used. Which turned out to be next to the one Sin had chosen. No one else

had arrived yet and Boyd considered replying that he was early but he was more curious about Sin's presence.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as he sat down.

"If I'm going to start being your partner, I supposed it meant I had to show up here." Sin slouched in his chair and eyeballed Boyd from under his overly long bangs. "Why? Do you want me to go?"

"Of course not," Boyd said, pushing the chair at an angle so he could see Sin without craning his neck. "I was simply surprised to see you."

"I see." Sin looked at him and began absently tearing at a frayed pocket in his cargo pants.

Boyd continued to watch Sin. Nothing changed; the room remained silent and no one walked in. After a moment, he decided to try to see if Sin would voluntarily acknowledge his wound or whether he would keep it a secret.

"Incidentally, how are you?" Boyd asked. "I didn't think to ask you yesterday if you had any troubles executing the mission."

"It went as expected," was the vague response. Sin's green eyes slid away as he answered, focusing briefly on the door.

Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully. He supposed that could be a true enough answer; it would have been expected that with such heavy gunfire Sin would get hit at some point. But if he hadn't known Sin had been injured he would have assumed that meant there were no issues.

He wondered if Sin had purposefully chosen that wording so as not to lie or whether it was incidental. Was he simply trying to be vague enough to stop Boyd from questioning him further?

He couldn't push the subject without making it known that he'd seen the live feed, which he was hesitant to do. He didn't think Sin would appreciate the invasion of privacy. Yet he didn't want to give up the chance to see those glimpses of the more open, vulnerable man behind that strong demeanor.

Boyd's gaze lingered on Sin's features, which he couldn't help distantly noting added to his allure, before he looked away with a nod. "I wanted you to know that I appreciate your willingness to help and interact."

Sin made a face, eyes swinging back to Boyd. "Don't start thanking me. I almost killed you five hours before the mission."

"It doesn't matter," Boyd said impassively with a shrug. "It would have been an accident."

This earned him another incredulous glare. "Well it matters to me. If I'd have killed your dumb ass, the odds of me finding as good a partner are slim to none. So just ensure that you don't pass on too quickly. I'm starting to get used to you."

The comment caused Boyd to look over at Sin with a more alert expression than he'd had since they'd met. He stared at Sin a moment, his lips parting and eyebrows shifting up slightly as he searched Sin's expression, but words wouldn't immediately come to him.

The distant emptiness he typically surrounded himself with cleared for a moment at the surprising idea that someone cared about his life. That Sin actually did want him as a partner and that it wasn't meaningless to him if he died.

Even his mother didn't seem to care if he lived or died and most of the people on compound had thought Boyd wouldn't last more than a few weeks. Many of them seemed to hope that would be the case. Boyd himself was already resigned to the idea of his death so having Sin, of all people, comment against it made a strange sense of warmth flood through him.

A smile spread across his lips at the thought. It was small but genuine and it lingered briefly. A flash of surprise crossed Sin's face and his eyes briefly dropped to Boyd's mouth.

Boyd studied Sin's expression, wondering about that look. He opened his mouth to speak but before he could, a sound at the door caught his attention. His expression automatically closed off, returning to a blank stare before he'd fully turned his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a flash of annoyance on Sin's face.

"Hola!" Ryan's voice sang out even before the door had fully opened. "How--"

The words abruptly cut off as Ryan focused on Sin and he froze in mid-step, gawking. "Hsin!"

Sin stared at him flatly, mouth turned down.

"Uh..." Ryan trailed off and began walking again awkwardly, jerking at the straps to his backpack and tripping his way to his side of the table. "Wow, I didn't expect to uh, see you... ever."

The senior agent didn't reply and switched his gaze to the wall.

Ryan gave an awkward laugh and was clearly trying to make up for his lapse. He was unhooking his backpack and opening it up but his gaze kept straying back to Sin who studiously ignored him.

"Hello, Ryan," Boyd greeted, partially as a way to break the awkward silence. "Are the others on their way?"

"Owen's probably stopping to get coffee," the R&D agent replied quickly. He was still flushed red from embarrassment and fiddling with his laptop. He seemed to be one of the few people who still preferred a laptop over thinner hand held devices.

"So, how are you guys?" he asked, awkwardness still as prominent as it had been a few seconds ago. He snuck a glance at Sin out of the corner of his eye.

"Grand," Sin said blandly.

"Fine," Boyd said. "And you?"

"Oh, you know. Busy, not being able to sleep because of all of my projects-- although... oh! That reminds me," Ryan burst out, looking over at Boyd but not before his gaze stumbled over Sin once again. "I was going to ask you if you wanted to come watch anime with me. I just downloaded a series I've been searching for forever. It's super old."

Sin's gaze switched to Boyd but he said nothing. The information seemed to catch his attention although Boyd had no idea why.

"Is it the one you have on the walls with the robots?" Boyd asked, not knowing much about anime or what kinds of series existed.

"No but if you're interested in mecha, I have a ton of Gundam stuff. The series I found was called Rurouni Kenshin. It's so cool; it takes place in the 19th century and is about this awesome samurai guy in Japan."

"Where else would a samurai be?" Sin commented, eyes still on Boyd. He only shifted them after Boyd returned the stare once again.

Ryan shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I dunno. I was just explaining..."

"I don't know what I'm interested in," Boyd admitted, turning his attention back to Ryan. He didn't know what mecha meant but apparently it had something to do with young men and robots with wings. "The series you mentioned is fine. Is it historically accurate?" he added curiously.

"I'm not sure so far, it just finished today. I didn't want to start until I had it all. There's a movie too." Ryan flicked a look over at Sin. "Hey, you know, you could--"

"No."

"Okay..." Ryan frowned but didn't seem terribly surprised.

The door opened before any of them could speak. Owen shuffled in, his eyes bleary and half-lidded. He looked across the room and stopped just inside the door when his eyes fell on Sin. He stared at Sin, looked down at his coffee, and then turned around and headed back for the door.

"Where are you going?" Ryan demanded, sitting up straight. "Owen!"

"Something's wrong with my coffee, Ry-Meist," Owen mumbled sleepily as he continued toward the door. "I think they gave me a shot of L-espresso-D. I'm seeing things now. I'm going to go away and come back and see if anything changes."

Sin's gaze flicked over Owen before moving to Ryan. He didn't appear very moved by any of this but then again, he always looked that way around other people.

"Come sit down before Jeffrey gets here and starts badgering you."

Owen made a face and stopped. He turned around, peering at Sin again and then looking over at Boyd and finally Ryan. After a pause he shuffled back over to the table and sat down next to Ryan, carefully setting the coffee cup on the table.

His sleepy gaze didn't waver on Sin even as he leaned over to Ryan. "Okay but just so we're clear... Sin Vega *is* sitting on the other side of the table right now and I'm not imagining it? I've been having some weird dreams lately so I don't know what's going on right now. I might look down and realize I'm naked."

A low scoff emanated from Sin's full lips and he slouched down in his chair, tapping his knuckles impatiently against the desk. Now that other people were in the room with them it seemed like he couldn't wait to leave.

"It's good that he's here," Ryan said with an encouraging grin, apparently deciding to pay no attention to Sin's unfriendly behavior. "I'm glad. We can all be one big happy unit now and everything."

"Oh yeah, it's all good," Owen said, relaxing and finally looking away from Sin. He took a long drink of coffee and immediately grimaced, his entire face scrunching up. He looked over at Ryan with his eyebrows dragging down.

"I just didn't wanna be hallucinating in the middle of meetings again. I got a lot of dirty looks the time it happened with Stephen. I don't know why it's such a big deal anyway. It would've been way more exciting if there really were tap-dancing penguins in there, even if it made it kind of hard to concentrate."

Boyd didn't pay much attention to Owen as he found his gaze straying to Sin. He wondered if Sin didn't want to be around others at all or whether it was specifically the way Owen and Ryan were acting that caused his impatience. Given how uninterested Sin had seemed for a long time in even interacting with Boyd when they were alone, Boyd assumed it must simply be the idea of being around a lot of other people.

It made him wonder why exactly Sin had come. Was it really that he was trying to make more of an effort to be a good partner? Was he finally putting some amount of stock in this whole process? Or, perhaps, had General Carhart or someone else recently told him he needed to start attending the meetings?

He thought that maybe it really was just that Sin was trying to be nice but he wasn't certain if he only thought that because that was what he wanted to believe. He knew that there was more to Sin than his gruff exterior but some of his motivations were still a mystery to Boyd.

The door opened and General Carhart and Jeffrey arrived at the same time. Carhart's gaze immediately fell on Sin and he arched an eyebrow as he took his spot at the head of the table. "Nice of you to finally join us."

"No problem," Sin replied with a smirk. "Nice group of misfits you have here."

Owen rested his chin against his palm, still looking half asleep. He raised one hand briefly, just a flick of his wrist, with a look that clearly said 'guilty as charged.'

Jeffrey's eyes narrowed and he stared at Sin in clear distaste as he took his seat across the table. His lips were thinned and for a moment it seemed he planned to say something but in the end he remained silent.

Carhart ignored the comment and looked between his two field agents. There was a slightly pleased tilt to his mouth but he evened it out after a moment and turned to business.

They went over the mission with Boyd doing most of the talking. Sin didn't speak even when it came up how Boyd and Warren Andrews had been saved. From time to time, Boyd noticed Sin observing him but for the most part Boyd ignored it as they discussed the mission and information he'd been given by Andrews.

It wasn't until Boyd mentioned Thierry's name that the routine of the debriefing seemed broken.

"Oh no," Ryan groaned with an almost comical grimace. "Not that guy again. Ugh. And also, my sources all dried up with him. They lost touch or don't have any access to him anymore. We'd have to go through the civilian route to get in touch with him."

Owen took a long drink of coffee, made a face, and set the cup down heavily. He nodded tiredly, seemingly barely listening before something apparently clicked. His head shot up and he straightened abruptly, looking between Ryan and Carhart. "Wait, what? We're talking Mr. Suave in the tux? I know someone with the direct connect."

"Good," Carhart said. "We'll get a feel on how agreeable he's feeling lately and decide how to approach him from there. If he is having recent contact with Janus shot-callers, that goes directly against his previous claims that he'd fallen out of contact with them."

"Who is he exactly?" Boyd asked, looking at the others with slightly drawn eyebrows. Looks were exchanged around the table and Sin rolled his eyes. "A pointless asshole with a lot of connections."

"Basically," Ryan agreed with a snort of amusement.

"Yeah, I don't think anyone wants to claim him as their BFF," Owen said and then finished off the rest of the coffee in one gulp. When he made a face and started to set it down, Jeffrey snatched the cup from his hands and moved it well out of Owen's reach.

"Whoa," Owen said in surprise, looking over at Jeffrey. "What's with the ninja move?"

"You'll play with it and irritate us otherwise," Jeffrey said shortly, turning his attention to Carhart.

Carhart once again ignored the side comments and looked directly at Boyd. "Thierry Beauvais is a wealthy entrepreneur who uses his vast wealth to either help or hinder different political groups in Western Europe. His father had been one of the first benefactors of Janus when they were nothing more than a fledgling group but when he died, Thierry didn't show that same exclusivity and instead began playing various groups against each other seemingly for his own amusement."

He paused and glanced at Sin. "We've had previous dealings with Thierry. In the past he's shown interest with helping America gain access to certain people but he's very temperamental. The most recent negotiation with him ended in disaster when Sin took the liberty of insulting him to the extent of the mission failing."

"He's a condescending fuck," Sin replied with a shrug.

Boyd leaned back in his chair, studying Sin briefly before returning his attention to Carhart. "Are there worries that despite his interest in helping America in the past he may be uninterested in negotiating with us again?"

"It's possible. But we won't know for certain until we contact him. At that time, we'll have a follow-up." Carhart looked at Owen. "Get your source on this as soon as possible. I want a contact number immediately."

"I'll be all over that after the meeting," Owen said with a nod. "Like a mongoose on a snake." He frowned. "The trained ones, anyway."

Jeffrey glared at him from the side.

Carhart shook his head. "If no one has anything further to add, we'll wrap up for now. Owen, I expect you to be in touch within the hour."

Owen nodded again, although this time he eyed Carhart briefly as if wondering if he was in trouble.

No one spoke and Carhart soon left. Jeffrey wasn't far behind him, pointedly taking the cup with him and throwing it out in the garbage on the way out. Owen rolled his eyes but he left unusually quickly as well, no doubt to work on his assignment.

"Don't mind Jeffrey, by the way. He has a permanent case of stick-in-ass," Ryan confided, glancing at Sin with a brief hopeful grin. When he got a non-response in return, the R&D agent sighed and looked over at Boyd again. "Well, if you're interested in the anime let me know."

That being said, he gathered his stuff quickly and headed out of the room. When the door shut, Sin looked over at Boyd with raised eyebrows. "Interesting."

"That does seem to be the best word to describe the unit," Boyd replied, inclining his head in agreement.

Sin just shook his head and shoved his chair back, dropping his hands on the arms of the chair as if to push himself up. He didn't do it automatically though and his vivid green eyes rested on Boyd for a long moment. There was something almost curious about his gaze and it was the most deliberately open Boyd had seen his expression so far.

But then the senior agent shook his head and stood. "Well, I'm off to the training room to likely be hassled by complete morons."

"Is that the one on the first floor?"

"Yes. It's an unfortunate place to go because it's widely used by every single idiot on the compound but it offers a wide variety of equipment to work out and spar if you want to do that sort of thing." There was another pause and then he added, "My new found freedom to roam the compound leads me there more often than not."

Boyd's gaze hovered on Sin. He was unaccustomed to Sin offering up so much information. It was nice and almost seemed as though Sin was still interested in interacting even when they weren't on a mission. He nodded, pulling some hair behind his ear.

"That's good to know. I'm primarily used to the training complex but I don't have access to it anymore. Are there places where a person can be left alone or does it get too crowded?"

"There are private rooms." Another pause. "You should consider utilizing the area. To further your training."

"I will." Boyd's lips tilted up a hint on the edges in a quiet smile that was gone almost before it was there. "Thank you. I've needed a place to go."

Sin looked at him sidelong and then after a stretch, nodded curtly as he turned away. "I'll see you around."

Boyd nodded and watched Sin leave. The latest mission seemed to have changed a lot in even the peripheral parts of their interaction. It was somewhat unexpected. He'd as much as expected to die the day before and now not only was he alive, but a goal he'd been struggling with for weeks was realized as well.

He couldn't help feeling intrigued by this new possibility. He wanted to know more about Sin when he wasn't on guard. He'd thought he would only be able to do that by watching the live feed but now he was starting to wonder if maybe he'd have the opportunity to see it firsthand.

As he stood, he thought about the training room. Maybe if he started stopping by there he could train but also get the chance to observe Sin. Maybe Sin would continue to talk to him as an equal if they ran into each other there.

He was still considering the idea when he left the room.

## Chapter 11

When Sin woke up, it was with a flash of panic. Sweat was running down the sides of his face as his heart galloped in his chest. The last vestiges of the nightmare haunted his peripheral vision but when he jerked his gaze to the darkened corner, he found nothing unusual there.

Slumping back against the bed, he took a deep breath. There was a distinct tremor in his limbs and his breath was still coming fast. Phantom aches echoed through his body as though he'd really experienced whatever had happened in his dream.

He pressed the heel of his hand to his eyes and grit his teeth. Trying to remember the entirety of it was always pointless. He'd had the same nightmare countless times. Recently, it had started coming more often. But no matter how worn out he felt after waking up, no matter how dismayed he was-- only flashes of it remained.

Green grass stained with blood, rocks and the moon hovering in the blackened sky. Flashes of a body being dragged through tall grass or weeds, a slack mouth, and fingers trailing limply through dirt.

"Fuck."

Sin opened his eyes again and pulled himself into a sitting position. His head was pounding but the ghostly pain in his torso that had accompanied it gradually faded. It was always the same when he woke up-- strange aches as though he'd just been in a fight and a clawing horror that made his heart catch in his throat. But he never remembered.

Throwing his long legs over the side of the bed, Sin combed his fingers through his hair. Disgruntled and irritated over being plagued by the nightmare so frequently, he rolled his stiff shoulders in an attempt to relieve the tension from them. He didn't understand the dream or why it had such an effect on him. The fact that he woke up in a

cold sweat was bad enough but the idea that he thrashed and yelled in his sleep was even worse. It still annoyed the hell out of him that Boyd had witnessed it firsthand.

Sin stood up and headed to the bathroom, shoving off the loose grey pants he'd worn to sleep. The daylight streaming into the apartment windows seemed too bright compared to the darkness of his bedroom, even if the sun was still muted behind clouds. It made him wince as his head pounded but he felt simultaneous relief as the dream drifted further away.

However, his brain didn't stop feeling muddled and confused until he stepped under the powerful streams of water from the shower. It plastered the sweaty hair back against his head and face, cooling his uncomfortably heated flesh. He smoothed his soaked bangs away and kept his face tilted up against the cold water. It felt good.

It was stupid to continuously revel in the feel of a normal shower but he couldn't help it. The fact that he had his own apartment was something that consistently surprised and pleased him in general.

It was something he'd never had before; his own space. It was a standard Agency apartment and was Spartan by default but it was still his own. He likely would never be able to add his own furniture to it like most people could but he didn't really have the desire to do so either. It didn't matter to him what it looked like; all that mattered to him was that he had it. So much of his life had been spent under the watchful eye of other people, in one trapped circumstance or another. This was the first time he was on his own.

Of course he was still confined to the compound unless he had supervision and guards stood in front of his apartment door at all times but it was better than what he'd had before. He often wondered how Carhart had managed to convince Connors to finally let him have his own quarters. The Marshal had never shown any interest in treating Sin like a normal human in the past. Perhaps they thought if they chose this tactic, he'd be more likely to cooperate. If that was the case, he couldn't deny that it had been a motivating factor.

Well that and the fact that Boyd had turned out to not be so bad.

Sin opened his eyes, lips drawing down in a frown as he finally reached for a washcloth and soap. The thought of Boyd unsettled him in a way that he didn't entirely understand. He'd had mixed thoughts about the younger man from the moment he'd seen him during the interview and he still didn't know entirely what to make of him. For someone who had seemed so taciturn at the start, Boyd had slowly morphed into not only a decent partner but a companion of sorts.

It had struck Sin as odd almost instantly and for awhile he hadn't been able to figure out why their conversations had thrown him off so badly. Then he'd realized that during his entire time at the Agency, Boyd was the first person to really talk to him. Carhart consistently tried and failed but Sin could never look at the man without thinking he had some kind of motive. Boyd, however, didn't seem to have any. It was possible that it was all just a ploy to get under Sin's skin and keep their partnership working but if it was, Sin still couldn't deny that having someone around who didn't shudder at the sight of him was nice. Especially since Boyd had more of a reason to fear him than anyone after their nearly disastrous mission outside of Carson two weeks ago.

The thought of it once again pulled his full lips down into a scowl.

The worst part of it was that he didn't remember anything until the point where he'd already been crushing Boyd against the floor. It was just like the other times-- the other episodes, as the Agency liked to call them. The difference was for some reason this time he'd been able to snap out of it before damage had been done. He didn't know why he'd been able to and he had doubts that either of them would be as lucky again.

Scrubbing himself quickly and allowing the powerful jets of water to rinse him off, Sin had reached over to shut the faucet off when he heard it. The low click of his door opening and footsteps treading inside.

Resentful irritation flooded him and all thoughts of his nightmares vanished. It galled him to know that people had access to his apartment. In fact it really fucking pissed him off. It half made him want to storm into the living room naked and crack

someone's skull open. But that would only lead to him being dragged off to the Fourth for a couple of weeks in the box before yet another bastard came waltzing back into his apartment a few days later uninvited and unwanted. Assuming they let him out this time.

Stepping out of the shower with a grimace, he wrapped a towel around his waist and looked in the mirror. The bruises were slowly fading from his torso but the wound from the gunshot was still painful and raw looking. After the first couple of days of caring for it he'd been forced to go to the medical wing to make sure it hadn't gotten infected. As little as he liked having them attend to him, an infection wasn't something he could fix on his own.

There were sounds emanating from his living room and faint conversation. Whoever it was sounded impatient but he didn't give a shit. He turned on the faucet and brushed his teeth slowly before taking the time to actually comb his hair. It would have been amusing to walk out completely naked but at the last minute he dragged on the cotton pants. He didn't feel like having anyone gawk at his scars.

Still damp from the shower, Sin stalked out into the main room and stared flatly at the man waiting for him there.

Rueben Steig was an upper tiered support staff agent who'd been exclusively tasked with Sin. He'd made his presence known not long after Sin had relocated to the apartment and had explained how the supply cards worked, when deliveries were made and how money was removed from his accounts. It felt like the worst kind of babysitting to have someone literally purchase and deliver all of his food and supplies but apparently every agent who lived on compound utilized this function. He would have preferred to do these things himself but since he wasn't even allowed off the compound alone, that wasn't going to happen. It also didn't help that unlike other agents, he didn't even have direct access to his own money.

"You didn't submit your supply card," Rueben said almost immediately upon seeing Sin. He was flanked by Officers Kemp and Daniels, two of the guards that manned Sin's door. Rueben crossed his arms over his grey dress shirt and frowned

disapprovingly. It was one of the two expressions he typically wore when looking at Sin; the other was a condescending sneer.

Sin shrugged and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest loosely. "Yeah, and?"

As usual, this response seemed to irritate Rueben and his scowl deepened. He was one of those support guys who took their jobs way too seriously. A lot of people in support roles had once been candidates for something more high ranking such as field, R&D, IT or techs of some kind and had failed the required training to move on. It landed them in varying roles around the compound and there were always those individuals who made themselves believe that they were still really important just to get over the disappointment of being demoted. Sin had a feeling that Rueben was one of those people. He seemed to think that the world would come to an end if anyone submitted a late supply card.

"Yes and you aren't the only person I have to deal with, Vega."

"So quit. Tell them to send someone with a shorter stick up their ass."

Daniels snickered and just raised his eyebrows when Rueben cast him an icy glare.

"Where is the card?"

Sin gestured vaguely to the kitchen counter and didn't bother to move. Rueben was hardly the rudest person he had to deal with on the compound but he still got under Sin's skin.

Rueben jammed the card into a panel computer and waited impatiently as the information loaded. It didn't take long for the man's blue eyes to flick back up incredulously. "You didn't select anything!"

"I don't like anything on it," Sin replied with a shrug, not moving from his position by the wall. "You people gave me bullshit options. I don't like fish and that's most of what's on there. Don't most people get to choose their own food?"

"You aren't most people so you'll just have to get over it. It's not my problem what you like and don't like."

Green eyes narrowed and Sin had a vivid mental image of caving Rueben's face in. Seeming to realize his misstep, Rueben shifted uncomfortably and glanced at the guards behind him as if to ensure that they were still there. "You are on a protein-specific diet until you reach your weight and muscle goal."

"It's not *my* goal," Sin retorted, feeling the irritation rising even further. "If you people want to tell me what the fuck to eat, why don't you just send me whatever you want? Giving me the illusion of choice isn't going to change the fact that I have none."

"I don't have time to sit around making your selections--"

"Well I suggest you make time and stop charging into my apartment in full bitch mode." Sin looked the other man up and down, taking in the sandy hair and lean body. He was more attractive than average and Sin briefly wondered what he'd initially tried out for. If it was for a field agent position, he had valentine operative written all over him. "I don't care about your sense of superiority or your high horse, stock boy. But if you keep speaking to me that way I'd have no problem knocking you right off it."

"Was that a threat?" Rueben demanded, eyes narrowing. "I dare you to--"

"Okay," Daniels interrupted, looking exasperated. "Just take the supply card and shut the hell up already. Jesus, you're like a fucking woman on her rag."

Both Sin and Kemp looked at Daniels in surprise. Rueben just flushed and sent the guard a withering look. "Stay out of it, guard."

"Well then hurry up, stock boy," Daniels returned, using Sin's description. "We don't have all day."

Rueben appeared completely thrown off by this turn of events and he grumbled something incoherent before shoving the card in his pocket. Mortified and resentful, he shot Sin another annoyed look and stormed out of the apartment. The guards followed without sparing Sin another glance.

Sin turned away from the door and stared at the window. He wanted to feel grateful that they had gone but whatever enjoyment he would have gotten from being in his apartment and not on a mission today was effectively spoiled. He'd known from the start that privacy was nonexistent in his world but it still irked him that people actually had access to his locks.

It was possible that maintenance and support staff had access to all Agency apartments but he highly doubted they typically talked down to agents the way Rueben did to him. There was usually a certain level of respect as a person's rank increased but that obviously didn't apply to him.

And Rueben was far from the only one who acted that way. Being ultimately despised and disliked by the Agency staff as a whole made that a given. Given the things he'd done along with the rumors that added to it, at times Sin couldn't even blame them.

Aggravated by the encounter, Sin stalked around the apartment trying to find something to do. His books no longer seemed entertaining and doing sit ups quickly became boring. The entire place seemed tainted now and nothing was enjoyable. The concept of personal space was shattered every time some asshole with a sense of authority came bursting in.

Disgusted, he went into his room and stared at the meager articles of clothing that he owned. It didn't take long to grab a pair of worn sweatpants and a threadbare t-shirt. None of it fit him exactly right but it was clothing he'd owned since he was a teenager and it served its purpose for the training room.

Sin didn't look at Daniels or Kemp as he left the apartment and stalked down the hallway. He could feel their eyes on his back as he went but he didn't bother to

acknowledge them. He could tell already that it was going to be a terrible day but his desire to work off the aggression that had steadily built in him was stronger than the desire to be left alone.

As usual the compound was relatively quiet around his residential building. It was set apart from the others and was considerably smaller due to the fact that it was meant for special cases. There were the usual guards posted by the main doors who stared at him as he went by but other than that, he was left alone on the walk across the courtyard. It wasn't until he got closer to the Tower that crowds of people began to appear.

The tension that had built in his shoulders only worsened as he walked up the steps. He didn't have social anxiety but he did have idiot agent anxiety. Most people avoided him or went in a different direction if he came near them but there was always someone who would inevitably piss him off. He was dully hoping that Rueben had fulfilled the universe's asshole quota for the day just so he could work out in peace. It didn't take long to figure out that that wouldn't be the case.

It started out well enough; he'd managed to get the only remaining private room off the side of the main training space so that he wouldn't have to deal with gawkers. He spent over an hour doing various exercises and stretching in relative peace and quiet. His mind cleared and the anger slowly melted away as he lost himself in the repetition of what he was doing.

Unfortunately, when he briefly left the room to get some free weights he noticed that Harry Truman and Dennis McNichols were in the main room. It was even more unfortunate that Harry immediately noticed him. The tension returned almost instantaneously and Sin set the weights down before standing up to wait.

A blanket of quiet rage slowly swept over him but he kept it in check, narrowing his eyes. Harry was the only person on the compound who wasn't afraid to touch him. He knew better than anyone what the senior agent was capable of but that didn't deter him at all. In fact, he seemed to want Sin to react to him. Harry did everything in his

power to get him to lash out. No one seemed to understand it, even dimwitted Dennis didn't seem to entirely grasp the reasoning most times, but Sin had figured it out instantly.

Harry wanted him on the Fourth and he was upset that he'd been released. Their interactions went back a long way but it had only been after the introduction of the box that Harry had taken it to the next level. While Sin was kept drugged, Harry was able to do whatever he wanted. He'd never actually gone as far as he could have but Sin had enough muddled memories of large hands groping at him as a hot wet mouth slobbered on his mouth and neck to figure out that Harry had a sexual fixation with him.

The cause was baffling but after a background check into the man's file, Sin hadn't been surprised to see that in Harry's civilian years he'd been a registered sex offender with a long history of stalking, even though he was only in his late twenties. The Agency had taken him for his military background and sociopathic tendencies but even they had shied away from a field agent path once they realized that the man couldn't reign in his sexual impulses.

"We just keep running into each other, Vega," Harry drawled as he entered the room with Dennis close behind.

"Imagine that, considering we both live on the compound," Sin said flatly, maintaining his position even as Harry kept walking closer.

"Oh is that all it is?" Harry stopped only when he was less than a hand span away from Sin, well into his personal space. Light brown eyes flicked over Sin's sweaty form, focusing on the crotch of his sweatpants before sweeping back up to his damp neck and pursed lips. "I thought maybe you were doing it on purpose."

Sin smirked, revulsion twisting with the hatred he felt for the man. "You wish."

Harry just raised his eyebrows slightly and didn't bother denying it. He looked over his shoulder at Dennis. "Why don't you give us a minute?"

Dennis blinked in surprise. "I don't think that's a good idea, Har--"

"I said get the fuck out," was the snarled response. Harry's lips curled back in a sneer and the look he shot his friend was full of venom. Judging by the way Dennis quickly departed, it would seem that Harry's abusive personality came into play in his friendships too.

Sin uncrossed his arms and curled his fingers into loose fists. He cast a quick look around the room and noted that there was indeed a small camera mounted in the ceiling although it was nearly disguised by the light fixture.

"You just keep playing hard to get now that you're free, don't you?" Harry asked, moving closer and forcing Sin to back up unless he wanted the other man pressed against him.

"Groping someone who is in a drugged stupor doesn't count as compliance," Sin replied blandly, not flinching when the other man pushed him against the wall. "I know that must be hard for a pedophile--"

"I'm not a fucking pedophile," Harry snapped, cuffing Sin upside the head.

It took all of his willpower not to respond. Sin took a deep breath and exhaled slowly but his fingers were now balled into white-knuckled fists as his eyes burned into Harry. "Is fourteen the age of consent in your fantasy world? That was the age of the boy you attacked before the Agency recruited you wasn't it?"

A flash of anger glittered in Harry's eyes and he grabbed the front of Sin's shirt, bunching the fabric. "That's a lot of talk from someone who kills civilians and rapes his shrink."

Sin grit his teeth but didn't deign to respond. He didn't know how the rumor about him having raped Lydia had come about but he wasn't going to respond to it. That was what Harry wanted-- to get a reaction out of him.

Harry smirked when Sin didn't answer and leaned forward again, raising a hand to slide down the side of Sin's face as he leered. "Now when are you going to start

playing nice?" He rubbed his thumb against Sin's lower lip, trying to force the finger inside.

Sin responded instantly. Without thinking, he wrapped his hand around Harry's wrist and twisted it backward until the other man grunted in pain, stumbling back.

"Touch me and I'll kill you," Sin said flatly as he wiped a hand across his mouth. "We aren't on the Fourth floor anymore."

The other man flexed his wrist, looking at Sin darkly. "Attack me again and you will be, boy. I'll activate that collar and zap you so hard your eyes will be rolling for a week. When you wake up you'll be back on the Fourth--" Harry stepped closer again and Sin tensed. "--drugged, helpless and fully at my disposal."

The words caused a rush of memories to crowd Sin's mind. The feel of a heavy body crushing him, an erection digging into his thigh-- unable to move, unable to defend himself. The power Harry held over him at the moment was just as bad as what had happened then. The inability to react without even worse consequences made him freeze in place. He was just as helpless as he'd been in the box. Everything Harry said was true and Sin was damned either way.

Black rage rolled off of him and his lip curled, nostrils flaring as his breath began to come faster.

"Don't like that do you?" Harry taunted, thick lips lifting in a filthy smile.

Harry leaned forward again, hand outstretched as the anger began to consume Sin completely. The image of Harry in front of him began to shift and flicker as everything around them started to dim. His peripheral vision was nonexistent-- his eyes only focused on the threat before him.

"Touch me and you will be sorry."

The threat seemed to excite Harry, who chuckled deep in his throat. But just as his hand wrapped around Sin's arm, the door behind them opened. Boyd walked in, taking in the room with the same disaffected look as ever.

Sin didn't take his eyes away from Harry's as he panted harshly. His heart was pounding and his hands were starting to tremble as he forced them to stay down. But he could feel himself starting to lose the tenuous control he had over the violence that wanted to wreak havoc.

Boyd's eyes shifted over Harry, moving down to his hand on Sin's arm and then flicking back up to Sin's face. He walked toward the two, turning an even stare onto Harry. "Am I interrupting anything?"

"Mind your fucking business," Harry snapped, not even looking at Boyd.

"This *is* my business." Boyd stopped next to Harry, pointedly looking down at Harry's hand on Sin's arm. The young agent was the picture of nonchalance, with his hands loose at his sides and expression impassive, but there was definite strength underlying his tone when he continued. "I suggest you take your hands off my partner."

Dennis came hurrying through the door, his expression a mixture of irritation and fear as he shot Harry a look. "Sorry dude I walked away for one minute--"

"Shut the fuck up," Harry snarled, casting his friend a dark glare.

Sin wrenched his arm away but Harry responded by grabbing the front of his t-shirt. He yanked Sin against him, ripping the collar in the process. Their faces were only inches apart although Sin's bangs were shading his eyes. All that could be seen of his face was the vicious sneer that twisted his features.

Boyd's hand suddenly snapped out, wrenching Harry's wrist away from Sin's shirt. Harry jerked his hand back with a swear and Dennis slammed Boyd back against the wall. Dennis reared back his fist just as Sin snapped out of his hate-filled daze. Before Dennis could strike Boyd, Sin's hand shot out and wrapped his hand around the guard's neck.

Another guard entered the room before anything more could happen. Sin's eyes flicked over to him quickly and he realized that it was Luke Gerant.

"What the hell is going on?" Luke demanded, staring at the scene incredulously.

Harry snorted in disgust and flexed his hand. "Nothing. Piss off."

Sin released Dennis although he noted that his fingers had already made red marks on the man's throat.

"Officer Truman was harassing Sin," Boyd spoke up, moving around Dennis. "He was using Officer McNichols to watch the door so no one would enter and obviously planned to escalate the situation. I attempted to intervene and you see the result."

Sin looked at Boyd with surprise and adjusted his shirt. Adrenaline was still pumping through his veins but the desire to eviscerate both men was slowly fading. "Boyd--"

"Shut your mouth and mind your business," Harry interrupted, narrowing his eyes at Boyd hatefully. "It's between me and Vega."

The look on the guard's face gave Sin pause. There was genuine animosity there for Boyd and that did not bode well for the future. Shaking off the last vestiges of the episode that hadn't actually come, Sin kept his eyes focused on Harry. He wouldn't put it past the man to try to attack Boyd now-- his temper was that bad when he didn't get his way. But at the same time he usually didn't strike out with an entire audience.

"It isn't between you two," Boyd replied flatly. For the first time since he'd entered the room, his expression shifted from bland and emotionless; his eyes narrowed and he turned a cold, hard stare on Harry. If he noticed Harry's obvious ire, it didn't seem to bother him. "You're clearly a deranged man taking advantage of the situation. Sin may feel unable to properly respond but I don't. I'll file a formal report on you if that's what it takes."

A vague feeling of unease shot through Sin and he shifted where he stood. "Let's go."

Luke ignored him and looked between Dennis and Harry with a scowl. There was obvious dislike imprinted on his expression as he nodded. "It may be a good idea for you to report this."

Dennis shot him an incredulous look. "You're taking their side over us?"

Harry just sneered, not looking surprised in the least.

"It's an incident that clearly needs to be put on the record. You were on camera the whole time anyway. It may be best if everyone has their side of the story documented," Luke replied diplomatically despite the way his eyes betrayed his clear disgust. "Besides, others in the training facility were aware that something was going on. A maintenance worker grabbed me while I was passing to inform me that something was happening."

Sin just shook his head, impatient to leave. He had no interest in filing reports or documenting anything. "I'm out of here."

Boyd remained focused on Luke. "How do we file official reports through the guards' database? Do I report what I've witnessed to you or should I write a report and send it in?"

Harry scoffed with disgust and turned around to walk out but not before giving Boyd another dark glare. He brushed by Luke rudely with Dennis following behind him.

Ignoring them, Luke nodded. "Go to the third floor-- that's where the guard command center is. All incidents that occur on the compound are reported there before being distributed to the proper chain of command for the individuals involved. Since it involved Truman and McNichols, I'll make sure my captain gets it."

Boyd nodded. "I'll do that. Thank you."

Luke looked at Sin and opened his mouth to speak but before any words could come out, Sin walked out of the room. He almost kept going until he was clear of the training area but he made himself stop. As much as he wished that Boyd would have left it alone instead of pressing the issue, he couldn't deny that he felt oddly... pleased that the younger man had been so vehement about defending him.

Frowning, Sin looked over his shoulder and saw that Luke was exiting the room with Boyd right behind him. The guard stopped and stared at him for a moment.

"Not terrified of me anymore?" Sin asked with a raised eyebrow, flicking his gaze over the man.

Luke frowned at him. "So you were awake that day..."

"What does it matter?"

"I guess it doesn't." Still frowning, Luke shook his head and looked at Boyd. "Let me know if you have any issues filing the report. You can find my number in the directory. Take care."

Sin ignored the thoughtful stare the guard pinned him with and waited until Luke walked away to speak. "Why did you do that?"

Boyd's gaze idly ran across the room before he met Sin's eyes. "You seemed like you were about to hurt him and I wanted to intervene before you could get in trouble for something that isn't your fault. I also wanted him to know that not everyone will ignore such blatant harassment. By reporting it, maybe he'll see some consequences for his behavior."

The comment was met with silence as Sin stared down at his partner for a long moment. Several things about Boyd's answer stood out to him as unexpected and it threw him off guard momentarily. However there were too many eyes on him and he still felt the burning desire to bash someone's face in. "Let's get out of here."

Boyd's gaze was thoughtful on Sin before he nodded and followed him out of the training room. Most people avoided looking directly at Sin when he came close to them but as soon as his back was to the rest of the room, there was the instant heat of stares on his back. A few mutters echoed around the room and Sin thought they undoubtedly believed he'd once again caused some issue. He couldn't help wondering what people would think if they knew the truth.

They continued walking until they were through the lobby and outside of the Tower, well out of earshot of anyone who would be brave enough to eavesdrop. They ended up stopping to the side of the courtyard, with trees nearby and most of the others on compound far away. Only then did he glance down at Boyd's serious face.

"You unnecessarily brought yourself to the attention of someone you would have been smarter to avoid."

Boyd shrugged, looking entirely unconcerned. "It doesn't matter. I wouldn't have stayed quiet walking into that regardless."

Sin scowled at him and moved to cross his arms but thought better of it as the wound in his arm twinged with the halted motion. "You're either being cocky or stupid. Truman is the pack leader of a lot of guards who run this place. The ones that hate me and field agents in general, not guards like doe-eyed Gerant back there. It would be wise to not get on their bad side just because of me."

Boyd looked over and his eyes narrowed. There was a flash of something in his eyes that Sin was unaccustomed to seeing in Boyd; a firm, hard edge that was as close to anger or a warning as Sin had so far seen. "So I should allow a terrible person to hurt others in front of me simply because it could be inconvenient for me to say anything? Do you think they wouldn't hate me anyway? I'm already disliked because of my mother and my position. You're my partner and I'm going to help you. Even if it wasn't part of my job, I would not let that go."

Sin opened his mouth to reply but halted abruptly. Frustratingly enough, he found that he didn't know what to say in response. There was something intriguing about the

way Boyd's eyes were flashing at the moment; about the way his quiet voice had an undercurrent of vehemence on Sin's behalf. It was so unexpected and bizarre that he could only shake his head as he tried to form proper words.

"You defended me, that was enough. And I..." he trailed off for a moment, looking away casually with a slight shrug. "I appreciate it. No one ever has before. But taking it further isn't necessary. I would not like... to see you once again get hurt because you were trying to help me."

Boyd's lips were parted as if he planned to continue arguing, but Sin's words made him pause and search what he could see of Sin's face. After a moment he shook his head and his eyebrows drew together. When he met Sin's eyes, he looked quietly determined.

"It'll be alright; that doesn't concern me. What concerns me is you have such low expectations that even someone speaking up on your behalf is enough for you, and Truman seems too arrogant to stop until he's challenged. I'm not going to stop halfway on this. If something happens to me on a mission, I'd prefer to have your treatment on official record first. Your next partner may be unwilling to help."

At that, Sin glared. "Will you shut up about next partners? I decide to go along with this shit and you're still all ready to drop dead at any moment."

"I'm being realistic," Boyd replied simply. "I'm more likely to die before you do. It has nothing to do with you being a good partner. I'm simply thinking ahead."

"You're an idiot."

Boyd's eyebrow quirked up at that but he didn't seem angry. He simply scrutinized Sin before responding. "What are you worried about anyway? Is there something I should know about Truman?"

Sin rocked back on his heels for a moment before answering, debating how far into it he wanted to go. It would have been smarter to end the conversation before he gave Boyd further ammunition for filing a report.

For some reason, however, he didn't.

"He's a predator and he views me as an ideal victim. The fact that I'm generally hated suits him because no one is likely to believe me if I tell anyone, but he doesn't actually care about what I've allegedly done. When he's denied what he wants, he gets worse and he will lash out. It doesn't help that his buddies tend to man the surveillance station."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "I see. As a predator, does that mean he's attacked or harassed others in the past? Or has it mostly been you due to your circumstances?"

"I know he had a record of it before he was recruited here."

Boyd seemed to consider that. "How long has he been here?"

Sin shrugged again, looking away from Boyd finally. "At least five years, perhaps more. He first appeared on the Fourth two years into my first incarceration."

Boyd's lips twitched down on the edges. "Does everyone know what he's like? Officer Gerant didn't seem surprised by the situation."

A low scoff escaped Sin's mouth and he shook his head. "All of the guards on the Fourth who are in the maximum security wing know what he's like. I don't know what it is to Gerant. Maybe he's a bit more squeamish than the others."

Boyd shook his head. "Why would you not want me to file a report? He obviously has no intentions of stopping and is unlikely to with that history. Everyone knows and looks the other way. The ignorance and discrimination in that alone is astounding. Doesn't it bother you at all?"

Another shrug and this time Sin couldn't help wanting to turn away from the topic. He wasn't interested in being seen as the victim in some unfortunate circumstance. Harry Truman was a nuisance and a danger to him only because he couldn't defend himself without making the situation worse. It would be something he'd have to deal with or learn how to in order to avoid the box.

"I'm used to it. It doesn't make a difference to me anymore. People will do what they want because of what they believe about me."

There was a beat of silence and then Boyd frowned. He crossed his arms, somehow seeming stubborn in the act. His tone was matter-of-fact when he spoke. "Well, I don't accept your status quo. He already dislikes me so not filing the report wouldn't help. And regardless of that, I disagree with your treatment. I won't stand by and do nothing when it's within my power to at least put down in words what everyone else would like to conveniently ignore."

There was obviously no point in arguing the topic so Sin just shook his head. Boyd seemed determined to go through with his plan and he wasn't going to keep fighting him on it. Besides he couldn't deny that there was something interesting about this stubbornness. It was a change from the way Boyd usually acted.

Switching topics entirely Sin asked, "Why were you there, anyway? I'd never seen you there before."

A gust of wind burst past them, whipping Boyd's hair into his face. His eyes narrowed and he tilted his face against the wind. The leaves rustled on the trees around them, while most of the other people in the courtyard gave the two of them a wide berth.

"You told me it was a good place to train."

Sin looked at him with surprise and recalled the brief discussion a couple of weeks ago. He hadn't expected Boyd to actually listen. At the time, he'd only said it to distract himself from the odd thoughts that had started shifting in his mind. Thoughts such as a random desire to cause Boyd's fleeting smile to reappear and curiosity about why Boyd went to Ryan's house when he had seemed so reclusive before.

Boyd's eyebrows twitched down at Sin's expression. "Is it so strange that I went there?"

"No. I just--" Sin stopped, scowling because he couldn't figure out what to say. After a moment of hesitation he finished, "That is, I didn't think you would actually go. I took you for a loner."

"Oh." Boyd studied Sin, his eyebrows drawing down further. After a brief pause he spoke again. "There are times I don't mind being around others. Since you recommended it, I went."

Not knowing what to say to that, Sin looked down at his torn shirt for inspiration and realized that it was worse than he'd thought. The entire collar was destroyed and the shirt was ripped haphazardly to the left. There was a beat of silence between them.

Boyd's gaze ran down Sin's front. "If you need to leave to change..."

"It's not like I have much to change into, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because the clothes I have are the clothes I've had for over a decade. I don't get out much to do more shopping," was the bland reply.

Boyd watched Sin thoughtfully. "Are you still not allowed to leave on your own?"

Sin shook his head, casting his eyes in the general direction of the gates. "Not without an escort. I am not to be trusted in the city on my own."

"Hmm." There was a brief pause. "Would you like to go now?"

His eyes snapped back to Boyd and this time he didn't bother trying to hide the surprise on his face. "With you?"

"Yes."

There was another extended pause and Sin said finally, "You're really not afraid of me, are you?"

"No, I'm not." Boyd's gaze was unwavering as he met Sin's eyes.

There was something ironic about that, considering Boyd had almost been killed by him not even a few weeks ago. They looked at each other for a moment longer before turning to walk towards the gates of the compound.

"Do you drive?"

Boyd nodded and gestured to the large parking lot by the residential buildings, not too far from the entrance to the compound. "Usually. My car's in the main lot. "

With a somewhat skeptical hesitation, Sin followed Boyd. He stole discreet looks at the younger man as they walked, trying to determine why this invitation had suddenly come about.

Yes, they'd had more frequent conversations lately, including topics other than missions or the Agency, but this was still unexpected. If Ryan's words were anything to go by, Boyd had apparently spent time with him outside of briefings. But Ryan appeared to be a sociable and outgoing person in general. Him trying to get to know Boyd made sense. Seeing Boyd outside of the Agency was not something Sin had ever thought about.

Frowning, Sin slid his hands into his pockets. Not knowing where he stood with another person wasn't something he was used to. Most of his interaction with people on the Agency was either one way or the other; they ignored him or went out of their way to ostracize him. Not even Carhart had offered to escort him off the compound before.

Another thing that bothered Sin was that he couldn't decide whether this behavior was genuine or just a way to keep their partnership going smoothly. He had reached a point where it was now pointless to deny that Boyd intrigued him. Everything from his unexpected behavior to the surprising pleasantness of his face being brightened by a smile. Sin couldn't remember the last time anyone had graced him with that expression and it had struck him at the time. But that still didn't give him any more insight into whether this was all an act or not.

Suspicious and quiet, he followed Boyd to his car. It was black and sophisticated looking but Sin didn't pay any attention other than that. They got in and briefly stopped at the gates while Boyd showed his identification and cleared their trip with the guards. It was easier than Sin had thought and he could only assume that Boyd was already on the list of the few people he was allowed to leave with.

As they left the Agency behind, it was quiet in the car at first. There was no music playing and the engine was smooth. They didn't get far away before Sin saw Boyd's face tilt in his direction, and his eyes flick along Sin's length. "Do you have any preferences for price range?"

Sin made a face, having forgotten about that necessity. "Somewhere cheap. I'm kept on a cash allowance. I don't have access to my account."

"That seems strange," Boyd said, looking at him sidelong. "Why not?"

"Because they control every aspect of my life," was the matter of fact reply. Sin shrugged, letting his eyes slide out the window as they drove through All Saints, the neighborhood that the Agency was in. The majority of it was trees with Silver Lake Park not too far away but as they went further south, neighborhoods began cropping into view.

For a moment it seemed Boyd was going to say something else. His lips had parted and he studied Sin's profile a moment, but then he looked away. "I know of some affordable places. If you have no objections, I'd planned to bring you to a thrift store anyway."

Sin shrugged. "I don't care how I look. Wherever is fine."

Boyd nodded and continued driving, leading them southwest toward Vickland neighborhood. Sin didn't pay much attention to where they were headed, although he did note as the scenery passed by that Boyd was taking a few of the lesser used residential back roads. They backtracked to the North to get to a through street and

then came back down. They hooked up with Dauphin Street in far western Vickland, just before the area started to transition to the upper class Financial District.

It wasn't until Boyd parked the car that Sin realized the quickest route by far from the Agency would have been to drive all the way down Dauphin Street. Boyd had gone out of the way to avoid it and had probably taken twice as long to get to the destination. The information clicked with Boyd's behavior on their first mission together. Sin glanced over at his partner, wondering just what had happened with the younger man in that area.

"Why are you going out of your way for me, anyway?" he asked, not voicing the questions going through his mind.

"Because I want to," Boyd said simply and honestly. He pulled the keys out of the ignition and looked over at Sin. "I don't have a very good answer aside from that. Except..."

He paused, his eyebrows drawing down. He searched Sin's face thoughtfully, as if he could find the answers he was looking for there. "It bothers me to think that you have no one to rely on, and that most of your alienation appears to be due to others' issues more than your own. I'm not in the habit of acting before I think, and I've taken the time to consider you. I've yet to find a reason why I shouldn't help you. So when something occurs that makes me want to help, I do."

Eyebrows rising, Sin tilted his head to the side. "You really don't seem like the charitable type. You seem like the mind your own business and try not to give a fuck or get involved type."

Boyd's lips tilted up humorlessly on the edges. "Normally I am. It seems to be different with you."

Not entirely knowing how to respond to that, Sin looked away and opened the door. It would have been easy to press further and demand why, to try to figure out if the words were true or just carefully crafted lines. But for some reason he didn't want to.

Boyd got out of the car and turned his attention to Sin over the top of the car. He tilted his head in the other direction to indicate where they were going and slid his hands in his pockets. He waited to speak until they were walking side by side.

"There are a lot of second hand stores in the city but I think Aspen's Closet is best as far as the price and quality. How much money do you have?"

"I don't know," Sin replied with a shrug. "A couple hundred. They don't give me very much."

"That should be more than enough here." Boyd looked over with a frown. "Unless that's what they provide you for a long time. What if you were to use it all here? Do you get more this week?"

"No. It doesn't matter, I don't buy anything anyway except shit from the vending machine."

Boyd shook his head. "It seems insulting to have your own money withheld."

Sin scoffed and started walking towards the store. There were a couple of people in front that gave his torn shirt dubious looks before averting their gaze. "It's pretty tame compared to locking me in a box."

"Yes, but the fact that it occurs to them to limit your freedom on small details as well as large is what adds to the insult. Why should it matter to them if you were to have access to all the money you've earned? It isn't as though you could buy your freedom."

Boyd reached out and caught the door before it could fall shut behind a woman who was leaving. He went into the store and Sin followed, sliding his hands into his pockets.

The truth was, Sin hadn't even thought much about his allowance when it'd been implemented. In the past, he hadn't been given any of his money at all. He'd been told that it was sent to his bank account where it would remain for safe keeping until he was

deemed capable of handling it on his own. Now he had the fleeting wonder if it had been a lie. If they'd never actually paid him all of these years.

With a frown, Sin shook his head absently. Whatever the case was, he'd find out eventually.

Boyd turned to the right and glanced at Sin as they walked. "The majority of the men's clothing is toward the back but there's an area you should check first."

He led Sin to what looked like a small alcove that was all but hidden on the side. It seemed like an area that was off limit to the public but Boyd walked in as if it were normal to do so. A short hallway opened up that they walked down. At the end around the corner was another room. Several racks of clothing and shelves of shoes filled the room. Boyd stood to the side, gesturing to the racks in back that seemed to have men's clothing.

"These are the new arrivals. It's best to check here before the good items disappear too quickly on the main floor. The shoes are especially good to peruse here first."

Sin arched an eyebrow at Boyd. "Come here a lot? You don't seem very hard up for cash."

Boyd's eyes tracked across the room, a distant look crossing his face briefly before he shrugged. "My mother's wealthy but until this position I wasn't necessarily. I've never had to worry about having a home but as for money for food or supplies, it varied. I became accustomed to minimal spending when possible." He seemed lost in thought. "And my..."

He trailed off, eyes narrowing. He shook his head to himself and crossed his arms. "I knew others who didn't have much money so we came here sometimes. I bought my trench coat and boots here, so they do have some quality items."

Giving another shrug, Sin swept his gaze over the racks but found that he kept getting distracted by the other people. He couldn't help absently wondering if any of

these civilians would recognize him from the incident all of those years ago-- were his unique features ingrained in anyone's mind as the Vickland Psycho?

It made him more antsy than he thought it would. He hadn't been in the city for so long that the familiar anxiety that swept through him at the idea was surprising. It was also stupid-- he knew the Agency would smooth over any scrapes or recognition should anyone try to make a big thing of it. He also knew that technically his name had been cleared, even of the slaying of the civilians and police. It was something else that bothered him, though; the possibility of running into someone who'd actually been there...

"I just need a new t-shirt, really," he said flatly.

Boyd's eyebrows rose skeptically. "How much clothing do you have?"

Sin mentally cataloged the things he had. It didn't take very long. A handful of t-shirts, a couple of pants and one pair of boots. He didn't own a proper coat of any kind that would be suitable for cold weather. Not to mention that all of the articles he had were incredibly worse for the wear and old.

"Enough," he answered vaguely.

"What constitutes 'enough' for you?" Boyd asked dubiously. "I've hardly seen you in anything aside from that."

Sin opened his mouth to retort but frowned, finding that he didn't have one. "I have... a few items."

"A few," Boyd repeated, looking at Sin askance. "What? A pair of pants and possibly two shirts?"

"I have two pair of pants, for your information."

"My mistake," Boyd said mildly, his lips pulling to the side faintly. He ran his gaze along Sin, taking in his threadbare clothes. "And exactly how long have you had this clothing?"

Feeling decidedly unimpressive as a result of the conversation, Sin turned away and shoved some clothes around unceremoniously on the rack. "Some years. What difference does it make? They're clean and covering the essential body parts, aren't they?"

Boyd walked over next to Sin, absently pushing a shirt aside to glance at it. When he looked over at Sin, the subtle tilt of his lips and the cast of his eyes betrayed mild amusement. "Yes but you've nearly worn the clothing through. It gives the impression that you've worn the same thing almost every day for decades." He paused, the humor largely fading to be replaced by the earnest study of Sin's features that Sin was becoming accustomed to with Boyd. "Anyway, I think we should remedy that today. If your summer clothing is this threadbare I don't have high hopes for your winter choices."

Making a face, something occurred to Sin. "I probably could have sent my service slave out to do all this."

"Who?"

With a dismissive shrug, Sin made a more conscious effort to look at the stuff on the rack. "Some damn fool service staff man who was assigned to deal with me. He hates me almost as much as I loathe the sight of him."

There was a black bomber coat that would suit his purposes during the winter time. The inner lining was worn but not nearly as worn as the things he had now. Mildly surprised that he'd actually found something that caught his eye, he picked up the hanger.

"With how infrequently you buy new clothing, would you really want someone like that making those decisions?" Boyd asked idly as he turned to a nearby rack. He

pushed some clothes apart, the hangers making quiet scratching noise with the slide of metal on metal. "Considering how people cringe at the sight of me, it doesn't really matter what I wear or look like but I suppose you have a point."

Sin looked down at the coat and then at the other racks. He didn't even know what else he should have. Surviving for years on the bare minimum made it difficult to figure out what was supposed to be a necessity.

"Hmm." Boyd pushed a plain black long-sleeved thermal shirt back so he could see it fully. He held the bottom out, his eyelashes sheltering his eyes briefly as he studied it. His gaze shifted over to Sin in assessment. Without saying anything, he pulled the shirt off the rack and held it out to Sin who stared at it.

"Are you going to dress me like you?"

Boyd looked over, seeming startled. "What? No. I doubt you have warm clothing for winter and this is in good condition. You don't have to get it if you don't want; I just thought you may want to try it on."

Sin smirked and tossed the shirt over his shoulder. "I'm just messing with you, sweetheart. No need to get all explanatory."

Boyd's near-perplexed gaze lingered on Sin. "Why do you call me that?"

The smirk widened and Sin reached out, cupping Boyd's face and moving his chin from side to side without really thinking about it. But then the feel of Boyd's soft skin against his callused fingers startled him and the sarcastic comment he'd been about to make got lost somewhere.

Sin's eyebrows drew together and he dropped his hand, staring at Boyd blankly. He'd been about to say "because you're so innocent and cute" but somehow that seemed like a bad idea at the moment when he randomly realized that Boyd actually was quite attractive.

"Because you're... young."

Boyd's eyebrows drew down and he gave Sin an odd look. His hand moved up to his chin, seemingly absently brushing where Sin had touched him, and then he turned away. He pushed some clothes aside on the rack. "Some of the trainees said the same thing."

"That you're young?" Sin stripped off his t-shirt and tossed it aside.

Boyd nodded, looking sidelong at Sin and then turning his face away again. "They seemed surprised. I suppose it's because I went straight to a high rank without a pertinent background. Even so, you were recruited much younger than I was, so am I really such a precedent?"

Sin pulled the thermal shirt over his head and shrugged his shoulders to loosen it up. "It's because you're off the street and don't have any experience in anything. It makes it seem like it's nepotism. In reality, it's just because mother dearest knew two rejects of society might get along, I think."

A strange look seemed to pass Boyd's face at that but his head was tilted at an angle where his expression was mostly sheltered by his hair. He pushed aside a worn t-shirt with a logo of an old soda company. "You may be giving her too much credit."

"Probably." Sin looked down at the shirt again before yanking it off. There were two other customers in the area and they gave him long looks as he switched back into his ragged t-shirt. "I really hate civilians."

"Most people use a dressing room," Boyd said mildly.

"I'm not shy." Sin threw the thermal over his shoulder and walked back out toward the main store. He thought he heard Boyd mumble, "I noticed," but he couldn't be sure as he left the room.

The main space was larger and more spread out. It looked large and overwhelming and it belatedly occurred to Sin that he didn't really want to be there. Somewhere along the line he'd just agreed because he wanted to be around Boyd. It was a startling realization; almost as startling as the realization that he found the

teenager attractive. He'd never given much thought to who looked good and who didn't before but for some reason his mind was working differently around Boyd. Sin had no idea if this was a normal part of being around someone consistently. He didn't really have any other human interaction to use as comparison.

Scowling at the thought, Sin walked over to a rack full of denim just because he'd always wanted a pair of jeans. He tried to focus on the task at hand but all of them looked the same to him so he carelessly pulled one off that was his size and didn't bother to search too hard between styles.

It wasn't long until Boyd reappeared at his side with several articles of clothing slung over his arm. He held up a pair of black and red sneakers with his free hand. "Do you like these?"

"I have shoes."

"One pair, right?" Boyd asked, unperturbed.

Sin glanced down at his worn boots. "Do I need more?"

"Yes. If those get worn out, what will you use to replace them?"

Making a face, Sin took the shoes and looked at them dubiously. He supposed they'd be an improvement for working out. "Fine."

Boyd smiled slightly, seeming pleased. "I found some pants and a t-shirt. And I'm not positive you'll like this sweater but it seems warm."

Sin briefly glanced at the items Boyd was holding. "Looks good. Can we leave?"

"Does it bother you to be here?"

A brief hesitation and then Sin shrugged, eyes flitting around. No one was really paying them any mind now that he wasn't stripping but he still felt uneasy. Like someone would remember his face or would just pick up on the fact that he didn't belong there.

"I don't feel comfortable around... civilians in Lexington."

Boyd watched Sin, a faint frown in his eyes and lips that only increased when he looked around the room. He was silent a moment, absently holding the clothes closer to his chest, most likely to relieve the heaviness of them at the other angle. "Well," he began but then closed his mouth and paused. "I don't think anyone is paying any attention to you at the moment. Maybe we could stay a little longer? If it isn't a problem."

Looking around again, Sin considered it. It was true that no one was giving him strange looks; the discomfort was likely his own paranoia. The only people looking at them at the moment were a group of teenage girls. Now that he was paying attention, Sin faintly heard them commenting on both of their looks. According to the girls, he had amazing eyes and Boyd had beautiful hair.

Smirking, Sin relaxed somewhat. "I suppose staying won't be too bad. This area isn't as cramped. And those girls would like to know what conditioner you use, I think."

Boyd shook his head to himself, although there was a hint of a smile on his lips. "I'll never tell."

"Maybe you should. You may even get a date out of it."

With a quiet scoff, Boyd turned to the nearest rack. He used his free hand to absently push aside a pair of jeans that looked twenty years old. "I hardly think that will happen."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "So little faith in yourself?"

Boyd gave Sin a sidelong look, his eyes narrowing faintly and lips pursing subtly. After a moment he returned his attention to the clothing. "No. I'm uninterested in them."

The comment caused Sin to give the girls another assessing look. By now they seemed aware of the attention they were getting and to his irritation, one of them smiled at him encouragingly. His eyes narrowed into a glare and the girl, a petite red haired little thing, instantly dropped her bold gaze.

"Well. I can't say they exactly strike my fancy either. But then again, I'm not looking to add pedophilia to my list of crimes."

Boyd shook his head to himself but didn't comment further on the girls. He continued flipping through the clothing, at times moving aside three or more pants at once. The rest of their little shopping expedition went uneventfully. Boyd took the liberty of grabbing a couple of other items that he deemed to be essentials and Sin went to stand in the abysmally long line.

To Sin's dismay, the group of girls managed to stand right behind him. They stared openly and murmured to each other. One of them wondered if the two of them were gay. The question surprised Sin so much that he turned around completely and leveled them with a steady glare. They instantly shut up, obviously thinking they'd gone too far, and didn't talk again.

Irritated, Sin shook his head and turned away. He glanced at Boyd but his partner had wandered off at some point and was out of ear shot.

The comment hadn't particularly offended him. When he thought about it, he supposed long-haired, blond Boyd with his androgynous face and thin build was likely assumed to be gay based on appearance alone. Pair that with the two of them shopping together while Boyd nagged him about things he needed and it could be a possibility.

What surprised him most was that his automatic response hadn't been to think that he wasn't gay at all. He hadn't thought anything other than that they needed to shut the fuck up already and quit talking about them. That being said, Sin was pretty sure he wasn't gay himself. Harry's fondling hadn't exactly gotten him excited but neither had Lydia's.

But then again, the idea of intimacy in any way was so far removed from the reality of his life that he couldn't picture himself having sex with anyone at all. It wasn't even something he'd ever bothered to think about. He'd had no reason to. The only people he'd regularly been in contact with since childhood were the people of the compound and they all thought he was subhuman.

The only person who had ever overtly expressed attraction to him had been Thierry, and that had likely been more of an attempt at expressing control over a situation than anything else. And while Sin found himself capable of noting whether or not a person was attractive, it never went very far beyond that.

Irritation turning to idle curiosity, Sin moved up in line and looked over to where Boyd was standing. He took the time to study the teenager's face closely. He had good features-- a wide mouth with full lips, golden brown eyes, and what would likely be a nice, lean build if he ever put weight on. Sin tried to figure out if he really was attracted to Boyd or just capable of noting that he was good-looking.

It was impossible to tell, so he gave up on the endeavor and instead focused on what Boyd was doing. He was picking through a stack of charcoal-colored thermal shirts. He was on a real keep-Sin-warm kick. He apparently thought that Sin was destined to die of frostbite because of the way he dressed.

The line moved up again and Boyd came back to stand beside him. The proximity made the idle curiosity return and Sin tried in vain to figure it out. The three girls behind him were too ridiculous to even count as possibilities for women and they were closer in age to him than any other female in the room. A quick inventory of the other male customers told him that Boyd was by far the most attractive, although that was more of a fact than anything else.

It was bordering on the pathetic side of sad that his abnormality extended this far. He wondered what Boyd would think of the girls' comments. There were certain people on the compound who joked about Boyd being gay much for the same reason that the girls had likely assumed it, but Sin had no idea if it was true. He couldn't really imagine Boyd being sexual with anyone. He barely had an expression half the time.

The thought sparked interesting mental images in his head and Sin smirked, shaking his head and pushing it aside.

Boyd looked over, drawn out of reverie by Sin's amusement. His eyebrows furrowed as he gave Sin an odd look. "What?"

"Nothing," Sin said, declining to explain.

## Chapter 12

A few weeks passed without incident before their next call for a mission appeared. It was a relatively low-key, simple mission. Although many of their missions seemed to involve Janus on some level, this one did not.

They were to collect data on Di Zhi, a China-based faction that allegedly rivaled Janus in strength. The Agency's goal for this mission was primarily reconnaissance. Boyd and Sin were to infiltrate a cell that had moved to the United States a few months earlier. They were to steal information from their computers to determine what to expect from Di Zhi on American soil in the future. The two agents were sent to infiltrate the base, fifty miles out of Carson. The town was deserted and had been since the last wave of bombs had moved through, decimating part of the town and leaving the rest of the people with no livelihood. Eventually, everyone had moved away and, years later, Di Zhi had moved in.

Boyd and Sin had set up their base of operations in a small building that was in the vicinity of Di Zhi's base. It gave them a good viewpoint to overlook the innocuous building without being seen. Sin hadn't shown much interest in the planning of the mission but Boyd had thrown himself into it as soon as they'd shut the door. He'd pulled up maps and blueprints on a laptop and had spent the first two hours in silence, staring intently at the screen as his fingers moved across the keyboard. When he was ready, he set the laptop on a coffee table and moved it so Sin could see it as well.

"The exits are here," Boyd said, pointing to four places on the main blueprint. "But the main database room is here." His finger moved to one of many rooms in the basement. "Although it would be best to enter the building via the nearest exit and go downstairs, that won't be possible. The building is set up so the only way to access the basement is by special doors near these two exits." He pointed to two exits that were furthest from the database room as well as being on the other side of the base from the building they currently sat in. "They've concentrated their highest security in those points."

His eyes flicked up to Sin. "Realistically, there's no way to disguise ourselves in order to infiltrate so we'll have to enter undetected. Owen's sources have given us a good idea of the timing for changing of the guards and rotations. We should easily be able to avoid confrontation or discovery by taking that into account."

He flipped screens on the laptop and showed Sin a simple simulation he'd generated of the mission using the blueprints for the layout. The simulation ran as he spoke, illustrating his plan in quick detail and showing the locations of the different areas he mentioned on the blueprints themselves.

"At 0800 hours they switch guards on the eastern entrance, and the same at 0810 on the northeastern. Since we don't know which way will be quicker and we don't want to garner attention, we should enter separately. You can take the eastern and I'll take northeastern. There are utility closets about fifty feet in on each of those corridors. That should provide an initial hiding place if necessary. The rotation will continue with a full sweep of the building until 0825 hours. These corridors seem to be the least convenient so they'll most likely receive less attention. If we hide there until the sweep is past, we will be able to proceed back through the areas that have already been checked."

The simulation continued to run while Boyd pointed at the screen to two different areas.

"Access to the basement is through here and here. I'll bring the decoder with me which should allow us to breach the security on the database room. We'll have a ten minute time window before the next group of guards moves through so we'll have to be quick. Egress will be back the way we came, behind the sweep. We'll split up at this intersection and leave through the doors we originally entered. Once outside, we'll have to avoid the scouts so I suggest leaving through this alley to the north and doubling back here. Provided there are no unforeseen difficulties, we should be done and leaving here by 0900 at the latest."

Sin stared at the maps without much interest from where he lay stretched out on the floor. His head was propped up on his hand and his face was the picture of boredom. "Sounds thrilling."

Boyd watched Sin for a moment and then flipped the laptop closed. "We have to leave in a few hours so I'm going to get ready soon. I suggest you do the same."

Sin scoffed and shook his head, laying down entirely on the floor. "I'll be sure to do that." Boyd's eyebrow raised and he looked down at Sin. The senior agent's nonchalance caused a moment of displeasure within Boyd but ultimately he ignored it. Sin's reaction didn't really matter as long as he was ready when it was time for the mission.

Boyd brought the laptop with him and spent some of the preparation time before the mission on going over the blueprints once again. He studied them until he had them memorized, looking at all the levels so he would know what routes to take if certain ones were cut off.

When it was time for them to head out, he was ready. He dressed in a dark long-sleeved shirt and sweater, dark pants and his usual combat boots. His long blond hair was pulled into a ponytail and shoved under a black cap so it didn't stand out as much.

When it came time for the mission, everything started out as planned. The intelligence they'd gathered proved to be accurate. Boyd was able to slip in the building when the guards were distracted with shift change. He found the utility closet to be unlocked when he needed to duck in there to escape view from one of the Di Zhi rebels walking past.

The rotations and guard sweeps came as planned and Boyd found the corridors he'd pointed out to Sin to be largely unoccupied. He had to duck out of the way when a hostile unexpectedly turned the corner, but there was an empty room nearby that gave Boyd cover. He couldn't help wondering whether Sin was finding it as easy as he was, or whether he'd run into any snags. He hadn't heard any commotion so he could only assume Sin hadn't been caught yet.

As Boyd moved further into the building, he kept his attention on his surroundings. He couldn't help noting that if they hadn't had the information they'd been given ahead of time, this would be much more difficult. Although he wasn't running into any major problems, it was because he moved quickly, to pre-designated spots, on a precise time schedule. It was giving him the opportunity to avoid the majority of the occupants of the building. If they hadn't known any of this, there were already over a dozen instances where he could have easily been caught.

When he reached the destination, he turned the corner and found Sin standing outside the door to the main database room. He gave the impression of having been there for a long time. Since Sin was scheduled to have entered the building ten minutes after Boyd, and Boyd had been moving quickly and hadn't had any issues, he'd expected to get there first and have to hide while he awaited his partner's arrival.

Boyd made sure no one was in the vicinity before he approached Sin. "That was fast," he observed, keeping his voice quiet so it wouldn't carry. "How did you get here before me?"

"Took a different route."

Boyd paused as he pulled out the decoder. He looked over at Sin with slightly narrowed eyes. "What? Why would you do that? With the timing, that should have been the best route."

"Yeah, according to you." Sin pushed himself away from the wall. "My route was easier and faster."

Boyd's eyes narrowed further. He felt a flash of irritation, although whether it was at Sin's attitude or the fact that he couldn't deny that Sin had gotten there first, he didn't know. He'd spent all that time concocting the plan and studying the Intel; that should have been the most efficient route. So how had Sin managed to beat him? Why did he constantly have to one up Boyd on everything they did? It was so frustrating.

Pulling the decoder out, he set it to work on the lock. "Yeah?" he asked, unable to keep the challenge from his tone. "And exactly what route was it? Or did you just charge in without thinking as usual?"

Sin's eyebrows rose at that and there was a beat of silence before he said flatly, "I can't figure out if it's funny or embarrassing that you actually think you have superior knowledge of how a mission is carried out."

"There's a reason we're part of a unit, Sin." Boyd said stiffly. "No one person knows best which is why we all work together, including using the Intel we receive from the others. My plan was based on that Intel. If you had a problem with it or saw a flaw, why the hell didn't you say so before we started?"

"Apparently you got it into your head that you're team leader and didn't bother to ask what I thought. I guess since I apparently charge in without thinking and don't know how to do a job I've been doing for over a decade, it wouldn't have occurred to you." Giving him a scathing look, Sin then turned his attention to the stairwell and corridor.

"What, so now the great Sin Vega is too afraid to speak up to someone half his size?" Boyd scoffed. "Don't blame me for not saying anything when you had the chance. You could have told me the plan was terrible after I pitched it to you. Nothing stopped you but your own apathy."

"You sound like an idiot. If this is how you're going to act when I don't follow your orders, I'll go back to waiting in the van. Too bad you waited to put your bitch hat back on or I never would have bothered to cooperate at all."

The decoder flashed to signify it was finished. Boyd pulled it off the lock and then opened the door with sharp movements. "This has nothing to do with whose plan it is; it's about sticking to the plan itself. What's the point of being your partner when I never know what to expect from you? Or when you won't even tell me your opinion? I may as well go it alone like I used to."

Sin gave him a disgusted look. "Nice job trying to back track. Next time you have something to say, maybe you should keep your fucking mouth shut and think before you start insulting me. I should have known your whole friendly routine for the past few weeks was bullshit."

Boyd opened his mouth to angrily retort because his main aggravation really was that Sin hadn't followed the plan, no matter who's it was. But it was true he'd started out being annoyed that Sin had somehow come up with something more efficient despite all the time he'd spent on the plan. Still, if Sin had said something in the first place none of this would have happened.

The fact that now Sin was attacking the rest of their time together as a lie only served to anger him further.

Frustrated, he turned his back on Sin and stalked across the room. He started the download of the information with curt movements, his back thrumming with tension. "Don't start making assumptions about the past few weeks."

"As far as I'm concerned, this conversation is over."

Boyd scoffed, shaking his head to himself. He wanted to argue the point; to say it wasn't over just because Sin said it was. He couldn't help feeling furious and insulted and a mess of other reactions, which made him realize even at that point that he didn't know what else he'd say to Sin anyway. He wanted to yell at him at the same time as he wanted to walk away and ignore his existence entirely.

With the tension nearly palpable in the room, the downloading of the information seemed to take forever. Even as Boyd kept his back turned toward Sin, he couldn't help running through the mission in the back of his mind. He kept track of the time while he paid just enough attention to Sin to note that he kept an eye on the corridor and door.

When the download was complete, Boyd erased any indication that they'd been there and pocketed the flash drive with the information on it.

The two of them barely looked at each other as they fled the base. Since they weren't in pursuit and hadn't been discovered, they ended up leaving together. Boyd had initially planned for them to flee separately, thinking it would draw less attention. He didn't know if it was because he'd been right about that, at which point he felt vindicated on some level, or if it was coincidence-- but as they fled together, despite their quick and quiet movements they were discovered passing up to the main floor.

Three men were there, looking startled to see them although it quickly became anger. They yelled something in Chinese and two of them reached for their guns. They didn't stand a match for Sin's speed, though. The first one had barely moved his arm before Sin knocked him out. The second one had only curled his fingers around the stock when Sin was at his side.

They got into an altercation that Boyd ran right past, his narrowed eyes zeroed in on the third man who was reaching for a communication device. The man's eyes turned to slits when he saw Boyd approach and he had to jerk his hand away from the radio to block a strike. They got into a brief fight, Boyd's hits and blocks a little harsher than normal with the aggression pent up inside him. He was able to overcome the man and knock him out with a strike to his head.

He caught the man before his limp form could make a resounding noise when he fell. Once the man was unconscious on the floor, Boyd looked over to see Sin already finished and keeping an eye out for anyone else. When he noticed Boyd was ready, they set out again. Luckily, they didn't run into anyone else.

The deserted streets flashed by them as they ran, navigating the ghost town to reach their designated point. The plain black Agency van was parked where they'd left it, shining dully in the muted light. Boyd headed toward it immediately when he saw it.

Sin, on the other hand, stopped walking a short distance away. As Boyd got into the driver's seat, he noticed that Sin wasn't making any move to get into the van.

Boyd paused, his hand on the door as he'd been getting ready to shut it. He glanced back the way they'd come, making sure there wasn't any pursuit they hadn't noticed. "What the hell are you doing? Get in."

"No, I think I'll pass on that." Sin looked at him for a brief moment before turning and walking away with a toneless, "Later."

"What?" Boyd burst out incredulously. He half stepped out of the van. "We're over a hundred miles from home!"

Sin didn't respond and he easily swung himself over the railing at the side of the road. His boots crunched over an old and long forgotten memorial cross that had been pegged into the earth there.

"Sin!" Boyd called after his partner. "Come back! How are you going to get back? What if something happens?"

Sin kept walking without even so much as looking over his shoulder. He disappeared into a grove of trees nearby. Boyd hesitated by the van, anger and uncertainty warring within him. It occurred to him to run after Sin but what was he going to do? Sin was twice as strong as he was; there was no way he'd be able to drag him back. If Sin was determined to do his own thing there was nothing Boyd could do about it.

"God damnit," he hissed to himself and dropped back into the van, slamming the door shut. He put the van in drive and took off, taking a route that brought him along the woods as long as possible so he could keep an eye out for Sin.

He didn't see him again and soon he had to veer away to get to the interstate.

The more space he put between Sin and him, the more frustrated he grew. He couldn't help feeling resentful of Sin, as if this was some punishment for the argument on base. Yet he also couldn't help wondering how the hell Sin was going to get back to Lexington, and whether he would be okay. What if Di Zhi found him? What if he got hurt?

At the same time, Sin was one of the best agents at the Agency. If he didn't want to be found then it was unlikely Di Zhi would catch him unaware. But Boyd was his partner and was supposed to be there with him in the unlikely event something like that happened. What was Boyd supposed to do in this situation? How was he supposed to convince someone as stubborn as Sin to listen to him when the man always seemed to do whatever the hell he wanted whenever the hell he wanted?

Twenty miles out of the town he almost turned and went back. He got off on the ramp but at the intersection where he could turn to go back the way he'd come, he stopped.

He couldn't just abandon Sin. For all that he was angry with the man, it bothered him immensely to not know if he was okay. He didn't like the image of Sin walking silently away.

But what was he going to do? He had no idea where Sin was and if he ran into the woods alone he would probably just get lost. Or, worse, get himself caught by Di Zhi while Sin meanwhile would probably be just fine and somehow end up back in Lexington safe and sound.

He had to get the information back to the Agency. If he failed to complete this, the Agency would research the mission and hear from the van's audio that he'd been yelling for Sin to return. If he was caught a second time having an argument with Sin that resulted in issues between them...

It wasn't worth the consequences. If he failed the mission and lost Sin, there was no doubt his mother would follow through on her threats, if she didn't do something worse. If he at least got the information back on time then he could give Sin time to return on his own and the Agency may never know about any of this. Still, he wished this situation hadn't occurred because if the Agency found out about any of this he was probably the one who would receive the punishment, not Sin. They would say he'd failed in his duties to keep an eye on Sin.

This was exactly what he'd been talking about to Sin; he never knew what to expect from the other man. And since Boyd was the probationary agent, any issues would fall on his shoulders to be explained or to take the punishment.

It was so frustrating, especially since they'd been getting along better lately. He felt uneasy with this entire change and was even more frustrated with himself for his indecision. His fingers gripped the steering wheel and he hesitated until a car that had been stopped behind him finally honked impatiently.

"Damn it," he growled to himself.

His face set seriously and he ended up continuing on his way to the Agency. It was the best option available to him, even if it left an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The rest of the drive to the Agency was uneventful. He was able to enter the compound and submit his report without Sin's absence being noticed by anyone. Or, if it was, no one commented on it. Although it did occur to him that it was possible Sin would use the opportunity to run, he highly doubted the man would. After all, there was a tracking device in him.

As far as that went, if Sin did want to flee the Agency, even angry with him Boyd wouldn't be able to blame him.

By the time he finished all his duties and got home, he still felt restless. He couldn't get the image of Sin walking silently away out of his mind. He couldn't help going in circles in his mind, worrying about how Sin was doing and cursing him for it coming to this. After a short period of time it occurred to him to check the live feed to Sin's apartment. When he pulled it up and found the place to be empty, the questions only grew.

He waited a few minutes and then shut it down, frustrated with himself.

Why should he care if Sin was alright anyway? Sin had caused as much of this problem as Boyd himself had, and he'd been the one to walk away. Boyd had tried to get him back in the van, hadn't he? It wasn't his problem what Sin decided to do.

But it was his problem. And it was his responsibility to look after Sin when he did unexpected things like this. That was why he was even at the Agency.

Boyd ended up in the living room, feeling stressed out. He dropped onto the couch and leaned forward, squeezing his eyes shut and resting his elbows on his knees. His fingers dug into his hair and he let out a harsh breath.

As his resentment and frustration faded, and as he went over the argument in the base, he had to acknowledge a few things that at the time he'd been too angry to notice.

First, Sin had never actually insulted his plan. He'd only stated that he'd followed his own route. Boyd had been so frustrated by Sin's ability to always one up him in everything that he'd automatically taken it as an insult to his skills when it was possible Sin hadn't been thinking anything of the sort. Second, Boyd had been the first person to insult Sin. Sin hadn't started being caustic until Boyd had implied he didn't think ahead. When he thought harder about it, in a way he had contradicted himself. He wanted Sin to treat him as a partner, yet he hadn't asked Sin what he thought when initially crafting the plan.

It was so frustrating to him.

It wasn't like he hadn't asked because he didn't value Sin's opinion. It was simply that Sin had so rarely shown any interest in the planning of the mission that Boyd had automatically taken over. Planning missions was what he felt most comfortable doing and what he thought he was best at, whereas Sin was best at fighting and executing the mission itself.

Guilt became a weight alongside worry and frustration and it was all muddled by surprise that he even cared in the first place. What did it matter to him what Sin thought? Why should he care if he'd been unintentionally rude?

Yet it did matter. And he did care. And he didn't understand why.

Still, he couldn't deny the worry that continued to eat at him, nor could he ignore the increasingly unlikely scenarios that popped into his mind about what may have happened to Sin after they'd parted. That only increased the frustration.

Time seem to stretch endlessly. At length, he gave in and decided to check the live feed again. It was a few hours after he'd returned; surely Sin would have had enough time by now?

At first he didn't see anything in Sin's apartment. He watched for several minutes and was just starting to consider attempting to focus his attention elsewhere when Sin's door opened. Sin entered the apartment and Boyd felt such relief at seeing him that at first he didn't notice how angry the other man looked.

Sin strode toward the bathroom the moment the door shut behind him. Boyd could see that his jeans were muddy and he looked slightly damp, probably from the rain that had started to fall. Sin stripped off his clothing, leaving it as a trail on his way to the bathroom.

As soon as Sin was naked and went to turn on the shower, Boyd switched to the view in the living room. Sin had enough issues of violations of privacy without Boyd adding to it on his own.

Even though Sin had walked around naked in front of him before, it still made Boyd feel uncomfortable to see someone when they weren't aware it was happening.

Instead, he idly looked around Sin's living room. He'd seen the place often enough when he'd watched the live feed. Although he gave Sin his privacy in the bathroom, he couldn't stop himself from watching Sin in his apartment where he seemed to be aware of the scrutiny of others. He'd tried to avoid the live feed after he'd first discovered it but he'd found himself returning there more than once; looking for those elusive flashes of who Sin may really be.

Sin wasn't in the shower long and soon reappeared with a clean pair of jeans. When he strode to the kitchen, his expression dark and nearly pensive, Boyd found his gaze running down Sin's body almost absently.

A few beads of water still clung to his sculpted body, trailing along muscles that narrowed to hips that seemed in danger of being exposed by the low pants. A possibility that seemed even more evident when Sin jerked the refrigerator door open and pulled out a carton of juice.

His green eyes were narrowed and eyebrows lowered thunderously even when he tilted his head back and drank straight from the carton. When he was finished, Sin shoved the carton back into the fridge and pulled out a candy bar that he unwrapped and started eating. Even with the chocolate bar in his hand, he was glowering at thin air. The scene was incongruous and yet so much like what Boyd had become accustomed to with Sin.

Boyd watched him, wondering what his dual feeling of unease and comfort meant.

Since he didn't have an answer for himself, and couldn't even be certain he was assigning the correct labels to his own reactions, he ignored the feeling and focused instead on Sin's obvious aggravation. Sin balled up the wrapper and threw it into the garbage. Soon, he started pacing.

The guilt Boyd felt before returned as he wondered whether Sin was so aggravated because of him. It very possibly was the case.

Sin's comment that the past few weeks had been a lie ran through his mind again. Did Sin truly think that? Did he actually believe Boyd had been playing him all along? And if so, did this mean Sin was going to return to the way he'd been before? Judging by the way Sin had been acting back in town, Boyd worried that may be the case. And that was the last thing he wanted.

It surprised him that he cared that much about it but he couldn't deny that he did. He'd come to appreciate having someone to talk to on some level; someone who didn't automatically hate him for his name or the position he'd gained. Someone who didn't take it as a personal affront if he wanted to be quiet for a few minutes or, at times, hours. Someone whose fleeting expressions of interest or intrigue or even near-camaraderie felt like a victory over the suspicious glares from the past.

He didn't want to lose all the progress they'd made simply because of one ill-timed argument and misunderstanding. A wave of uneasiness moved through him again and he reached for his phone without thinking. He dialed Sin's number, staring at the numbers flashing on his phone before turning his gaze up to the computer screen when he heard Sin's phone ringing.

On the screen Sin had paused to lean against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest. His face was turned to the side and half cast in shadow as he appeared to stare into space. However he looked over at the phone.

Sin's mouth twisted slightly and a distinct look of annoyance washed over him before he pushed himself away from the counter. He crossed the kitchen in two strides and grabbed his phone without even looking at the screen.

"What?" he demanded curtly.

"Hi," Boyd said into the phone as he closed down the screen. He didn't want to be staring at Sin's expressions when Sin didn't have the chance to look at him in return. It didn't feel right.

There was a brief silence and then a flat, "What do you want?"

Boyd paused, realizing he didn't know exactly what to say. He'd called with the thought that he didn't want it to return to the way it had been before and yet he wasn't entirely sure how to go about that. "I wanted to make sure you'd made it back alright," he said after a moment.

"I'm not entirely incompetent at traveling."

"I wasn't implying you were."

There was another pause before Sin said, "Well, as you can see I survived. Are we done?"

"No. Look--" Boyd sighed, bringing a hand to his forehead and closing his eyes. He'd never been particularly good at admitting his own faults. He'd been raised to be so proud that sometimes he felt at a loss as to how to properly word apologies. "It wasn't my intention to insult you on the mission. I was frustrated."

This time the silence was longer. For a moment it almost seemed like Sin had hung up but then there was a toneless, "I see."

Boyd thought about turning on the live feed again so he could see Sin's expression and get an idea of whether he was making matters worse. But that was an unfair advantage that he didn't want to take. He paused and then pressed on, deciding that since he'd started this he may as well finish it.

"It isn't that I don't value your opinion; I just didn't think you were interested in the planning. I thought it would be most efficient if I planned it based on research you likely didn't want to do, and I assumed if you had a better idea than what I presented then you would tell me."

Sin made a low sound on the other end. Judging from his tone, he didn't seem entirely trusting of this explanation. It was entirely likely that he now believed that all of their interaction that had been civilized and even sometimes pleasant had been an act. If that was the case, then he'd likely think this was now an effort to regain his trust. It was a frustrating situation.

"Why don't you come to the compound and we can discuss this in person," the senior agent said at length. His voice still held heavy notes of skepticism.

Boyd raised his eyebrows, mildly surprised by the suggestion. He'd half expected the man to hang up on him. "Alright. Where would you like to meet?"

"Come to my apartment," was the short reply. The line went dead immediately after.

Boyd slid his phone in his pocket and grabbed his keys on his way out. As he drove to the compound, he wondered about the situation. This was the first time he would be in Sin's apartment-- the first time either of them had invited the other to his house.

It was interesting that Sin hadn't chosen the typical neutral territory of a courtyard or somewhere else. However, there they wouldn't have even the modicum of privacy that Sin's apartment offered. Boyd assumed that Sin wanted to talk in person so he could see Boyd's body language and expression, to gauge whether he was telling the truth.

When he got to Sin's building he already had his ID card out from showing it to the guards. He saw the swipe pad next to Sin's locked door and remembered being told in passing something about his access rights. He swiped the card out of curiosity, half expecting it to not work. The lock pad flashed green and he opened the door, walking into Sin's apartment.

Boyd barely had the chance to see that Sin had put on a shirt before he registered Sin's reaction. The expression on Sin's face was one of genuine surprise. As the door shut, it turned to anger.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

Boyd stopped, not expecting that greeting. "What?"

"Why do you have access to my quarters?" was the sharp demand.

"How should I know?" Boyd felt like Sin was accusing him of personally seeing to it that he had reason to anger Sin. "It's not as if I set the access myself. Ask HR."

"And so you take it upon yourself to just fucking barge in here?" Sin practically snarled in response, his eyes narrowing.

"You invited me over!" Boyd protested, defensive anger flaring in the face of Sin's aggression. "You were expecting me any time now. I didn't think it was such a problem."

Sin scoffed disgustedly. "You didn't think walking into someone's home without alerting them to your presence is a problem? You people think you have so much power over me that you can do whatever the hell you want."

"Stop assuming all this shit of me," Boyd snapped. "You keep accusing me of all these thoughts I never have."

"Well whatever fucking thoughts you have are obviously not making themselves seen in the way of your actions," Sin retorted. "You act like a self-righteous, condescending little bitch on the mission and now you walk into my apartment as if you have the right to have access to it. It never crossed your mind that you're crossing a line? It never occurred to you that you're invading my privacy just like everyone else does every fucking day?"

"I was just testing the card," Boyd shot back in frustration. "I didn't think it would work. I never would have even tried it if you hadn't invited me here and hadn't been expecting me any minute. I won't ever use the card like that again."

Sin just shook his head, looking off to the side as his jaw clenched and unclenched. His entire body was wrought with tension as he stood ramrod straight with his arms crossed.

Boyd sighed, feeling exasperated by the situation. He looked away broodingly, pushing his hair back from his face. This distance and misunderstanding kept seeming to happen between them. But he'd come over here to apologize and even if he had to stumble through it, he was determined to do so.

"I don't have ill intent when it comes to anyone, Sin, least of all you," he said with tired honesty. "I have times when I get frustrated or do something without thinking, just like anyone. I'm sorry for my mistakes but none of the issues today have been purposeful on my part."

Sin didn't respond or react even enough to show whether he was listening.

"I didn't want to argue," Boyd pressed on after a pause. "I only came to apologize. Earlier, I was frustrated after having spent hours on something that was completely ignored. Maybe it seemed like I think I know more about missions than you but I don't. When I get frustrated I say things I don't mean, and sometimes you seem to assume the worst of me no matter what I do. And..."

Boyd hesitated. He knew this was all on camera but at the same time it was important to him that Sin hear what had been on his mind all day. "And I don't want that. I don't want you second guessing me based on one or two events and ignoring everything else in between. I thought we were getting along better lately. I wanted it to stay that way."

Sin still didn't respond and after a moment, Boyd sighed and dropped his hands at his sides. His expression closed off as he turned away. He wasn't going to put himself out there like this if Sin wasn't going to do anything other than act like a statue.

"Forget it."

Before he could turn the door handle Sin grabbed his arm and yanked it back. Boyd was briefly tugged off balance. He jerked at his arm but Sin didn't shift; his fingers were as strong as steel and just as unyielding.

Frustrated and annoyed, Boyd twisted and shoved Sin in the chest to get him to back off. It had zero effect aside from making Sin's eyes narrow.

"Just fucking wait," he said, jerking Boyd back.

"Let go of me," Boyd snapped.

Sin was as strong and unmovable as a mountain. The thought that Boyd couldn't get away grew stronger as Sin didn't give in at all. Boyd started to struggle more in earnest, becoming unnerved. It was beginning to feel too much like being held down and a thrill of alarm made his heartbeat skyrocket.

He tried to twist out of Sin's grip but Sin snapped his other hand out and grabbed Boyd by both his arms. Long fingers dug into him before Sin abruptly slammed him back against the wall, pinning him with hands digging into his upper arms.

Suddenly Sin's face was so close to his that their noses were nearly touching. Vivid green eyes were blazing down into his and Sin was growling again, "I said wait."

The words caused Boyd to still, his chest shifting as he caught his breath. The panic that had started to set in at being immobilized faded as Sin's uttered words caused his breath to mingle with Boyd's harsh pants. Boyd made a conscious effort to try to calm himself, to stop his chest from heaving against Sin's from the exertion to get away. The panic was gone but the remnants of it only made him hyper aware of their proximity.

The smell of Sin, freshly showered, his still damp hair against Boyd's face, his mouth shockingly close when his lips parted to speak. Those intense green eyes burning into Boyd with smoldering intensity that seemed at the moment just as caught as Boyd's. Sin's lips parted as if he was going to speak again, but he didn't. His eyes just remained locked with Boyd's, his fingers loosening although they didn't slide away.

"Why?" Boyd's voice came out a little rough.

The response wasn't immediate. Sin's eyebrows drew together and he opened his mouth to speak but closed it soon after. There was frustration in his face at that moment-- frustration that was marked by confusion. Whatever was causing it didn't make Sin back off, though. He remained nearly pressed against Boyd as his narrowed-eyed gaze skimmed over Boyd's face before focusing intently on his eyes. His hands shifted, bracing against the wall on either side of Boyd's shoulders.

The feeling of Sin's body so close against Boyd was causing his thoughts to scatter. He couldn't help noting Sin's muscular shoulders. He knew what Sin's chest looked like beneath his shirt, covered in beads of water that slowly traveled down his body.

With Sin so close, it was impossible not to think about that, and impossible not to notice how attractive his features were. Boyd's gaze started to drop to Sin's full lips but he made himself look back up to Sin's eyes before he could. Not that staring at those green eyes was much better. Uncertainty dominated the confusing emotions that were beginning to swirl inside of him.

"What do you want?" he pressed.

"You--" Sin broke off and scowled. He backed off as suddenly as he'd made contact and retreated a step. The last vestiges of confusion disappeared as he said gruffly, "You piss me off."

The attraction Boyd had been feeling faded with Sin's words and the loss of his proximity. Boyd raised his eyebrows, giving Sin a mildly incredulous look as he pushed himself away from the wall. Now he was just annoyed again.

"*That's* what you wanted me to stay and hear?"

Sin turned away and stood with obvious tension. There was hesitation before he spoke but when he did it was awkwardly. "I don't know what to believe when it comes to you. I don't trust you. I don't trust anyone. And I don't want to."

Boyd crossed his arms and looked away. "I don't know what to say to that."

"Don't say anything," Sin snapped, turning again. He ran his hands through his damp hair, exhaling slowly. "Just shut up for a change."

The senior agent went silent again, watching Boyd out of the corner of his eye. He seemed unsettled by something and it was making him fidget as he haltingly spoke the next few words. "I like getting along with you. But I don't trust you. And I don't know what to fucking do about that."

Boyd was quiet, watching Sin for a period of silence. "Well," he said, his eyebrows drawing together. "I don't entirely either, but since we both like getting along with each other why don't we keep aiming for that?"

"I don't know how to get along with people." Sin sighed disgustedly and looked at Boyd fully again. "I'm twenty-eight and you're the first person I ever had a normal conversation with. You can't expect much from me. And if you do, you will be sadly disappointed."

"I'm not particularly extroverted myself so I can't promise I'll do much better," Boyd said, shaking his head. "But I'm willing to at least try for this partnership."

At that, Sin stared at him in seemingly genuine confusion. "Why?"

"Because it's a significant portion of my existence at this point," Boyd said honestly. "And since I prefer to get along with you rather than not, I see no reason to not put in effort."

Not looking entirely convinced, the senior agent shook his head. "We'll see."

## Chapter 13

Boyd's shoulder twinged as he hit the floor hard. He half skidded, half rolled across the cement floor for a brief moment but was able to turn the momentum to his favor. He caught himself on his hands and looked back over his shoulder but he couldn't see anything around the crates. Bullets shot tiny crevices out of the wall above his head and the sound of men shouting and screaming echoed alarmingly in the warehouse. He couldn't make sense of anything except that within a matter of seconds, absolute chaos had exploded around him.

A man went careening past the crates; he hit the wall so hard Boyd heard a disturbing crack and blood splattered out in rivulets. He collapsed against the floor in a heap as Boyd stared with widened eyes. He stayed crouched down as he moved toward the crates that were sheltering him from the fight. When he peered around, what he saw was almost like being in a dream.

The warehouse he and Sin had been sent to destroy, taking the node of a rebel group along with it, was supposed to hold fifteen men. They'd arrived to find closer to forty. And at that moment, a good ten looked to be dead or dying and the rest were trying to kill Sin.

And none of them were succeeding.

Sin was like the eye of a storm and the men darting in and flying out around him were his tornado. He had his guns out, shooting with both hands at the same time even in different directions. His bare arms gleamed with sweat and what looked like blood, and the same could be said of his face. His expression was set in that distant, serious look Boyd had seen on some of the videos. The face of death.

As Boyd watched, Sin killed five men in succession, blasting out the backs of their heads with perfect shots to the foreheads, or felling them where they stood by hits to the throat and chest. The ones who came close enough received violent kicks that had them flying backward, or hits with his elbows and the sides of his guns.

But even as they fell, others came at him like cockroaches.

Sin sheathed the guns so fast Boyd hardly noticed it happening, and soon the fight turned to bare hands. Throats were ripped out, shoulders dislocated and people thrown through the air as if they weighed no more than a paper doll. One man screamed as he was thrown back, slamming against someone behind him. The two fell in a heap of curses and growls and were nearly trampled by three others trying to rush Sin at once.

Sin jerked one man around to take the knife of another man's attack. The knife went straight in the gut while the injured man stared in shock. Sin casually snapped his neck so hard his head nearly spun backwards. Sin was already breaking the back of the man behind him as the first man fell.

Even without weapons, blood sprayed around Sin in arcs as he ripped bodies apart with little to no effort. When the hostiles shot at Sin he evaded or dragged other people up to serve as human shields. Bones snapped, breaking through skin and showing gruesomely as white shards while blood spurted out. Bodies tumbled, some in disarray and some looking mostly intact, but almost all of the faces were set in looks of surprise. As if the person never expected to die here.

People ran past Boyd's hiding place, not noticing him, and he stayed where he was. He would be of no use in a fight like this; he was still trained primarily for small groups or one on one.

As he watched in a mild form of disbelief at the carnage that was happening around him, he tried to make sense of how it had all started. He and Sin had been setting explosives around the warehouse. It was going to be a simple bomb job and they'd been careful to be quiet. Still, they hadn't counted on the numbers and that had been their downfall.

Boyd had been leaning over to set one of the final explosives when he heard a sound. He'd looked up just in time to see a gun aimed at him. Sin had thrown him out of the way as the gun went off.

And then... this.

The first man Boyd had seen die had been the gunman and so far he seemed to have been the only one who knew Boyd was there. Sin had immediately become the center of focus for the entire warehouse and he was halfway across the cavernous room. Far away from where anyone would think to peek behind some stacked crates to see if there was anyone else to fight.

It made it seem like Sin had been protecting him. Like Sin had purposefully drawn them away to keep Boyd safe from a fight he would no doubt lose. But that couldn't be. He was probably reading into it too much... Wasn't he?

There was a scream that was cut short abruptly, the thump of another body hitting the floor, and then silence. It stretched for a moment before the sound of a single pair of booted feet walking across the concrete floor echoed across the room.

Boyd looked out from his point of cover.

As expected, Sin was the only one left standing. He was completely covered in evidence of the carnage. Blood streaked his face, splattered his clothes and dampened his hair. It was difficult to tell if any of it was his but aside from a slightly halting gait when he strode quickly to Boyd's side, he seemed fine.

"Set the charges anyway," Sin said flatly, green eyes devoid of emotion as they surveyed the room.

There was a brief beat of silence while Boyd stared at him before he looked away abruptly with a nod. As he moved out from behind the crates, he could see the massacre that was left.

It was like seeing a real life version of some of the video games he'd once played, a long time ago. How could so many people have been killed by one man? How could that man have used his bare hands for some of it? And how could it all be over so quickly? It seemed impossible.

There was no way to avoid pools of blood as he returned to where he'd been crouched before everything went to hell. He finished arranging that explosive. His fingers came away sticky with blood and something else, possibly some brain matter. He ignored it and simply wiped his hands on a clean patch of floor. He was going to have to wash his hands later.

He stood again, glancing sidelong through a fall of blond hair to check Sin but the senior agent had his back turned to Boyd as he presumably checked on something over there. There had been one explosive that Boyd remembered thinking may not have been set properly across the warehouse. He skirted the perimeter of the room to walk over there.

His boots made sticky, sucking noises as he passed through puddles of blood. He crouched by the other explosive and couldn't help looking over at the pile of bodies near him. It was an intense caricature of life cut short. It didn't even seem real.

He surveyed the room again before he turned and silently walked back toward Sin.

He stopped at Sin's side, his fingers curling around the remote as he pulled it out of his coat pocket. He held it up to show that they could remotely detonate whenever they wanted.

"I'm ready."

Sin didn't answer and the two of them left. It was dark outside, aiding in concealing the blood that splattered Sin. They got into the van and drove a block away before Boyd hit the detonation switch. The explosion rocked the van and broke out windows on some of the neighboring buildings. Fire erupted, casting strange, flickering shadows across the street as they calmly drove away.

They were gone before anyone could respond and notice they'd been there.

The safe house they had for this mission was an empty apartment in an area of the city where no one paid much attention to anyone else. On the drive over, Sin didn't speak much so Boyd didn't either.

When they got in the apartment, Sin immediately went to the bathroom. The sound of the pipes shuddering as the shower turned on could be heard through the wall. Boyd packed up their gear and did a sweep of the apartment to ensure they weren't leaving anything behind. He had their bags packed and ready to go by the time Sin stepped out of the bathroom, wearing fresh clothing and with the heat of the shower still flushing his complexion. They shouldered the bags and left the apartment, with Sin taking only a short detour down the alley to throw his bloody clothing into the dumpster.

They were back at the van and on the road again not long after having blown up the warehouse. Boyd ended up in the passenger seat, which he was glad of. He'd driven out here and although he hadn't had a physically intensive part of the mission he was still tired. Since it was going to take six or more hours to drive back to the Agency and it was already the dead of night, Boyd was glad to be able to stretch out. Still, having to not pay attention to the road just meant he had more time to think about everything. Which meant he found himself discreetly watching Sin as the city lights flashed by them.

Sin's face was cast in stark shadows as they passed between dark and light areas of the city. It made the unreadable quality of his expression seem tenfold, and lent weight to the silence between them. Although Sin had showered, Boyd still couldn't look at him without remembering the blood coating him. The flecks of something else spattered across his form like he was some nouveau art installation decorated by pieces of a corpse.

Boyd looked away, his eyes narrowing pensively as he stared out the window. He almost felt uncomfortable even turning his head away from Sin; like he had to keep him in his peripheral vision to make sure he wouldn't suddenly snap and attack him too.

The scene kept replaying in his mind. The sheer power and speed that Sin possessed; the silence with which he could move. The fact that he could get behind someone and kill them before they even realized they weren't alone.

And the bodies lying in blood.

For a moment, the memory overlaid with another; eyes wide and set in death. Glassy and too grey for how bright they'd been in life. Blood hot and metallic against his face and that hateful red creeping closer and closer.

Looking down and seeing his hands coated in blood and gore. Gloves of death.

Boyd shifted in the seat, his jaw setting and expression turning stony. He shut that thought off abruptly, even though it left the taste of nausea in the back of his throat. That fearful dread gripped his heart and made it feel like it was beating in the deep pressure of the sea.

*Don't think about it*, he told himself harshly the same as he had so many other times. *It doesn't matter. It's not real. Forget about it. Forget about all of it. It's over.*

But the massacre in the warehouse was too fresh. He could do his best to ignore the other things it made him think of but he couldn't forget the blood and death. He couldn't forget how incredibly easy it had looked for Sin.

Forty men against one. How were those odds possible in reality? How was it possible that Sin was barely injured? How could they be sitting here so civilly inside the car as if nothing had happened? As if Sin hadn't just washed the blood of so many men off his body like it was nothing?

And yet... Strong hands gripping his arm and yanking him back. The spark of a bullet ricocheting off the floor where he'd just been crouched. The crates protecting him as all hell broke loose.

He could have died tonight. He probably would have, had Sin not thrown him to the side where no one knew he was there.

Boyd looked sidelong at Sin again.

Sin flicked his gaze to Boyd and then away. He didn't say anything but Boyd could see the tension in his shoulders.

What was he supposed to do with this information?

On the one hand, he'd known Sin could kill this easily. He'd seen it on some of the videos. But things felt different when he was watching it on the screen versus being there in the room. It felt more real hearing the bones breaking and seeing the bodies falling and stepping through the blood to complete his mission.

On the other hand, Sin had saved him. But wasn't that just his job? As far as that went, hadn't it been his job to kill them as well? Wasn't Sin just following orders either way?

Except Sin had gotten hurt protecting Boyd before. He'd saved even saved Boyd's life on that Andrews mission. He'd told Boyd later that he didn't want another partner and that he didn't have much interest in Boyd dying. So was he helping Boyd because he was Boyd, or was he doing what he needed to do for a partner who was bearable?

Was he doing this all in self-interest or was there another reason?

The more he thought about it, Sin didn't act the same around the others. He seemed to hate being around many other people-- even Ryan, who everyone liked and who had been on Sin's side for a long time, and Carhart, who seemed to be trying to help Sin when he could. Yet Sin seemed to show interest in Boyd sometimes. He was civil toward him and there had even been the occasional time when something approximating friendliness had passed between them.

Sometimes Sin looked at him in a way Boyd couldn't identify. Sometimes it seemed like Sin actually cared about Boyd's existence. Yet other times it felt like nothing had changed between them from the first moment they'd met. There were times

he had no idea at all what Sin was thinking and those times bothered him more than he cared to admit.

But then there was his blank expression as he killed people. The strength in him as blood spread like arced wings. The void in his eyes and the violence in his hands.

Sin could go either way. He was quiet and intelligent, sitting in the corner of a library talking about Milton and poetry he read when he had the chance. He was silent and alienated, sitting alone in his apartment as the darkness swallowed him the way it so often felt it swallowed Boyd in his own home. He was violent and uncontrollable, tearing at people like so much meat and shooting them with a sure hand that never wavered. He was pensive and unreadable, flicking his eyes between Boyd and the enemies as if to ensure his safety, and watching him from the corner of his eye as if wondering what his younger partner was thinking.

Which one was the real Sin? What part could Boyd believe in on any level?

It left him feeling uncertain and confused; an uncomfortable feeling for someone like Boyd, who was used to gathering information, forming an opinion, and being done with it.

Part of him knew it would be best if he kept his distance from Sin. After all, these violent spurts were unpredictable. So far they had largely been limited to missions but hadn't Sin seemed ready to kill Harry awhile back? Although Harry would have deserved anything he got, Sin hadn't seemed to realize how close he was to the brink. What if Boyd angered him like that one day? Sin had nearly killed Boyd just for trying to wake him from a nightmare.

But he'd protected and saved Boyd too. He treated Boyd differently than the others, for whatever reason. Boyd still didn't understand why but he couldn't deny that it was the truth. And he couldn't deny that there was something about Sin that made it difficult for him to turn away. Something about Sin that made it so he didn't even want to.

He couldn't help thinking that some of Sin's situation wasn't his fault, yet he was paying for it as if it was. He couldn't help thinking that he and Sin were alike in some ways neither of them fully acknowledged, yet it was that similarity that made him incapable of turning his back. Even if Sin hadn't been his partner, he felt a certain, strange sense of defensiveness for him, or perhaps protectiveness. As if he was now getting the chance to protect someone from bullying the way he'd been protected in the past.

He went back and forth in his mind, acknowledging the danger and the value that Sin represented. He still didn't know exactly what he thought but he noticed Sin glancing at him a few times. And as the silence stretched between them, he realized why it seemed strange. Although they didn't tend to have extensive conversations all the time, by now they would have spoken at least a little. Even if it was just about the mission.

When it became apparent that they would spend the whole ride in silence if Boyd didn't say anything, he turned his head toward Sin and studied him openly. That look Sin got when he was practically another person, killing indiscriminately, was nowhere to be found on his unreadable features. It tipped the scale for Boyd.

"Are you alright?"

"My injuries aren't severe."

Boyd nodded but didn't look away. "You're very quiet," he observed after a moment.

There was a pause and Sin looked over at him again. His mouth turned down slightly and he shrugged. "I don't have much to say."

"Usually you have something to say by now."

Sin grunted and focused on the road again. His fingers flexed against the wheel and he shifted slightly, eyebrows dipping down. It was clear that even if his injuries weren't severe, they were still causing him some degree of discomfort. He'd stopped hiding his wounds so completely only recently, but it was still surprising to see.

More moments stretched in silence until Sin shrugged his broad shoulders. "You weren't exactly looking very chatty yourself."

Boyd was silent a moment as he considered that. He supposed it was true enough. "I was thinking."

"About what a freak I am?"

Boyd looked over, his eyebrows drawing down. "No." He paused and then frowned. "I won't deny that the mission underscored how dangerous you can be but you've also saved me twice. I don't entirely know what to make of you but I can say for certain that I don't see you as the psychopathic monster others seem to, or that you may believe I do."

Sin turned his head and looked at Boyd fully. His eyebrows were drawn together and lips parted, genuine confusion written across the planes of his striking face. It looked like he wanted to say something but he just looked back at the road.

"What?" Boyd asked.

Black hair rustled against Sin's jacket as he shook his head slightly, dark eyebrows still knitted together. "I didn't expect you to say that."

"Did you think I would hate you now?"

There was another pause and then Sin said slowly, "No. But I thought perhaps now would be the time when the fear you've been lacking all along would set in."

"Would it have bothered you if it had?"

At that, Sin made a face. "Why do you always need so many details?"

"Why are you always so reluctant to answer when I ask?" Boyd countered.

Sin rolled his eyes and scoffed. "Because you ask questions that are uninteresting to me."

"The answers would be interesting to me," Boyd replied with a shrug. He looked out the window, noting that they were moving out of the city and onto the highway.

"Should everything be solely according to what you want?"

"Yes."

Boyd snorted quietly and he shook his head, but there was a faint curve of his lips. "If you say so."

Sin smirked and he seemed to visibly relax. It would seem that even though he didn't want to admit it, the idea of Boyd being afraid of him had bothered him. Before anything more could be said, the loud shrill sound of fire trucks sounded somewhere in the distance. Sin looked in the rear view mirror before focusing on the road again.

He turned on the local news station and within the next twenty minutes, there was a special report of a large explosion on the outskirts of town. There wasn't any other information and no indications that anything more was known, so Sin switched the channel. Obnoxious pop music abruptly filled the car and he made a face and turned the radio off.

Boyd watched Sin for a moment, idly wondering what sort of music he generally listened to, but ended up looking away again without bothering to ask.

He watched what he could see of the scenery flashing by, although he didn't see much. Trees were dark sentinels in the night, broken up by roadway signs saying how long it was to the next several cities and billboards that hadn't seen maintenance in years. The lights turned toward the billboards to illuminate them had broken in many places, leaving strange messages behind where only half the advertisement could be read. Boyd wondered how many of the places advertised were still in existence and how many had become just one more ghost haunting peoples' memories.

With the darkness seeping in from outside and silence in the van, Boyd started to get lulled into a doze. His body rocked faintly with the movement of the vehicle and he ended up leaning his head against the side of the door. The seat belt pressed against

his lap and stretched lightly across the shoulder, holding him in place as he started to fall asleep.

It felt like his eyes had barely closed when he was suddenly awoken by a change in his surroundings. He sat up a little abruptly, absently pushing hair away that had been pressed against his cheek. He squinted at the lights around him and couldn't stop a brief yawn. They'd pulled in at a 24-hour rest stop. He looked over at Sin as he started to unbuckle his seat belt.

"I want to eat before we get back," Sin said, glancing up at the diner across the parking lot.

Boyd nodded, unsurprised. Since Sin got the chance to buy anything he wanted when they were off compound, he usually wanted to stop for food when they were returning from missions.

Boyd got out of the van and shut the door behind him. He took a moment to stretch. His limbs felt creaky from being in the same position for awhile. They filled the car with gas and headed over to the diner, crossing the distance as Sin adjusted his jacket and pulled his hood up over his head.

Once inside, Boyd saw that it wasn't much different than the other diners they'd been to recently. There was a bar at the front with the rest of the space dominated by booths. No one really paid any attention to them when they arrived, which was one of the good things about roadside diners. They offered anonymity since most people were just passing through.

The hostess, a girl with black curls, green eyes and a slightly bored look on her face, perked up when they approached her. Her eyes rose to take in Sin who stared back grimly from beneath his hood, before falling on Boyd.

"Hi, I'm Danielle. Welcome to Sam's Shake Shack," she said with a grin, green eyes flitting up and down Boyd quickly.

Boyd nodded politely in return and glanced away to take in the diner. He hoped they ended up in a booth a little away from others so they didn't have to overhear any pointless conversations.

Danielle started to walk them over to a booth at the front near the window but Sin said flatly, "The one at the back."

She glanced at him again and shrugged. "Sure."

The booth he'd indicated was set apart from the rest of the crowd and she placed menus in front of each of them. "The special shake tonight is strawberry shortcake if you're interested. It's pretty awesome if you like that kind of thing."

When neither of them replied aside from Boyd nodding she sighed. She gave Boyd another once-over. "Your waiter will be right over."

Sin opened his menu and didn't bother to say anything in return.

"Thank you, Danielle," Boyd said, glancing up at her as he opened the menu.

She gave him a bright smile and turned away, glancing back before returning to her station at the door.

"How cute," Sin commented from behind his menu.

"Hmm?" Boyd asked absently as he flicked his gaze along the menu. He didn't know what he felt like eating. For some reason he was in the mood for breakfast and turned his attention to the omelets. It would probably fit in his diet.

"I forget that you're blond."

Boyd flicked his gaze up at Sin with a clearly unimpressed look. "Is it possible for you to make it through a conversation without insulting someone in some manner?"

"Most likely not." Sin snapped his menu shut and put it on the table, leaning back against the booth. His eyes were barely visible from beneath his hood.

"Well, if you want to say something, just say it," Boyd said as he looked down at the menu. "I don't like it when people play games."

"I guess I won't take out my set of checkers then," was the disinterested reply. Sin looked around the diner, seemingly checking out the other patrons.

Boyd shook his head to himself and skimmed the menu. He didn't feel like getting into a roundabout conversation if Sin didn't want to say what he was thinking in the first place. He didn't respond and focused instead on determining what he was going to order.

The waiter came over and put glasses of water in front of each of them. He was tall, gangly and had shoulder length light brown hair.

"Hi guys, I'm Steve and I'll be your waiter tonight," he said in a dull sounding voice. His eyes were slightly bloodshot and he looked tired. "The specials today are the golden crusted chicken pot pie with buttermilk biscuits, the tri-color pasta tossed with lemon chicken and the strawberry shortcake shake."

"I'll have the grilled chicken three-egg omelet," Boyd said. He closed the menu and slid it over to the side of the table so Steve could take it with him.

"Potatoes or hash browns with that?"

"Potatoes, please."

Steve nodded, not writing anything down. "White or wheat toast?"

"Wheat."

"K." Steve looked at Sin expectantly.

There was a pause where Sin stared at Steve and then asked, "What's a pot pie?"

There was another pause as Steve tucked some hair behind his ear and looked at Sin skeptically. Then he shrugged. "Uh. It's like, chicken, potatoes, peas and carrots and gravy baked into this crust stuff like a pie. It's pretty good. The biscuits are awesome too. Buttery and stuff."

Sin considered this. "I want that. And a black and white shake."

"Cool. Drinks?"

"Just water for me," Boyd put in.

"Same."

Steve nodded. "K. Let me know if you change your mind."

When the waiter left, Boyd idly looked around the diner. Some men who were clearly truckers were at the counter and a number of customers were dotted throughout the room.

One woman was leaning against the table looking thoroughly despondent as she let her half-finished shake slowly melt in front of her. She kept dipping in the long spoon, pulling up bits of the half melted ice cream, and letting it fall back into the glass. One of the truckers was watching her in between bites of his meal.

"I wonder what these people would say if they knew what I'd just done," Sin said seemingly randomly.

"I don't know," Boyd said, his gaze shifting to take in the mannerisms and expressions he could see. Everyone looked, for the most part, very ordinary. "I imagine most of them wouldn't be able to conceive of it let alone know how to react."

Sin grunted, his eyes going from one customer to another. "I think they'd be disgusted that we're capable of sitting down to have a nice meal afterward."

"Probably," Boyd agreed.

He wondered briefly why it was that he could do that; why the idea of food didn't disturb him. But he couldn't change what had happened any more than he could change the functions of his body. There had been a time in his life when maybe all of this would have been too much for him, but he'd seen and experienced a lot over the last few years. And the months at the Agency had helped to deaden his responses even more.

His gaze lingered on the woman with the shake and he shook his head. "Some of them probably wouldn't care, though. She seems too depressed to notice much of anything around her. I wonder if she lives in the area and came here for comfort food in the middle of the night or if she's on a long ride where she's dreading the final destination."

Sin looked over at the woman as he finally pushed the hood away from his face. He studied her before letting his eyes skim over the people around her. He lifted an eyebrow slightly, nodding at the bar. "Whatever her problem is, big boy in the red jacket seems to want to solve it for her."

"He certainly does," Boyd mused. He studied the two for a moment. "I don't think he has a chance, though."

Steve came back with Sin's shake and placed it in front of him. It was impressively large.

"Anything else yet, guys?" When they both declined, Steve disappeared again.

Sin stirred his straw in the shake and eyeballed it. He leaned forward and took a long sip, nodding as if in approval.

"I'm surprised you didn't get one of the other shakes," Boyd said, looking at the relatively simple order. "Some of them sounded as though they may be sweeter than that."

"They also sounded like they'd make me vomit." Sin sat back and picked up the thin spoon that was in the tall cup. He stirred it around, mixing in the whipped cream. "However, I may still get dessert."

Boyd shook his head again and folded his arms to lean against the edge of the table. "You have the strongest sweet tooth of anyone I've ever met. Only you would even consider dessert after a large shake like that."

Sin drank some more, eyes moving around the diner again. "Sugar deprivation as a child."

"You're going to make yourself diabetic."

That was met with a scoff. "Like I'll live long enough to suffer the effects."

Boyd shrugged. "If anyone would in this line of business, it'll be you. Your skills are uncanny. I doubt you have to worry about much on missions for the foreseeable future."

"Aw shucks sweetheart, you're going to make me blush," Sin said around his straw, looking up at Boyd from beneath his black hair.

"Oh, is that all it takes?" Boyd drawled, his eyebrows ticking up. "I was under the impression you were shameless."

The comment seemed to surprise Sin and he actually stared with confusion for a moment. "Why?"

Boyd couldn't help a small smile. He was amused by the idea of catching Sin off guard on something like that. "I was teasing you. Nothing ever seems to get to you so if all it took to make you blush is a veiled compliment, I would be surprised."

"Oh." There was a pause. "It's somewhat sad that saying I'm less likely to die is a compliment."

"It is," Boyd had to agree.

The waiter came by again, this time with a tray filled with plates of steaming food. He set Boyd's food in front of him: a large plate was filled with the omelet and potatoes, and a second, smaller, plate next to it had toast and a small package of butter. Steve

then set the pot pie in front of Sin. The table already had condiments set to the side, including a number of packages of jam. He asked them again if they needed anything else and when Boyd shook his head, he left.

Boyd tried a bite of the steaming hot potatoes. They were good but a little bland. He dusted the potatoes with pepper and a hint of salt and found them to taste better the second time around. He started eating, turning his attention first to the omelet. Since it was the protein, it was the most important thing to eat.

The food wasn't bad. He'd had better omelets but not many, and at the moment he was hungry enough that anything warm and filling was welcome.

Sin was devouring his pot pie at a rapid pace and using his large fluffy biscuits to sop up gravy from the inside of it. For several minutes they did nothing but eat in silence but after awhile, something caught the older agent's attention.

"The hostess is noticing you again," he pointed out idly.

Boyd sighed under his breath and didn't look over to follow Sin's gaze. He concentrated on eating as if he had no idea Sin had just said that. It was for the benefit of the girl, though, because he soon muttered, "I wish she wouldn't."

"Why? She's pretty enough."

"Because I'm not interested," Boyd said mildly. "And even if I were it's not as though it would matter. We'll be leaving soon and I won't be by here again."

Sin looked over at the girl again, observing her. "If she's leering at some man in a truck stop, I highly doubt she has a long term involvement in mind."

Boyd shrugged without looking up from his food. "It doesn't change anything for me."

"Why?" Sin asked again, actually looking curious as he paused in his eating.

Boyd opened his mouth to say something dismissive but he stopped when he took in Sin's expression. It was rare for Sin to show genuine curiosity in him and even more rare for him to ask personal questions, so it gave Boyd pause. He frowned slightly, more in thought than anything.

Ironically, he'd assumed that Sin had made the same assumption so many others already had. He didn't know what to think about the fact that it was possible Sin hadn't. It made him a little reluctant to come out to him only because they'd finally started to get along more consistently.

He wasn't ashamed of his sexual orientation. But he didn't want to have to deal with judgment from Sin on something he'd already received judgment on from plenty of other people, his mother included. Especially when it was something he had no control over. But if he didn't say anything now, Sin would find out eventually anyway and whatever his reaction would be, it probably wouldn't change. Better to just get it over with so he didn't let himself start enjoying Sin's company if it could all fall apart anyway.

"Because I'm gay."

A flash of surprise crossed Sin's face and he looked confused. It wasn't an exaggerated expression; his eyebrows drew together slightly and he tilted his head to the side. He studied Boyd, looked around, and then said, "So if it was an attractive man would you go off with him?"

Boyd raised an eyebrow. That hadn't exactly been the response he'd expected and it left him a bit bemused. "No. I said I was gay, not that I have sex with everyone I see who's passably attractive. I'm not particularly interested in flings with anyone, whether or not they're male."

"Ah."

Sin forked up another mound of his pot pie and chewed it slowly, staring at Boyd without much of an expression on his face.

After a moment of watching Sin, Boyd picked up his fork and cut off one of the last pieces of omelet. He speared the piece and hesitated with it in front of his mouth before he took the bite. "Is this going to cause a problem for us as partners?"

This earned him one of Sin's half skeptical, half annoyed faces-- the ones that implied he thought Boyd was ridiculous for whatever reason. "It doesn't matter to me one way or the other. I was just wondering if you'd ever actually been with a man."

"Ah." Boyd chewed, watching Sin thoughtfully. He supposed it didn't matter if he answered that, especially since he often asked questions of Sin. He swallowed and speared the last fold of the omelet without looking away from Sin. "Yes, I have."

"Oh." One of Sin's dark eyebrows rose higher than the other. "Weird."

"Why is that weird?" Boyd asked, giving Sin a slightly odd look.

"Because most of the time you have zero personality. I can't imagine you being intimate with another human being."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "I hate to disappoint you, then," he said mildly as he started to eat the potatoes.

Sin just shrugged, turning his attention back to his food and occasionally observing the people around him.

A few minutes passed with neither of them saying anything. As Boyd ate, he found his gaze more than once returning to his partner. Although they'd eaten at diners before, for some reason it struck him today about how strangely normal this all was. And how he was actually kind of liking it. He was enjoying the chance to have a conversation with Sin, even if it was on topics he hadn't ever planned to come up between them.

And that's what led him down another line of questions he couldn't get out of his mind. Now that they were talking about sexual interest and relationships, he couldn't help thinking about Sin. The man was unquestionably attractive. His body alone was

enough for Boyd to find his eyes straying toward it when he wasn't thinking about it, but Sin's face made it all that much better. His eyes were striking and expressive; intense. And his full lips were just as intriguing.

It made it worse, in ways, to remember going to Sin's that night they were arguing. He could still recall Sin's hands, strong and holding him still, but not hurting him. Despite all that strength, despite the fact that Sin could probably break bones if he wanted, and despite the fact that Boyd had been struggling against him-- Sin had held him still without harming him.

And then shoved him against the wall.

Boyd looked away from Sin and focused on his plate of potatoes so nothing could accidentally be seen in his eyes. He wondered what that had all been about. He'd wondered about it after he'd left, too, although neither of them had ever brought it up again. He couldn't deny the confusion that had come from that hard body pressing against him. That breath curling against his lips and those eyes, those damn unforgettable eyes, so close to his own.

Boyd skewered a potato and chewed on it in contemplation.

Despite the fact that Sin was often glowering at others or seemed sarcastic, the more Boyd saw of his other expressions the more he felt like he was getting reeled in. And he didn't know what made Sin more attractive: that glare that fended others off and lent mystery to him, or the intriguingly normal and, at times, uncertain way Sin could be in quiet moments like this.

It was a little frustrating. Part of him wished he hadn't been assigned a partner who looked like he could easily pass as a model on a worldwide circuit. The man's combination of features was criminal, as far as Boyd was concerned.

It was the fact that he was so damn attractive that made Boyd wonder what Sin's past was like with other people. Although so many people seemed to be afraid of him, had that always been the case? Did the fact that he'd pressed Boyd against the wall,

their lips nearly touching, mean he was attracted to men or had it all been a misunderstanding? Something that had happened when they'd both gotten carried away? How many people, if any, had braved that glower to get close enough for intimacy?

Sin had said before that Boyd was the first person he really had these sort of conversations with, yet he seemed completely confident when it came to almost anything he was doing. And he hadn't hesitated to ask Boyd about being with the hostess, as if it would be perfectly normal to go to the bathroom for a quick spot of sex between the meal and dessert. So is that what he was used to? Having one night stands or quickies with whoever was interested? Or did he have a different sort of past and had just assumed that was what Boyd would be into?

"What about you?" Boyd asked curiously.

"What about me, what?"

"Your interests or relationships," Boyd clarified as he put a little more salt on the potatoes.

Sin stirred his straw around in the milkshake for a moment, regarding Boyd quietly. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking in that moment, but at least he didn't brush off the question the way he would have in the past.

After a moment he took a sip and shrugged, saying blandly, "There's not much to talk about in that regard."

Boyd watched him a moment and wondered what that meant. He must not have been with many people which wasn't surprising given his circumstances. "Who are you interested in, then? Men? Women?"

"I've grown to despise both."

The comment made Boyd's gaze linger on Sin briefly before he nodded and continued eating. Sin must have had some unfortunate ends to relationships in the past

to have gotten to that opinion. It lent more questions, including whether that meant Sin was bisexual, but he didn't voice them. He didn't think Sin would answer and even if he would, he didn't know what he would do with the information anyway.

It wasn't like it really mattered how many or few people Sin had been with in the past. None of that had anything to do with Boyd.

He finished his potatoes and realized belatedly that he'd forgotten about the toast. It had cooled by then so when he tried to put some butter on one of the triangular half pieces, the crispy part of the bread was mangled more than anything.

They didn't say much through the rest of the meal. Boyd was still a little distracted but Sin seemed pretty normal. Boyd could feel the weight of those green eyes on him more than once, which wasn't unusual. Sin had a tendency to watch him on and off since they'd met.

In the beginning, it had seemed like he was watching for Boyd to slip up on some act. Then it seemed he was watching him to figure out what his motivations were. And later it seemed he was studying him, as if perplexed to find someone like Boyd existed or perhaps trying to determine what made Boyd tick. Whatever the case, it was distracting but Boyd did his best to ignore it. It was stupid of him to be this distracted by the simple questions that had come up between them, anyway.

They hadn't spent too long at the diner by the time they were both finished. They threw their money down and started across the room. Boyd noticed Danielle eyeing him again. She was sitting on one of the bar stools in a quiet conversation with one of the waitresses. Even so, after he and Sin passed he overheard one of them musing, "He's probably gay anyway."

Boyd's eyes narrowed faintly and he resisted the urge to look over his shoulder in exasperation. It irritated him that people so easily assumed that of him. If he had a more overtly masculine build and, more importantly, face, then no one would probably make that assumption based on his mannerisms. He didn't hear anyone ever speculating that Sin was gay despite the fact that he was certifiably gorgeous to behold.

So why was it that everyone seemed so ready to believe it of Boyd?

"What's your problem?" Sin asked as they walked back out into the night.

"Danielle," Boyd replied with a suppressed sigh. He looked sidelong at Sin and tried not to let it all irritate him more than it already had. "I'm tired of people making such automatic assumptions that I'm gay when I don't even stereotypically act like I am."

"Hmm." Sin considered him for a moment and reached out suddenly, grabbing Boyd's chin and leaning forward to stare down at him contemplatively. His green eyes seemed so close and intense. His fingertips slid against Boyd's skin, brushing against his neck briefly before they fell away entirely. The feel of those fingers touching his bare skin was so unexpected that Boyd almost stumbled. "Maybe it's the hair."

Boyd's eyebrows raised and his eyes slightly widened. His lips parted but he didn't know what to say at first. Sin was watching him and he wondered what the older man was thinking.

Boyd looked away abruptly, absently pulling some hair behind his ear as he tilted his head down in a nod. In his mind, his skin tingled quietly but maddeningly where Sin had touched him. He resisted the urge to scrub at it or linger his own hand briefly against his cheek.

"Could be," he said, although his voice wasn't quite as calm and collected as usual.

Sin didn't answer and the two of them got back into the van. They pulled back onto the road and continued on their way toward Lexington. This time, there was no way Boyd was going to be able to sleep. He was entirely too aware of the fact that they were alone in the cabin of the van. They weren't even that particularly close to each other, but the proximity was enough that if Sin had to reach over for something his arm would sometimes come close to brushing Boyd's. And Boyd didn't know if he did or did not want that touch to happen.

He felt confused.

He couldn't help going back to his debate from earlier. The sheer strength that Sin had was contrasted so starkly by the way he was around Boyd. He not only treated Boyd differently by actually talking to him and now showing genuine curiosity in certain aspects of his life-- but he also treated him differently physically. He could kill people with little to no effort but when he touched Boyd, it was different. He protected Boyd, or held him without harming him, or, most bewildering of all, gently ran fingers along his skin.

The thought made a shiver tingle up Boyd's spine. Part of him wanted Sin to touch him again. He wanted those long fingers to slide back and tangle in his hair. That same part couldn't help wondering what it would have been like had their lips touched that night in Sin's apartment. What would Sin taste like? How firmly did he hold the person he was kissing? How would it have felt to be wrapped in those powerful arms, held tight against that strong body?

Boyd's lips thinned and he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. What the hell was wrong with him that he kept thinking these things? Why couldn't he make himself forget it or ignore it all like he'd been able to with so many other things for so long?

He resisted the urge to sigh and focused instead on watching the road signs flash by. That didn't take long to bore him, however, since the road signs were few and far between on this stretch of the highway. With nothing but darkness outside, inevitably he found himself paying attention to Sin instead.

He noticed that as they grew steadily closer to the Agency, Sin started to grow tenser. His fingers started to flex against the steering wheel and his eyes became progressively hooded. Boyd observed the shift in his partner's demeanor for a few minutes before he asked something that he'd been wondering for awhile.

"Why don't you ever just run away?"

The question seemed to surprise Sin because he gave Boyd another of his slightly perplexed looks. Then he shrugged, mouth turning up slightly. "Where would I go?"

"I don't know." Boyd gestured vaguely. "Anywhere but the Agency. You could flee to another country where they don't have a strong reach."

There was a stretch of silence as Sin looked out the windshield, guiding the car through the blackness that surrounded them. After a moment he gave a careless one shouldered shrug. "I wouldn't be any use on the outside. Someone who can slaughter a warehouse full of hostiles and still maintain an appetite isn't exactly inclined to the domestic life."

"Maybe, but have you tried?" Boyd asked with a faint frown. "There are many types of jobs out there even in civilian life. Is the idea of a domestic life all that's stopping you?"

"No. It just wouldn't work."

"Why not, though?" Boyd pressed. "Are you worried about them noticing too soon if you left on a mission? Because if so I could cover for you."

The comment caused Sin to look over and give him a long assessing stare. His lips pursed together and his green eyes skimmed Boyd's face before he looked back at the road. "Why would you ever do that?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Boyd replied with a shrug. "I'm your partner and as such your well-being is important to me. I've seen the way you're treated at the Agency so if you wanted to leave, I wouldn't blame you. I could easily tell them I lost you on a mission. Or if we wanted it to be more believable you could injure me; make it look like you attacked me and fled. It could even be fairly severe if that was needed. Since there's already a running bet on how soon you'll kill me if a mission doesn't, I'm sure no one would question that too closely."

"Did it occur to you, in this fantastic plan, that they would terminate you for losing me?" Sin asked scathingly, seeming irritated by the suggestion.

Boyd shrugged unconcernedly. "It wouldn't matter. In this line of work, it's inevitable I'll die anyway. Since it'll happen regardless, I don't mind it having more meaning by at least helping you."

There was another stretch of silence as Sin scowled without looking over. He didn't bother to explain what he was thinking this time and he shook his head slowly.

"What?" Boyd asked, watching him a little more closely.

"I just think you're brain dead sometimes. You're almost like what happens when a completely thoughtless person meets a borderline one." A pause. "Besides, it would never work. This collar cannot be removed without surgery and it has a tracking chip inside."

Boyd considered Sin for a moment. He was bemused to hear Sin mention a psychological disorder like borderline personality since it wasn't one of the more well-known ones. Since psychology had been an interest of his own during school, it made him wonder if it was something Sin was interested in as well. Still, now that Sin mentioned that he did recall Carhart saying something about surgery.

"I see," was all he said aloud. He paused. "What if you found a black market surgeon who could remove the collar?"

Sin sighed, seeming to tire of the subject entirely. He never seemed to have very much interest in the conversation if it was focused on him, especially if it was sympathetic in any way.

"They'd have tracked me down by the time I was ready for the procedure to be performed. The Agency has connections internationally. We also have a European division. And in addition to that, the procedure is complicated. The collar is connected to my spine, and also situated in a way which makes it possible to sever my jugular easily during removal."

"Hmm." Boyd turned to look out the windshield, leaning one arm against the door of the van. "That does make it problematic. I see your dilemma."

Once again Sin just shook his head silently.

The rest of the drive was spent in relative silence, broken only by a few inane comments back and forth. Boyd was surprised by how comfortable it felt. He wondered how long this would last or whether the two of them would end up sliding back to earlier interactions at some point. He hoped that didn't happen.

When they got to the Agency and parked in the garage, Boyd hesitated when he got out of the van. He found himself unwilling to leave Sin immediately like he always had, although there wasn't much that he could do about it. He shut the door behind him and looked at Sin over the hood of the van.

"Well..." He gestured over his shoulder. "I suppose I'd better write the report..."

He didn't look away from Sin, though. It was almost a bit awkward, as if he were acting like they were two people on a date trying to decide whether or not they should kiss at the front door. He almost made a face at the fact that his mind picked that analogy.

"I'll go too."

"You will?" Boyd asked in surprise.

Sin shrugged nonchalantly, looking around the parking lot. "If it's some private thing you like to do, then I won't."

The comment drew an unexpected laugh from Boyd. Trust Sin to make writing a report sound like he was going off to masturbate. "I do prefer the old library but I assure you, I'm not doing anything that can't handle a witness or two," Boyd said dryly with amusement clear in his eyes.

Vivid green eyes slid across Boyd's face, studying him more thoroughly than was necessary. It was almost a full moment before he turned and said only, "Let's go then."

Boyd ended up leading the way up to the old library. He could feel Sin's eyes returning to him on and off as they waited for the elevator, although it was no more than normal.

There weren't many other people around, given that it was in that time period that was either very late at night or very early in the morning, depending on a person's perspective. Only one other person ended up in the elevator with them. The young woman was apparently trying to discreetly creep to the corner furthest from Sin without anyone noticing. She seemed tense and unnerved and kept glancing at Sin through her hair.

Boyd couldn't help wondering what all these people would think if they saw the other sides of Sin that he did. It was hard to be terrified of a man who could be so normal.

No one was in the library and Boyd headed toward the back where the old computers were pushed against the wall. Most people used them for little other than a catalog check of the books but since they were the first generation of computers that had been used for reporting, they still had the software and databases installed. Boyd preferred the quiet of the library to the crowded bustle of the main reporting room, where he sometimes had to wait for a computer at peak times.

He sat down at the computer and got to work. Sin leaned against a table nearby, his arms loosely crossed.

And he watched.

At first Boyd tried to ignore it but it became very distracting, feeling that gaze burning into the side of him. He thought maybe Sin was making sure he wasn't being disingenuous and writing horrible things about what Sin had done at the warehouse. He thought maybe Sin was checking his wording to be sure.

But when he looked over, he was startled to realize Sin was staring at him.

Only him. Not the computer at all.

The first time their eyes met, Boyd's fingers stilled on the keyboard. He was caught by that intense stare and he wondered what Sin was thinking. What he wanted. How it could possibly be worth his time to have followed him up here only to stare at him while he worked.

He ended up smiling slightly at Sin, almost as if he were trying to encourage or reassure him for something he didn't even know, and turned back to the computer.

From then on, he was acutely aware of the way that stare was centered solely on him. And, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he'd spent so much of his time being unnoticed by others, he found he kind of liked that Sin was so interested in watching him. Especially when he wasn't doing anything particularly exciting.

Sin didn't say anything and Boyd didn't want to break the spell so he didn't say anything either.

When he sent the report and closed out of all the programs, he stared for just a second at the blank screen. Then he turned to Sin, searching his expression-- for what, he didn't know.

"Did you make it good?" Sin asked calmly, not breaking his steady stare.

Boyd's lips tilted up on one side as he stood. "Oh, did I ever," he drawled. "Stories will be told for years to come about this one."

"It's always good to have something to add to my resume," Sin said with a smirk, pushing himself away from the table.

Boyd couldn't help a faint sound of amusement. "Don't forget; you can put me down as a reference as well."

They looked at each other for a moment before Sin shook his head slightly and finally looked away. "I suppose I should return to my quarters."

"I should probably go home, too," Boyd said, although it wasn't with much conviction. He was reluctant to leave Sin's company. He paused and then tilted his head toward the library's entrance. "We could walk out together..."

It sounded so stupid that he half wished he could take it back.

But if Sin found the comment odd, he didn't let on. He didn't even make a joke about it or twist the words like he normally would. "Okay."

Boyd watched him for a moment and then smiled slightly and turned to leave. They walked back to the elevator together, not saying anything but alternatively watching each other.

Boyd couldn't get that stupid comparison out of his mind about a date, which was ludicrous considering the circumstances. He didn't know why it was so prevalent in his mind. Sin was one of the only people he'd spent any amount of time with in a long time, but he'd spent time with Ryan as well. And as far as date analogies went, going to someone's apartment to eat dinner and watch shows fit the bill much more than walking out of a place of work with a coworker.

So why couldn't he ignore the flush of pleasure he felt at being able to extend his time around Sin just those scant few extra minutes? Why couldn't he ignore the fact that Sin was so attractive? And, most of all, why couldn't he ignore that Sin had seemed equally reluctant to part as well?

Nothing of import occurred on the way down in the elevator and out into the courtyard. Being out in the clear night, Boyd slid his hands in his pockets and tipped his face up toward the sky.

The buildings of the compound were like monoliths in the night, but he could see dotted spots of color scattered across them where lights glowed through curtains and windows. There were probably other agents returning home from missions right now, and still others getting ready to depart. In the quiet of the night that thought made him

feel, just for that moment, like he was part of a greater whole. It was reassuring, after having felt isolated for years.

He paused at the point where their paths would diverge and looked over at Sin.

"I'm parked over there," he said, tilting his head toward the main parking lot. As if Sin wouldn't know, since that was where Boyd usually parked. But it seemed as good a way of saying 'I have to go now' as anything else.

Sin nodded, pulling up his hood again and letting it fall to shade his eyes. "See you around."

Boyd nodded and after a moment, the two of them parted. He glanced back once on his way to his car. Sin was walking silently toward his building, the hoody making him a tall, dark figure that slid in and out of the shadows like a wraith.

## Chapter 14

Eugene Yardley was different in both attitude and appearance than any of the other rebels that Boyd had met thus far in his career at the Agency. It left Sin wondering how his partner would deal with the man. Up until now, most of their assignments had dealt with obtaining information, dealing with small, somewhat disorderly groups or with informants who were paranoid and shaken by whatever caused them to turn double agent for the Agency.

Eugene fit none of that but maybe that was because he was an ex-Janus soldier.

Even that description seemed odd.

He didn't look downtrodden, rough or bitter like so many of the others who joined these insurgent groups. He looked more like he should be watching a tennis match at a country club rather than standing in a back alley in a shady part of Seattle. Eugene looked fit and preppy in corduroy pants, a v-neck sweater and running shoes. His light brown hair was a mess of curls and his dark brown eyes were sharp and alert behind his thin-framed eyeglasses.

He almost looked nonchalant with his hands slid casually into his pockets but the way his bodyguards surrounded him showed that he was not taking any chances. Whether he was actually frightened of them or he always had this much back up was unknown. It was highly possible that he always went around with an entourage. Apparently Janus was as fond of deserters as the Agency was.

Regardless, Sin found the whole thing to be amusing. He didn't think it would take more than three minutes to take them all out, unless Eugene could afford exceptionally trained guards. Actually, it was entirely possible that that was the case. If someone could afford cashmere sweaters and diamond crusted watches in the post-war economy, they could afford mercenaries instead of street thugs.

"I'd ask how you boys found me but I'll assume you weren't the clever ones doing the finding," Eugene said after a long moment, his eyes sliding from Boyd to Sin and back again.

"We have our sources," Boyd agreed mildly.

"I doubt you have anything. You two are just little messenger boys for whichever government agency is currently trying to nail Janus." Eugene arched a brow. "Which is it this time?"

"We represent an independent group that is unrelated to the government." Boyd's expression remained impassive as he glanced at the bodyguards and then back at Eugene. "I imagine you already heard of us from your time in Janus. We are often referred to simply as the Agency."

A smirk slid across Eugene's face at that. "Right."

"We have some things we'd like to discuss but perhaps there's a better setting than this." Boyd gestured to the alley, which was dark, damp, and had traces of the smell of the garbage in the dumpster at the end of the block.

"The setting suits me fine," was the calm reply. "I didn't know you Agency boys were so high maintenance." Eugene's gaze slid over to Sin who stared at him blankly.

"The ambiance doesn't concern us," Boyd replied with a shrug. "I simply thought you may be hesitant to discuss potential business in the open where anyone could overhear, especially given Janus' notorious distaste for former members."

"I'm not fond of repeating myself."

As always, Boyd seemed unperturbed. "As I'm sure your time is valuable, I will make this short." He put his hands in his coat pockets. "Our organization is interested in purchasing information from you. As you've recently been running into some financial difficulties and the information we seek is likely no longer of use to you, we feel it could be mutually beneficial for all."

Eugene's other brow rose to join the first one and he rocked on the balls of his feet. His gaze switched back to Sin and focused on him for a moment as if waiting for him to contribute something. When Sin just stared at him with complete disinterest, Eugene scoffed and slid his hands into the pockets of his jacket.

"While I'm sure it must be difficult for people such as yourself-- meaning opinion-less lackeys who are sent on errands and kill quests without much say in what's happening or understanding of why it is-- I'm... not. Is there a particular reason why the Agency thinks I'd start helping them now?"

"There are several reasons, two of which being your financial situation and your defection from Janus itself," Boyd replied. "Having left their group you're liable to be targeted by them as a traitor, which no doubt would result in your torture and death. Information from our sources implies Janus may be closing in on your location. We do have the ability to aid in your continued escape by slipping conflicting information into the market, should you choose to work with us."

This time Eugene snorted and looked at his guards. "Am I hearing a broken record? I asked why would I help the Agency? Everything about you people disgust me. It's the reason I joined Janus to begin with. I left because I didn't like what they were doing down in Mexico-- not because I'm suddenly going to switch sides."

Boyd studied Eugene quietly. After a moment, he looked over and met Sin's eyes.

So much for plan A. Negotiation was out. Neutralizing was in. If he wasn't going to be of any help, his continued existence was unnecessary. All it would accomplish was allowing Janus to possibly find out that the Agency knew about some of their defectors if Eugene ever went back. Marshal Connors wasn't taking any chances with that. He didn't even want Janus to know that the Agency focused on them specifically at all.

Without speaking or giving any indication of his intentions, Sin moved. Within two blinks, one bodyguard lay on the ground with a bullet in his head while the other was flung across the alley to crash into one of the brick walls that surrounded them.

The scene exploded into motion as the remaining guards rushed Sin. As Sin had suspected, it seemed that Eugene had the money to buy skill. These guys were trained-- likely ex-military or even spec ops. These were no green kids straight out of boot camp.

As Sin traded attacks with one of the more skilled of the group, he noticed Eugene scrambling away out of the corner of his eye. Baring his teeth in annoyance, Sin evaded a jab at his throat, twisted out of the way of a knee to his side and barely dodged a bullet careening past his head. He flipped backwards and allowed his booted foot to crush the other man's throat in the process.

"Get cover!" he shouted at Boyd, dodging another bullet as he started down the alley after Eugene. He could hear footsteps pounding after him as they pursued.

The ground was damp from recent rain and he splashed through the puddles without even noticing. The sound of the guards chasing him lessened as his legs pumped faster, distance growing between him and them. Eugene was moving like a man possessed-- managing to somehow keep a block between them as he shot terrified glances over his shoulder.

Lips turning up into a cold smirk, Sin narrowed his eyes and sprinted forward. There were no civilians in the dark neighborhood that they were in but if Eugene got any further, they'd be hitting the main street. Abandoning his plan to do it soundlessly, Sin opted instead for speed and extended one hand.

He shot Eugene twice in quick succession in the back of the head. The man dropped to the ground lifelessly.

Within the space of one second and the next, Sin had turned on his heel and run back the way he'd come. Somehow he'd failed to realize that the sound of pursuit had died away entirely.

A trill of alarm ran through him and he grit his teeth, cursing himself silently as he crossed the distance that he'd come. It had been further than he'd thought-- several blocks, and two avenues. The seconds it took to make his way back seemed to stretch unbearably as he realized that he'd fucked up by letting Boyd out of his sight.

This was confirmed when he skidded back into the alley. Boyd was sprawled on his side with the remaining bodyguard standing over him, about to blow his brains out.

Sin narrowed his eyes and unloaded into the man, barely pausing before he ran to Boyd's side. He pushed the corpse aside to get to Boyd. He scanned the perimeter quickly before he determined that Boyd had dispatched the other guards before going down.

"Boyd," he demanded harshly, dragging his partner up.

Boyd's jacket was ripped and damp with blood. Sin swore when he noticed that there was blood in Boyd's blond hair as well. A quick assessment of their surroundings told the story easily-- whenever the teen had fallen, his head had slammed against the edge of the garbage bin. It was now smeared with blood as well.

"Boyd, get up," Sin snapped again, eyebrows drawing down.

Boyd's fingers twitched followed shortly by his expression scrunching. His eyebrows drew down laboriously and his lips pulled up; making him look pained. He barely squinted his eyes open, looking blearily up at Sin, before letting them fall shut again.

After a second he grimaced further and made an effort to sit up. It took him a moment to manage it and he moved gingerly. When he was slouched, his hand went to his head where the blood matted his hair, standing out starkly against the pale blond.

"Ow..." he said thickly.

"What the fuck happened?" Sin growled, glaring at Boyd furiously.

Boyd looked around, a blearily confused expression marring his face. His hand was still on his head. "I don't know..." Given how disoriented he sounded, it was unclear whether he didn't know the answer to Sin's question or whether he was still trying to understand the situation.

"Forget it."

Sin stood up impatiently, grinding his teeth with irritation and pulling Boyd up gingerly. It was obvious that Boyd had a head wound but he didn't have time to check anything here, with dead bodies all around them and gunshots still echoing off the buildings into the night. He slid a hand around Boyd's waist and crushed him against his side, more carrying him than supporting him as he started towards the car.

Boyd stumbled along beside him, one arm around Sin's waist with his fingers seemingly absently wrapped in Sin's clothing. He looked around but didn't say anything, his dazed expression not fully leaving.

It would have been easier just to toss Boyd over his shoulder and hurry out of the vicinity but Sin was loathe to draw attention to them so soon and settled for gripping the teenager as tight as possible against his side. He took as many turns as possible to get out of the general area of the shooting.

It wasn't long before sirens sounded in the distance and Sin gave up on being discreet. He looked over at Boyd who was still trying to get his bearings, and picked the younger man up. He could feel the warmth of blood against his own shirt when Boyd's jacket pressed against it and there was no denying the startled worry that exploded in him.

The sudden feeling irritated him and Sin shook his head sharply, pushing everything aside as he ran the rest of the distance. They'd examined the maps of the area closely before coming to the meeting, just in case of an ambush or a need for a

quick egress. It was convenient since he wasn't at all familiar with the labyrinth of streets in the city, and their escape was kept to empty side streets and alleys due to the knowledge.

Only once did he have to duck under an awning and into the doorway of a closed shop. A group of drunk young people were stumbling by and Sin slid sideways, blocking Boyd's bloodied face and hair from view. It likely looked like they were doing something unsavory but at the moment, he didn't give a shit.

Taking the opportunity to examine Boyd further, Sin ignored the catcall that they drew from the passerby.

"Are you more alert?" he murmured, leaning forward to hiss into Boyd's ear as he allowed his fingers to reach up and seek out the wound. Boyd twitched away from the touch. There was a gash from the sharp edge of the dumpster but the blood had already seemed to clot around the wound. It didn't stop Boyd's pale blond hair from looking garish in the light, though.

Boyd looked up at Sin, his honey brown eyes dark in the dim lighting. He nodded, although the movement was gingerly done and he still held himself in very careful positions. "I think so," he said quietly. Sin could hear pain like a faint undercurrent to his words.

"Can you run? The motel is another twenty minutes away."

Boyd's expression was taut and his face a little pale but he nodded.

"I can carry you," Sin added quickly, frowning. "You're bleeding a lot. It may be better."

Relief was unmistakable in Boyd's face. "Okay."

As soon as the noises of the group disappeared down the block, Sin picked up Boyd and began running through the darkness again. He could feel Boyd's face pressed

against his chest; Boyd's arms tight around his neck. Warm blood was sticky between them and beneath that Sin could feel the beating of Boyd's heart.

The city streets went by in a blur, until they returned to the area their motel was in. It was as equally shady as the area they had met Eugene in but several portions of the city hadn't regained their stature after the economic collapse. The end result was boarded up businesses that had never acquired new owners, copious amounts of beggars, street walkers and drug dealers in equal numbers.

Their motel was one of the few in the area that afforded separate units in a ranch style that didn't require going near the management office. Sin moved silently through the shadows, melting into them and then separating himself easily once he reached the unit they'd requested. It was the one farthest from the parking lot and closest to the tree line of the surrounding area.

He set Boyd down as they went into the surveillance camera's range and supported Boyd as if helping a drunk friend. Boyd played along well enough but Sin suspected that the stumbling and slightly disoriented quality wasn't entirely staged.

Sin swiped the keycard quickly and ushered Boyd into the room. As soon as they were inside, the younger man's face screwed up and he doubled over to the nearby trashcan.

"God dammit," Sin hissed as Boyd got sick.

Boyd shook his head wearily, pushing himself upright when he was done but wincing in obvious pain. His eyes were still half-shut and his face was pale as Sin crouched down next to him. Long fingers flew over Boyd's jacket, undoing the buttons deftly. He pushed it aside and saw that the black long sleeved shirt that Boyd wore beneath was cut open in an arc at the top where blood was flowing freely.

Not hesitating or waiting to ask Boyd's opinion on the matter, Sin picked him up again and crossed the room quickly. The wound was bleeding profusely and getting the motel room bloody would only draw attention to who had been occupying it once they

were gone, especially with the news of murders nearby. The last thing they needed on top of a trip to medical was having to explain the PR nightmare to Vivienne if Seattle cops started investigating.

"Do you know what I'm doing?" he asked harshly as they entered the bathroom.

Boyd nodded although it seemed to take a lot of effort to move his head. His breath hissed out in pain and he muttered something slightly incoherent. The only word Sin made out was "mess."

Glad that they wouldn't have to argue about this at least, Sin ripped the shower curtain aside and gingerly pushed Boyd down on the tiled floor inside. Both of them were covered in blood by this point, so Sin switched on the water and flicked the shower on-- allowing the water to spray close to where he'd situated them. It hit Boyd's face and hair indirectly. Boyd started with a gasp, eyes opening wide.

The water started washing the blood off Boyd, along with the filth that had collected in his hair from the alley. It wasn't the most convenient option but it was the one that allowed for as little movement of Boyd's head as possible after he'd been jolted around in their egress.

"I need to wash out these wounds without making this whole room look like a crime scene," Sin said in explanation, crouching on the shower floor next to Boyd. The water was hitting his side and soaking through his shirt but it didn't matter. He'd have to change anyway unless they made the trip across the country in bloody clothing.

Boyd's eyes were more alert on Sin and he nodded. His eyebrows dragged down and his gaze slid away, squinting as he tilted his head toward the spray of water. He was slouched and looked down at the water that had started to splash back off onto his pants and trickle down his shirt.

"What about..." He gestured to the shoes still on their feet.

Without waiting for a response he leaned forward, fingers slightly clumsy and shaky as he started to untie the shoelaces of his boots. He looked determined but the position wasn't doing anything to help stop the flow of blood.

"Forget that," Sin snapped, pushing his partner back against the shower wall, reminding himself to do so gently. "Just be still."

He stood up and backed out of the shower, kicking off his own boots only because they would track the blood that had soaked into the soles onto the cream colored carpet in the main room. The med kit wasn't even out like it should have been in case of an emergency, but they hadn't anticipated injuries for such a small scale mission.

Swearing and ignoring the steadily building tension in his body, Sin narrowed his eyes and forced himself to focus solely on the matter at hand. His own issues could wait.

Unzipping the duffel bag with more force than was necessary, Sin dug out the med kit and belatedly took out his gun. It was soaked from the water. In his haste, he'd forgotten to remove it before jumping in the damn shower. Stupid. When had he become so completely unprofessional over a couple of fucking flesh wounds?

Grinding his teeth in agitation, Sin turned away from his weapon. It would have been smarter to take it apart and let it dry out but somehow that seemed less important at the moment. If anyone came bursting in for whatever reason, the mood he was in would guarantee a neck ripped out anyway. Guns weren't something he necessarily relied on.

He stripped his shirt off upon reentering the bathroom, crouching in front of Boyd. The other man was awake it seemed, and had managed to kick off his boots as they were haphazardly lying out of the shower. One pale hand was pressed against his head wound as he looked out at Sin blearily.

Pushing Boyd's hand away, Sin began looking closer at the head wound. It was bleeding a lot but the wound didn't look very deep. He checked for signs of swelling or any sunken areas but found none. Ignoring the relief that met with this discovery, Sin tilted Boyd's chin up and looked into his face.

Their gazes locked and Boyd's golden brown eyes looked focused.

"Are you good?"

Sin felt the movement of Boyd's nod. "The water helps."

Long fingers splayed across Boyd's face, pushing wet hair to the side. For a moment Sin let his hand stay there, pressed against Boyd's cheek, but then he shook his head and let it fall away. A low sigh escaped him and Sin narrowed his eyes, reaching back to extract antibiotic ointment from the kit.

"How the hell did those two idiots jump you?"

Boyd shook his head and grimaced faintly. For a moment it almost seemed he wasn't going to answer but then he spoke. "I took care of one and two came back at me at once. One cut me and then I got him. The other was too close and disarmed me." He frowned, his eyebrows dragging together. "Then I fell."

A scoff escaped Sin's lips and he leaned forward, carefully applying the ointment to the wound.

"That's the last time we split up. Got it? I run, you fucking run."

"Okay," Boyd said, slightly subdued.

He had his head tilted forward so Sin could see the wound. Despite how careful Sin was being, as he tended to the main part of the cut Boyd winced suddenly and automatically jerked back a little before he stopped himself. One hand reached up and curled around Sin's wrist. He didn't apply any pressure or try to push Sin away; his

fingers simply pressed against Sin's skin. Sin stilled and looked down, meeting Boyd's eyes again.

Boyd's fingers twitched minutely against Sin's wrist but he didn't say anything. His golden brown eyes were caught on Sin; quiet and seeming somehow more intense with his blond hair plastered in strings against his cheek and the sheen of water on his skin. Droplets of water ran down the planes of his face, sliding toward his lips and chin.

In that moment an image flitted across Sin's mind; the memory of him pressing Boyd against the wall as the younger man panted furiously, their lips only centimeters apart.

Sin's mouth opened slightly, eyebrows drawing together as his gaze flicked down to Boyd's mouth again. But then the feel of water sluicing down his arm snapped him out of the daze, and he abruptly looked away. He reached over and shut off the water. A few drops fell from the shower head while water tinged pink with blood flowed toward the drain.

He backed off and grabbed a thick wad of gauze. "Hold this against the wound."

Boyd's fingers brushed against Sin's as he took the gauze with a nod.

Sin shook his head, eyes dropping to the blood still seeping from Boyd's chest. He reached over, intending to rip the already destroyed shirt down the middle but before he could do it, Boyd's hand suddenly snapped up with a harsh grip on Sin's wrist. He shoved himself back against the wall, as if trying to get away or to put space between them. At the same time his knees snapped up, putting more of a barrier between the two of them.

"No--" Boyd said urgently, his voice seeming to wrench out of him. "Don't."

Sin looked up in surprise. Normally Boyd's expressions were subtle or subdued but Sin saw naked fear, nearly terror, in Boyd's wide eyes and ashen skin. There was a skittish quality to him, as if he was one heartbeat away from tearing away from Sin and running out of the room.

Baffled by the reaction, Sin could only stare. He had no idea what could have caused such an extreme reaction and for a moment, he felt a flash of impatience. He had no idea how deep the laceration was or how much blood Boyd had lost. They didn't have time for this shit, not when they were expected at the airport within the next several hours.

But the fear in Boyd's face stopped him.

"What if I just rip the part where the wound is?"

Even this suggestion seemed to scare Boyd on some level. He remained coiled for a moment, his hand tightening on Sin's wrist and eyes intense on Sin's face. After a moment, he seemed to force himself to attempt to relax. He dropped his hand to the shower floor, his fingers curled in a fist braced against the tiles. He tilted his head down slightly so he wasn't looking Sin in the eye. There was tension in his shoulders still, but he nodded silently.

Sin nodded, still watching Boyd contemplatively before he stood. "Let's go in the other room, you need to get your head elevated."

Boyd pushed himself up, using the wall for balance. He stepped out of the shower and made his way to the outer room. Sin grabbed the medical kit, keeping close behind in case Boyd lost his balance again.

The next few moments were spent propping Boyd's head up with pillows as he stretched out on one of the full sized beds. Sin sat next to him, using his knife to cut Boyd's already destroyed shirt at an angle that only exposed the very top of his torso and his left shoulder. The gash was deeper than Sin had thought and he shook his head again, mouth pursing in displeasure.

"I'm going to stitch this up."

Boyd nodded, tilting his head back against the pillows with eyes that were squeezed shut. His fingers curled into the covers and his chest rose and fell a little more quickly than normal.

Time stretched silently for awhile. Sin methodically sewed the wound with the precision of a surgeon. He'd done it often enough to himself to complete the task easily on someone else. But even as his hands moved confidently, closing the gash once he'd cleaned it thoroughly-- his mind was churning.

Everything was going wrong. The entire partnership had evolved in a way that he would have never possibly imagined. From the start, nothing had gone as he'd expected. He'd never expected to be intrigued by Boyd, or to find anything in common with him. He'd never expected to feel reluctance about allowing the teen to die. He'd definitely never expected to eventually start enjoying Boyd's company, and especially had not expected this god awful attraction.

As soon as he'd noticed Boyd's features that day in the thrift shop, the entire thing had taken off at a speed he hadn't been prepared for. He hadn't been able to stop noticing things about Boyd from that point on, which had manifested into a confusing desire to do... something, that night in his apartment.

After finding out that Boyd was gay and had been sexually involved with men, the situation had gotten worse. Trying to picture somber, expressionless Boyd without any of his inhibitions had somehow morphed into picturing him losing those inhibitions with Sin. It hadn't even been something he'd consciously done; the thoughts, the wondering- - they'd randomly accosted him and then refused to go away.

Scowling deeply, his green eyes flicked over to Boyd's face.

"Don't fall asleep yet."

One eye peeked open, peering at Sin through pale eyelashes. "You have a needle in me," Boyd said tightly. "I'm not going to sleep."

Sin smirked. "It doesn't hurt that bad."

Boyd scrunched his face up and closed his eyes again, dropping his head back against the pillows. "It doesn't feel good."

That couldn't be argued with so Sin fell silent again as he worked. The nagging feeling that had been plaguing him since he'd gone back to the alley to find Boyd on the ground came back.

"Sorry."

Boyd's eyes opened and he looked at Sin in surprise. His eyes flicked across Sin's face before he said, "It's alright. There's no painless way to stitch a wound like this..."

"That's not what I was talking about."

There was a brief pause. "Then what?"

Sin made a face, glancing over at Boyd again. "What do you think? If I'd been on top of things, this wouldn't have happened."

Boyd was quiet a moment, watching Sin with those eyes that had so often seemed silently trained on him. "It's not your fault. If you hadn't gotten Eugene, we both would've been in trouble. The rest of this..." He gestured to his wounds. "It just happens sometimes."

Unconvinced, Sin just shrugged. He finished stitching the wound, cleaned it up again and applied a bandage. Despite the fact that his wounds were now attended to, Boyd still looked like a mess due to his clothing. They had several hours before they had to meet the Agency crew who would be transporting them back to Lexington, so Sin reached for the pack with the intention of giving Boyd a fresh pair of clothing. However it occurred to him that Boyd likely wouldn't change in front of him for... whatever reason.

"If your head is feeling better, you should change," he said in his usual toneless voice, standing up finally. "We have seven hours before the transport team will expect us, but I wouldn't advise sleeping right away since we don't know if you have a concussion."

That being said, Sin turned to walk back to the bathroom.

"Sin," Boyd said suddenly before he got far.

Sin paused, turning to look over his shoulder.

One of Boyd's hands was absently touching the stitches peeking out of his ruined shirt. His eyebrows were drawn together and his gaze tracked Sin's face before settling to meet Sin's eyes. His expression was sincere when he said, "Thank you."

They stared at each other for a long moment before Sin just shrugged his broad shoulders and disappeared into the bathroom to clean up. He stayed in there probably longer than was necessary-- detailing the shower and the tiled floors as best as he could to get rid of all traces of blood. Afterward he showered himself after noticing that streaks of Boyd's blood had dried to his arms, hands and chest.

There was a strong desire to separate himself from Boyd as long as possible, that co-existed with a desire to watch Boyd and make sure he was okay. And it was that unhesitating response, that automatic action of attending to Boyd, which was disturbing him.

Why the fuck did he even care? It wasn't like Boyd didn't have medical training. He knew how to take care of himself, and if he didn't then he'd be taken out. It was a fact of life. A basic tenet of their lives. Yet here he was, babying the teen, running through the street in some rush to get him to safety.

And that wasn't even mentioning the actual panic that he'd felt at seeing Boyd sprawled on the filthy cold ground and covered in blood.

Sin turned off the water with more force than was necessary and stepped out of the shower. For what felt like the first time in a long time, he looked at himself in the mirror. It was usually something he avoided-- he didn't like being reminded that he was nearly a reflection of his now deceased father. But even so, Sin looked at his own face and tried to figure out what the hell was different. Where had he gone so fucking wrong? When had he become just another weak person?

He'd think that years of conditioning himself to not care about other people would have held out longer. He'd think that years of being alienated would make him not as likely to get sucked in. But all it took was genuine interest in him and a smile, and things had slipped out of his control.

Shaking his head, Sin turned away.

The next few hours passed slowly. They talked from time to time but Sin mostly withdrew. He dropped into a brooding mood and looked out the window silently most of the time, watching for anything out of the ordinary. After awhile he remembered to send in the initial check-in on his panel to say that negotiation had failed but Eugene was terminated.

He left Boyd alone to doze from time to time, prodding him every once in awhile to ensure that he rose easily. In that time Sin wondered what the hell Boyd's problem was with his shirt. It was entirely possible he'd been delusional due to the head wound but before and after that, he'd seemed fine. It would have been easy to ask but Sin didn't think he'd get an answer and at the moment, things felt alternatively tense and awkward anyway.

By the time they left the motel and met the plane at a private airport outside the city, things had slowly fallen back into routine. Without the urgency and adrenaline going full force, it was easy to push things aside.

After the flight back to Lexington, Boyd was sent to medical directly from transport and Sin was left with the task of writing up the report. By this time it was the middle of the afternoon and his body wanted to rest. He ignored it and typed a bare bones report that barely included any detail. It was pointless anyway considering they would debrief later that day.

Thinking about the debriefing sent an irritated flash through him. It was tempting to blow it off. He hated sitting at the conference table and listening to everyone's bullshit input. He'd lost interest in the details a long time ago.

Sleep came easily enough once he returned to the apartment, and when he woke three hours later it was already nearly evening. Glancing at the clock, Sin wondered if he'd missed the meeting but no such luck.

It was a complete chore to drag himself back to the Tower with the throngs of obnoxious staff. It was even worse to sit through the debriefing and listen to them all talk about future options and other possible defectors of Janus. Everyone played their roles well, and not for the first time did Sin wonder if Owen, Jeffrey and Ryan actually had these personalities or if they just acted a part for other people's benefit. He'd wondered the same thing about Boyd when they first met.

Looking over at his partner, Sin noticed that Boyd's eyes had been on him. They looked at each other briefly before mutually glancing away. After that, Sin kept his eyes on the panel in front of him, or zoned out completely.

"Are you with us?" Carhart asked him at one point, giving him a flat look when Sin's hair curtained his face as he leaned on one hand.

"Sure."

"Don't let me interrupt your nap," was the sarcastic reply.

"I wouldn't."

And the debriefing dragged on.

By the end he was ready to go back to the safety of his empty apartment where he could try to drown out his extraneous preoccupation with recent developments in peace. He was determined to somehow mentally retrain himself and get back to the place he'd been in before Boyd had come along and complicated everything.

But that too was ruined when Boyd stopped him after everyone else filed out of the conference room.

Sin looked over his shoulder and turned, facing his partner entirely. He gave him a full once over for the first time since the briefing had started. He was paler than usual, but seemed better.

Boyd glanced at the door and then studied Sin a little more closely. "Thanks for waiting," he said, watching Sin with a thoughtful air. He hesitated and then turned to his messenger bag lying on the table. "I wanted to give you something."

He pushed the flap of the bag up and pulled out something that was rectangular and wrapped in several layers of white tissue paper so Sin couldn't see what it was. He held it out to Sin, his eyes not leaving Sin's face.

Confused, Sin took the package. It was heavier than he'd expected. "What is it?"

"Open it and see," was all Boyd said.

Not entirely knowing what was going on, Sin ripped the paper down the middle. It was a book-- an archaic looking hardcover book. It was reddish gold in color with a plain cover. The spine was more elaborate despite the fact that most of the cover was faded with age. He could just read the words 'Paradise Lost' fading on the spine.

Eyebrows shooting up, Sin looked up at Boyd. "You're giving this to me? Why?"

Boyd shrugged, looking down at the book. "I've had it for awhile but after I saw your tattoo, I started wondering whether you would appreciate it more." He reached out, his fingers brushing the cover. The movement must have pulled at the stitches because his lips thinned briefly, but when he looked up at Sin again there was only interest in his eyes.

"It's a second edition. I wanted a first but those are too expensive. I was lucky enough to find this at an antique store I frequent." He dropped his hand at his side and shrugged again, seemingly absently. "Anyway, I wanted to give it to you as a thank you."

Trying to figure out what to say and completely failing, Sin looked down at the book. He felt simultaneously awkward, baffled and... pleased. The book was something he would appreciate. He hadn't read it in years and he didn't have access to any real books of his own that he could enjoy. But aside from that--

Sin cut the thought off sharply. "Why do you keep thanking me?"

"Because--" Boyd stopped, his eyebrows drawing together. "Because you're nice to me. And you listened when I..." He gestured to his shirt, looking highly uncomfortable. "You could have forced me and you didn't. And I..." He hesitated. "I appreciate that."

"Oh." Sin stared at him and then back down at the book again. "I see." If Boyd was underwhelmed by Sin's response, he didn't show it or look surprised. There was a pause and then Boyd turned and flipped his bag closed. "Well, I'm going to leave. I have some errands I have to run today." He put the strap of the empty bag over one shoulder and turned toward the door. "I'll see you later."

There was a moment where Sin struggled with an appropriate response. He had none. This was a situation he had never been in. But he opened his mouth anyway, to at least say goodbye, when his cell phone vibrated against the pocket of his pants. Caught off guard, the moment passed and Sin ended up not speaking at all as Boyd left the room.

Irritated, Sin took the call without even looking at the caller ID.

"What?" he growled.

"Problem, Vega?"

Sin paused and glanced down at the book in his hands. He had a sudden desire to cover it up again, as if Marshal Connors could see it through the phone. There was an instinctive part of Sin that didn't want Connors to know that he and Boyd got along now. He couldn't explain it, but it wouldn't go away.

"No," he snapped. "What do you want?"

"You, in my office, in twenty minutes," was the chilly reply. "You're being sent out within the hour."

The call ended and Sin slid the phone back into his pocket. Whatever he figured out to say to Boyd, it would have to wait. With a low sigh, Sin left the conference room and headed to his building to drop off the book reluctantly. It too would have to wait until his mission was over.

Feeling inexplicably gloomy, Sin wondered who he would be assassinating now.

## Chapter 15

It was the end of November and Sin was slightly mortified that someone had put up Thanksgiving decorations in various places around the compound. He wondered if this was some pathetic attempt to make the Agency seem less like a life-sucking void and more like a normal job. If so, they had failed miserably.

Paper cutouts of fat turkeys did not a welcoming environment make.

He stood in front his apartment and stared at the thing that was stuck to his door. It was a cardboard decoration of some sort that looked like an odd horn with fake fruit stuffed inside of it. He stared at it silently for a full minute as he searched his vocabulary for the word that would describe such an odd creation.

"Cornucopia," he murmured out loud and pulled it off the door. The guards on either side of it had all but ignored him until that point, when one of them actually snorted a laugh.

'All employees are formally invited to a Thanksgiving feast this Thursday, 11/21/19, at 1700 hours in the main cafeteria.'

Sin stared at the thing and began shredding it into small pieces. He did not know what had possessed someone to stick this to his door, of all doors, but he found it mildly offensive. He wasn't even really American. Not technically anyway, he didn't think. Perhaps that was something to look into.

He tossed it on the floor and swiped his card key in the door, opening it and entering his apartment. After his solo assassination assignment, there had been a lull in missions. He didn't have any problems with admitting that he was bored. In the past month and a half he had participated in a grand total of three missions and none of them had been very exciting. He spent most of his time exercising, reading or roaming the compound when he was alone.

He'd begun leaving his quarters more often lately and he wasn't entirely sure why. He thought maybe it was because most of the other agents had grown almost

used to his presence in the past two months. It may have also been because he would frequently spend time with Boyd.

Sin walked across his apartment and leaned against the wall so that he could stare out the window. A few months ago, he used to sit in the dark for hours while his mind remained perfectly blank in an almost meditative state. His sole purpose had been for killing and for avoiding the box. He hadn't cared or had interest in much else other than that. He'd had no desire to be around or to speak to anyone else. For the most part, that hadn't changed.

Except, of course, when it came to Boyd. His preoccupation with his partner had not diminished at all in the past month. If anything, it had grown.

He found himself thinking about Boyd at odd times, even often wondering what he was doing when they were not together. When Sin exercised or when he grew bored with that and sat staring into space for hours, he found himself wondering what Boyd did in his spare time. What he read or did to get through the long hours of the day that were filled with silence and inactivity. He wondered if Boyd went out, if he spoke to people outside the Agency. Most of all, he wondered if Boyd wondered these things about him.

Sin didn't particularly like this new, needy aspect to his personality. In fact it was a little disgusting. But no one else seemed to notice the change within him and to everyone other than Boyd he was as coldly sarcastic as ever.

He slid down the wall and sat on the floor, staring into space silently. It wasn't only the sudden interest in his partner that alarmed him, however. It was more startling that he'd begun to act differently when they were together.

There were times when his gaze would linger on Boyd longer than was necessary. When his eyes would focus on Boyd's mouth or eyes. There were times when he would sit alone and think about how odd it was to desire someone after so many years of not even knowing what that would feel like. There were other times when he would think about the mission in Seattle, and the feel of Boyd's bare skin underneath

his hands. Sin closed his eyes and tilted his head against the wall, irritation bubbling to the surface. And here he fucking went again.

He'd begun reminding himself nightly that he was behaving extremely out of character. He was a killer. He'd been trained to be one since he was eight years old and that was the only thing he was good at. He had had enough trouble even learning how to have a normal conversation without thinking Boyd would use any information for devious purposes. What would he even do if he decided to focus on this completely random attraction?

Sin ran his fingers along the carpet idly. He was relieved that Boyd had been called away on a solo assignment to meet up with Andrews. It allowed him some time to sort out the confusion that constantly clouded his brain.

His lips quirked up into a sour smile as he recalled the brief meeting with Carhart before Boyd had left. Apparently Andrews would only agree to the meeting if Sin was not there. He wanted nothing to do with "that animal."

The words didn't bother him but the idea of Boyd going off on his own did. It was the first time Boyd had a solo mission of any kind with no backup in the vicinity. What would happen if Andrews had turned on them, and decided to take Boyd hostage or kill him to get out of the deal?

He hadn't voiced the concerns out loud, not seeing the good it would do since no one would listen to him anyway. Ryan, however, had done it for him. He'd complained loudly that at least Sin should accompany Boyd even if he didn't actually go to the meeting. Carhart had said there was no point and by now Boyd should be able to hold his own.

It was true, but the entire thing still made him, and apparently Ryan, uneasy. The thought reminded Sin of something else, something that he'd noticed and completely forgotten immediately after finding out that Boyd was going alone. Before the briefing had started, Ryan had asked Boyd if Wednesday was his birthday.

The concept of a birthday was alien to Sin. He couldn't remember celebrating his own and was unsure as to the actual date of it. He suspected that it was sometime in April and he knew that he'd been born in 1991, but that was the extent of his knowledge. Despite that, he knew that other people sometimes considered them to be joyous occasions that called for celebrations. He wondered mildly if Boyd was one of those people. Somehow he doubted it but at the same time, he had trouble dismissing the date from his mind.

His eyes wandered over to the manuscript of *Paradise Lost* that sat on the small table in front of the couch. It occurred to him that he could get Boyd a present but the idea seemed absurd.

For one, it wouldn't do anything to change his ridiculous fixation with Boyd and the idea wasn't doing anything but feeding into it. And two, he'd have to sneak out of the compound. The sneaking out wasn't actually the problem-- the wandering around trying to find a present before the Agency came hunting him down was.

He banished the thought for the moment and walked over to the kitchen, making a dinner for himself out of chocolate chip cookies and instant oatmeal. He stared at the sink blankly and automatically ate, attempting to adopt his old meditative mind frame and failing when his thoughts wandered right back to Boyd's birthday.

Even if he were to get Boyd a gift of some sort, which he wasn't, he had no idea what he would get. It occurred to him that other than the fact that he knew Boyd enjoyed reading, he knew next to nothing about the kid. It nagged at him for a moment and he rationalized that it was because Boyd seemed to somehow know quite a bit about him.

He liked to be on equal footing with the people around him and he was on anything but that with Boyd. He barely knew anything about his background or life before coming to the Agency. Sin had the opportunity to read Boyd's file long ago but he'd never intended to maintain the partnership so he'd barely glanced at it. He didn't have access to the files anymore but he knew someone who did.

Sin tossed the empty packages into the garbage and strode out of his apartment again.

This time, the guards looked at him fully instead of ignoring him as they had before.

"Where you headed?" Daniels asked although he didn't seem very interested.

Sin stared at him impatiently. "What do you care?"

Daniels shrugged. "I don't really, I'm just bored." He eyed Sin's attire skeptically and looked out the doors. "The temperature is in single digits tonight, guy."

"Your point?"

The guard held up his hands and looked exasperated. "Forget I said anything."

The look on Sin's face made it obvious that he planned to do just that. The guards at his complex often treated him that way as of late. They no longer seemed particularly hostile although they were always wary. Now they seemed almost curious about him and the lack of bloodthirsty rampages that they'd heard so much about.

When Sin got outside the cold stung his face and went through his thin clothing but he showed no outward signs of discomfort and strode towards residential building C. The guards of that complex gave him more of a hard time but they had no real reason to deny him access to the building and had no choice but to let him pass. He ignored the elevator and took the stairs two at a time to the fifteenth floor.

He noticed that this door also had been accosted by the hideous cornucopia and he took the liberty of destroying it as well. After it was sufficiently shredded, he knocked on the door.

Someone from within the apartment shouted, "Coming!" There were clattering noises before the door swung open without much delay.

He was surprised that an agent, even a non-combative one, would be so careless as to open their door without so much as pausing to look through the peephole. Although, he supposed, maybe it was better that way. He didn't particularly enjoy the idea of standing in the hallway, trying to explain why he was there or dealing with anyone's overactive paranoia.

Ryan stood in his doorway in an oversized red t-shirt and baggy boxers. His hair was sticking out in every direction and he had a can of soda in one hand. He stared at Sin with an expression that could only be described as agape. "Hsin!"

Sin raised an eyebrow at the usage of his real name.

Ryan reddened. "Er--Sin."

He raised the other eyebrow.

"Hsin?" Ryan asked in confusion.

Sin gave him a flat look and strode into the apartment, not waiting for a formal invitation. "Give me your keycard."

"Um? What?" Ryan blinked at him and closed the door. He looked around his apartment, and then hurried over to his desk, closing his laptop hurriedly. He'd stopped behaving awkwardly around Sin after the first several weeks but he still maintained a generally flustered air when he was in his presence.

"Your keycard. Give it to me."

"That's not really... like, allowed." Ryan scratched the back of his head, looking baffled and conflicted. "What do you even want it for?"

Sin stared at him silently and held out his hand.

"Well when are you going to give it back?" the R&D agent asked uncertainly, eyebrows drawing together.

Sin supposed that it was very fortunate that Ryan would most likely never be questioned by an enemy if this was the extent of his resistance. "Shortly. I need access to personnel files. The entire ones, not the superficial version. I don't have the access code for that."

Ryan opened his mouth to question him further but the expression on Sin's face shut it instantly and he settled for just looking extremely curious. "Uh... well, I guess. My access code is um..." He looked mildly embarrassed. "0666." He pulled the card out of his pocket and handed it to Sin. "But first can I--"

Sin was striding out of the apartment before the younger man had a chance to complete his sentence. He took the stairs once again and determined that this building was designed identically to every other residential building. Which meant that there was most likely a public computer lab and lounge area on the third floor. He was pleased to realize that he was correct, and even more pleased to see that it was entirely empty. He took a seat at the back of the lab and swiped Ryan's card, waiting for the screen to load.

It welcomed Ryan Freedman and asked for the access code. Sin punched it in and stared at the screen for several moments before figuring out how to get to the area of the database that he wanted. His own keycard was limited to unlocking specific public areas of the compound unless they temporarily increased his access. Even then it was limited to accessing mission files that he was specifically involved in.

Ryan, on the other hand, apparently had free run of the entire database.

He typed in Boyd's name and found the folder instantly. There were subfolders within it and he took his time, going through all of them. He checked all of the files and images of certificates from academic awards and contests that Boyd had received throughout the years. Sin noted that Boyd had graduated high school early, skipping to college courses at the age of 15. Sin had never been to school himself but he figured that was impressive.

He only skimmed through the information about Vivienne but took his time reading about Cedrick Alan Beaulieu, a journalist and aspiring author who had perished during the bombings in New York City while covering the story.

There was an entire subfolder dedicated to Boyd's father, and Sin read every document and went through every subfolder. He was curious about the type of person who would marry and have a child with Vivienne, who seemed even less likely to be capable of intimacy than Sin was himself.

It seemed like Cedrick had done well for himself in his young life. He'd gotten a position at a good newspaper fairly young and went on to dedicate his short career to focusing on political intrigue. He'd done a surprising amount of investigative work considering he was fairly early in his career, but apparently some of his first stories had blown the top off a lot of scandals and impressed a fair share of important people.

There was a video attached to one of the files, and Sin started to bypass it before pausing. After a moment he decided that he was curious enough to watch and opened the file.

In the video, the camera was at an angle from the corner of a closed room, catching the back half of the person doing the interviewing. All Sin could see was a woman's dark hair that had turned largely grey, pulled back in a complicated braid rolled into a bun. She had a clipboard in front of her and a pen in her hand. Sin couldn't see much of what was written on the sheets of paper but he did see that she'd been making notes.

A young man who Sin assumed was Cedrick sat across the table from her.

He was young, maybe twenty years old, and wore a plain black shirt under a slightly ill-fitting jacket. His brown eyes were alert and a darker shade than Boyd's honey brown ones, but their shapes were similar. He was a little older than Boyd was now and some similarities could be seen. Still, where Boyd was lean and had blond hair, Cedrick had thick, short brown hair, a stockier build, and none of the androgyny that his son would grow to have.

It quickly became apparent to Sin that this was an interview for an internship, and that Cedrick was still in college. Cedrick seemed to alternate between an easygoing demeanor and seeming nervous as he tried to do his best in the interview. He kept straightening his back after seemingly realizing he'd started to slouch. Although a genuine smile easily lent itself to Cedrick's lips, his eyes had a haunted quality to them that wasn't uncommon at that time, not long after the war had started.

The interview started with a few questions that were only partially interesting.

The woman asked Cedrick about his qualifications. He mentioned how he'd been the recipient of multiple awards, including a prestigious award in Canada that had allowed him to travel to Europe for a week to attend a press conference in Brussels. When he mentioned that he'd direct enrolled at Centre de Formation des Journalistes in Paris for awhile, the woman's face had been tilted at just the right angle for Sin to see the way her eyebrows raised in interest. He talked about how two of his main focuses of interest had been covering elections and being a journalist in conflict zones. He also mentioned how he'd wanted to work at a newspaper for a long time and he was excited about the opportunity to interview for an internship at this one.

The woman asked a few other cursory questions. She noticed that according to his resume, much of his earlier schooling was in Canada and France, so why was he in the United States now? He'd mentioned the nearby university and how he'd wanted to take some classes there. She asked about how it was better than Centre de Formation des Journalistes and he said a lot of it had come down to personal choices for where he and his wife would raise a family.

The woman gave him a strange look at that. "You have a family?" she asked doubtfully.

For the first time, all shadows of nervousness disappeared from Cedrick's face. He broke into a wide grin, looking proud with a faint flush to his face that hadn't been there before. "I do," he said happily, leaning forward and pulling out his wallet. "Do you

want to see? My boy was just born a few months ago. I have a beautiful wife and an adorable son-- despite everything that's happened, I feel like the luckiest man alive."

He pulled out a picture but the woman held her hand up. "That won't be necessary." Her tone was curt but not cruel.

Still, there was a definite note of disapproval when she continued, "We are only interested in serious applicants that may grow to become full time members in the future. However, we have multiple locations and the very nature of our more enterprising journalists requires travel. If you were to get the internship and if you were to be hired full time after you graduated, what would this mean about the possibility of relocation in the future?"

Cedrick looked down at the picture in his hands and smiled. It was an enigmatic look that seemed neither happy nor sad. "I would love to have this internship, and one of my dreams is to work at the Sun. I want nothing more than to have the chance to be part of this organization and represent journalism the way it was meant to be."

He looked up and met her eyes, his expression set. "But for all that, my family comes first. I could go on trips or do short stints in other places but I can't move. My wife came with me from France. We're both relatively new here and still settling in, and my son needs as much stability as he can get as he grows up. Especially with war at our doorstep. I would give anything for this position, but I won't give up my family's needs. They're too important to me."

There was a beat of silence as the woman stared directly at him and he returned the stare, unwavering. She sniffed and looked down at her clipboard, making several notes. It was hard to tell whether she was approving or disapproving of Cedrick's response. He seemed a little uncertain about the reception himself but he didn't take it back. His fingers lingered on the picture before he pushed it back in his wallet and returned the wallet to his back pocket.

"What area of interest do you have for the paper?" the woman asked without looking up.

"Politics," Cedrick said without hesitation.

"In what way?"

"I want to expose corruption." Cedrick leaned forward against the table, his brown eyes intent. "Did you know that in the last twenty years, nearly fifty percent of the people in Congress have been proven to be corrupt or have taken part in criminal scandals on some level? So many people are completely disingenuous. They promise one thing and then get into office and do the opposite. All these 'family men' who cheat on their wives and rape young men make me sick. The worst part is so often the proof of that and other scandals goes missing or gets buried. The apparent inability for grown adults to take responsibility for their own actions is astounding."

He shook his head, clearly disgusted. As he got more into his response, his hands started moving around to emphasize points and ideas. "Money, power, famous names... So many people in office take advantage of the system and twist it all to their own benefit. That isn't right. And nearing fifty percent corruption is not only insane, it's pathetic. I want to have the chance to do exposés of the truth, based on actual facts rather than opinions. I want to look into political corruption, especially at a time like now with the war underway and all these questions in the air. If I had my way, eventually it may be interesting to do comparisons to other countries. The US could stand to be improved in a number of ways. Maybe there could be an article that alternated showing the truth and showing how it could be done. My family back home--"

"Where is back home?" the woman interrupted.

Cedrick blinked, looking slightly startled. There was passion for his beliefs in what he said and the way he spoke; in the intensity of his eyes and his voice. He likely hadn't realized how into the answer he'd been getting until she cut him off.

"Quebec City," he answered absently. His eyebrows drew down. "But my mother is American and my wife is French so I've had these conversations at the dinner table before."

"What conversations?"

"About the different options out there," Cedrick insisted. "You know, the United States prides itself on being a democratic nation but it's not the most ideal democracy. It's a federal constitutional republic with representative democracy. The founding fathers didn't even care for democracy. Although some states have different aspects, as a whole the United States government can easily be skewed. Look at the electoral college alone; it doesn't matter what the people want. Even if everyone in a state wanted to vote Republican, if the elector for the state wanted to vote Democratic than that's what they do. It's hard to believe it can really be a government 'by the people, for the people' when you look at it like that. But if you take Switzerland's model, for example..."

The interview continued for awhile longer with Cedrick expounding on his view of politics, government, and how things could be improved upon. Rather than seeming critical, he seemed genuinely interested in the topic and seemed to view it almost as a cultural study of the world. He started to cite examples of comparisons of actions governments had taken and consequences that could directly or indirectly be tied back to them.

He mentioned that one of the biggest problems he'd noticed with governments in general was that they all seemed utterly incapable or uninterested in admitting their own wrongs. That, he said, was why he was so interested in revealing political corruption; because when left on its own, the situation would never be revealed. Or, if it was, it would be skewed by the opinions of the people reporting it. There was a passion and intensity to him that showed he could devote himself fully to an idea and would have the energy to see it through.

The interview continued with some more back and forth questions. After fifteen minutes it concluded with the woman telling Cedrick she would be in touch with him.

When Cedrick stood to leave, he smiled and thanked her for her time. He shook her hand with enthusiasm and seemed genuinely pleased to have had the opportunity for the interview, regardless of how it would turn out. When he left the room, the woman

leaned back in the chair and tapped the pen against the side of the clipboard while she stared thoughtfully at the door. She made a soft, contemplative noise in the back of her throat and then stood to turn off the camera. The screen went blank.

Sin stared at the screen for a moment before shaking his head. Cedrick was like the antithesis of everything Agency. Of everything Vivienne for that matter. It was bizarre that two such different people had been together. It was also highly ironic, especially considering that if Cedrick had continued on the path he'd been on he'd have likely been on the Agency's radar for all of the wrong reasons.

In addition to that, it was now even harder to picture the idealistic young man in the video as someone who would ever marry someone like Vivienne. Perhaps she hadn't always been such a stone cold bitch.

Somehow he found it unlikely.

Then again, he had no idea how normal families functioned or how people formed relationships. The extent of his knowledge in that area stemmed from watching his mother interact with johns and his father fucking every attractive human that passed him. Neither of his parents had been very interested in family-life before they died.

Sin went back to his research and found a subfolder labeled Louis "Lou" Krauszer. It seemed like an anomaly and Sin clicked it, baffled as to why some random individual was included. He barely glanced at the main document before moving on to the others, wondering about the connection to Boyd.

After a few moments of perusing it, he realized that Lou was a childhood friend of Boyd's. His parents had been liberal politicians before the war and they'd both perished during the bombings that came after it.

There were several police reports and mug shots of the teen. It appeared that after his parent's death he'd begun to participate in petty crime as a means of survival. There were several stills of surveillance videos on city streets that depicted him and Boyd walking together, his arm thrown casually around Boyd's shoulders most of the

time. Sin studied the images and noted that although the teenaged Boyd in the images had begun to adopt his usual style of all black attire and a generally serious expression, his eyes were much more animated than they were now and his mouth was often spread across his face in smile.

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and he stared at this Lou person with a slight frown. He had a long slender body, unruly masses of curly blond hair and grey-blue eyes that seemed to perpetually twinkle with mischief. He was attractive and had a devil may care quality to his body language and clothing style in the images.

The dates on the images were as recent as four years ago, which meant that Boyd was most likely still acquainted with the boy. The idea made Sin frown further. He wondered why Boyd had never mentioned a childhood friend hanging around. What did this person think about Boyd joining the Agency-- did he even know? That actually brought to mind another question that Sin had wondered about recently-- what cover story did Boyd use on the outside world, anyway?

He idly flipped through files as he tried to find recent data on the mop headed teen. His search came up short and he made a face at the computer before going back to the main document on Lou.

Louis "Lou" Krauszer

Occupation: None

Status: Deceased

Birth: 3/14/2000

Death: 5/23/2016

Sin stared at the words for a moment and decided that this was interesting. It was an abrupt end to a teen who had looked relatively healthy. Although it was possible that he'd been suffering from the lung disease which had taken out a lot of young people

after the war. Curious despite himself, Sin kept looking to determine what had actually happened.

After several minutes of searching he came up with nothing. Frustrated, he growled at the computer and flipped back to the main folder. He went through every folder and every file and finally found one that was labeled "police-hospital reports, surveillance." His eyebrows rose and several files appeared on the screen. He opened each one, pouring over them thoroughly. It seemed as though Boyd had been involved in a mugging where he'd been injured and his friend Louis Krauszer had been slain by the attackers. Further reading described an inept and somewhat crooked police department who did very little to catch the gang that was involved.

A follow up report noted that Boyd's wound had not been fatal and he hadn't had any damage to major organs. However he returned to the hospital a few days later with severe chest and stomach trauma from numerous stab wounds. Despite Vivienne's insistence that they'd been from another attack, Boyd's despondence and instability had hinted otherwise. Barely a day after he'd been released he had shown up at another hospital due to an obvious suicide attempt. This information gave Sin real pause and he stared at the screen contemplatively. His mind jumped back to the mission in Seattle-- Boyd's bleary insistence that his shirt remain on despite his injuries. Sin pictured the frightened look on Boyd's face at the idea of his torso being exposed. Was this why? If he'd had severe stab wounds, there would be scars unless Vivienne had paid to have them removed. Although, he supposed, that was entirely possible. It was also possible that Boyd simply didn't like the vulnerability of being naked when he was barely conscious. It was a sentiment that made sense.

The hospital report noted that it had been recommended for Boyd to receive additional psychiatric help but there were no further reports. It seemed that Boyd had been taken out of the hospital early and had never returned. There were no further reports or follow ups by authorities and it seemed for one reason or another, they'd decided to stop investigating.

Sin's long, slender fingers tapped against the table impatiently. There had to be more information somewhere. He scowled and looked at a couple of other files before coming to another video clip. It was also inside the surveillance folder and was labeled "First Bank-05232016." There was no sound but the video quality was excellent. It was a nice day. A little bit of water was still trickling along the gutters from a recent rain. The sun was bright behind a layer of the ever-present ash that blanketed the sky. The sun was intense enough that it lightened the dull grey to an almost white. A sign hung just in the lower portion of the screen, proclaiming 'First Bank' in bold letters.

Sin immediately recognized the street the surveillance camera was taping. It was outside First Bank on Dauphin Street in Vickland neighborhood. The area that Boyd seemed so intent on avoiding and the street where he'd reacted so strongly on that first mission.

At first Sin didn't see anything of interest; the street was empty and judging by the foliage and light, it seemed to be mid-day in the spring or summer. Then he noticed two teenagers walking into frame from the side.

One of them was unmistakably Boyd, although he was a few years younger than he'd been when Sin had met him. The other was Lou. He was taller than Boyd but not by much, and had a similarly lanky build as Boyd although he was filled out a bit more.

Sin couldn't hear anything that was being said but there was no mistaking the way Lou's hand kept trailing along Boyd's skin. As they passed an alley, Lou suddenly tugged Boyd into the alley and turned him so they faced each other. He backed Boyd up against the wall, his fingers curling around Boyd's arms while he looked down at his face.

Boyd looked surprised at first and glanced around as if searching for witnesses. He started to say something but Lou leaned in, capturing his mouth in a kiss that cut off any of Boyd's protests. Boyd's stiff back gradually loosened and soon their jaws were working as the kiss deepened. Boyd's hands moved up Lou's back while Lou buried his hand in Boyd's blond hair and wrapped his other arm around his waist.

The video froze in place as Sin automatically paused it, more out of shock than anything else. His eyes were focused on the two boys, their lips and the placement of their hands. For a moment, his breath caught and he swallowed hard.

Some distant part of him told him to shut it off. Boyd wouldn't want him to see this. Why was it even here? Why was this intimate moment captured in time? But he found himself incapable of stopping it now that he'd started watching.

The video un-paused.

Lou's hips rolled against Boyd's and soon they were moving against each other, their actions growing more intense. Boyd pulled away from the kiss to tilt his head back, his mouth falling open and eyes sliding shut; his cheeks flushed as he clutched at his friend. Lou moved down Boyd's jaw and sucked on his throat.

Boyd was saying something, his lips moving increasingly urgently. His hands slid up and then gripped Lou's shoulders, shifting from trying to pull him closer to trying to push him away. Lou seemed uninterested in complying and Boyd's knees seemed to buckle as Lou's mouth moved to the place where Boyd's neck met his shoulder.

Even without sound, Boyd's curse was unmistakable. His expression was partially pained, partially ecstatic as his head was pushed back against the brick wall. There was nothing of the blank-faced, terminally controlled boy that Sin was used to seeing. This Boyd seemed passionate and caught up in the moment.

In the end Boyd won. He was able to push Lou away and the two of them stood panting, hands still on each other, faces tilting forward until their foreheads touched. Sin couldn't see their expressions with their faces so close together but he did see them move in for a few short kisses. Their hands roamed along each other's body languidly before they finally pulled apart.

Boyd turned to leave the alley and Lou's hand slid from his elbow down along his forearm to end at his hand. For a moment they walked with their fingers intertwined, Boyd leading the way with his arm stretched back and Lou moving in closer behind him.

When they got back out onto the main street, they seemingly reluctantly released their hands and started down the street again.

Shortly after, they both seemed to hesitate. A sound must have caught their attention because at first Sin didn't see anything.

Then he saw the five teenagers strolling into view. They had the sort of slouching stride that was prevalent among the thugs who roamed the street. It was obvious that they were in a gang; each wore a green bandana in some fashion. The tallest of them glanced at the others with barely a nod of his head, but the four seemed to understand. Without saying a word the group closed in on the two ahead of them.

At the sight of them, Lou muttered something to Boyd and looked irritated. Boyd just looked confused and a little concerned when the gang members moved closer. The tallest boy had black, slightly oily hair that fell into his eyes. Judging by the way he held himself and the way the other four kept glancing at him, he was in charge. He called out something to Boyd and Lou and the arrogance in the way he tilted his head was clearly visible.

Lou shot something back, his expression mocking. Boyd stood at his side, his eyes darting around between the teenagers and the exits he and Lou still had. He said something to Lou but whatever he said, Lou ignored it and continued to stare down the other five.

What followed was several minutes of arguments. The leader had the other gang members fan out and surround Boyd and Lou. The leader punched Lou in the face and the fight began. The leader and Lou clearly had some kind of history that had resulted in animosity between the two. The leader repeatedly mocked him and, at times, Boyd, who visibly grew increasingly alarmed as everything progressed.

Two of the teenagers held Boyd between them while the leader and another stayed by Lou. The youngest kid seemed uncomfortable and soon turned to be the lookout. He only occasionally looked behind him at the others.

The minutes that followed consisted of the five boys beating Lou and Boyd mercilessly although most of the violence appeared to focus on Lou. Whatever vendetta the leader had against the blond teenager seemed particularly severe. He seemed intent on making him suffer, and when it became obvious that Lou was more disturbed by the violence that was being inflicted on Boyd, the leader used it to his advantage.

Boyd and Lou called out to each other at times, desperation to get to each other obvious in their faces. The leader only seemed to become more disgusted by the spectacle and continued mock them. Sin couldn't understand most of it but he clearly read the word 'faggot' on the leader's lips.

At some point, a boot slammed into Lou's mouth and Sin had no doubts that teeth were knocked out or broken. The violence only advanced from there and after watching Boyd struggle once again to get to his friend, the leader's expression soured. He shouted an order and Boyd was yanked upright between two of the other teens. At first Sin thought the leader would advance on Boyd but instead, he turned to Lou.

Boyd's eyes widened in horror and he began struggling anew as he seemed to beg the leader to let them go. The leader ignored him and went over to Lou who was still struggling in vain. It wasn't until they were at a particular angle that Sin saw the knife glinting in the leader's hand. That must have been what frightened Boyd so much.

Without any hesitation, the leader slammed the knife into Lou's side. Lou's shirt quickly stained with blood, and he appeared to shout in pain. Boyd seemed to freeze in shock, tears tracking down his face. Sin could read the words 'no' and 'Lou' and 'help us' on his lips.

The lookout was turned toward the camera, and the highly uncomfortable way he looked at Lou and Boyd was clearly seen. The other gang members just seemed amused.

Boyd was struggling vehemently now, throwing himself forward like a dog gone insane and surging at the end of his leash. He was screaming at the leader, who didn't even flinch. The leader's mouth spread in a twisted smile as he reared the knife back

again and slammed it deep within Lou's stomach. Lou's mouth dropped open and his eyes rolled.

Boyd was able to twist and jerk until he got away. Sin thought it seemed as though the two holding him were playing with him and let go of him on purpose to make him think for a moment he had a chance to react. He ran at the leader but they easily caught him by the shirt and jerked him back so abruptly he looked like he was half choked by the movement.

The two gang members fell on him with casual violence; hitting him and throwing him back and forth between them as they traded blows on him. He fell to the ground and they kept kicking and punching him until he collapsed. One of the two teenagers holding him sneered and flipped Boyd onto his stomach. He sat down on Boyd's back, making him unable to move. The other one grabbed Boyd's hair, yanking his head back at an angle so that he could see what was happening to his friend.

With Lou's blood staining the ground just in front of his eyes, Boyd seemed incapable of looking away. Lou barely seemed alive by this point and the blood seemed to be flowing steadily from his wounds. Boyd looked devastated and Sin read on his lips that he kept murmuring 'no' and 'I'm sorry.'

The leader stared down at Boyd in disgust. He said something, punctuating his words with another attack. He plunged the knife into Lou's stomach again, then yanked it out and repeated the action. Blood flew everywhere, spraying in arcs around Lou, splattering the leader.

Lou collapsed completely on the ground, convulsions violently taking over his body. He could not seem to control any of his actions, but he did not look away from Boyd. Lou choked and gagged, his mouth working uselessly as blood poured out. He struggled and extended one arm weakly toward Boyd, trying to reach him.

The leader snapped something and jerked Lou up by the hair. A gold chain with a ring on it fell out of Lou's shirt. Blood had coated parts of it, but the leader casually tore it from Lou's neck and stuffed it in his pocket. He turned and nodded at the two holding

Boyd, who stabilized his head so he could do nothing but watch in wide-eyed hysteria as the leader finished what he started. Yanking the knife clear across Lou's throat, the leader destroyed Lou's throat so terribly it was almost unrecognizable as a human neck. Without losing the momentum, he followed it up by slamming the knife savagely into Lou's heart. The weapon disappeared into Lou's chest nearly to the hilt.

Boyd was staring at Lou's eyes when they went blank in death. At first he stared in disbelief at the body that had fallen in front of his eyes. But then his breath visibly quickened and what had just happened seemed to hit him at once.

He went wild, struggling against the ground. He was screaming, his mouth open wide. Tears coursed relentlessly down his cheeks. Sin read Lou's name on his lips, over and over like a helpless prayer. He couldn't seem to look away from his dead lover.

Although he had to have been screaming loud enough for his voice to echo, not a single soul came to investigate. The leader stared at Boyd silently for a long moment and let Lou's face drop into the dirty water of the street gutter. The puddle steadily curled and twisted with the blood spreading into it. Dirty brown became clotted crimson. The blood spread further, a pool growing around Lou that crept closer and closer to Boyd's face. The leader smirked and stepped over the corpse, boots splashing in the deep red puddle. He sauntered over to Boyd and stared down at him coldly. He ordered something to the other two, who unceremoniously yanked Boyd up. He laughed as Boyd continued to thrash and scream. He reached up and pulled Boyd's head back with a hand in his hair. At that angle, Sin could clearly read the words on the leader's lips. "I want you to remember this."

The knife was still wet with Lou's blood when it plunged into Boyd's lower right stomach. The leader yanked it out, dropping Boyd's hair so he could get better leverage. With more force than was necessary he slammed the knife into the same spot. Boyd appeared to cry out, going slack in their hands. Even so, the leader yanked it out again, rearing back for a third strike. The blade was just arcing toward Boyd's stomach when the lookout suddenly turned and yelled something. There were hurried, confused motions and the leader reluctantly stopped his assault. The leader looked annoyed at

first but then they must have all heard a noise because the gang members all looked over at the same area. The leader flipped his bloody knife out of view and immediately ran away, seeming to completely forget Boyd and Lou's existences. The others were close behind.

Alone, Boyd dropped to the ground. By now it appeared that the fight had gone out of him. His face was blank with shock. He held a hand to his stomach almost absently as his eyes once again sought out Lou's ravaged body. Boyd dropped his hand and crawled toward him, leaving a bloody print smeared across the pavement every time he set his hand down.

He started to reach out to touch Lou but his fingers came away completely coated with blood and gore, and he held them up. Sin got a glimpse of a shocked, deadened expression and distant eyes before Boyd suddenly turned from the camera's view. He began heaving violently in the gutter behind the bloody scene.

Within seconds a young woman with dark brown hair appeared on screen. She seemed a little distracted, looking down at something in her hands, but when she looked up she saw the two immediately. Stumbling back, her mouth opened wide. She ran over, screaming with as much terror in her face as if she were the one hurt. She appeared to speak to Boyd before pulling out her cell phone.

Although the woman appeared hysterical, Boyd just stared at Lou's body. He didn't move any longer and any traces of emotion had drained away from him. His face was slack, eyes blank, as the woman called out to him frantically. Boyd didn't respond--he didn't react, and didn't even attempt to pay attention to his own wounds. He let the blood soak his shirt and pants; his stare centered on Lou's face, bloody and twisted to the side. Staring at Boyd with sightless eyes.

Within the next few minutes, the scene exploded around him with commotion. Police and EMT workers arrived, but even then Boyd didn't react. They moved him around but he was limp as a corpse, although his eyes never left Lou's body. The video ended soon after, with Boyd being loaded onto an ambulance and sped away. Lou's

corpse was left behind to the police and crime scene technicians, in a pool of his own blood.

Sin sat and stared for a long moment before he replayed the video again, and watched with an almost clinical detachment. He observed from under heavy lidded narrowed eyes and picked Lou's fighting technique apart with almost cruel disgust at the boy's inability to defend himself and his lover. The sloppy way the gang leader gutted him was not much better and Sin absently went through several methods of killing that would have been quicker and more efficient.

He'd been a professional assassin by the time he was their age; as far as he was concerned there was no excuse for the lack of skill.

He replayed it again and watched the desperate way Lou fought to defend his friend, and watched the knife disappear into Boyd's body.

The anger that Sin felt at the sight was unexpected. Why should he care, he asked himself dully, looking away and focusing on the window and the dark sky beyond. Boyd had survived the attack. If Lou had lived, it was more than likely that Boyd would have never become an apathetic recluse who'd valued his life so little that he'd agreed to join the Agency. He would have never met Sin.

Even so, Sin's teeth ground together and his fingers tightened around the mouse. He knew why it bothered him, and it was because of the ridiculous, growing infatuation he had with the younger agent. It was the same reason why it pissed him off when anyone on the compound looked at Boyd the wrong way or made one of their stupid comments about him.

It had nothing to do with whether Boyd was alive now. It just bothered him that someone had attacked him in general.

Shaking his head and wondering where he'd gone wrong to be in this partnership, Sin looked back at the screen. He tried to ignore the desire he had to replay the first part of the video. It shouldn't have taken him so aback to see Boyd

kissing Lou, to see their bodies grinding together in a mimicry of sex. But it had surprised him, and his body had reacted in an unexpected way. The coil of arousal didn't make another appearance when Sin inevitably re-watched it, but that was only because he now knew what would happen next.

But his mind betrayed him and supplied mental images of himself crushing Boyd against the wall to his apartment. Instead of the memory of what really happened next, he closed his eyes briefly and saw himself ravaging Boyd's mouth and sliding his hands down the younger man's body the way Lou had.

Green eyes snapped open and Sin shook himself. He was being a fucking idiot.

He focused instead on finding out what had become of the attackers but he met with the same irritating conclusion that he'd expected. Lack of evidence, the eventual police file had said, no suspects, unsolved. He reviewed the files again more carefully and after watching the latter part of the video a second time, he focused more on the lookout and read his lips more than once. It would seem that the leader's name was Jared.

And Jared, it seemed, had gotten away with it.

Sin began opening programs and clicking things automatically, face perfectly blank although his eyes burned. He was in mission mode, doing things without thinking; his movements quick and concise. He printed out five pages and erased all traces of his history on the computer. He left the lab with an expression that was a lot deadlier than it had been when he'd gone in.

He took the stairs up to Ryan's apartment again and his fist pounded against the door loudly, enough for the sound to echo through the hall.

Ryan opened the door slowly and stared up at Sin. He seemed to note right away that something was wrong. He took an automatic step back as if wanting to put space between himself and the waves of anger that were radiating off Sin.

"Did something happen?" he asked hesitantly.

Sin stared down at him blankly and pushed his way into the apartment. "Look these men up for me," he said flatly.

"What?" Ryan squinted at him with a bewildered look on his face before taking the printed images that Sin held in one white-knuckled hand. "Who are these guys? Is this all you have?"

Sin stared at him stonily. "Just do it," he said softly.

Ryan nodded hastily and shoved the mass of papers and magazines off his desk before taking his seat at the computer. He laid each photograph out in the newly cleared space and chewed his lip. "Are these surveillance stills?" He glanced up at Sin and pushed his glasses up his nose, professional attitude taking over. "I need more to work with than this," he said almost apologetically.

"They are near First Bank. I think that one's name is Jared." Sin pointed at the picture. "He's the one I want."

Ryan froze for a moment and then nodded. "Uh, okay jussec." He turned on a lamp with an extremely bright bulb.

"I know for a fact that after the war there were only three First Banks that re-opened in the city so..." He trailed off and turned to his computer, fingers flying over the keyboard. "Okay, so these pictures were taken in front of the First Bank on Dauphin Street in Vickland," he murmured more to himself than Sin. "Used to be a nice area, wealthy folks, but it was prime spot for gang activity and looting after the bombings because it was really close to one of the blast sites." Sin crossed his arms over his chest and said nothing.

"And it looks like they're in the same gang... with a green bandana," Ryan mumbled to himself. He focused entirely on the computer screen and his fingers clattered at the keys as he intently studied everything he saw. His mouth pursed in a thin line and he swore several times to himself.

Sin stood completely still, not moving from his position even as time ticked by. He didn't know why it made him so angry-- didn't know why he even cared in any way. It didn't affect anything happening at the present time. It certainly didn't affect him. But even so...

Even so, it didn't stop him from wanting to know if Jared was out and about, enjoying his life.

It was another few moments by the time Ryan sat up straight in his chair and let out an exclamation. "The Outlaws!" he said excitedly. "They're in the news so much you'd think I would have remembered what color they wore," he complained even as he poured over the information he'd apparently found.

Sin's eyes finally dragged away from the photo and trained on Ryan with cold patience. "Yes?"

"Wait-" Ryan said, swept up in his research. "Okay, Outlaws formed before the wars... major beef with the South Side Boys, got worse over the years-" He mumbled as he read out loud and skimmed the information.

"Jared Strickland suspected in multiple murders and rapes around Vickland... but never pinned with any of them. He's a real shitbag. Has a terrible record dating back to 2010 when he was only fifteen. Seems to get off on slashing civilians and has a bad history of rape. It doesn't make sense that he's never been inside a jail for longer than a few months at a time. He has to be protected by someone in the police department or higher. There's even speculation about it in the Journalist Guild although it doesn't seem like they ever found concrete proof."

Ryan looked up at Sin and motioned for him to come to his side of the desk. Sin eyed him for a moment before crossing the space that separated them. He stood behind Ryan and leaned over his shoulder, looking at the computer screen impassively.

"Is uh, this your guy?"

"Yes. That's my guy." Somewhere in the back of his mind he noted absently that it'd been the same corrupt police department that had tried to pin the Vickland murders on him several years ago.

Ryan nodded and glanced back down at the screen. "A lot of his cronies are in jail or dead already but somehow this guy has survived. His crimes have piled up a lot over the last few years but nothing has happened really. Sometimes there has even been evidence that was either ignored or miraculously went missing. He definitely has to be related to someone or else he has some kind of dirt on a big shot in the city." The comment deepened Sin's frown and he brushed a hand across his face. He fought the urge to ask which crimes exactly had piled up over the past decade. Had it been the serial rapes in Vickland and Crandall Park that they'd tried to pin on Sin? The murders that had seemed mostly gang related although they'd tried to imply that he was behind it after going on some kind of rampage?

He didn't know if any of this was true but at the moment it seemed possible. The man had obviously been an active psychopath for the last nine or ten years so the timing was correct. How ironic that if it turned out to be true the police would have stuck him with Jared's crimes, possibly even including Lou's murder. But it was all speculation.

Getting back to the matter at hand, Sin looked at the laptop again. "There's a surveillance tape of one of his crimes in the Agency database. How could the police not use it against him?"

Ryan shook his head, seeming just as dismayed by the obvious obstruction. "My guess is that the Agency was keeping an eye on Jared since he was obviously a high profile criminal."

"Maybe they wanted to recruit him," Sin said flatly.

The R&D agent gave a disgusted nod. "I wouldn't be surprised. I know they've hired lots of criminals and killers before. I guess sociopaths fit their assassin profile... In

the end they don't actually keep people like Strickland though. It seems like he gets too much of a thrill out of doing this stuff."

Sin didn't really give a shit about Strickland's psych profile. "The tape?"

"Oh, right. Well, I'm thinking after the Agency copied it, the original somehow disappeared like all of the other stuff that tended to go miraculously missing with this guy." Ryan scanned whatever he was reading, frowning. "Oh wow, apparently he killed some rich politician's son a few years ago too."

Sin tensed at the words. So far he hadn't explicitly told Ryan that he was looking into the death of Boyd's friend and he didn't plan to. If Ryan saw it himself, it would be out of his hands. Fortunately, whatever Ryan was reading didn't appear to mention Boyd's name.

"That was pretty high profile for awhile so there's some stuff on it here. Apparently he murdered this kid in broad daylight and then went around trying to pawn some jewelry taken from the scene. Several different pawn brokers came forward stating that Strickland was trying to sell a pendant with the Krauszer family crest on it, and even people stating that they saw Strickland wearing it but nothing was done."

The venom that had started swirling in Sin's system began to burn. The arrogance of this person was astounding. He must think himself untouchable. Safe beyond a measure of doubt.

"Where is he now?"

Ryan scanned the page with an abnormal speed but somehow took in every piece of information. "According to what we have in the database about him, he's still a lieutenant in the Outlaws but really heavy into drugs. He's in a methadone program but still does heroin at the same time. And... oh, he currently resides at 289 Hammond Place in the Industrial district. Hmm... It seems that he is just squatting there but it's on his residency placard for some re--"

Sin was gone before the sentence could be completed.

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Aside from the Barrows, the Industrial district was one of the worst places to be in the city after a certain time. Despite the curfew that the police had put on the area, it could still be a haven of crime. Robberies were a frequent occurrence as were random acts of violence. The area was controlled by the South Side Boys ironically enough so Sin had no idea why Strickland was even living there. Perhaps it was close enough to the Theater District that he felt comfortable.

289 Hammond Place was one of the abandoned tenement buildings that hovered in one grid of the district. It was dilapidated and against building code, but no one was supposed to live there so nobody cared. Jared Strickland lived on the top floor. It appeared to be half hideout, half drug den; paraphernalia was scattered everywhere in the loft-like space he occupied.

The years hadn't been kind to Strickland. Years of fighting, drugs and alcohol had aged him. He was only in his mid-twenties but he looked closer to forty-five. His eyes were as hard as they had been in the video and his face just as cruel. He was one of those rare people whose inner qualities seemed to be displayed across his outward appearance like a banner. But despite this toughness, Strickland was obviously not doing well. He looked emaciated and weak. The room stank of sickness.

Strickland sat on the filthy mattress that sagged on the floor and peered out the window with anxious eyes. His hands were shaking slightly and he was covered in a sheen of sweat. He looked pale and unclean; his eyes looked sunken in and had a yellowish tinge.

He didn't seem to sense that someone else had entered the room until the shadows shifted in the corner. His eyes snapped to the area and narrowed, mouth twisting in a hateful sneer.

"It's about time," he growled. "I feel like fucking shit waiting for you. I can't even get up."

His only answer was silence but silence that was punctuated with the undeniable fact that there was someone else in the room. Strickland shifted on the bed and shakily pulled himself to a stand.

"Archie, what the hell are you doing?"

Sin's dark figure detached itself from the rest of the shadows and Jared recoiled instantly. He pushed himself back against the wall, tremors increasing as he bent to grope the dirty sheets for a weapon. His skinny body moved erratically, fingers barely able to perform the search.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

Sin didn't respond and walked towards him calmly. The moonlight illuminated his face as Strickland looked at him with a growing sense of unease. His arrogance didn't seem to be with him at the moment. Neither did the prowess he'd showed with his blade on the video. Now he just looked helpless. He was starting to look frightened as well.

"I'm warning you man, you're fucking with the wrong dude," Strickland said lowly. His breath was coming in fast, uneven spurts.

Sin didn't stop walking until he was standing directly in front of him. Strickland pressed his back against the wall, looking as though he wanted nothing more than to cling to his arrogance. If he'd been face to face with anyone else he would have likely started dropping Outlaw names, claiming that Fender Aulds himself would avenge him if anything happened.

But Sin wasn't anyone else. His face was devoid of emotion, his green eyes burning with hatred. At the moment it didn't process that this would be cold blooded murder. It didn't process that this man was helpless. Defenseless. At the moment he just saw an arrogant killer who was still wearing the Krauszer pendant on his thin neck.

"Dude--what do you want?" Strickland demanded desperately, scuttling away from Sin. "Money? Drugs? Fuck man, just tell me what you want!"

Sin's full mouth twisted up into a smile. "I want you to remember this."

Jared's blood-curdling screams echoed through the Industrial district for hours. No one came to his aid.

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When Boyd entered his house, it was dark and silent. He absently flipped on a light as he dropped his bag on the couch in the living room. The meeting with Andrews had ended up running long and he was tired. Part of him wanted to go straight to sleep but he decided he needed some wind down time to relax. He headed toward the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

He turned the light on as he walked into the kitchen. The unexpected sight of someone sitting in there made his heart jump with adrenaline and alarm. It took a second to realize that it was Sin, sitting at his kitchen table, his eyes down and face void of expression. Boyd was completely taken off guard by the presence of his partner, who he'd never told where he lived.

"Sin," Boyd said in surprise. "What-- How did you get in here?"

Sin's vivid green eyes rose and he stared at Boyd for a long moment before he shifted in the chair. It was then that his shirt became more visible, as well as the blood stains that were splattered on it. Closer inspection showed that there were remnants of blood also visible on his hands, with splatters on his face and neck. It was barely visible as if he'd tried to quickly scrub himself clean but hadn't been able to do a thorough job.

"I picked the lock."

"What? Why--?" The scene almost felt surreal but it was quickly being eclipsed by confusion and growing concern. Boyd moved toward his partner. "Did something happen? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Sin replied quickly, standing and moving further away from Boyd. He raked both hands through his hair, the movements slightly unsteady. "Fine."

Boyd stopped, hands still partially raised from when he'd been about to reach out. Sin's reaction only confused him further. The strangeness of the situation was beginning to make him nervous.

"Sin, what's going on?" he asked a little warily. He stayed where he was, although now he was getting even more worried about his partner and the question of whose blood that was.

Sin's gaze flicked away again and he didn't reply. His face was drawn in blankness except for eyes that burned like green fire. It was an expression that was eerily similar to the one he took on when a mission was occurring. A mission where he shut everything else out and became the killing machine he was said to be.

Boyd hesitated. Was this the precursor to one of Sin's episodes? No one had ever fully determined what exactly caused them.

Despite seeming as though he may have washed some off, there was enough blood left on Sin to make it seem very likely that he'd killed someone. Who? As far as Boyd knew, Sin hadn't been on a mission although one could have come up. But if he hadn't been, had something happened? Had he snapped? Had he killed a civilian? Was this the beginning of an episode and, if so, was it possible he would attack Boyd?

If that happened, would Boyd be able to stop it this time?

"Sin..."

He watched his partner, feeling poised on a moment of uncertainty. He wanted to move closer to him to see if he was injured; see if he needed help. At the same time, his instincts were yelling at him to move to the far side of the room and stay near an exit in case he needed to run.

He didn't know what to do in a situation like this, and it was starting to scare him.

"Sin, what do you want from me?" Boyd asked carefully.

At that Sin looked up and moved forward, reaching out suddenly. It was so abrupt of a movement, and so unexpected, that Boyd took an automatic step back. Alarm flashed across his face before he could stop it and he tensed as he subconsciously fell into a defensive stance.

There was another pause, but this time Sin seemed to freeze. There was a brief flash of something in his expression as stared at Boyd for a long moment, but then his eyes dropped as his mouth turned down.

"I found something... of yours."

"What..?" Boyd felt like he was constantly losing his balance in this conversation.

There was another brief stretch of strained silence before Sin put something on the table and slid it across towards Boyd.

Boyd looked down, his eyebrows drawing together at first. A necklace? He didn't even have any necklaces so how could it be his? He started to reach for it when he registered that there was a ring on it. Something about it made dread pool in the pit of his stomach and it was only a second later when he recognized it.

Lou's ring.

Lou's necklace.

The necklace he was wearing when he--

Boyd's hand snapped away and he stumbled back automatically. His face drained of blood, a look of horror twisting his features. The dread in his stomach spread like wildfire with nausea as thick as smoke--

That day slammed back into his mind with sharp, frightening clarity. The memories he'd been trying to push away and suppress and ignore and pretend it hadn't happened, it had all been a nightmare, it had all been--

Lou's face, twisted in agony and impotence-- that helpless, terrible certainty that moved between them when they realized it had all gone so horribly out of control and there was no stopping it-- there was no changing the way that fight was going and Lou was going to die--

Bile was at the back of his throat and Boyd's arms jerked against his stomach. The memory of that knife, hot with Lou's blood, plunging into him-- and it hurt, it hurt so much as they held him still and smirked and laughed. When the knife drove into him he couldn't help thinking, this is what Lou felt, this is what Lou felt when he--

He was going to throw up. He couldn't be here. He couldn't...

Boyd turned around and walked out of the kitchen, feeling ten steps removed from the moment and unable to deal with any of it. He was barely able to hold everything together so it wouldn't make him break down again. Lou's violent death and the anguish in his eyes right up until the end-- those blue eyes that used to follow his movements and those lips that smiled at his presence and brushed his warmly when they were close--

No. No, no, no, he didn't want to remember, he didn't want to hurt like that again...

Nowhere felt safe in his house but he fled anyway, going into his parents' old room because it didn't have memories of Lou there. Memories and emotions and pain were an avalanche growing inside, ready to topple and suffocate him, and he had to be alone before it happened. He couldn't show that weakness; he couldn't let anyone hurt him with it again.

His body was taut as a rubber band ready to snap and he was gritting his teeth, coiled in on himself in a dark corner and holding tightly to his knees. It was rising in him; the agony and the horrific memories and he could practically feel again the ghost of that hot blood splattering his face and Lou-- his best friend, his lover, his protector, his brother, his everyone-- Lou's eyes going from wide and shocked (as if he was asking

himself, *Can it really end like this?*) and pained (*Don't hurt Boyd, don't put your hands on him!*) to glassy and dead--

Pain and a torrent of tears and too much, far too much built in him-- memories of Dauphin Street and afterward and everything that he'd tried so hard for so long to push away so he could function. Lou's death had destroyed him and it had taken everything to make it through that and the aftermath. And all along it had only been reinforced-- he shouldn't show weakness so they wouldn't hurt him again, so no one would hurt him again.

But all those years of trying to deny and repress were ripped out and flayed by the sight of one innocuous necklace. His fingers dug into his hair and he pressed his face against his knees and he tried so hard not to cry, not to vomit, but he didn't make it long.

He didn't even hear when Sin had left.

## Chapter 16

The week following his birthday was punctuated with nightmares like Boyd hadn't had in years, and overwhelming moments of feeling at a complete loss. He avoided the kitchen for most of the next day, not wanting to confront the memories that seemed too stark and cutting. It made it feel like Lou's murder had happened yesterday instead of years before, and like all the months he'd spent layering avoidance upon apathy upon denial were now taken away.

When he closed his eyes he had the nightmares again. That day, over and over in his mind. Remembering the feel of the wall hard against his back, his hair catching on the bricks and Lou's chuckle. The guilty thrill of his lover, his best friend, pressing him to the side of an alley and that happy feeling that had suffused him when they'd touched foreheads and smiled at each other.

The erroneous belief that everything would be okay. That they had each other, no matter what.

And after that, the horror that for so long he'd wanted to believe had just been a dream, a terrible dream that he could wake from. But it was all there, locked in his memory and seeping poison. The laughter around him; the hands digging into his arms and fists slamming into him until he fell.

Their taunts and inhumanity. Blood spilling out of Lou's mouth and mocking words sliding around them.

*"I think you broke some of this fucker's teeth."*

*"It'll make it easier for him to give head."*

And Jared's face, burned into his mind like a brand. That smirk; that arrogance. The way he played with the knife. The way he played with them.

*"This your little woman? I always knew you were a fucking faggot, Lou."*

Those hated fingers digging in his hair; the feeling of the world as a black hole collapsing in on itself and everything falling apart. That face, close to him and smirking. And, more than anything, the words that had haunted his dreams and mocked every scream, every hysterical sob in the long weeks that had followed.

*"I want you to remember this."*

During the waking hours he tried not to remember Lou's death because it hurt so much but at night it was all he saw, over and over. Arcing blood and the wet, dead weight sound of a body falling to the ground. The feel of hot blood licking his cheeks; getting smeared by his tears.

His remembered his throat going raw from screaming and, feeling worse and worse each time he remembered it, the impotence and terror of being held down throughout it all. Unable to do anything. Unable to stop the moment that destroyed everything for him. Unable to protect his lover only a few feet away. Unable to even protect himself. And, compounding it, other memories crowding in. Dark shadows and painful wrists and the taste of blood in his throat. The fear only growing and growing until it was enough to eclipse all else.

It took several days to be able to function on any level. He'd spent years trying to protect himself from the very thing that had so unexpectedly been brought back to him. At first it was all he could do to make it through the night. He spent more hours awake than not and finally breached the kitchen for tea.

Later, he was able to look at the situation askance just enough to realize that the presence of the ring and the blood must mean Sin had found Jared. He'd tracked down the arrogant son of a bitch who had destroyed Boyd's life and murdered Lou for fun, and he'd brought the ring back as proof.

But even when he'd realized that, it was still too much to comprehend. Too much to take in. He'd spent so long trying to protect himself from these very memories that it was a struggle to get over them at all. Let alone formulate any sort of coherent response.

During that period Boyd and Sin saw each other at a meeting. Boyd didn't remember much of the meeting itself. He'd felt Sin's green eyes burning into him from time to time but Boyd hadn't been able to speak to him. He didn't know what to say when he barely had words for himself. He didn't know what to do when he was still reeling from it all.

So he ended up partially avoiding Sin because he was almost afraid to be alone with him. Afraid that there hadn't been enough time for him to rediscover his balance. Afraid that Sin would ask him questions he couldn't answer and afraid that being alone with him would make him start thinking too much about the whole situation. Like how had Jared died? Had he suffered? Had that piece of shit remembered what he'd done to Lou and had he been keeping that ring as some sort of laughing memento? How could Jared have lived so long when Lou, Lou who'd been everything to Boyd, had been killed so violently and so soon?

It was over a week and a half since his birthday, and a few days since the first meeting, when Boyd was called into a briefing. He'd managed to force himself to come to terms on some level with the situation but he was still at a loss as to how to respond to Sin.

Nothing seemed right and part of him wasn't sure he wanted to broach the subject anyway. Part of him wanted to simply accept the knowledge (and the relief he hadn't realized he'd been waiting for) of knowing that Jared was dead, and not examine it any further. That part of him wanted the ability to walk away from all the terrible feelings that had been dredged up and try, once again, to start anew. Yet another part of him knew he was only fooling himself to think he could do that, and pointed out that obviously the first time he'd done it he'd only buried the feelings or else they wouldn't have hurt him so much when they were sliced back open.

Regardless of that, the one thing he knew was that it was painful enough to think about and felt impossible to talk about. The very concept was overwhelming.

At the meeting, Boyd sat down next to Ryan while Jeffrey focused on his panel. Owen came in later than Boyd and, with a sleepy, disgruntled look at Boyd for stealing his usual spot, he moved to the other side of the table.

Sin and Carhart were already there. Boyd noticed in glancing past Sin that he was expressionless, reminiscent of the way he'd been before they'd started talking. Although Boyd noted that, he didn't know what to do about it. Since the briefing was about to start, he felt relief in knowing that he didn't have to try to figure it out.

"I won't bother to ask how everyone is doing," Carhart said dryly, taking in Boyd's somber face and Sin's non-expression. "I'm sure everyone's tired of doing nothing for so long, but the good news is that we finally arranged a meeting with Thierry."

When neither of his field agents commented, Carhart scowled and looked between them more closely. "Is there something I need to know?"

Boyd kept his eyes on Carhart while he silently shook his head. Owen looked between Sin and Boyd with sleepy interest, and Jeffrey watched them strangely. "It's probably the weather," Ryan said lamely after an awkward moment of silence.

Carhart stared at Ryan briefly before shaking his head. "Anyway. The meeting will be in France and is expected to last two days. That is all he claimed he can spare, and that's your window for getting the Intel from him. Arrangements have already been made and you will be staying at Thierry's hotel in Paris. You leave tonight."

"He has a hotel?" Ryan asked. "I didn't know he was that loaded."

"Yes. But I don't really wish to discuss the man's money." Carhart made a face and continued. "I cannot stress enough the importance of this mission. He's willing to give us data on Janus' inner core, with a very high probability that it is legitimate. Before now, their inner core has been almost mythical because it's been completely out of our reach."

His blond eyebrows drew together as he gave Sin and Boyd significant looks. "Thierry is very fickle, as you should know, Sin. His cooperation depends on his mood

so you need to keep him happy. I don't care what you have to do as long as you stay on his good side. He's loyal to no one in particular and will go with whoever best suits his needs and whims at the moment."

"It should be noted," Jeffrey said mildly, "that the area the hotel is set in is very high class. If you stand out too much," and his gaze settled on Sin, "then you may irritate Thierry. He does not want it known that he associates with questionable people."

Owen nodded, leaning against one hand. "You'll be going penguin-style."

"Sin?" It seemed as though Sin hadn't even heard him so Carhart leaned forward and slammed his hand against the table. "Wake up."

Green eyes lifted and stared at Carhart moodily. "Yes?"

"You need to do something about that hair. Report to Cynthia in Unit 16 immediately after this meeting."

Sin looked at him with barely concealed contempt. "Whatever."

"It sucks for you guys, though," Owen said to Sin and Boyd, completely idly as if he had not heard Carhart and Sin's exchange. "He gave you no time. Gave me no time, either... I had to get you plane tickets for tonight already, and I bet you a week's vacation that tomorrow he'll be expecting you to be bright-eyed and chipper, and..." Owen trailed off in confusion for a second. He turned to look at Ryan almost curiously, as if asking him silently what he had been talking about. "And all awake. And chipper."

"He will," Carhart agreed. "He demanded that the meeting be tomorrow and no later or the whole deal was off. I don't particularly enjoy playing his games but unfortunately the current state of affairs leave me very little choice. He is very particular about what he wa--"

"What I don't understand," Sin interrupted coldly and flatly, "is why my presence is needed at all. My job is to kill. There will be no killing. I serve no purpose."

"Oh, I'm sure you can find the odd innocent bystander to rip into," Jeffrey drawled.

Sin stared at him and said nothing.

Carhart was silent a moment as he sized up the senior agent. His blue eyes were narrowed and his expression was becoming increasingly stormy. "You're going because it's your job. You and Boyd are a team. Your job is to back him up when things get out of hand. This isn't a Warren Andrews mission where we know exactly how to handle him. Thierry is a wildcard, we can't trust him. For all we know this could very well be a trap."

Sin's eyes flicked to Boyd but his eyes almost immediately moved away. "He can handle it," he said flatly. "Just put me back in my fucking box and stop making me go on these bullshit assignments."

Carhart's mouth tightened into a line and he looked at the others. "Jeff, give Boyd the overview. Sin. See me outside. Now." He stood up abruptly, gave Sin another frozen look and strode outside.

Sin's mouth twisted into a humorless smile and he followed Carhart. Boyd watched the two leave, wondering briefly what was being said out there. He kept his expression blank and unreadable.

"What the hell is wrong with you two?" Jeffrey asked Boyd, actually sounding curious. He slid two panels across the table.

"Nothing," Boyd said tonelessly. He grabbed one of the panels and turned it on, flicking through the documents on the touchscreen quickly. There was the mission outline, background information on Thierry, the information to download their tickets and more.

Shrugging in complete unconcern, Jeffrey didn't challenge the comment when Boyd said nothing more. "If you lose the password, you will be out of luck. The information is heavily encrypted."

"Ah," Boyd said, for lack of anything better to say.

Jeffrey just shook his head and looked back at his panel. "I'm sure you can read and you have an eight hour flight so I don't really see the need to tell you detail by detail right now."

Boyd nodded. "I understand."

Jeffrey gave up with a mildly irritated sigh.

Ryan frowned slightly and leaned closer to Boyd, speaking low enough to be unheard by Owen and Jeffrey. "What happened? You were both doing so well."

Boyd just shook his head, not wanting to go into the details. He did his best to not seem completely unapproachable in the movement but he didn't know how successful he was.

Although he'd spent some time around Ryan on and off over the last few months, and although he did like him and they'd spoken a bit about some personal information, Boyd hadn't told anyone about Lou. He couldn't even come up with adequate words for Sin, let alone Ryan.

Ryan frowned and his eyes looked almost skeptical behind his glasses. "I know it's none of my business but ever since that night Sin came to my apartment--"

The door slammed open with a crack, cutting Ryan off. Carhart reappeared, a black look on his normally affable face. "Boyd, get in my office."

Boyd looked over immediately and felt his stomach drop. Any questions that had started to form in his mind as to why in the world Sin had been at Ryan's apartment, fled when he saw Carhart's face. His expression automatically turned blank and he pushed himself to his feet. "Yes, sir."

Carhart got ahead of him while he delayed long enough to grab his belongings. When he reached the office, Carhart was already there. He stood facing his window,

hands clasped behind his back. His spine was ramrod straight and everything about his posture screamed anger and tension. He seemed upset from whatever had been said in his exchange with Sin but Sin was nowhere in sight.

Boyd shut the door behind him quietly, but did not move much further into the room. Every time Boyd could remember being in Carhart's presence before he had seemed in a relatively good mood and if he was angry it was never at Boyd. But now that didn't seem to be the case. As he stood there, he didn't dare look at the walls, didn't dare do anything but watch Carhart's back with the utmost respect. Carhart stood there for several moments before saying anything. The silence practically hummed with tension that thickened the air, radiating off the obviously upset General.

"I don't suppose anyone ever told you how I met Sin's father?"

The question seemed like a non sequitur but Boyd decided not to question anything. "No, sir."

Carhart nodded and continued to stare out the window. "After the war began, the military was a mess. Our Commander in Chief was dead, the Vice President was dead, the Secretary of Defense... dead. The Pentagon was in shambles." He was quiet for a moment.

"I began to work for the Agency as a field agent at first, quickly moving up because of my military background. I met Sin's father here." There was the hint of a smile in his voice, although when Carhart turned to Boyd again it wasn't entirely visible on his face.

"He was such a cocky fuck. I disliked him at first, especially because everyone else loved him. I was quiet and he was outgoing, I was a loner and he was so damn charismatic. He baited me and we'd argue. But we worked together for awhile and he saved my life on more than one occasion. It made me feel worthless at first. I was the one with the military background, the apt pupil, and he was some scruffy street guy, self-trained and brash, learned everything he knew from street fighting... but yet he was better than me."

Boyd thought Sin and his father sounded quite opposite, other than the brash part, but he said nothing.

"There was a time when things were especially bad. The government was still picking up the pieces and everyone was an enemy. Emilio was sent on long solo missions, assassination missions, he'd disappear for months on undercover stints. Our main form of communication to him was via e-mail for two years."

Carhart paused and stared at Boyd calmly. "He was to come in for a debriefing after the completion of a long series of assassinations. It was interesting because Emilio had a certain flare in everything he did. He had a dark sense of humor and it was always evident in his work. But for some reason in his last few missions, there was a distinct lack of that personalization in his mission reports." He paused again. "Do you know why, Boyd?"

Boyd watched Carhart with an unreadable expression, not answering at first. Ryan said that Sin's father trained him, and that he came in when he was fourteen, but he didn't know if it was directly related.

"Because Sin helped him?" he ventured.

Carhart smiled. "You could say that."

He walked around his desk and leaned against the front of it. "We expected Emilio for the debriefing but instead we got his son. In walked little Vega with his father's laptop, fourteen years old, skinny as a reed and with his father's same intense green eyes. We still don't have complete Intel on the events that occurred during that time but as far as we gathered, Emilio concealed his son's existence from us for six years as he trained him and took him on assassination missions. It seemed as though he'd been planning to get us to recruit the boy but it didn't happen exactly as he had planned."

Carhart paused for a moment and shook his head. "We're not sure how Emilio died. We never saw a body, never got a straight answer, but it seems that he'd been dead a year before the debriefing and Sin had completed the assignments on his own."

"Why did he come in?" Boyd asked. "Couldn't he have ignored the summons?"

Carhart spread his hands. "I don't know. I don't even know why he completed the missions after Emilio died. A normal child would have... run away, I imagine." He looked away, mouth drawing down in a frown. "Emilio was my friend. But when Sin arrived here, he was half the age of any other agent and ten times as skilled a killer. What Emilio did to get him to that point, I can only wonder about."

Looking down at the panel in his hands, Boyd nodded for lack of anything better to do.

"I always knew it was a bad idea but no one listened to me at that time," Carhart said with a sigh. "I had no real authority. They couldn't pass up so good a killer, especially one they thought they could mold from childhood. They didn't care about his age. Or the fact that there was something... wrong with him." He shook his head. "Sin was always different. It seemed that he knew nothing else but violence; it seemed that he could react in no other way than with violence. He was like a dog that had been trained only to fight. He had no bark. It was all bite."

The general looked into Boyd's eyes again. "The people here didn't help. They knew he was mentally unstable but still they used him and while they used him, they ridiculed him. They labeled him as a freak because he was so young and such an adept killer; they sent him to murder but flinched at him because he did it so well and without any emotion. He got older, colder, more violent. They treated him like a wild animal that could never be tamed, even if they could force him to do what they wanted at times. I'll never understand the depth of his illness or the triggers of his behavior, but as his violence began to spread outside of missions... the Agency began to worry. He was too skilled an assassin to give up but at the same time he was wild and out of control. They began devising ways to control him without having to get rid of him."

Carhart's hands curled into fists and once again, he looked away with narrowed cerulean eyes.

"I'm ashamed to say that I've continued in that vein. I'm ashamed of the box; of the collar. But you have to understand that at this point, after all of the years of his instability growing while untreated, it seemed like it was too late. It seemed as though he was too far gone to ever come back. And although he'd done some heinous things, I knew it was because of his upbringing and I couldn't blame him entirely. I convinced Connors to give him another chance because I can't stand to see him in that box, where his claustrophobia pushes him further into insanity. So I devised a plan. I gave him the collar, I tried to do something to let him have some freedom. I didn't think it would work, I didn't think you would last as his partner, but for awhile it seemed..."

Carhart trailed off for a moment, his expression growing weary.

"For awhile I began to see a side of him that I'd never seen before. But now for some reason it's gone. Now he's back to being cold. He told me that if I didn't put him back in the box, he would make me sorry. That he would force me to do it." Carhart narrowed his eyes.

"I need to know why."

Boyd felt caught by Carhart's stare; by the history he laid out. And by the information. Sin had actually said that? But he feared the box. Why would he ever make that threat to Carhart?

It didn't take a genius to note the difference between the way Sin had been before that night at Boyd's house and the way he acted afterward. In the past, Sin had wavered between shutting down any progress and moving forward with whatever strangely comfortable thing they'd managed to form between them.

But on that night, somewhere between Sin giving him the necklace and Boyd walking out on him, things changed. Sin had somehow found out about Lou; maybe he'd read whatever background information he'd once claimed he could read any time he wanted. And he'd managed to somehow track down Jared, presumably kill him, and return the missing ring.

Boyd didn't know how Sin knew about the ring but he assumed the Agency had found out about it. Given that Lou's parents had been high profile people, and the fact that Vivienne had already been at the Agency, it wasn't surprising if they'd discovered information Boyd wouldn't have thought could have spread beyond that street. He'd never told anyone about the stolen ring so he could only assume the Agency had found out later through something related to Jared. The thought was unnerving.

Boyd didn't know Sin's motivations for why he'd done it, what he'd expected of Boyd in response, or whether he'd understood from Boyd's reaction about how much it all had upset him. But with the tension and distance that had grown between them afterward, it was clear that it was contributing to the way Sin was acting now.

"We--" He stopped. What could he possibly say? "Something happened and it created some distance between us. He may be upset about that."

Carhart's brow creased and his lips pursed as he stared down at Boyd. "And what is this something that occurred?"

"Just a miscommunication," Boyd said dismissively. His stomach clenched at the idea of Carhart pressing it; of him demanding to know what it had been about. "Which isn't unusual in all honesty, given our history."

Carhart was silent for a moment before shaking his head with a sigh. He didn't seem like he wanted to give up that easily, but for some reason he decided to let it go.

"Whatever it is, I should hope it gets sorted it. Especially in light of what is going on now. And now I'm going to get to the real reason I called you in here. What happened to your remote? I know the chip has either malfunctioned or been destroyed."

Boyd was caught off-guard by the question. He had almost completely forgotten about the remote, and he certainly didn't think that anyone would be able to know that anything happened to it. In retrospect, it did make sense that it would be monitored; Sin was only controllable as long as the remote was active.

"Ah," Boyd said after a moment. "It..." He wanted to lie, but he couldn't bring himself to do so to a commanding officer. Especially not after Carhart had seemed so angry, and certainly not after he took the time to explain his viewpoint to Boyd.

"I think it broke."

"It broke," Carhart repeated flatly. There was a stretch of silence. "I didn't mention the remote before because Sin had showed considerable improvement in his behavior. But now that he has gone right back to where he'd been before, I feel it is imperative that you have it."

He paused and seemed to be searching for the right words. "I can see that you are like me, that you don't just consider him a tool. I also understand that you two have become close. At the same time, you have to be on your guard. Considering the state he is in at the moment, I strongly advise you accept a replacement." He walked over to his desk and set a new remote on top of it. "And use your best judgment about its usage."

Boyd stared at the remote for a long moment. Carhart may be right about Sin's instability, but Boyd had managed to stop him before without the collar. He didn't feel that he was about to use it now. Still, whether or not he used it didn't matter. He didn't have a good reason for turning it down to Carhart; all he had to do was not use it. He picked up the remote and put it in his pocket without saying anything.

Carhart nodded shortly, all business again. "Sin is with Cynthia at the moment, getting ready. I suggest you do the same. Your flight is in five hours." He turned towards his desk again but added something else before Boyd could turn to go. "Sin is not the only one you should be worried about on this assignment. Thierry is a good source of information but he has a knack for putting us through hell in order to get it. Regardless of that, we must have it. The information he's hinting at could turn this entire war with Janus, Boyd. It could change everything. And I need you to do whatever it takes to get it."

There was another pause but not one long enough to leave Boyd time for questions or comments. "Good luck."

"Yes, sir," Boyd said, and left the room without another word.

He went back to the conference room only long enough to find out where Cynthia was located, and head over. The receptionist informed him that he would be needing minimal "physical work" and sent him to a room where they ended up giving him a haircut. They didn't cut off much length but they gave it some style, something he'd been utterly lacking for most of his life.

After that he was sent to another room where it turned out that they'd designated suitable clothing for him already. He was told to change into a charcoal-colored suit and a button down shirt, while two more outfits were carefully packed for him in preparation, as well as clothing for Sin. Apparently Unit 16 was yet another pit stop that field agents made before a mission, just like Artillery. However Unit 16 specialized in undercover outfits and disguises, not weaponry.

The wait for Sin was at least forty minutes, but when the other man finally reappeared he'd undergone a considerable transformation. For the first time since they'd met, Sin was clean shaven and the straggly remains of red dye from whatever assignment had called for it were gone. His hair was shorter although it still reached the nape of his neck, but black hair escaped the style they'd tried to give it and hung in his eyes. He was wearing a black suit that was fitted to his lanky body, and a crisp white shirt beneath that had been unbuttoned at the collar.

Even with the awkwardness between them, Boyd found his gaze lingering on his partner's appearance. Sin looked good. Really good. It was strange seeing him so cleaned up; almost like he wasn't the same person. Boyd liked the scruffier look Sin usually sported but there was definitely something to be said about the way his eyes and body seemed to stand out even more when he looked like this.

He felt a slight pang at the thought combined with the expressionless way Sin glanced past him. He found himself wondering what Sin would look like with one of his

more approachable expressions when he was dressed like this. At that thought, he wanted everything between them to be fixed as soon as possible.

But when he thought about fixing it, he thought about talking to Sin, which made him think of that night, which brought to mind the ring, which still brought a clenching dread to his stomach and throat, which made his voice leave him before he could even think of anything to say in the first place. It was a cycle he suspected he'd go through a few more times until he could find a way out of it.

He just needed a few more days. He just needed to give himself a chance to recover and a chance to determine what he could and would say.

Besides, he had to admit that after everything that had happened, and after how upset they each were in their own way, trying to bring up a serious discussion like that right before such an important mission with such a mercurial person was a terrible idea. All it would take was the wrong word or wrong expression and things would be worse off than they already were. And since Sin didn't like Thierry, the mission was probably going to be strained enough on its own.

The mission felt ominous enough on its own, with the warnings about how imperative it was that they do anything necessary to get the information from Thierry and how unpredictable Thierry was. Even so, maybe it was good to have a mission now even though he felt nervous and not at all at the top of his game. Maybe having something else to focus on would help him clear his mind. Maybe on the plane ride home or after the debriefing later he would be able to pull Sin aside and they could talk.

But right now, it didn't work. So, although there were so many things he knew needed to eventually come up between them, he didn't say any of it.

Instead he nodded at Sin and fell in line beside him as they headed toward the door. "You look good," he commented.

Sin shrugged. "I guess."

Boyd didn't have a response to that and they ended up falling silent. Neither of them spoke as they headed for transportation to the airport.

The flight ended up being eight hours and they were almost the only people on it. It was a semi-private jet that Owen ended up booking them on; the only other people there were a couple of very rich looking business men whose suits probably cost more than a typical person could earn in two years. They spoke over wine about nothing in particular, but Boyd found himself idly listening to them as he read through the information on his panel.

He gave the other panel to Sin, but Sin did not so much as look at it. His pale green gaze was focused solely on the window, and for the entire flight the only time he was not looking out was when he closed his eyes and sat silently for long periods of time.

Being stuck on a plane would have given Boyd too much time to brood if he hadn't had the panel with him. He read everything and reread parts a few times simply because it was something to do. He was very aware of Sin sitting next to him and couldn't help watching him from the corner of his eye now and then. When he'd exhausted his attention for the panel, he'd turned to watching the drivel movie they had playing on the screen embedded in the back of the seat in front of him. He managed to fall asleep but it wasn't long before any inane dreams he may have been having turned down the dark path he'd been treading all too often of late, filled with blood and screams and terror. He jerked awake, his heartbeat racing and his skin feeling clammy.

Seeing that the others were asleep or not paying attention made relief flood through him. He got up and walked to the bathroom, bracing his hands on the sink for a moment while he tilted his head forward and closed his eyes. He couldn't think about these things. He couldn't let nightmares keep jerking him awake; it was dragging down his energy little by little. But he also had no control over it and he supposed expecting himself to deal with everything in under two weeks after having repressed it for years was expecting too much.

He ended up splashing his face with some cold water and looked at himself in the mirror. He could see the rings beneath his eyes, which were slightly bloodshot. Aside from that, he hadn't mussed up his hair or clothing too much so far. He was still presentable, which was the most important thing right now. If he could give a good first impression with Thierry, and if he approached this as high level negotiation and was careful with his interaction, maybe they could pull this off with minimal problems. He could do this.

He pat-dried his face with one of the paper towels in there and then threw the crumpled towel in the trash receptacle with a partially suppressed sigh. The idea of going back out there, acting like everything was okay for the sake of the civilians on the plane while he worried about the mission and Sin and his own problems... It wasn't something he looked forward to but there was nothing he could do about it. So he straightened his clothing and expression, and walked out of the bathroom as if nothing had been wrong.

By the time they arrived in France he was tired but not exhausted. The pilot welcomed them to France, and the single flight attendant smiled amiably at them and helped them with their bags. Boyd looked around, feeling a moment of disorientation as he saw that everything around him was in French. Of course he'd known that would be the case, but it was more relieving than had been the case in Barcelona, when he hadn't been able to read the signs fully.

As he looked around, he reflected on the fact that it was because of his mother that he was able to read any of this, and partially due to his mother that he was even here. Without her having taught him French when he was younger, he probably wouldn't be fluent. And without her nominating him to the Agency, he wouldn't have ever had reason or money to fly here to the country where his mother had been born.

Her lessons in French were one of the few fond memories he had of her. When he was young, she'd been still working on perfecting her English. She'd spoken French at home more than English and had insisted that he learn the language. Although she'd been a harsh teacher, impatient with his mistakes and very short on praise, he still

remembered how intently she'd focused on him. Her long, elegant fingers shuffling through cards and pictures, trying to teach him simple words that he could repeat, and later increasing it to harder words that someone his age normally wouldn't have been able to comprehend.

The small light of success that had been in her face when he'd gotten something right. The way she'd told his father that Boyd would be fluent and how much further ahead of the other kids he would be. The time he'd overheard them talking and her saying that he was a quick learner and ahead of his age, and almost sounding proud of the fact.

She hadn't taught him for long or particularly often, since she was often busy. When his father had died, the lessons had all but died with him. By that time, the already tenuous ties with countries like France were broken and now that Boyd thought back on it he suspected that she'd no longer wanted to admit to anything that linked her to a homeland that would not further her profession in America. Still, he'd continued learning French on his own, mostly out of love for the language but partially out of a need to see that approval from her again. A need to see something other than the expressionless or cold stare she'd so often turned his way after that.

Boyd had retained the ability to speak French and continued to enjoy the language. He still read books in French and still wrote in the language. He had an entire notebook filled with terrible French poetry that he'd written mostly after his father died.

Some part of him was probably clinging to the memory of his father, and happier times when his mother spoke to him more. Times when she'd acknowledged part of his ancestry and had told him tiny bits about his family. Still, because of that, he had no troubles falling back into using the language.

The day passed relatively quickly. When they made it to the hotel, they were given key cards to the suite that Thierry had booked for them in anticipation of their arrival. It was one of the few towering buildings that remained with multiple levels, and their suite was toward the top.

Situated on one of the upper floors of the hotel, it would have been more accurate to refer to the suite as a small apartment. Everything about it was decadent and luxurious, with rich décor, smooth carpeting and a wall of windows overlooking one of the few views in the city with very little lingering damage from bombs. The curtains were whisper-soft to the touch when Boyd ran his fingers down them and the large sitting area had multiple couches as well as a television with a video player. There was a cabinet which appeared to be stocked full of expensive liquor and a small fridge next to it was already filled with food. The excessive use of wealth was a little overwhelming.

They ended up divvying up the rooms without speaking about it. They had both hovered for a moment in the main room before Boyd ended up choosing the far bedroom. They didn't have long to wait until it was time for them to go down to the restaurant on the main floor of the hotel.

The dining hall continued the theme of overt wealth that he'd so far seen throughout the hotel. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling with dangling crystals that made the light sparkle. There were several tables, each carefully set with a white tablecloth, expensive-looking plates and shining sets of silverware. Couples in elegant clothing dotted the room, with the occasional group of three or four, and Boyd paused just inside the room to scan the people. He knew what Thierry looked like from a picture he had in the files, but he did not see him. He was just turning to Sin to ask him if he saw Thierry when he noticed someone appear behind them.

It turned out that Thierry was more attractive than the image in his file. He was just under six feet tall and had a sleek muscular build that was showcased in the slim cut pants and fitted suit jacket he wore. His hair was wavy and a chocolate brown color that was offset by steel blue eyes and tan skin.

He approached them with a smile, white teeth flashing at them as his eyes slid from Boyd to Sin and back again.

"Hello, hello," Thierry said with genuine sounding enthusiasm. "We meet again, Monsieur Vega. But who is this young man accompanying you?"

Sin raised an eyebrow skeptically. "You thought it was just me?"

Thierry smiled indulgently. "Yes, even despite our previous misunderstanding. But that is in the past, let us not be rude." He turned his eyes onto Boyd, looking him up and down fully. "I am Thierry Beauvais. I welcome you to my home."

"Thank you, Monsieur Beauvais," Boyd replied with a smile. Wanting to give the best impression possible to sway Thierry to their side, he switched to French for the pleasantries of a greeting and introduction. "*C'est gentil de ta part,*" he continued with a perfect French accent. "*Je m'appelle Boyd Beaulieu. C'est un plaisir de faire votre connaissance.*"

Sin's gaze shifted to Boyd but he didn't speak. Thierry, however, seemed delighted. His eyebrows rose as his face lit up with a grin and he slid his arm through Boyd's, guiding him over to one of the grand tables so that their backs were to Sin.

"*Your French is excellent-- almost native sounding,*" Thierry said in French, looking genuinely impressed. "*How did you learn? School, perhaps?*"

Boyd glanced over his shoulder at Sin before he turned his attention back to Thierry. "*I did take some classes but I learned from my mother.*"

They moved across the room and settled in a table that was tucked into an alcove in the corner. Thierry sat on the same side as Boyd while Sin, who had lagged slightly behind them, sat on the other side. For the most part the senior agent maintained his non-expression but his eyes had drifted away from them again.

"*Is she French, your mother?*" Thierry asked, turning slightly toward Boyd and focusing all of his attention on him.

"*Yes. She grew up here.*"

"*Excellent.*" Thierry's smile turned a touch indulgent. He sat back in the chair and looked over at Sin. He observed the senior agent as Sin looked back coolly. During the interim, a waiter glided over with three glasses and a bottle of champagne.

"I find it quite amazing that your organization continues to find such beautiful specimens of masculinity to recruit," Thierry said, pouring the golden liquid into their glasses after the waiter popped the cork and disappeared. "How very odd that I feel quite plain now, as I sit next to the two of you."

Thierry paused with the neck of the bottle tilted towards Sin's glass. "For you?"

"No."

Looking unsurprised, Thierry set the champagne down in the chilled bucket and looked at Boyd again. "*Do you not find it interesting that the Agency only wants beautiful people?*"

*"Perhaps they only send the attractive ones to you to make you believe we're all beautiful,"* Boyd replied with a slight smile.

"*Or perhaps they know beautiful young men are my weakness,*" Thierry replied with a slow smile, his gaze once again sliding along Boyd's face. It moved away languidly to focus on Sin once again. "Is that not correct, Sin?"

Sin stared at him flatly. "Sorry, my pig Latin isn't up to par."

A smirk found its way onto Thierry's face although his lips then pursed slightly with displeasure. His blue eyes narrowed and he arched an eyebrow, sitting back and crossing one knee over the other. "Did you tell our blond young friend about our previous meeting, Sinful?"

"Why don't you do the honors?" was the flat response.

"Heh." Thierry turned his body to Boyd again, reaching out to sip from his glass. "*I am not sure how long you have known Sinful, but those striking features mask quite a terrible temper. He was quite cruel to me on our last meeting.*"

Boyd glanced briefly at Sin. Since he'd been told that Sin had insulted Thierry, he could only assume what Sin had said. Having been on the receiving end of some of

Sin's more cutting remarks himself, and considering Thierry's reputation as being mercurial, it wasn't a surprise if negotiations between the two had failed miserably.

*"I could see that happening,"* was all Boyd said.

The sound of Sin's fingers tapping against the table made an audible, staccato sound.

Thierry's gaze switched to Sin and his mouth once again turned up into a smile as his gaze flicked over the senior agent. *"I was surprised that they were to send him again, although I have been told that he is considered the best in many capacities. A sad testament of our times when a powerful organization such as yours, must be in such desperation to rely on one such as him, who seems incapable of understanding the importance of society--"* Thierry's gaze switched back to Boyd and he reached out, casually pushing hair out of his eyes. *"--and human interaction."*

Boyd was mildly startled by the touch and turned his attention fully on Thierry. He wasn't entirely sure how to respond. *"Well,"* he said with a small smile after a moment, *"we all have our talents."*

At that, Thierry's eyebrows ticked up. *"And what are some of yours?"*

*"Negotiation, I suppose,"* Boyd replied thoughtfully. *"And strategies. I enjoy planning."*

*"Mmm. Interesting. You make quite the spy, I must say. Just like in the old movies-- the beautiful, talented agent who is known more for intelligence than brawn. I am intrigued as to how you became what you are. You seem quite young for this profession."*

*"I am, to an extent,"* Boyd agreed with nod, keeping his expression amiable. *"I was recruited as a possible partner for Sin. My age is atypical for my position."*

Thierry made another "hmm" sound and switched his gaze back to Sin, taking in the other man's obvious irritation.

*"A pity you were only recognized to be his partner. I can imagine you are capable of much more. Your looks, manner, your ease in talking to people-- I have met many people in my time and it is not simply with kindness do I say that."*

Boyd's eyebrows raised slightly at what seemed to be a genuine compliment, although what this 'much more' was that Thierry was thinking he could be, he didn't know. *"Thank you."*

Boyd glanced at Sin, noting how annoyed he looked. He determined that Thierry seemed approachable enough at this point to try to get to business. He switched back to English, deciding that flattery seemed the best way to work with a person like Thierry.

"And thank you again for inviting us to visit you at your hotel. I've never seen anything like it."

Thierry reclined in his seat and looked around, seemingly modestly. "Thank you. It took a long time to restore it to what it was pre-war. I seek to give people a place they can enjoy, a place they can find luxurious."

"The attention to detail is impeccable," Boyd said in agreement. "Paris is lucky to have a business owner such as yourself who is able to restore the glamor of the city from times that were less uncertain." He looked around the room and let regret stain his features. "It would be a shame if there were another incident and this was all lost once again."

"We will see where the world takes us next," Thierry replied, looking around the room. His eyes rested on some of the other patrons, nodding once at a woman across the room, before he looked at them again. "Would you like to dine, or are drinks fine for now?"

Boyd glanced at Sin before answering Thierry. "Perhaps we could discuss business over drinks."

"Mmm." Thierry had raised the glass to his lips and he took a long sip, looking at Boyd as he did so. After a brief pause he raised his eyebrows and smiled, leaning forward to say quietly, *"I think I would rather hear more about you tonight."*

Although Boyd felt a sense of urgency to get the information since they had a very limited time in France, he didn't want to offend Thierry. So rather than push for business talk, which he wanted to do, he let the topic be deflected. *"What more is there to hear?"* Boyd replied with a faint smile.

Thierry reached out and squeezed Boyd's hand slightly, his smile becoming more intimate. It was almost as though they were the only two people at the table. There was an extended pause as Thierry's deep blue eyes locked with Boyd's brown ones, as Sin stared at them on the other side of the table.

*"I am sure there is much more to you than your partnership with this one."*

For a moment Boyd debated his response. There was no mistaking the mood Thierry had created but on the other hand it was probably in their favor that Thierry was interested in connecting on a more personal level. With negotiation, especially with people known to be capricious, it was important to build rapport. And although it would have been nice to go straight to talking about the information they needed, in truth he hadn't expected they'd be able to get all that done right away the first night.

Better to let Thierry decide the flow of conversation tonight and through it get an idea about his interests and personality. Boyd could use that to determine how best to get Thierry to work with them. Maybe it would end up working out like Warren Andrews had, where over time he had become rather cooperative when Boyd was the one contacting him.

The rest of the evening was spent with Thierry asking Boyd about his past and other personal questions. Boyd answered the questions but didn't go into detail on anything big and didn't mention Lou at all. He stuck to safer topics like the loss of his father at an early age or his interest in things like architecture and art.

Thierry became increasingly suggestive throughout the night until the flirtation was obvious. To maintain the rapport, Boyd stayed mostly neutral but played into the flirting enough to remain approachable and keep the conversation going. He found that he was even starting to enjoy Thierry's company; the man was charming and had a good sense of humor. He seemed genuinely interested in Boyd as well which for the most part wasn't something Boyd was accustomed to, especially in the last several years.

He tried switching to English once or twice but somehow it ended up being deflected back to French each time. And soon Boyd stopped remembering to think about that. It was such a pleasure to be able to converse with someone in French after so long of not using it frequently that he didn't even realize until the end of the night that they'd hardly said a word in English.

## Chapter 17

The next morning felt like it came too early. The bed was sumptuous and comfortable enough that it was difficult to make himself roll out of it when the time came. Thierry had told them to be downstairs waiting for a limousine by 8 am so they could get in a full day of sightseeing. When Boyd walked into their common room he saw it was the way they'd left it the night before; their coats were thrown over chairs and their shoes were knocked over near a wall, but their overnight bags had been brought to their respective rooms. Although it was Boyd's experience that Sin often rose early, he hadn't seemed to have left his room yet. Or he was already downstairs waiting and hadn't woken Boyd.

Either way, Boyd went about getting ready. He took a shower and ended up having to blow dry his hair because letting it air dry would have taken far too long. He got dressed in black slacks and a fitted grey cashmere sweater with a pinstripe dress shirt beneath, showing at the collar and wrists. He left his hair loose and checked the clock as he walked through the common room again. Sin still wasn't anywhere to be seen and they had to be downstairs within the hour.

Boyd walked over, pausing at Sin's bedroom door to strain his ears for any hint of movement. He didn't hear anything but that didn't mean much. After a moment, he knocked.

The door opened to reveal Sin in a pair of the faded jeans he'd gotten from the thrift store a few months ago, and one of his old t-shirts. His hair was uncombed as it usually was and he hadn't bothered to shave.

"We're supposed to be downstairs in half an hour." Boyd gestured over his shoulder. "I'm done in the bathroom."

Sin looked him over, not giving much away in his expression. "I don't see the point in going."

"Why not?"

This earned him a flat look and Sin scoffed. "You can't really be this obtuse."

Boyd watched him for a moment and then sighed, looking away and pushing some hair out of his face. He supposed it didn't matter. Sin had barely said a word the previous night, and Boyd couldn't blame him since most of the conversation had ended up in French. He didn't particularly want to be alone with Thierry all day but Sin was probably right that there wasn't much point in him going. Especially since he had seemed very quiet and rather irritated before. "I can go alone, then. It may work better that way, anyway."

"I'm sure it will."

Boyd noted the sarcasm and shook his head. "I just meant that it was likely Thierry would end up speaking French again and you'd be bored."

Sin raised his eyebrows, his face going from blank to scathing. "Yes, I am sure it will be very likely since you made sure that it would end up that way."

"How did I make sure of that?" Boyd replied, eyes narrowing. "I wanted to make a good impression on him and introduced myself in French to build rapport. I didn't know he was going to bring everything back to French for the rest of the conversation because of it."

The other man scoffed and leaned against the door. "I would think your mother would have taught you proper manners as a child. Such as, speaking in a language that not everyone at the table can understand is fucking rude. Or maybe you just wanted to exclude me so you wouldn't have to bother talking to me even on a mission."

"That has nothing to do with this," Boyd shot back flatly, defensive anger flaring at the accusation. "Every time I tried to switch it to English, he brought it back to French. What the hell did you want me to do? Annoy him to the point that the mission fails and we both get in trouble?"

At that, Sin made a face. "Keep the fucking melodrama to a minimum. Starting a mission off in a language your partner doesn't speak sets the tone for the whole time

we're here, especially with a man who condescends to me every chance he gets, without that added disrespect."

"Well, I'm sorry I'm not as versed in negotiation or building rapport as you are," Boyd said sarcastically. "Obviously your way worked so well with Thierry last time. Maybe you should come with after all and show me all the things I'm doing wrong."

"My way had to do with refusing to fawn all over him and encouraging him to flirt with me, so you're right-- you're sure one-upping me there," was the flat reply.

"As long as I get us the information, who cares?" Boyd crossed his arms, his eyes narrowing in irritation. "I'm not going back with a failed mission because I didn't feel like letting him smile at me or touch my hand."

Sin shook his head disgustedly as he pushed himself upright. "You're unbelievably fucking naive."

The irritation Boyd had been feeling became closer to aggravation. He stepped back and glanced at the clock. He could have spent more time in the room but he wanted to get out of there. "You're staying, right?"

Sin didn't respond, but he stared at Boyd with the same look on his face.

Boyd strode across the common room and grabbed his coat. He was further aggravated by having to stop and pull on his shoes rather than being able to walk out right away. He could feel Sin's eyes on him but he didn't look over. Not even when he left the room.

He shoved his fists into his jacket pockets and took the stairs down to the main lobby. His shoes made a gratifying pounding noise that echoed around him. He didn't know why Sin always got under his skin, or why a few comments or looks from him could turn Boyd from being in a perfectly fine mood to one that made him feel testy and irritable. He didn't appreciate being called naive and he couldn't help still feeling defensive over his choice of negotiation. How many times had they been told to do whatever it took? How many people had said that Thierry was temperamental?

Obviously a person had to take care around him and make sure he was happy. Thierry could just tell them to leave and be done with it and they would be the ones in trouble, not Thierry. He wasn't going to risk the mission by annoying a man with that sort of reputation.

He made it down to the lobby fifteen minutes too early and ended up lurking in the corner, trying to get his bad mood to fade so he could be properly approachable for the day. At seven minutes until their meeting time, he walked outside and stood beneath the grand opening to the building. It wasn't long until a black town car rolled up alongside him.

The driver got out and greeted him, moving around the side to open the door. Boyd got into the limousine and settled into the seat as the chauffeur shut the door behind him. He looked over and saw that Thierry was seated across the vehicle.

"Thank you for picking me up," Boyd said politely as he leaned back in his seat.

"And where is your partner?" Thierry asked with raised eyebrows.

"He will be unable to make it today. I hope my presence alone is acceptable?"

Thierry stared at him for a moment before his eyes slid to the window where the hotel loomed beyond. "Did you tell him to stay behind, or did he decide to?"

"A little of both, I suppose," Boyd said with a slight frown as he considered the question.

"I see." Thierry leaned back in his seat and looked at the driver. "Go," he said in French.

Boyd watched Thierry for a moment. The man seemed unusually serious. Boyd wondered if Thierry was trying to figure out what this turn of events meant, or whether he'd wanted Sin to be there and was disappointed by the lack of his presence. "I could call him and ask him to join us after all if you'd like," he offered.

The car began gliding down the street as Thierry waved off the comment. "That will not be necessary. Perhaps it is just as well. He was quite jealous."

Boyd's eyebrow quirked up slightly at that. "Jealous?" *More like pissed off*, he thought to himself. "What makes you think that?"

Thierry gave Boyd a sidelong glance. "Surely you must have noticed."

"I confess, I was paying more attention to you than my partner." It was true enough. By the time the conversation had grown more involved and Thierry had started flirting openly with him, he'd been so distracted with how to reply that he hadn't thought to glance over at Sin again.

Thierry's lips curved into a smile and he reached out to turn Boyd's face so that their eyes met fully. "Is that so?"

"It is," Boyd said, smiling in return.

"Hmm." Thierry extended one of his fingers and slid it along Boyd's cheek. His fingertip moved down to ghost over Boyd's mouth before he dropped his hand and sat back. "I was not surprised that he is jealous. You are something I would be possessive of myself."

"You flatter me." Boyd let the smile linger on his lips. His gaze rested on Thierry for a moment, not letting his thoughts get to his face. Then he slid his gaze away to look out the window.

He wondered how much of what Thierry said was the truth and how much was simply his nature. Boyd didn't consider himself to be a particularly amazing catch, but then perhaps that was because so many people responded negatively to the way he looked and acted. It was strange to feel the gentle caresses and be told such things so casually, and yet there was a part of him that craved it. That didn't want to be pushed away or put down. That wanted to feel loved and accepted like he hadn't since the only two people who had ever loved him had been killed. But thinking of that only brought him down the wrong path like it had far too often the last two weeks.

He shoved the memories firmly out of his mind, knowing full well they would come back with a vengeance later. They always did. They always knew how to wear down his control. How to plague him until he faltered, and swarm on him until he gave in.

"Where are we going today?" Boyd asked, pleased to hear that his voice came out as merely curious. He wanted to change the subject in his mind and the conversation. He didn't like the uncomfortable vulnerability he felt toward the idea of someone that didn't want to hurt him.

"Anywhere you want."

Since Boyd was interested in history and architecture, they mostly drove through the city. They visited several of the monuments that still existed in the area, and stopped at a beautiful park that managed to survive the bombs. The wind was light and a little cold, but the day was pleasant enough. Thierry had a bodyguard who trailed them everywhere while the chauffeur stayed by the car at all times.

Boyd and Thierry talked as they went around and despite everything Boyd found himself slowly relaxing around the other man; not even realizing that it was happening for the most part. Thierry was conversational and more intelligent than Boyd had initially assumed he would be based on the rumors. Thierry knew enough about the history of the different locations that Boyd felt comfortable asking questions. Boyd was content with simply looking at the architecture of the buildings but after they stopped for lunch he found himself growing curious about the damage the war had wrought and how Paris had started to recover.

Thierry had the chauffeur bring them to Le Marais, which had become the concentrated center of some of the wealthiest shops in the city. Part of that demographic existed prior to the bombs, but it only grew after nearby areas were decimated in the bombs. Hotel De Ville, which had previously worked as a sort of unofficial city hall, and the huge art collection in Centre Pompidou were completely gone, taking out part of Le Marais with it. Boyd saw that the Parisians had gotten about

as far as the Americans had in Lexington with reconstruction. As he looked down the wealthy street and saw the destruction in the distance, he was reminded of the Financial District back home. He wondered how much life differed here compared to where he'd grown up, and what it all would have been like had his family been in his mother's home country rather than his parents moving to the United States. They stopped for a late lunch at an outdoor cafe on Rue Cler. They ended up sitting at a table while Thierry's bodyguard sat at a nearby table where he had good visibility but couldn't listen in on their conversation. The tables were small, best suited for two people at most. The streets were so different to Boyd than they were in the United States; back home there was a clear distinction between pedestrian areas and vehicular areas. Here, at least by this cafe, everything seemed to blend together on the same grade, with streets that were aesthetically pleasing to the eye. It lent a very integrated feel to the semi-pedestrian part of the neighborhood.

Most of the tables were full in the cafe, creating a quiet lull in the background. Boyd ordered the plat du jour and looked around as Thierry ordered. There seemed to be a good mix of locals and visitors at the cafe and there was enough pedestrian traffic that Boyd had something interesting to watch.

"You spoke of your mother yesterday," Thierry said after a moment, turning to Boyd and lifting a glass of wine to his lips. "Did she not tell you anything of her home country?"

Boyd shook his head, returning his gaze to Thierry. "Nearly everything I know about France I learned in a book. I have some memories from when I was small of her talking about Paris but it's so vague I'm not even certain it wasn't a dream."

Thierry nodded and pursed his lips, flitting his deep blue eyes away. He seemed to fall into a pensive silence for a stretch before smiling briefly. "From the little I have heard of your mother, it reminds me greatly of the distance that existed between my father and myself."

The Agency's information was that Thierry's father had been a main benefactor of Janus and that there had been a falling out between the two. "Did something happen to cause it?"

"Mmm." Thierry tilted his head, his gaze moving along the cafe before resting on Boyd again. "He never liked my way."

"What way is that?"

A low chuckle escaped Thierry's throat and he sat back in his chair. "Expulsions from boarding school for inspiring rebellions, leading adults to believe... anything I wanted, and of course, seducing my male tutors."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, an amused smile playing on his lips. "Tutors, plural? How many of them did you seduce?"

Thierry smirked and leaned forward conspiratorially. "Enough of them to ensure he hired women in the future. Although I suppose the elderly gentleman didn't fall for my charms."

Boyd couldn't help laughing. "You're a dangerous man, Monsieur Beauvais."

"Of that, you can be sure," Thierry practically purred. He slid his fingers over Boyd's hand and moved them over it in a light caress. He didn't stop even as he continued to speak. "My father did not appreciate the embarrassment that I brought to his name. Even before he knew I was gay, he held some distaste for my temperament as a child. It is unfortunate that my mother died when I was quite young. I fear I never quite knew the love of a parent properly-- perhaps this is why I have always looked in other places."

Boyd looked down at their hands; at Thierry's fingertips ghosting his skin. Although the slide of skin against skin didn't produce the electrifying tingle that seemed to happen any time Sin touched him, he felt... intrigued. Comforted, in some strange way. But as he considered what Thierry said, he realized maybe their similarities were

why he didn't mind so much when Thierry touched him, despite the fact that normally he would look askance at a person he just met for doing the same thing.

They'd both lost one parent early, and although Boyd had known the love of his father it was all blurred by childhood and loss that happened far too soon. They were both gay, raised by a parent who had more issues with them than acceptance, and who didn't approve of their sexual orientation. What Thierry said about looking for love elsewhere resonated in Boyd as well. The comfort he'd been missing for the past few years, the gaping hole he'd been burying deeper and deeper within himself to try to ignore how much had been stolen from him with Lou's death-- It had all been ripped back out into the open.

It was the prominence of it all in his mind that made it impossible to ignore the fact that of all the people he'd met so far since joining the Agency, Thierry was the first one who he thought may actually get what it was like to be him. The first one who may understand how frustrating it was to constantly be compared to the successful but distant parent; to be only a surname to so many people, who threw that name back at him. To be told by that parent repeatedly that he wasn't good enough; that he would never live up to his own name. To be gay in a world that didn't always accept that. To be surrounded by a life of intrigue and negotiation that rarely let a person relax. And to not always know who to trust.

Boyd's eyebrows furrowed faintly and he dragged his eyes back up to Thierry. He searched the older man's face, feeling confused and off-balanced. He knew that Thierry was a seductive type who was interested in him. He knew that he had to get the information out of Thierry about the Janus insiders, and yet...And yet, at the same time he couldn't deny that he was comforted by Thierry's presence. He couldn't help feeling like Thierry understood him. And with those gentle touches and casually kind words, it felt like he would never hurt Boyd like so many others had. There was no denying what Thierry was capable of but Boyd knew from Thierry's files that the bare facts of what he was bringing up were true. His father and he had been estranged. His mother had died

young. Thierry wasn't lying to him about that, and it made the similarities too hard to ignore.

With that in mind, Boyd found himself starting to speak, then having to clear his throat quietly. He looked back down at their hands, feeling a temptation to turn his palm to Thierry's to implicitly accept the flirtation. He ignored the urge, although his fingers did twitch. "My mother..." He frowned, his eyebrows lowering further, and he met Thierry's eyes again. He didn't move his hand, finding himself hoping that Thierry didn't withdraw that gentle caress any time soon. "My mother was the same. She's never fully approved of me. I used to try so hard to be worthy of her praise but I have almost no recollection of it ever happening." He shook his head, his lips tilting on the edges bitterly. "Of course, when it became apparent that I was gay, it didn't help my standing in her eyes."

"We are much alike, you and I," Thierry observed. "Perhaps that is why I feel drawn to you and not because you are gorgeous."

"Perhaps," Boyd replied, his eyes remaining on Thierry. He fell silent, taking in the way the other man was watching him. Given Thierry's reputation he'd been worried about getting on Thierry's good side. For all that Sin had criticized Boyd's approach, it seemed that he'd succeeded. But despite that, all the times he'd tried to bring up business in varying ways, Thierry had always sidestepped or deflected the topic. It was growing worrisome; they had limited time in France.

He let out a quiet breath and looked away with drawn eyebrows. He watched a couple pause as a man on an electric scooter drove by. So far Thierry seemed to respond most positively to the truth so that's what he said.

"Thierry, I don't mean to be rude but we have to return to the States tomorrow and I'm growing worried about having to go back empty-handed. I'd really like the chance to discuss work with you. Could we do that?"

Thierry patted his hand, and sat up straight. "Yes, but not now. I would like to invite you to my home this evening."

Boyd's gaze hovered on Thierry. There was no question that Thierry was attracted to him and yet until this suggestion, the flirtation had been mild and always in public. Being alone in the man's house could possibly make things turn to a different direction, and that made him hesitate. Still, there was no guarantee anything would happen. And if anything did start happening that he didn't want, he could just say no. In the meantime, Thierry had finally agreed to talking business so that was a definite step in the right direction.

"Of course," Boyd replied with a smile. "What time would you like me over?"

"I have some things to attend to after lunch," Thierry replied, looking over as the waitress returned with their lunch. "I will drop you off at the hotel and return this evening. Please do explain to your partner where you will be, so he does not think I have abducted you and proceed to then rip apart the hotel."

"I will," Boyd assured Thierry. Lunch passed without incident and it wasn't long until they got back into the town car and headed toward the hotel. When he got to the hotel room, he wondered whether Sin would even be there. He opened the door and glanced around the common room for his partner. He saw that Sin was sitting on the edge of the couch, palm computer in hand as he skimmed through something on it rapidly. His lips were pursed and he didn't look entirely pleased with whatever he was doing. Boyd shut the door behind him and took his jacket off as he walked across the room.

"Did something happen?" he asked, tilting his chin toward Sin's palm computer. Although he hadn't received any notices from the Agency about any changes in the mission, it was possible Sin had.

Sin looked over at him, gaze lingering for a moment before switching back to the computer. "I have a mission when we return."

Boyd nodded in understanding and threw the jacket on the back of a chair, on top of his trench coat. "Just you?"

"Yes. Rank 10 mission." Sin turned off the panel and dropped it on the table beside the couch, standing up. He turned and observed Boyd.

Boyd nodded again and dropped onto the couch. He let his legs stretch out in front of him and leaned back, taking a moment to relax. He let out a low breath, closed his eyes and tilted his head back against the couch.

After a moment, Boyd opened his eyes and sat up. "Before we can end up splitting up for any reason, I wanted to let you know you'll have the room to yourself for awhile tonight."

Sin had been about to go into his room but he stopped completely and turned. "Why is that?"

"I'll be at Thierry's."

There was a stretch of silence as Sin stared at him for a longer period of time. His eyes narrowed slightly. "Why are you going to his house?"

Boyd watched Sin silently for a moment and then leaned forward, bracing his forearms on his knees. "He wouldn't talk business today but he said he would if I came over. We only have until tomorrow to get what we need, so..." He shrugged and trailed off.

Sin's eyes narrowed further and he brought a hand up to briefly rub his forehead. He started to turn again, stopped, and then said, "You shouldn't go."

"If I don't, how are going to get what we need?" Boyd shook his head. "We're running out of time. I'll just go over, get the information, and come back. I'm only telling you so you don't wonder where I am."

"And you think it's going to be as simple as that?" Sin asked, raising his eyebrows and staring down at Boyd without expression.

"No but what does it matter?" Boyd asked rhetorically. "He said he'd talk to me if I came over so that's what I'm going to do. Besides, after spending so much time with him I have an idea of how he works. I'll use that to figure out how to get what we need so I can stop worrying about it."

"If you had have an idea of how he works, then you're aware that there's a good chance he'll want you to fuck him for it."

"Obviously that's a possibility," Boyd said simply with a shrug. "I'm not going over planning on that. I just want him to talk. But you heard General Carhart-- you know how important this information is. We can't go back without it."

There was a long silence as Sin stared at him incredulously. "So you'd actually do it then?"

"I don't know," Boyd said honestly. "I'm going to make plans for how to get him to talk. But we're quickly running out of time and if nothing works, if he won't listen to me and it's a question between that or going home with nothing--"

His eyes narrowed and he looked away. Carhart's words were strong in his mind; to do whatever it took to get this. That he couldn't stress the importance of this enough.

"I don't know," he said again. "I guess I have to plan for the possibility of that happening, too."

Sin's lips parted but no sound came out at first. A flash of anger crossed his face and mingled with the surprise that was evident. "Did it ever occur to you to say fuck the mission, or do you actually want to bend over for that piece of garbage?"

"Fuck the mission and then what?" Boyd shot back. "Go back to the Agency and tell them sorry, I didn't try hard enough? They wouldn't let that pass. And--"

He remembered his mother, her cold eyes staring him down after she'd brought him into her office on his first failed mission. Her threat that the Agency had ways of making agents usable again. She knew what would hurt him most; what would terrify

him beyond anything else. She knew and she would use that information. He was still trying to get over the shock from Lou's necklace suddenly reappearing in his life. If they did that too--

His jaw tightened and his expression set in resolve. He wasn't going to let that happen. "If a mission fails, it's not going to be because of me."

"You're a goddamn idiot," Sin replied disgustedly. "If you don't listen to me, for the first fucking time, you're going to regret it."

"If you have a magical answer to getting the information from Thierry tonight short of working this angle then by all means, tell me," Boyd said impatiently, growing frustrated with the way Sin constantly attacked everything he did. "I'd love to hear it. But if you're just going to tell me I'm doing the wrong thing and offer no other solution aside from failing the mission then I don't know what to tell you. I can't do that. I'm bringing the information back with us somehow."

"You can't do that," Sin scoffed. "Mommy isn't going to terminate you, you fucking moron. What are you scared of, a trip to the Fourth? Man up-- who cares? Have some dignity instead of being so quick to stoop to the lowest level just to please the fucking Agency."

"Man up?" Boyd demanded incredulously. He stood up, his eyes narrowing into a glare. "Do you even--" He cut himself off, a wave of anger burning through him. His teeth grit and he stared coldly, holding a hand up palm out to Sin. "You know what? Just-- Don't. Don't try to pretend you know me. Or her. You have no idea what she will and will not do to me."

"And you obviously don't know shit about me if you think I haven't been tortured in every possible way at the Agency, and I still wouldn't ever become their little prostitute," Sin replied acidly. "But go ahead, have fun."

Boyd's jaw set and for a long moment he could only glare at Sin. Anger, indignation and frustration warred within him until he didn't know what to say. The tension in him made him feel locked in place until he abruptly turned his back on Sin.

"I can't talk to you right now," he said tightly as he started toward his room.

"That's fine," Sin snarled, his lips twisted down into a vicious scowl. "Because I'm fucking done with you. This is the second time I tried to help you, and the second time I completely regret the effort."

Boyd felt a welling of something at the words but he didn't let himself focus on it. He stalked into his room and shut the door harder than was necessary behind him. But even being alone in the room didn't help; the atmosphere felt oppressed, giving him no way out.

He dropped onto the bed and leaned forward, his fingers digging into his hair as he squeezed his eyes shut. Sin's words echoed in his head, jumbled by Carhart's and his mother's and he didn't know what to think. What to feel.

What was he supposed to do? He didn't want to have sex with Thierry but he couldn't walk away from all this. He couldn't go back to the Agency with nothing-- not when Carhart had said straight out that they had to do anything it took. He couldn't walk away from the Agency or his responsibilities. He couldn't disappoint his mother. The consequences of failing...

His chest tightened at the thought-- at the memory of pain lancing up his arms from his wrists; his own screams echoing around him and the darkness closing in on every side. Terror eclipsing everything else to the point that he didn't even know anymore what was a dream from that time and what was a horrible mockery of reality. The memories of Lou's murder that wouldn't leave him and the knowledge every time he'd slept and woken that he was alone-- left completely alone and without any recourse and no one would care and no one would help him--

His eyes squeezed shut harder and he let out a harsh breath, his mouth falling open as he curled inward. No, no, he couldn't do it. He couldn't. He didn't care what he had to do to avoid that; he would do it.

Even so, Sin's words continued to haunt him. He thought about Sin commenting on trying to help him twice. It could only be referring to the necklace-- to Jared. It was the only thing that made sense to Boyd. Guilt and confusion were nearly suffocating at the thought. He knew they needed to talk about that all-- but it was so hard for him.

Did Sin really regret it?

Did he regret anything he'd done or tried to do for Boyd?

He didn't want those words to cut him so deeply-- *I'm fucking done with you*, and, *completely regret the effort*. He didn't know what to do. He knew Sin was angry with him, he understood that probably part of it was related to their distance the past two weeks contrasted to how friendly he'd been to Thierry.

But what was he supposed to do? Why couldn't Sin understand? These were things he'd been burying for so long, things that had nearly killed him in the past, and in less than two weeks he was expected to be able to get over it and talk rationally about something he'd never even brought up? Something Sin somehow had found out on his own and suddenly shoved in his face?

Just because Sin could take any torture and not budge didn't mean everyone else was the same. Just because Sin thought a trip to the Fourth was doable didn't mean the very prospect of it couldn't terrify Boyd. Especially with the imaginings made more vivid by memories recently stirred up, like dirt at the bottom of a lake. Clouding everything that used to be so clear.

And just because Sin thought he knew everything about the Agency didn't mean he understood Boyd's mother, or the resolve she could have about her work. Sin was so confident she wouldn't have him terminated but he hadn't grown up with her. He didn't know how she could be.

He wouldn't have chosen to have sex with Thierry; after all, he'd only ever slept with Lou so a one night stand seemed strange to him. But he didn't even know that it would come to that anyway. And Sin could mock him all he wanted but in the end, what was one night with a man who at least was charming compared to possibly weeks in the alternative?

If he could only succeed in this, everything would be okay. Even assuming they had sex tonight, he would be in an entirely different country from Thierry tomorrow so their one night together wouldn't matter anyway. The Agency would be happy with the outcome and they could all move on. It's not like he planned to make this a regular occurrence; the desperate measures would be only for this one extreme case and he could go back to his life the way it had always been before.

No harm done.

He told himself that but he couldn't forget the look of disgust on Sin's face.

By the time he had to head downstairs, he was almost relieved despite the ominous feeling he'd developed about the night. He just needed to get out of there. He just needed to get away.

He didn't see Sin as he left, a fact he was grateful for. He didn't know what he would have said and he didn't want to have to see whatever expression Sin would level his way. He was already a little uneasy about what may end up happening at Thierry's but it didn't shake his resolve to avoid the terror that otherwise would likely await him.

He took the stairs on the way down so he had more time to school his expression and loosen the tension in his shoulders. He didn't want to let on to Thierry that he was distracted or worried. He had to focus on getting the information. In order to do that he needed to be clear-headed so he could notice any shifts in Thierry's mood that he could take advantage of.

He was glad to see the driver had been sent alone to pick him up. It gave him more time to prepare. To think. He walked across the sidewalk, the cold cutting through

him harshly. He'd left his coat behind and the wind was just as icy here as back home. After getting in, he sat in the back, his expression blank and his mind anything but as he watched the city flash by outside the tinted windows.

The driver brought them to Avenue du Maréchal Maunoury in 16<sup>e</sup> arrondissement. The building they pulled up to was beautiful from the front; brick with white trim and almost looking more like it belonged on part of an old estate or mansion rather than being luxury apartments.

Thierry lived on the highest floor and when Boyd was let inside, he took in the apartment. He had to admit it was beautiful.

Less ostentatious than the hotel, the apartment had hardwood floors with tall ceilings, warm cream walls, and dark trim. There were two floors, as evidenced by the large open area where the second floor was cut away almost like a balcony looking down on the first floor. It made it feel like a luxury loft.

Continuing that theme were the floor to ceiling windows along one side, overlooking Bois de Boulogne park and, beyond it, what little could be seen of the River Seine. The only chandelier he saw was hanging from the second story in the open living room area, about even with the first floor's ceiling. The apartment was spacious, the furniture was tasteful but obviously expensive, and it looked well lived in.

"Welcome," Thierry's voice called from somewhere further in. He appeared moments later, wearing an indigo v-neck shirt that fit tight against his toned arms and chest, and black pants that were obviously fitted to his body. It was the most casual that Boyd had seen him so far, which was further enhanced by Thierry's bare feet and tousled wavy hair. "I thank you for coming, once again."

"Thank you the invitation," Boyd replied as he walked further into the apartment, toward Thierry. He looked over at the windows covering the wall.

"You have a very nice apartment." He gestured out the windows and meant it when he said, "Even at night, the view is amazing."

"I enjoy beautiful things." Thierry's lips curved into a grin and ran his hands over Boyd's arms briefly. "And you, my dear, are frozen. Would you like some wine to warm up?"

"Sure."

Thierry moved to a mahogany cabinet and opened the door, pulling out glasses. He took them to a glass coffee table where there was a waiting bottle of wine. He filled both, and glanced over at Boyd.

"Make yourself comfortable."

"Thank you."

A large sectional couch curved around the coffee table. Boyd sat down, finding it to be surprisingly comfortable. He picked up a glass of wine, the liquid seeming a rich burgundy hue in the lighting. He held the glass carefully so as not to spill and leaned back, hearing the quiet crinkling of the fabric as it settled around him.

Everything felt warm and inviting. The impression was furthered by licks of flame in the electric fireplace he hadn't noticed before, set nearby within the wall. He watched the fire for a moment as he took a sip of the wine, the taste of it filling his mouth and warming his tongue. He looked over at Thierry and smiled, hoping to take control of the conversation from the start.

"I was pleased when you told me earlier you were interested in discussing our mutual acquaintances. Janus has been a growing concern for us and we're very grateful for any help you would be willing to give. After all, you're something of an expert on the topic."

"Expert?" Thierry held his glass contemplatively and frowned thoughtfully. "Perhaps. It was not always this way, though. At one time I was just a novice, barely understanding my place in it all."

It was more than Thierry had said about anything related to work so far so Boyd took to the topic. "As I understand it, you got into the business when you were eighteen?"

"Seventeen, actually." Thierry took a sip and crossed one knee over the other, his gaze moving to the window. "I was aware of my father's dealings with Janus since I was quite young. When he died, I simply took up the mantle. It was interesting... to say the least. "

Boyd watched Thierry thoughtfully. "What was it like?"

A small smile quirked across Thierry's lips and he raised an eyebrow. "To say they did not know what to expect from me would be accurate. To them I was a spoiled child trying to involve myself in affairs that were better left out of my reach. They did not respect me, even when I began to work for them."

Boyd smiled faintly, although the expression was more contemplative than anything. He could understand that feeling to an extent. "What did you do?"

"I refused to give up." Thierry turned to Boyd on the sofa and tilted his head thoughtfully, as if he were remembering back to that time. "Their world, my father's world, it was something that intrigued me. For so long I felt as though I was without purpose and this thing-- this strange thing that I do, it gives me purpose. After quite some time, they finally began to admire my tenacity."

Boyd nodded and took a sip of wine as he thought about what Thierry said. His eyes were drawn to the fire; to the flickering flames that were incapable of settling.

He wondered if he would ever get to the point of feeling a purpose in any of this. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he felt that he was only at the Agency while he waited for something to change. While he waited, most likely, to die.

He didn't feel any purpose in his life aside from being in a state of in-between, and the occasional time when something drew his attention enough for him to be intrigued. But those moments always faded and he was left once more to disinterest.

Apathy that recently had been struggling to keep in check all the dark thoughts it had grown to hide.

"Did you feel that way right away?" he was unable to stop himself from asking. His eyes flicked over to Thierry. "Having a purpose?"

"Mmm." Thierry set his wine glass down and rested his arm on the back of the sofa. A low laugh escaped his throat and he shook his head slightly. "No, at first it was a game. Perhaps like chess. Or perhaps a spectator sporting event that I had helped to fund so that the teams could keep playing. It kept me busy, but I did not truly expect to become so immersed and to eventually care."

Boyd nodded again and shifted on the couch so he was turned more toward Thierry. He tilted his head slightly, studying the other man thoughtfully. "What drew you away from working solely with Janus like your father had?"

One of Thierry's hands began absently sifting through Boyd's hair as he pondered the question. After awhile he said, "I did not like the idea of putting all of my eggs in one basket, as they say."

"It must have been a trying time, when you were learning the ways and who to trust," Boyd said thoughtfully. He didn't react to the fingers threading through his hair, letting Thierry do as he pleased. "Did anyone take you under their wing and help you out?"

"Not at all," Thierry said with another of his intimate smiles. "And what of you?"

Boyd was disappointed but not entirely surprised by the subject change. "Not at first. Things are changing over time, though."

"Sin did not guide you?" Thierry asked, eyebrows ticking up slightly. "Is he not an agent of some high degree?"

"He is but he wasn't interested in being my partner," Boyd replied with an unconcerned shrug. "In the beginning I think he was simply amusing himself seeing how long it would take for me to fail or for something to happen to me."

"How unfortunate."

A frown marred Thierry's expression and his hands slid up to glide down the side of Boyd's face. "It would have been quite terrible if I would have never been able to meet you."

Boyd smiled. "I doubt it would have mattered. You wouldn't have known what you were missing, right?"

Thierry let his fingers move down to trace the side of Boyd's mouth. "Perhaps that would have been the worst part."

They spoke for awhile longer before Thierry invited Boyd to the other room for dinner. Over time Boyd learned that Thierry had made it himself, which somewhat surprised Boyd, who had expected him to have hired help for everything. He commented on how good the food was and Thierry seemed pleased by the compliment.

During dinner the conversation flowed in different directions a few times. Boyd continued to bring it back to work in different ways at first, attempting to get Thierry to follow through on his promise. Thierry bypassed the topic at first and then implied it would be better not to talk of such business over food. Boyd nodded and they went back to talking about nothing particularly important, dotted throughout with questions about their personal lives.

Afterward, they ended up on the couch again. Boyd wasn't used to drinking so much in one day. Despite dinner to balance it out, he started to notice the effects of the alcohol on his system. His body felt warm; his blood buzzed pleasantly through him. His head was starting to feel clouded and once or twice he found himself saying a little more than he'd intended. Giving a few more details than he normally would.

He had enough wits about him to try to talk about work, or Janus, or Thierry's time as he grew into his job. He asked about Thierry's life, how he knew about his father's involvement in Janus, whether anyone had ever visited his house. He tried to be straightforward and remind Thierry that he'd said he would talk about work. He tried many angles but every time somehow the conversation turned away before Boyd got anything of value.

At times he set his glass down on the table with the intention of no longer drinking any more. Thierry kept refilling his glass, and it took him a bit to realize that because of that he was drinking more than he thought he was.

As time went on, Thierry's flirtation grew more pronounced. He moved closer to Boyd, sitting near enough to him that the heat of their bodies felt trapped between them. He touched Boyd more as well, with the brush of his fingertips or press of his hand lingering. Becoming more bold.

Boyd started to grow confused; influenced by the pleasant burn of alcohol in his system, the muted warmth of the fireplace, and the heat of Thierry's skin brushing against his.

It seemed like Thierry's face grew so much closer over time, those handsome features focusing solely on him. He wasn't accustomed to being the center of anyone's attention in a manner that was so positive and prolonged. Thierry murmured words of encouragement and praise and compliments; flattering Boyd yet seeming genuine about it. As if he truly did think Boyd was worth something and he was pleased to have met him.

Without fully realizing what he was doing, Boyd started to tilt his head slightly into Thierry's touch. He was feeling the comfort of someone who had nothing but gentle touches and words for him. It was such a contrast to what he was used to that it worked its way into the buzz from the wine. Infecting his blood and his thoughts.

He thought he was being diligent and mindful but somewhere along the line, things spun away from him. Despite the many times he'd tried to redirect the

conversation, he wasn't getting anywhere. Around the time Thierry's hand slid along his thigh, Boyd realized it was very late at night. Midnight had already long passed them by and he hadn't gotten anything they needed.

Time was running incredibly short.

As that thought crossed his mind, Thierry leaned in to kiss him. Boyd automatically drew back, keeping their faces mere inches apart. He could feel Thierry's breath, warm against his lips, and their eyes locked.

Boyd couldn't read much except desire in Thierry's blue eyes. His thoughts were muddled and confused. The one thought that he couldn't ignore was that maybe Thierry hadn't given him any information yet because he hadn't been responding to his obvious attraction. Maybe he wouldn't follow through unless Boyd followed through himself.

He'd had time to think about what he would do in this circumstance and the wine made him feel pleasant, lacking his typical over-analysis. He'd run out of time and options. So when Thierry's eyelashes lowered and he leaned in again, this time Boyd didn't pull away.

Their lips met; an almost gentle caress at first that slowly built. Boyd hadn't kissed anyone, hadn't touched anyone other than Lou. Thierry's lips were soft and the taste of them seemed strange and unfamiliar. That sentiment was echoed in the unfamiliar slide of a hand along his leg, and the feel of Thierry's other hand tangling in his hair at the nape of his neck.

The oddity of the situation was fast overcome by the power of a sensual touch after so long. The body he'd forsaken awoke at Thierry's hands, aided by the burn of alcohol in his system. His breath caught when Thierry's lips slid along his jaw and centered on his neck. All the times Thierry had touched him before it had felt gentle or warm but that was it; there wasn't the electric tingle that sucked away his thoughts like when Sin brushed his bare skin with calloused fingertips. But with Thierry focused so fully on him, and under the expert maneuverings of his hands, Boyd felt desire stir inside him and grow.

Thierry's lips returned to Boyd's and their kiss deepened until Boyd felt the moist slide of a tongue against his lips. He parted his mouth and learned quite quickly that Thierry was an amazing kisser.

Before he knew it, he was letting out breathless moans, his eyes falling shut as his body automatically arched against Thierry's. Boyd could feel Thierry's erection through their clothing; hard and moving against him. It made him moan deeply, which became a gasping groan when Thierry slid his hand beneath Boyd's pants and started kneading his half-hard cock. Boyd's head jerked back and he gripped Thierry's arms; his mouth falling open as he breathed heavily. He could feel Thierry's lips smile against his skin.

For a moment all Boyd could do was moan helplessly, his fingers digging into Thierry's shirt as he jerked his hips up against Thierry's skillful hand. His body was an instrument that Thierry played to perfection; rising him up to a crescendo and stopping just before the climax. Boyd didn't even realize when he'd been moved to lay back on the couch, his legs splayed open with Thierry kneeling between them, rolling his body against Boyd's increasingly quickly. But when Thierry's hand shifted and moved for his shirt, Boyd snapped back to attention enough to grab his wrist.

He shook his head, his eyes half closed but still intent on Thierry. It took a second for his voice to work through his throat and when it did, it came out husky but firm.

"Not the shirt. Or underneath."

If Thierry thought the condition was odd, he didn't let it show. His hand moved away and he returned to kissing Boyd deeply. Their tongues worked against each other, filling Boyd's mouth with Thierry's taste. Boyd could feel Thierry's hands working on his pants and soon Thierry drew away. He sat up, his lips reddened from kissing and face flushed with desire. His hair was messy and his eyes seemed especially blue as he took in Boyd sprawled beneath him.

Thierry shifted and he moved back along the couch, his hands running along Boyd's thighs and down his knees, his shins, until he pulled off his shoes and socks. His fingers pushed up beneath the hem of Boyd's pant legs briefly, playing along the bones of his ankles. Then his hands were moving, pressing back up Boyd's legs and skimming the waistband of his pants. Dipping below to brush the hair from Boyd's navel that disappeared beneath the pants.

It seemed as though Thierry took enjoyment in every part of this. Even with his erection pressing against his pants, he seemed to be in no hurry to get straight to the act of sex. Being able to feel Boyd and unclothe him at his own speed seemed to give him some sense of satisfaction on its own. Nimble fingers unfastened Boyd's pants, laying them open to show his underwear beneath. Thierry's eyes were centered on Boyd's groin and the shape of his cock that he could see through the stretch of the fabric.

Thierry pushed the underwear down under Boyd's balls, allowing his half hard cock to spring free. Long fingers slid around his cock, with just the right pressure and speed as he started to masturbate him. Boyd gasped and twisted beneath Thierry; his body arching into the touch and his hands digging into the cushion and back of the couch. His hips jerked and he rocked up into Thierry's hand, breathless moans escaping him with increasing urgency.

When Boyd thought it couldn't feel better, Thierry moved his thumb to the head of Boyd's cock and played with the slit; rubbing in a motion that made Boyd groan loudly with an, "Ah-- Ahh!"

Just as Boyd felt himself teetering on the edge of control, Thierry's hands disappeared. Boyd panted heavily, his eyes opening enough to stare through dusty eyelashes down his body. Thierry was watching him with the intensity of an artist his muse, crouched between Boyd's splayed legs. Boyd started to bring one hand down to his erection to finish but Thierry's hands were a gentle rebuke; twining his fingers around Boyd's and pushing his hand away.

He didn't say anything but the desire in Thierry's eyes and the tilt of his lips clearly said, '*Let me.*'

Hands moved along Boyd's body again, this time hooking beneath his pants and underwear and pulling them down. Inch by torturous inch, Boyd's body was bared to the room. He tried to help Thierry, alternately lifting his hips and his legs so Thierry could slide it all off him. Thierry wasn't moving that slowly but it felt like forever when all Boyd wanted to do was finish the rise of the orgasm clawing at his stomach and tightening his balls.

When Boyd was naked except for his shirt, Thierry returned to the space between Boyd's legs. Boyd's knees were drawn up and tilted open, giving Thierry a perfect view of his body as he looked down. His hands rested on Boyd's knees, sliding up and down along his thighs and pushing them open even more. His gaze took in Boyd's erection, straining at the air below the crumpled hem of his button-down shirt, and traveled up to center on his face.

"Look at you," Thierry murmured, his lips lifting into a satisfied smile. "Flushed and waiting."

He ran his hands down to the hollow where Boyd's bare thighs met his hips. Thierry's thumbs rubbed near the curl of hair at the base of Boyd's cock. Boyd moaned quietly, his cock twitching, and Thierry's hands shifted away again.

The cushion of the couch depressed beneath Thierry's weight as he braced his hands on either side of Boyd's face. He leaned down to kiss and nuzzle against Boyd's cheek. "You are so perfect," he breathed into Boyd's ear. "If I could capture this moment..."

There was a pause as Boyd's chest rose and fell beneath Thierry's; their bodies nearly touching but not quite. Thierry kissed him again on the cheek and then slid off him, standing at the side of the couch. Boyd looked at him questioningly but before he could say anything, Thierry had his hand held out and smiled.

"Come."

Boyd watched him a second and then held his hand up, letting Thierry pull him off the couch to a stand. They stepped around the coffee table, where Thierry paused to pull a condom and a bottle of lube out of a discreet drawer. There was a rug laid out in front of the fireplace and Thierry pushed Boyd down until he laid on his back. The warmth of the fireplace surrounded him, rolling over him in waves while the rug against his bare skin felt decadent.

Boyd felt lost in the moment; drugged from the heat, the wine, and the need to fulfill the desire that had been building steadily within him.

The sound of the condom wrapper being ripped open was muffled beneath words Thierry murmured in French that Boyd barely listened to. He lay back against the rug, his head tilted and eyes burning down his body; locked on Thierry's every movement.

Thierry had taken his pants off somewhere along the line and was pulling a condom over his erection. His eyes were centered on Boyd and the display of his body; wide open and ready to receive him. It didn't take Thierry long to prepare himself with lube and then he was leaning forward, mouth unerringly finding Boyd's again while his erection slid alongside Boyd's. Boyd's groans grew louder and more helpless and then Thierry was shifting, his erection moving to slide between Boyd's butt cheeks and press maddeningly at his opening.

Boyd didn't hear himself gasping, asking for Thierry to do it. He only felt desire that ripened into passion as soon as Thierry finally relented and pressed his erection into Boyd's body. Boyd felt himself stretching painfully to accept Thierry's girth and for a second he could only arch beneath him; cock ramrod straight and body straining. Thierry paused, his lips raining kisses along Boyd's mouth and jawline, until Boyd was able to relax and the pain receded.

When Thierry moved, Boyd's thoughts scattered like leaves in the wind.

Pleasure blossomed in Boyd; a small bit at first that expanded incredibly fast and soon took over his whole mind. Thierry rocked into him; pulling his cock out and pressing it back in; a maddeningly slow movement at first that let Boyd feel every second of pleasure that his body could endure. Boyd arched and writhed and pressed up against Thierry; his feet braced against the rug to give a better angle while his body worked with Thierry's in the rolling of their hips. Boyd moaned, wordlessly begging for more, and just when he felt like he was going to go insane from pleasure just on the cusp of his reach, Thierry complied.

The sound of flesh slapping against flesh mingled with their moans and gasps. Boyd felt himself nearly come the first time Thierry shoved into him faster, deeper. His toes curled against the rug and he shook his head helplessly, his head thrown back and body quaking. His fingers dug into the tendrils of the rug and he nearly lost himself in pleasure. Somehow Thierry sensed it and held back just long enough for Boyd to, gasping, regain his control.

Then they were rocking against each other in heady abandon and Boyd's moans grew to echo in the wide open room, intermingled with Thierry's quieter groans.

Thierry was a confident but gentle lover; worshiping every piece of Boyd that he touched as if he were a priceless piece of art to be handled properly. There was skill and passion in his lips and tongue and hands, and the burn of his eyes when he stared down at Boyd.

As Thierry brought him closer to orgasm Boyd let it all slide away for the moment; the fears and uncertainty and hopelessness that had plagued him too often the last few years. He let himself forget about everything and focus solely on the pleasure of a body moving against his, and the heat of an orgasm curling in his stomach and flooding him with anticipation.

His hand snapped down to his cock not long after and this time Thierry allowed it; plowing deep into Boyd with heat and pressure that made Boyd feel dizzy.

He hadn't been touched like this in years and it was making it all come back; blue eyes hovering over his and soft lips he'd kissed innumerable times smiling down at him. Curly blond hair mingling with his. Their fingers intertwined as they panted, trying to stay silent in Boyd's bedroom even though Boyd never managed that. Inevitably, his voice was always freed from him with throaty moans and hoarse words saying how good it felt. Moaning his best friend and lover's name like a desperate prayer.

Those memories were muted with the alcohol and heat, and for a moment with his eyes closed he grew confused by thoughts of other touches against his skin. The memory of Sin's hands brushing against him and that uncontrollable flash of electricity that always seemed to linger behind. Those pale green eyes burning into him and that hard body with water sliding down it from a recent shower.

A thought came unbidden to his mind: if it felt this good with touches that didn't ignite his skin, what would it be like with Sin doing this instead? What would it be like to rock against that muscular body, and have that large cock buried deep inside him as their bare skin pressed against each other relentlessly?

Thierry's voice slid through that thought; murmuring words Boyd hardly heard as he lost himself in the feel of an erection pressing against his sensitive nerves. His hand quickened on his cock, jerking and sliding and squeezing. Thierry reached beneath Boyd's thighs and pulled him up at a different angle, spearing more deeply into him.

Boyd's body snapped, his eyes going wide open as his orgasm abruptly slammed through him. He came hard, his hand still jerking helplessly against his cock and his whole body tense and arching beneath Thierry. Boyd was moaning, nearly shouting with the intensity of the pleasure ripping through him, and for a second he didn't see the room around him. All he saw were white sparks dancing behind his eyes and all he felt was rapture rushing through his blood.

When he was finished, he panted heavily and slumped down. His body was sated and heavy from the rush of orgasm. Thierry kept rocking into him, his hands squeezing against Boyd's thighs until his moans became more urgent and breathy.

Then his body was snapping, his hips helplessly jerking more quickly against the pressured heat of Boyd's body, and he came. He still rolled his hips against Boyd for a few seconds as he finished, wringing every bit of pleasure out of it for both of them. Boyd lay back against the rug, exhaustion mingling with satiation, and languished in the feel of that hard cock still rolling into him until finally Thierry stopped moving.

Thierry's hands pressed against the rug above Boyd's shoulders and he hovered over Boyd, still inside him although Boyd could feel him softening. He kissed Boyd, their lips pressing against each other and heads tilting just so in order for their tongues to tangle. The kiss lessened and then Thierry's tongue slid out of Boyd's mouth. He kissed Boyd along the side of his lips and then down his jaw, ending once more on the side of his neck. Boyd could feel the moist heat of Thierry's breath against his neck, stirring his long blond hair that was spread out on the rug beneath him.

And then Thierry was pulling out of him and dropping onto the rug beside him. He pulled the condom off and put it to the side out of the way.

For a moment, they didn't speak while they each fought to catch their breath. Boyd felt his body burning from the heat of orgasm and he felt too tired to move. He stared up at the ceiling, his body tingling and eyes falling half shut. Thierry's hand was on him again, brushing down his cheek and sliding into the strands of his hair, damp from exertion and clinging to his skin. Boyd's head tilted over and he looked at Thierry. The older man was watching him with sated pleasure but there was something else there. Something that could possibly be fondness or perhaps simply satisfaction from great sex.

Still, with the passion of the moment starting to cool like the sheen of sweat on his skin, Boyd's mind started working again. The circumstances one by one fell back into place until the reality of what had just happened was undeniable.

He'd just had sex with someone for information.

It was something he never would have thought he would do and something he couldn't turn back from having done. The disgust in Sin's eyes flashed in his mind and he couldn't get the harsh words out of his head:

*I still wouldn't ever become their little prostitute.*

Boyd looked away from Thierry, his expression becoming blank as he turned his face toward the fireplace. Something curled in his chest at the memory of Sin's words and he didn't have the presence of mind to be able to identify what it was. Shame? Defensiveness? Resignation?

The wine still muddled his thoughts; the post-orgasmic bliss slowing down his movements. But none of that was enough to make him forget the situation. The bit of possible affection he thought he'd seen in Thierry's face and all those gentle touches Thierry had rained down on him only underlined to him that their motivations were different. Whatever it was Thierry had wanted from him, even if it was just to have sex with someone he was attracted to, Boyd had only ever wanted information. Without that forcing his hand, he never would have been lying here half naked after having let Thierry fuck him.

He sighed quietly and pushed himself up to sit. He moved mussed hair out of his face and looked down at Thierry, not missing the small flash of disappointment in the man's eyes. It made that unidentifiable emotion burn deeper within him.

"Thierry," Boyd said, his voice still husky and thick. "About the information..."

He was interrupted by the sound of a cell phone chiming loudly. Thierry rolled onto his side elegantly, reaching for his pants. He answered the phone and soon stood, walking away.

Boyd watched Thierry's bare back disappear into the kitchen. When he didn't immediately reappear, Boyd pushed himself up to a stand and looked for his clothing. He was sitting on the edge of the couch, just finishing with his shoes when Thierry returned. He rested his arms on his knees and watched Thierry.

"Unfortunately, I must go dear one. My assistant is arranging a flight as we speak."

Boyd's eyebrows shot up and he stood. "But we haven't had the chance to talk..." If Thierry still denied him the information even after all this, Boyd didn't know what he would do.

Thierry was tying the sash to a robe that hung on his muscular shoulders as he flashed Boyd a quick, charming smile. "Do not fret. I have the information on a flash drive, I will send it with you when my driver takes you back to the hotel."

"Oh." Boyd felt warily hopeful about that news but wasn't going to feel like the mission was over until the flash drive was safely in his hands. Still, he felt a little relieved that Thierry didn't deflect or ignore the topic again. "Thank you."

"I hope that you will want to see me again someday. Perhaps this was not just for work?" Thierry's eyes stayed on him for a moment before drifting away.

The comment made Boyd feel like Thierry really did like him and hoped he would say it was more. And that made him not know what to say. He didn't want to lead Thierry on or lie to him but at the same time he didn't want to be rude. He didn't dislike Thierry but the reason he'd had sex with him was for work.

Still, he didn't know if the Agency would need to contact Thierry again so he didn't want to say the wrong thing. And, more importantly, Thierry had been kind in his own way. He'd welcomed Boyd into his home and had made sure Boyd had a pleasurable night. He didn't deserve a slap in the face after all that no matter how often he'd deflected questions about business. Especially since Boyd had actually enjoyed some of their conversations.

"You're a very charming man, Thierry," Boyd replied with a small smile. "I was worried about the information but I still enjoyed my time with you. I can't say what would happen if we saw each other again, but I would be happy to talk to you again. You're the first person I've met since joining the Agency who has so much in common with me."

"I am glad to hear it." Thierry came over and kissed Boyd's face again, although he didn't make an attempt to do anything more.

They said their goodbyes, Thierry's including a brief, lingering touch. It wasn't long until Thierry's driver appeared at the door, somehow seeming to know the precise moment to appear. That seemed to be the case with all the people Thierry hired.

Boyd followed the driver down to the town car, and the whole ride back to the hotel he still worried about the flash drive. He was planning to ask about it but when he got out of the car, the driver opened the window and held out a plain white envelope. Boyd accepted it, feeling the familiar lines of a flash drive inside. He felt a measure more of relief and told the driver to thank Thierry once again. He placed the envelope safely inside an inner pocket and headed toward the bank of elevators inside the hotel. He still felt a little light-headed from the alcohol.

He was still thinking about Thierry and the flash drive when he opened the door to the hotel room.

Being so distracted, he was nearly hit in the face.

He barely dodged out of the way, jerking his head to the side as there was a crash against the wall. It took a second for him to realize that something had been thrown at him, and another second to realize it was the remote to Sin's collar. The remote had shattered and fallen to pieces, scattered on the floor.

Boyd looked up, completely taken aback, and saw Sin standing across the room. His eyes were narrowed and body taut, clearly angry. Taken so off guard by nearly getting brained, Boyd couldn't stop himself from demanding, "What the hell?"

"What the hell yourself," Sin said coldly, flexing his fingers. His words were laced with barely concealed ire. Everything from his expression to the tension in his body was humming with hostility.

Boyd looked down at the remote on the floor and back up at Sin warily. It wasn't difficult to figure out what Sin what must be thinking, and at the moment he seemed

furious enough to snap. Boyd didn't know what could trigger an episode so he quickly tried to think of the best way to explain without making the situation worse.

"Sin, I wasn't--"

"Don't give me your fucking--" Sin crossed the room with disturbing speed, stopping only when he was centimeters from Boyd's face. "--bullshit," he growled, shoving Boyd back against the wall. He leaned forward until they were nose to nose, his lips pulled back into a snarl as his eyes glittered dangerously behind his messy black hair. "You like fucking with me, don't you?"

"I'm not fucking with you." Red flags went off in Boyd's mind. With Sin that close and angry, he didn't know what would happen. He shifted and started to move around Sin, wanting to have more maneuverability. "Aren't you even going to let me answer?"

"It doesn't matter," Sin growled, slamming Boyd against the wall with more force, and causing his head to snap back against the wall. A spike of pain shot down Boyd's neck. Before Boyd could do anything, he felt his wrists being grabbed and twisted up, and pinned above his head. Sin shoved Boyd against the wall with his body, and leaned in close enough for their faces to nearly touch.

"What are you going to say?" he asked, his mouth pressing against Boyd's ear, voice low and hateful. The heat of his breath curled against Boyd's skin. "You weren't going to use it? Then why was it in your pocket? Why did you fucking bring it? Everything you say is bullshit, and a lie, you just fuck with my mind and I'm stupid enough to-- to just let you..."

A growl of frustration vibrated in Boyd's eardrum.

Boyd tried to stay still. The mood Sin was in was violent, dangerous, and it was something that had never been directed at Boyd before. But his thoughts kept zeroing in on the feel of his wrists crushed in Sin's grip, and the knowledge that he couldn't get away. The immovable press of Sin's body against his and the confusion of the different distractions that represented.

He jerked at his arms without thinking but they didn't move. His breath quickened at that, his chest rising and falling to brush against Sin's. He pulled harder and tried to twist away but it was useless. And the more he realized that, the more he wanted Sin to let him go and back up just a step. The vulnerability of the position made it difficult to concentrate on anything but the fear growing in him.

"Let me go," Boyd ground out.

"I want to hurt you so bad right now," Sin's deep voice uttered in his ear, as the grip only tightened.

Boyd's breath caught and his stomach fluttered at the words. He struggled but Sin's body was pressed against his, keeping him flat against the wall. He grit his teeth as his head pressed back against the wall, his heart slamming in his chest as he tried to concentrate on anything but any of the thoughts clamoring for his attention. His fingers curled uselessly above Sin's hold.

"What do you want from me?" he burst out.

"I want you to go away," Sin growled back, tightening his grip until his fingers were digging into Boyd violently. His breath was coming fast, and he shook his head. "I was fine before you came along, and now you did this to me and I want to fucking rip your throat out so bad, and I still can't do it."

Frustration and uncertainty spiked within Boyd. "Did what to you?" His fingers tingled as he started to lose feeling in them. "What the hell did I *do*?"

"You made me think that--" There was another frustrated hiss of breath and Sin pulled back slightly so that his eyes were burning into Boyd's while their faces practically pressed together. "I fucking thought--"

Sin broke off again, gnashing his teeth and jerking Boyd violently against the wall. "He was a helpless, emaciated, fucking drug addict. And I ripped him apart because of what he did to you, and you-- you just treat me like I'm a freak, and you sit there in my face and make nice with Thierry and let him take you home and fuck you."

"Goddammit, Sin, it's not the same thing!" Even if Boyd hadn't been caught by Sin's body, he would have been caught by the look in his eyes.

"It's--" His lips parted and his eyebrows drew together. His eyes were intense on Sin; tainted with the memories he'd tried so long to ignore and the difficulty of it all being brought up again. "Thierry was for work. Everything with you--" He stopped, frustrated by his inability to finish a sentence. "It's hard for me to talk about like this but it isn't how it seems to you. I don't think you're a--"

"Just shut up," Sin cut him off, shaking his head. They were so close that his hair mingled with Boyd's by the motion, curtaining their faces slightly. "It doesn't matter-- I just want you gone."

Sin's released Boyd's hands from the wall and then moved his hands up the side of Boyd's neck. Sin's hands were shaking slightly; from frustration or rage, Boyd didn't know. But when Sin's fingers moved up to dig into Boyd's face as their foreheads touched and air shared between their mouths, Sin didn't seem to have a very good handle on the situation at all. The decisiveness and confidence he usually maintained was gone in the place of this ragged desperation and anger.

"I wish I could hate you. You make me so fucking angry all the time, you make me act this way--"

With his hands free, the tension and fear that had been thrumming in the back of Boyd's mind dissipated. He reached up to where Sin was painfully gripping the side of his face, his fingers around Sin's wrist. He didn't know what he planned to do but when he felt Sin's heartbeat pulsing faintly against his fingers, it sidetracked whatever movement he'd intended. He shifted his thumb absently across Sin's skin, feeling the rise and fall of his tendons and veins.

For a moment, he didn't know what to think. Sin's eyes felt too close; too phenomenally green and far too intense and focused on him. And when Boyd's lips parted, any words he'd planned to say briefly failed him when their lips brushed. He could feel Sin's breath, heating his skin, and feel the tickle of that silky black hair against

his temple. His fingers twitched against Sin's wrist and his head tilted slightly; just enough to feel that maddening touch against his lips again.

He hadn't realized his eyes had dropped to look down at Sin's mouth until he felt his eyelashes barely brush against Sin. He looked back up, those green eyes drawing in his attention to the exclusion of all else.

"What--" His voice sounded too thick the first time so he stopped and started again. "What do you want me to say?"

Every word caused their lips to brush together more, and Sin seemed to unconsciously lean into it. "Nothing," he said, his voice the same angry growl. A ragged breath escaped his throat.

His fingers did not become any gentler even as the word brought their mouths together again, this time with more pressure. He leaned in again, his fingers digging in harder and his body pressing in closer despite the fact that his body was still taut with barely concealed rage. Even with the violent blackness still emanating from him, he seemed unable to create space between them despite the intimacy that it was creating.

Every time Sin's lips touched his, Boyd felt a current pass through him that made it harder and harder to think. The obvious anger wasn't enough anymore to stop Boyd from being aware of every plane of Sin's body, pressing against him. Even with the pain of Sin's fingers digging into him he couldn't ignore the addictive feel of Sin's bare skin beneath his fingertips, or the fire that burned in those green eyes. Boyd's breath let out shakily and his fingers tightened on Sin's wrist.

"Then--" he started to say.

He was cut off when Sin's mouth crushed against his in a hard kiss.

The kiss took away whatever control Boyd had. His hands jerked up to grip Sin's arms and a ragged groan wrenched from the depths of his throat. Their lips and tongues were warring with each other before Boyd even realized he'd opened his mouth.

Suddenly Sin's taste was all around him; intoxicating and making him crave more. Every time he'd been attracted to Sin and had ignored it, every time he'd wondered what Sin would feel like pressed against him, came back at him in an overwhelming wave of desire.

He wanted-- needed-- more. He had to taste every centimeter of Sin and feel every millimeter of him press him to the wall. He had to swallow every muffled moan and dig his fingers into those hard, muscular arms.

Sin's long fingers slid through his hair, ripping his head back as he continued to explore Boyd's mouth with his tongue. The same harsh desperation was present in the way he kissed Boyd, in the way his hands gripped him violently. But the hunger in it, the hot frantic pace, sent sparks of fire shooting through Boyd's body.

They panted against each other's mouths, teeth clicking together at times as they ravaged each other sloppily, noisily, as low groans echoed in the otherwise silent room. A low swear escaped Sin's mouth when after awhile one, or both of them, began grinding against the other almost unconsciously.

Sin yanked Boyd forward like a rag doll and before Boyd's spinning mind could even comprehend the fast, savage motions, he was on the floor and Sin was on top of him.

Boyd threw his head back and gasped loudly as the new position gave more strength to the grinding of their hips. He was almost uncomfortably hard, his body coming alight to every brush and push and pull of Sin's hands on his body. He felt dizzy with the savage passion of the moment and the jerking motion of their bodies.

His hands scrambled across Sin's back, fingers gripping and digging in; scrabbling for a place to hold while at the same time wanting to touch every part of him. Sin's mouth was on his; his hands tangled in Boyd's long hair and pulling back. Their kiss was all nipping and sucking and jaws working hectically and Boyd had never experienced anything like it. He felt swept away by the pure, unbridled hunger with which they devoured each other whole.

Boyd slammed his hips up against Sin's, his breath quick and frantic and not enough to fuel his feverish mind. Sin's lips pulled away and the loss was nearly devastating until Boyd felt Sin's hot breath traveling down his neck. Moist heat followed the erotic feel of Sin licking him, followed almost immediately by his teeth nicking him. Boyd's body arched up against Sin with an, "Ahh!" that became, "Ohh fu--" and then a groaning shout.

Lips that were pressed red from hungered kissing dropped wide open and Boyd's body was taut with a nearly overwhelming desire to feel everything of Sin at once. Suddenly, the layer of clothing between them was too much. His hands jerked down to Sin's waistband and, trembling with the need to feel Sin's naked erection against his own, he started to unbutton Sin's pants. His thumbs and fingers felt clumsy and every part of him was yearning toward Sin until Sin's hand sliding beneath his shirt made his heart nearly stop.

Tension of a different sort slammed through Boyd's veins like ice. He grabbed Sin's wrist and pulled it away, starting to say, "Wait."

Sin twisted out of Boyd's grip and closed powerful fingers around his wrist. He slammed Boyd's arm down impatiently, pinning it to the floor. Boyd jerked at his arm automatically but Sin only tightened his grip. Fear was like cold water running through Boyd's veins; a chill raising the hair on his skin.

"Sin, wait--" he burst out in growing alarm.

There was no chance for thought. Sin's other hand was already going for his shirt.

The terror of being held down took on a whole new level that transcended the moment. The fear that was so ingrained within him at the idea of anyone seeing his bare chest made him feel nauseated and exposed and far too vulnerable-- The grip of that hand on his wrist suddenly grew more ominous and the fear he'd felt earlier returned with a vengeance-- the knowledge that he was entirely at someone else's

disposal and they could do anything-- they could hurt him and no one would hear him scream--

Boyd panicked.

"No!" he shouted, the word wrenching out of him.

He struggled furiously beneath Sin; not feeling when Sin's grip changed or when the weight of his body started to pull away. His eyes were blind to everything around him. All he knew was someone was restricting his movement and he needed to get away but he couldn't-- he couldn't, he was trapped and anyone could do anything to him and he wouldn't be able to stop it--

He lashed out violently, one fist catching Sin on the shoulder as he hardly even registered himself screaming, "No, no, don't touch me--"

The next thing he knew he was sitting up, his knees drawn to his chest and hair awry. His body trembled with tension and fear and his heart jack-hammered against his ribs in a painful rhythm that nearly stumbled over itself in alarm. His lips were parted as he panted heavily and his fingers gripped his knees while, wild-eyed, he stared at Sin.

There was confusion in Sin's green eyes; confusion that was mixed with something else that wasn't as readily identifiable. But both emotions faded quickly until Sin's face was inscrutable. Without a word, he stood and walked into his room.

Boyd stayed crouched there for a minute; shaking and overwhelmed. He dropped his head into his hands, his fingers digging painfully into his hair and yanking back, and he dropped his forehead forward. The ragged panting of his breath caught moisture between his chest and knees and he felt sick to his stomach. He couldn't even fully comprehend what had just happened; the vestiges of panic were still shifting their way around his pounding heart and the scattered thoughts of his mind.

His head pounded to the drumbeat of his heart and his stomach clenched inwardly. He had to swallow back bile and fight against the confusion that swirled around him maddeningly like a snow storm. When he finally was able to come to grips

with the situation, he hissed out a harsh breath against his knees. Exhaustion was a seductive pull on his mind and body. When he pushed himself to a stand, he looked past Sin's shut door but couldn't go over there. He had no words for anything; no way to think properly about any of this and certainly nothing that could make it better.

He was still feeling the fear too keenly, and with it came the memories that had been bubbling too close to the surface lately. There was too much vying for his attention; too many thoughts and feelings and clustered, contrasting feelings cluttering up his head. He felt so weary and, in some ways, scared. Scared of all the things that were happening and the lack of control over so much, and the knowledge that his body and his mind were sometimes running full speed in opposite directions, with him left behind feeling torn.

He disappeared into his bedroom, leaving the palpable feeling of leftover tension behind in the common room. He couldn't think and didn't want to, and knew the luxury of a blank mind would not extend to the hours of the night. His mind was on overdrive despite the pressure of exhaustion on his body. He lay there for what felt like hours, eyes alternatively wide open and squeezed shut, and his teeth gritting as he tried to hold together control of his emotions.

What little sleep finally overtook him was filled with restless, harrowing nightmares, and dreams where everything went horribly wrong and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

The next morning came far too quickly. Boyd's eyes burned as if he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep and his body felt creaky and hollow, like a dusty old house. He hit the alarm clock a little harder than he'd meant to, and it was a process to drag himself out of bed and pack his clothing. He felt the presence of the door to the main room behind him like a hard stare centered on his back. When he could no longer delay it, he went out into common room.

Sin was sitting on the couch, his bag ready to go and resting near him. He wasn't doing or saying anything but cold silence filled the room like a muffling blanket. Boyd felt it strongly and noticed that Sin didn't look over even at the sound of the door opening.

At first, Boyd went about finishing packing. He put away his jacket and felt far too aware of the broken remote in the corner when he went to retrieve his trench coat. He kept glancing at Sin in the corner of his eye, wondering if he should say anything and at the prospect feeling such an overwhelming lack of inspiration that it dried up any words in his throat.

When everything was ready and he had nothing to do but hover there awkwardly, he checked his watch and saw that they still had about fifteen minutes until they needed to go downstairs even early to catch the ride to the plane. He perched on the arm of the couch and looked over at Sin.

"Sin, I..." Boyd started to say, his voice seeming abrupt in the quiet. Sin looked over, his green eyes cold and unreadable.

The blank set of Sin's features made Boyd's throat close. The words that had been difficult to say before now felt nearly impossible under the weight of the previous night. Even without that, what could he say? I didn't mean to hurt you? I need some time alone to think? I never meant for any of this to happen?

None of that would mean anything.

He closed his mouth, looking away with a troubled look. After a second, he shook his head and stood. He turned his back on Sin but then paused and looked over. His eyebrows drew together.

The only words that came to mind were, "I-- was never going to use that." He gestured at the remote.

"Okay."

The flat words didn't give Boyd any indication as to whether Sin believed him. Boyd let the silence stretch but the fact that Sin spoke at all seemed like it could be a good sign. He hesitated, and then forced himself to push on before he could lose the ability to say even this much.

"And, last night, I--" He stopped, searching for words with his hands rising briefly. He dropped his hands into his lap and shook his head. "I panicked."

"I have no idea why such a ridiculous thing happened anyway," Sin replied in the same blank tone. He pulled a palm panel out of his pocket and flipped it on. "I'm not usually in the habit of wanting to finish someone's leftovers."

The comment felt like a slap in the face. Boyd opened his mouth but words didn't come at first.

It wasn't something he could deny.

Going into this trip he hadn't planned to have sex with anyone, and he certainly hadn't planned to move on to nearly fucking Sin right after he'd finished with Thierry. That behavior was completely uncharacteristic of him and he still couldn't fully say what happened.

But then, he hadn't expected to feel that drugged heat of Sin's body shoved against his. Or for a hectic hunger he'd never felt before to steal away his thoughts and make him unable to stop from wanting more and more of his partner. If Sin hadn't accidentally triggered ingrained thoughts and memories that made him panic, they probably would have continued.

The worst part was, even in the light of morning looking back on the follies of the day before, he couldn't forget the electricity that had shot through him at every one of Sin's touches. He couldn't forget the way his body had craved Sin like an addiction.

And he couldn't say that he didn't still want it, even knowing how awkward and cold things were, and knowing Sin was angry with him, and knowing it was probably impossible that anything like that would ever happen again.

Even knowing all that, he couldn't regret what had happened, what had almost happened, and he couldn't ignore the part of him that was unable to deny his attraction to Sin any longer. He couldn't put the whole thing down to some silly mistake or being drunk, because he'd been noticing Sin for months.

The inclusion of Thierry the night before-- If that ruined things between them, if it took away an opportunity he hadn't planned to pursue but had been given the chance to follow anyway...

Boyd's eyebrows lowered as he watched Sin. "So-- if it hadn't been for Thierry last night..."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. It's bad enough that I behaved that way at all."

Sin shoved his panel into the pocket of his cargo pants and stood up, grabbing his pack. He seemed to be studiously avoiding making eye contact, his full mouth turned down into a scowl-- the first signs of an expression since the conversation had begun.

Boyd watched Sin for a moment, wondering what that meant and whether Sin regretted what had happened, the way he said he'd regretted ever trying to help Boyd in the first place. Not wanting to push it, or maybe more than that not wanting to find out that was true, he looked away and let the topic drop.

It wasn't long until it was time to head to the airport. The plane ride home was spent in silence between the two of them. Boyd didn't know what to say or even if he wanted to talk at all, and Sin didn't speak.

Boyd used his Agency panel to write the report during the long hours they were in the air. When he was finished and sent it off on the secure connection, he found himself staring at the blank screen. With nothing to distract him further and Sin's presence next to him, he couldn't help going over the previous night.

Logically, he understood why he had panicked. He knew it stemmed from Lou's murder and everything that had happened afterward. He'd known since then that any time he was held down or he lost control of a situation, it scared him. Even if the other person had no intention of hurting him, he couldn't help panicking, reliving memories at times and at other times simply reliving the fear in the automatic struggling of his body.

Even logically knowing that Sin probably hadn't intended or meant to hurt him didn't mean he'd been able to so easily convince the adrenaline-laced aftermath in his body. Or fully ignore the disturbed, nearly nauseated feeling at the thought of anyone bearing witness to the memory of a time he'd struggled for so long to deal with. It was a Domino effect of thoughts and reactions that triggered every time the idea came up that someone was going to touch his bare chest or see him when he didn't want to be seen.

And since he never even wanted to look at himself in the mirror-- the very idea of it aversive to him-- there was never a point when he wanted to be touched; wanted to be seen. Never a point when the idea of it didn't fill him with fear, and the act of it making it worse.

He found himself watching Sin out of the corner of his eye occasionally but Sin's expression hadn't changed. Although they sat next to each other, their arms occasionally brushing each other due to the close quarters, they interacted as little as if they were miles apart. Boyd tried to sleep a few times and was only marginally successful.

Boyd felt like they had been gone much longer than a couple of days when they made it back to the Agency. He checked to make sure the report had been received and found that the debriefing was set a few hours later. He decided to go home to shower and change.

For some reason, once he was home alone, time seemed to drag endlessly. He felt isolated in those empty rooms and it was more difficult not to think too much about everything that had happened on the trip. The argument with Sin. The night at Thierry's. Those heated few minutes with Sin and the subsequent fall out. He dropped his

forehead into his hands, sitting on the edge of his couch and closing his eyes against the thoughts pounding through his head.

When he left his house, he noticed his neighbor Mrs. Hensley watching him openly through her kitchen window. When she saw his head tilt in her direction, the blinds abruptly fell down with a swish. He resisted the urge to shake his head and just got into his vehicle.

She had been eyeing his family for most of his life but it had grown even more pronounced the last few years. He was fairly certain she'd witnessed a time he and Lou had messed around in the living room, one night when they'd forgotten to close the shades. The memory was bittersweet and filled with the weight of loss, and he sighed when he put his car into reverse. He couldn't think too much about Lou or the pain of it all would distract him during the meeting.

When he walked into the conference room, he saw that most of them were already there and seated. He paused very briefly before deciding to take his usual spot at Sin's side.

"Hey Boyd," Ryan greeted him with a smile.

"Hi," Boyd replied. He sat back in the chair, his fingers absently tightening around the flash drive in his pocket the way they had on and off since he'd been given the information. He was anxious to give it over to Carhart.

"I'm busy right after this," Ryan said quietly, when the door opened and Carhart came in. "But can I call you later? I wanted to see if we could set up a training thing like we talked about before."

"Of course," Boyd said with a nod, although his eyes strayed to Carhart like a magnet. The flash drive was burning a hole in his mind. He was tempted to give it to Carhart immediately but decided to wait until the appropriate time.

"I was think--"

"First of all, good job Boyd," Carhart cut Ryan off as soon as he sat down.

He glanced over at Jeffrey and nodded. The analyst seemed to take that as a cue because he began going through whatever documents he had before him. Jeffrey was one of the rare people who still preferred paperwork to electronic copies in some circumstances.

"Not only did Thierry come through for us for the first time, but you managed to develop a romantic relationship with him that may be helpful to us in the future."

Jeffrey's fingers paused briefly in flipping through his papers and he looked sidelong at Carhart before returning his gaze to Boyd with a raised eyebrow. He somehow managed to look disparaging and smug at once, without saying a single word. Meanwhile, Ryan looked at Boyd in surprise, his expression mirrored by Owen.

Boyd kept his expression perfectly blank, although he couldn't help a spike of irritation by the cavalier way Carhart had mentioned that. He hadn't planned to tell everyone since it wasn't really anyone's business anyway. And as far as that went, what did he mean by it being helpful in the future? He hoped Carhart simply meant they could play on the way Thierry had seemed to like him, and not that they expected any of that to happen again.

He dug into his pocket, wondering also why Carhart seemed so confident about information they hadn't even seen yet. The flash drive had been too heavily encrypted for Boyd to even know what was on it. He avoided eye contact with the others and held the flash drive out to Carhart.

"Do you want this now or later?"

"Jeffrey will take it. He's been decoding the information since early yesterday, but it is always good to have a hard copy."

Boyd felt the room go still around him. Early yesterday? How could they possibly... The flash drive felt heavy in his hand as he stared at Carhart.

"Yesterday?" His voice came out surprisingly even considering the way his mind was racing.

The General nodded, not seeming to notice anything was amiss. "Yes, Thierry e-mailed the information early yesterday morning. We haven't gotten far yet, but judging from the level of encryption-- well, Jeffrey can explain it."

Sin turned his head and stared at Boyd for a long moment before letting his pale green eyes drift away.

The information made Boyd's mouth go dry and he dropped his hand to the table, the flash drive still clutched in his hand. When he calculated the time difference in his head, that meant Thierry must have sent it to the Agency after their lunch but before Boyd had gone to his loft.

Anger coursed through Boyd. That bastard. Thierry had refused to talk business and had strung Boyd along until he'd felt the crunch of time-- until Thierry's advances had been what Boyd had felt were his sole hope for getting the information-- And all along it had already been sent?

Had the wine been to make him more compliant? All that talk that had made Boyd feel sympathetic toward him, all those times Thierry had changed the subject to a topic that Boyd could identify with, all those times Thierry had acted like he liked Boyd--

Had anything been real or had he been playing Boyd all along?

He'd gotten Boyd to have sex with him based on needing information he'd already sent, and then had the audacity to ask Boyd whether it had all been about work for him-- and Boyd had even felt bad for the man. He'd felt like he was the one being an asshole by not reciprocating affection toward Thierry-- affection he was now doubting had ever been anything more than part of a carefully crafted game.

All that second-guessing and the hesitation and the arguments with Sin and the possible degradation of their partnership-- for nothing. For a man who'd manipulated everything just so he could fuck an agent he wanted to fuck-- And the whole time Boyd

had known Thierry was known to be manipulative, he'd known he could be a seducer, but he'd thought he'd been in control. He'd thought it was the only choice he had...

He felt like he'd been punched in the gut. He sat back in his chair, hardly hearing a word of the meeting around him as he brooded about how furious and disgusted he was with the entire situation.

He started paying attention around the point that Jeffrey talked about the information more in detail.

"There are essentially two files I'll need to decrypt; what looks like a public-key cryptosystem and a one-time pad. The public-key will take a bit but I should be able to crack it. But the OTP will be a hassle." He looked up at Carhart with a serious look. "If they did that right, it's unbreakable."

Carhart stared at him flatly. "So then it's pointless?"

"Not necessarily," Jeffrey replied, straightening his back and looking very much in his element. "Thierry plays games but I doubt even he would have given us information we could not decipher. I have some ideas for dealing with this, including checking into some extra files on here that may be nothing. If I were a betting man, I'd say I'm going to have to decipher both main files and somehow combine the information between the two before I can fully understand what exactly is on here. But this is the level of encryption I would expect from Janus, so it lends credence to the idea that it may be legitimate. I just won't know until I'm done."

There was a brief silence as Carhart rubbed his chin and seemed to take in this information. "How long are we looking at?"

Jeffrey shook his head and pushed a sheet of paper back in place on top of the pile. "Hard to say, sir. It could be weeks; it could be months..." His lips turned down on the edges. "If I didn't have access to the sort of equipment I do here at the Agency, it could have potentially been years. A lot of it depends on how difficult or random the algorithms are. The one thing I know for sure is the OTP will take awhile. I'll have to rely

on Thierry to have given us a clue for that or we will get nowhere with it. But I'm confident I can figure something out."

The General shook his head in disgust. "Leave it to that bastard to give us information that may be out of date by the time it's decrypted. I guess we will just have to take it on faith that he didn't screw us."

Jeffrey smirked at that and looked over at Boyd; his tone light when he spoke. "Oh, I think some of it could be taken for fact."

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly but he didn't say anything.

The rest of the debriefing passed without incident, although Boyd noticed Jeffrey glancing at him in amusement now and then. He seemed to have taken some amount of delight in knowing what had happened between Thierry and Boyd. When the debriefing ended, Ryan reminded him about calling but had to rush off. Carhart and Owen were next, with Jeffrey glancing over his shoulder with a smirk one last time.

Boyd hadn't felt like walking out with any of them so he let them all leave. He planned to do the same with Sin, but his partner didn't leave right away. After a second of waiting, Boyd stood and turned to go.

"I hope you realize how badly you fucked yourself," Sin's deep voice rang out.

Boyd was half tempted to keep walking but Sin's words made him pause and look over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

Sin scoffed and looked at him flatly, pushing his chair back to stand. "I mean you should have listened to me instead of disregarding what I had to say."

Boyd shook his head impatiently. He felt like he'd already received enough slaps in the face with what he'd learned and the looks he'd received during the mission. He didn't want to have to stand around while Sin rubbed it in his face even more.

"Look, if you just wanted to keep me behind to tell me I told you so, I don't see why we need to talk about it. You said I would regret it. Knowing now how everything turned out, I do." He spread his hands. "Happy?"

Sin shrugged as he looked at Boyd scornfully, moving around the table to approach him. He looked his partner up and down, green eyes moving over him slowly before focusing on Boyd's face once again.

"It's strange how I thought I had you figured out, only to realize you're nothing like you appeared to be."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Boyd asked, irritation rising. He wanted to walk out of there but for some reason couldn't; not with Sin talking to him. "Weren't you the one trying to get me to go off with that girl in the diner? Why was one time of casual sex so acceptable to you there but suddenly so terrible when I made a mistake thinking I had to do it with Thierry?"

"Because doing something for yourself, and doing something for the Agency are entirely different things, you idiot." Sin stopped and stared at Boyd before shaking his head. "You pretty much submitted a resume to become a valentine, and you're attempting to compare that to sleeping with a waitress?"

"Valentine?" Boyd echoed blankly. The term sounded only vaguely familiar to him. "What are you talking about?"

There was a long silence as Sin glared at him with increasing impatience and hostility. "You are the worst. So willing to do anything for the cause, but you don't even know basic things about the cause you're rushing off to do anything for."

He walked closer to Boyd, until they were once again face to face. Sin raised his eyebrows, not looking at all sympathetic as he said coldly, "A valentine is a usually young, more attractive than average field operative who is sent on missions that require things of a sexual nature. And you put your name in the fucking hat."

Boyd's eyes widened and his eyebrows shot up. "What?" he burst out incredulously. "Why the hell would they-- But no one ever said anything about that. I don't want to have my name in for that kind of assignment."

"Too late, idiot. You basically asked for the title. Why the hell do you think I kept telling you not to do it? Because I was so desperate to ensure that you stay chaste?"

"Well a little more fucking information would have been helpful," Boyd shot back testily. Although he was largely angry with himself, he couldn't help lashing out at Sin. He made an easy target for his frustration. "I just thought you were pissed at me because it involved Thierry and the Agency, neither of which you seem to like. Why didn't you mention valentines before instead of being so vague in your warnings?"

Sin gave him another unimpressed stare. Judging from the look on his face, he seemed to think Boyd was a hopeless idiot.

"Because I didn't know you were completely ignorant. Don't blame me because you were so quick to fuck for information. I tried to warn you, and you didn't want to hear what I had to say. Take responsibility for your own bullshit. Or maybe next time, inquire as to why I'm so against it instead of just assuming whatever nonsense it was that you assumed."

Boyd grit his teeth and he looked away with his arms crossed. His eyebrows drew down broodingly, his eyes narrowing. He felt so incredibly frustrated by everything that had happened that he didn't even know what to do with the overwhelming feelings.

And the worst part was that he really didn't have anyone to push the blame on. He was furious with Thierry for manipulating him like that, for being so evasive and playing with Boyd until he was put in a position where he thought he had no choice. But he was also upset with himself for the possibility of that one mistake becoming something that could haunt him. With Thierry not there and himself otherwise to blame, there was no release for his anger and frustration.

After a moment he restlessly pushed his hair back from his face. "Well-- How do I tell them not to mark me that way? I only meant it to be a one-time thing, and even then it was because of the circumstances."

This earned him a completely incredulous stare and Sin grabbed his arm, appearing to lose all patience with him. "Don't you get it? Are you fucking oblivious? It's not up to you. Now that you put the idea in the air, they'll take it and run."

"But there has to be something I can do," Boyd nearly shouted back, the frustration making his eyes shine when he stared up at Sin. He jerked at his arm and made a sharp gesture while his other hand curled into a fist. His body thrummed with tension. "I don't know, a-- a review board, or-- what if I talked to General Carhart? What if he put in a word for me? I'd be terrible at that kind of assignment. They wouldn't even want me for it anyway. There has to be some sort of oversight that I can contact or lobby... Even if it's the Marshal."

By this time, Sin was just shaking his head and rubbing a hand across his face. He wasn't looking at Boyd anymore, and when he answered, it was with unfeeling finality. "They own you. They don't have to ask for permission. The only thing you had going for you was that you were a glorified babysitter for me. Now you let them know that you can be used for something else."

Boyd stared at Sin for a moment, searching for anything in his body language to say there was something he was holding back-- something to take away from the finality of Sin's words.

But there was nothing.

He felt his breath quickening as the reality of the situation crashed down around him. The idea of what he could be asked-- told-- to do, and the knowledge that he had gotten himself into this predicament all on his own. All because he hadn't understood Sin's warnings, and because the Agency had introduced him to this lifestyle but then seemed to keep so much pertinent information from him; even more than normal, from what he'd been able to gather from Ryan's responses in the past.

He turned away from Sin and pressed his hands against his face. He didn't even want to think about being assigned anything sexual with a target but it was there in his mind anyway. And with that came the inevitable thought about what he would do if that target tried to pull off his shirt and what if it happened like it had with Sin where he'd panicked? What would the Agency do to him if he failed a mission because of that? If they punished him it would only make the fear worse and the cycle would continue and what was he going to do? What was he supposed to do about any of this?

He felt his eyes pricking and he let out a rough breath. "Fuck," he hissed to himself.

"Exactly," Sin said without emotion, and walked out of the room.

## Chapter 18

For the past several days, Sin had seen no reason to leave his apartment or attempt to make any contact with people outside. He'd ignored the knock on the door when someone had come around seeking his supply card and he'd ignored the phone when, oddly enough, Ryan had called. He hadn't even bothered to leave in order to go to the gym. Being around people on the compound seemed like an unnecessary risk when he already felt like breaking someone's face just to watch them bleed.

He'd thought the anger and humiliation would dissipate over time, but it didn't. He felt the same hostility toward Boyd and the same scathing hatred about himself. The whole valentine situation didn't help matters. In fact, it only made things worse. It was now painfully obvious that Boyd knew nothing about the Agency, and even then he refused to listen to Sin's advice. In that regard, absence was definitely not making the heart grow fonder and Sin was pretty firm on the idea that Boyd was a completely arrogant fool.

If it were anyone else, Sin would likely think that Boyd deserved everything that would inevitably come to him with his new found status. He'd been too self assured and cocky to heed warnings, and too stubborn to even question his own decisions or wonder why Sin had been so adamant that he not do it. Even so, Sin wished that he wouldn't feel sorry for Boyd at all-- he especially wished that he didn't feel remorse about not saying more in France. It was actually ridiculously obnoxious that he regretted not doing so. It wasn't his problem and it wasn't his fault. He told himself this, damned Boyd as a headstrong idiot, and tried to leave it at that.

But his self-inflicted isolation only made him think about things all more. He thought about how ridiculous and stupid it was that after years of being ostracized by humanity in general, he'd allowed some stupid little civilian boy's rejection to hurt his feelings. Up until now he hadn't even thought such a scenario was possible. But then again, until recently he had never expected that he would go out and try to avenge anyone's pain either.

And what a brilliant plan that had been. His attempt to do right by Boyd had completely backfired. And it just kept backfiring. The worst part of it all was that Sin had realized that he was as pathetically needy as everyone else. Despite the years of isolation, despite his intensive training, despite hating most people in general-- he'd still wanted Boyd. As a friend at first, and then as something more complicated. A complication which had led to intense burning jealousy as he'd watched Boyd smile and preen for Thierry as he gave Sin the cold shoulder. The jealousy had morphed into a disturbing black fury at the thought of that pathetic little man getting to touch Boyd when Sin couldn't even talk to him anymore.

And then, of course, the remote.

Disgusted with himself, Sin stood and paced around his apartment. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration and tried to stop replaying everything that had happened in his mind. He tried to stop thinking about how good Boyd had felt as he'd writhed beneath him, and then how bad it had hurt to have been once again rejected. It was like giving a homeless kid a night in a luxury hotel. It only made a bad situation worse. Once a person knows that kind of pleasure, they just wanted it again. And again.

It was a stupid situation to be in, and he hated every moment of it. He wanted to hate Boyd for causing it all but somehow, it wasn't possible. Despite the anger and the bitterness, Sin still wanted to see him.

Irritated beyond belief by the thought, Sin had just decided to start working out for the third time that day when the phone rang. Half relieved and half hesitant, he walked over to the coffee table and grabbed it.

"What?"

"Get to my office within the hour," Connors' deep voice demanded gruffly.

"I'll be there with bells on."

Sin turned off the phone and scowled into space for a moment. A mission would be a great distraction but leaving the apartment was still a problem. He didn't have the

patience to deal with anyone at the moment. Shaking his head, Sin tried to put all of it aside and got ready to go. He was out of the apartment within minutes, ignoring the guards as he passed them. He ignored the bite of the wind ripping into his thin shirt, and didn't look at anyone even when he felt their stares on him.

When he got to the Tower, he took the stairs to Connors office on the seventeenth floor. Swiping his keycard in the restricted area, he stepped inside the administrative level which housed both Connors' and Vivienne's offices.

"What are you doing up here?" a feminine voice asked flatly as soon as he entered the wing.

Sin stared down at Ann dully, feeling entirely uninterested in the oncoming altercation. "Your father has summoned me. He can't live without my presence for long, you know."

Ann narrowed her eyes at him, mouth turning down into a frown. Her loathing of him pretty much topped anyone else's in the Agency but then again, she had a good reason. Because of him, her twin sister was being spoon-fed in a nursing home.

"I can't believe they allow you on this floor. Amazing how high your clearance continues to be despite your crimes."

"Yeah, well," he said coldly, eyes flicking up and down her frame before moving away dismissively. He summoned up a smirk despite the bad mood, just to push things, just to make her angrier despite the fact that he didn't have anything against her at all. "Apparently your father didn't think what I did was such a big crime, did he?"

The smack echoed throughout the empty lobby and he didn't even blink, smirk never leaving his face.

"Fuck you," she hissed and stormed in the direction of Vivienne's office.

"Not without dinner first," he called after her, but despite the snideness in his voice, his mouth twitched down into a frown and he dropped his eyes to the floor. There

was an almost immediate flash of a memory; milky white skin tattooed by a web of scars. No matter how cavalier he tried to act about it, Lydia would always haunt him.

Sin shook his head and continued towards Connors' office once again. He glanced briefly at Samuel, Connors' assistant, but didn't speak and walked right by him, ignoring the way the man's watchful gaze followed him.

No one knew much about Marshal Jacob Connors and most agents spent most of their careers without ever meeting the man despite the fact that their every action was dictated by his commands. He ran the Agency but very little was known about his history or how he'd gotten involved with it.

Sin knocked on the door and looked up at the camera with a kissy face as he waited for Connors to admit him into the room. There was a buzz, the light next to the doorknob turned green and he entered. It was probably the largest office in the building and was far more luxurious than Carhart's. Despite that, there were no personal effects to be found in the room, no hints about his life before the bombings and the war, not even a photograph of his wife or daughters. It was Spartan and cold, just like Connor's personality although his appearance wasn't always what people expected it to be. Most agents assumed Connors was like General Carhart; tall, muscular and obviously capable of holding his own in any number of combative situations. However Connors was quite the opposite and looked more like a politician than a soldier.

"I just saw your lovely daughter," Sin commented mildly as he sat in the chair across from Connor's desk. "She's as hostile as ever, Jacob. You must be proud."

"She's as hostile as she needs to be," Connors replied flatly, steel grey eyes glaring at Sin from under bushy silver eyebrows. "She's as wary as she needs to be. This explains why she is still here and why her twin is an invalid."

Sin folded his arms in front of him. "You're a cruel man, Jacob. Poor Lydia."

"Poor Lydia was an idiot and I do not further wish to discuss her, especially not with the creature that is responsible for her condition."

"She's responsible for her own condition," Sin replied coldly, refusing to admit any of the things that had been running through his mind only moments ago. "She's the one who deemed it necessary to drug me and then get the brilliant idea to sexually accost me."

"Precisely. And that is why I do not further wish to discuss her," Connors said shortly and turned his eyes back to whatever he was writing.

Sin said nothing and gazed at Connors calmly. He crossed one leg over the other and noted that the office was far warmer than his quarters ever were. There was a long stretch of silence as the Marshal finished whatever he'd been working on and then he pushed a palm panel across the table. Sin noticed that Connors watched him the entire time that he turned on the device, as though waiting for a reaction.

Sin turned on the panel, stared at the image, and snorted. "Wow."

"Question?"

"Isn't this the guy who rebuilds poor neighborhoods and donates all of his money to charities?" Sin asked, dark eyebrows arched slightly as he thumbed through the documents on the panel.

"Yes."

Sin nearly laughed. "Wow."

"It should be noted," Connors began coldly, "that he also donates a considerable sum of his money to Janus, which in turn leads to them purchasing arms."

Sin raised his eyebrows, a smirk playing on his lips. "Feeling the need to justify yourself, Jacob?"

"Why would I feel the need to justify myself to something like you?"

Sin shrugged and continued to read the assignment. After another moment he snorted with derision. "So this guy is so squeaky clean that you have to manufacture dirt

on him? I don't appreciate having credit for my assassinations given to random, inept hitmen."

"Do you understand the assignment?" Connors asked in a clipped tone, not responding to Sin's comments.

"Yes. Although, you realize that it won't be complete for a few weeks. Not more than a month though," Sin replied as he continued to go through the information.

"That's fine. Just get it done and don't fuck up." The warning tone in Connors' voice made it clear what would happen if he did.

"I'll try not to, darling, I really will." Sin stood up and slid the panel into his pocket. "I'll need supplies and money."

Connors nodded, already going back to what he'd been doing. "Fill out a supply card and see Charles. You're given clearance for whatever you need for this assignment."

Sin turned to leave but just as he began to open the door, Connors spoke again. "Are you fucking Vivienne's boy?"

Sin froze completely. "Why would you ask me that?"

"It's a yes or no question, Agent Vega."

"No. I'm not."

Connors snorted softly. "Didn't think so. The moment I actually believed you were sexually functional, I'd have you neutered. Dismissed."

Sin grit his teeth, hand tightening around the doorknob as he fought the urge to turn around and give Connors exactly what he deserved. He stood there for a long moment before forcing himself to leave the office without giving into his sudden craving for violence. He didn't know why Connors asked him that, and at the moment he didn't

care. Despite the fact that he hated Connors, he was very thankful for having an excuse to be gone for several weeks.

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Boyd had spent the last week at his house, trying to stay as far away from the Agency as he could. As if it would change anything. As if his absence would make them reconsider his status.

The churning disgust and frustration he'd felt over the knowledge of the valentines, the knowledge that he'd fucked himself over so thoroughly, had only grown at first. But with enough time to ruminate over the whole thing, he'd had to acknowledge that there was nothing he could do about it now.

With how happy Carhart had been about the 'romantic relationship,' he highly doubted the man would say anything on Boyd's behalf-- and according to Sin that wouldn't have mattered anyway even if he had. The only other option would have been to talk to his mother but that was the last thing he would do. There was no way she would help him out in this situation. He knew she was likely to be angry with him over it in some way, because that always seemed to be the case when he messed up on small levels. And this was definitely not small.

As time passed, he started to wonder if maybe he would be lucky. Maybe they would realize he would be a really poor fit for that and they wouldn't give him the status. Or even if they did, maybe he wouldn't ever have to receive any assignments since he was only meant to be Sin's partner. On the other hand, he darkly pointed out to himself, it wasn't like his time was taken up 24/7 by Sin. So, as Sin said, now they knew he could be used for something else...

It was ridiculous. Absolutely, completely stupid and so frustrating. But as the days passed, the anxiety and worry could only dull slowly until he started to feel resigned.

Ryan called a few times and Boyd ignored them at first. He didn't know what made him finally pick up but when they started talking, he felt a little better that he had. He hadn't realized how depressed he'd been until he had human contact with someone who didn't seem to think he was the stupidest piece of shit to ever walk the Earth.

It emboldened him a bit and made him feel more capable of following through on his promise to train Ryan in combat, who had never been able to be trained before due to his illness. Apparently he'd tried to be a field agent at one point and it had failed spectacularly, but Boyd thought that part of it may have been that the training Ryan had been doing had been built for a healthy person. Ryan was bound to fail something so rigorous when he had special considerations to take for his body. The lung sickness made it so he couldn't work out for long periods at a time.

So it was that they'd picked a day to meet at the Agency gym. It was the first time Boyd had been on the compound since that fateful debriefing.

He arrived early to the Agency, primarily because he had to be certain there would be space for Ryan and him at the training room. He could tell something was different when he walked into the training room; one of the guards looked at him sidelong and smirked. After a closer look, Boyd realized that it was Dennis McNichols. It wasn't too surprising considering he'd run into Dennis and Harry at the training room before, but at least this time Harry was notably absent.

Still that didn't stop Dennis from releasing a low wolf whistle as he walked by.

"Well if it isn't the Agency's latest valentine op," Dennis said to the man beside him, pretending to leer at Boyd. "He must not have been getting enough from his partner if he volunteered for that gig."

"Yeah right, dude. No one volunteers."

Boyd ignored them and kept walking, trying not to let the comments affect him. He wasn't entirely successful. Their words continued to float after him.

"He did. You can ask anyone. Must have been really hard up to get ass pounded to go that route, but hey, whatever floats his boat-- am I right?"

"That's pretty sick. It's not like there's some huge amount of gay valentines as it is. He'll get a lot more ass pounding than he thought--"

As Boyd selected a side of the gym to meet Ryan, he was glad that he was finally out of earshot. He didn't know who in the unit had leaked the Thierry situation, but it was obviously now well known on the compound. Apparently valentine agents had always existed but the fact that Vivienne's son was one was something to talk about. People who had already disliked him now had even more ammunition to use against him, and Boyd doubted this would be the last incident, or the worst.

He tried to ignore the way that thought clenched his stomach; the way he felt disturbed by the idea of one more private thing about himself becoming public. He'd never been the sort of person to enjoy being the center of attention and having malicious stares centered on him and people joking about his future didn't help matters. It was made even worse by the fact that he regretted the whole thing that had started this all in the first place. His pride felt wounded by having to constantly face his own faults.

He did enough berating of himself on his own; he didn't need help from the peanut gallery.

It didn't take long for Ryan to arrive, and when he did he stopped at the front entrance. Boyd could see him exchanging words with Dennis and the other man by the door, but he had no idea what was being said. Judging from the impatient look on Ryan's face, their trash talk hadn't stopped when Boyd had crossed the room.

Whatever they were saying ended with Ryan exclaiming, "Well you can basically just go to hell.", before stalking across the room. His thin face was screwed up in a scowl but when his eyes fell on Boyd, he grinned.

"Hey!"

"Hey," Boyd greeted in return. He resolved to push away all the darker thoughts he'd been immersed in for the past week and focus solely on helping Ryan. He turned and motioned Ryan to follow him as he headed toward the doors in the back of the room. "I reserved us a private room. I thought it would be easier."

Ryan nodded, unbuttoning the toggles on his wool coat. "Sweet. I wasn't looking forward to making a fool of myself in front of everyone."

Boyd shrugged. "I doubt that would happen but it's harder to learn anything, no matter your proficiency, when everyone is staring at you. Or you feel like they are."

They headed into the private room and Boyd turned around to shut the door. He saw Dennis watching them with a smirk, leaning over to make a comment to the guard next to him. He didn't have to hear it to know Dennis was probably making some comment about what they would really be doing behind closed doors.

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he closed the door firmly. He turned toward Ryan and was glad to see his friend didn't appear to have noticed the exchange. Not that it mattered, since he must have heard enough walking in. Boyd took off his trench coat and set it to the side of the room by Ryan's wool coat, suppressing a sigh.

"Ready?" he asked Ryan.

"Ready as ready can be. Except uh, I don't know how long I'll last. I've gotten a bad cough since last night," Ryan said apologetically. "It's the cold air, I think."

"That's alright."

Boyd made note of the way Ryan stood. He didn't want to tell Ryan he was checking his posture because he would automatically straighten. Ryan's hands were shoved in his pockets and his shoulders were a little hunched. His head was forward and a little down, his feet placed fairly close to each other.

"First," Boyd said, "I should tell you that although I'm going to spar with you, your true goal should be to avoid physical fights unless you're positive you can put all your

strength into the blow and you're aiming to harm. Half-hearted attacks will likely only annoy the person you're attacking, and will do you more harm than good."

Ryan nodded, looking thoughtful about that. He reached up to shove his mess of black cowlicks and curls out of his eyes. "How long did it take you to get good?"

Boyd considered that as he stretched his arms. "I still have a long way to go, honestly. But I didn't start feeling more confident in one-on-one fights for a few months. It takes awhile to learn and I had a steep learning curve. I'd led a very sedentary lifestyle."

"Same," Ryan said, smirking. "Carrying all of my stuff to the Tower from my apartment is as active as I get. But that being said, how did you... I dunno-- how did you know what to do in a fight? Even with training, wasn't it hard to know how to react once you were in a for real confrontation?"

"It was. You never know fully what to expect, which is partially why I try to avoid confrontations in the first place. That's probably the best place to start. And to do that, you have to consider what your body language says."

He nodded toward Ryan's posture. "Right now, you'd be a good target and would attract attention. You look timid, almost apologetic for your existence and that's easily preyed upon. You should stand with your back straight," he demonstrated each point by following it with his own body, "and slide your feet apart about your shoulder length, one a little forward, one a little back. Keep your body loose, particularly your knees, elbows, and shoulders. Acknowledge the presence of those around you, but you don't need to make eye contact for that; you can look at them around their nose level and they'll know you're aware of them even if you aren't necessarily inviting interaction."

He paused, then shot Ryan a questioning look. "I've never taught anyone this before so I'm trying to think what helped me most. But I don't know how much you already know. Are you fine with an overview like this first, or would you rather go straight to physical sparring?"

Ryan shook his head, trying to follow Boyd's directions and just managing to look awkward. "No, it's good! The last person I trained with already expected me to know everything because I'm Connors' ward." Ryan frowned and tried to keep himself loose but just managed to look like he was intoxicated. His face twisted in frustration.

"I look like a wet ragdoll," he complained.

"You don't," Boyd assured him with a slight smile. "You're just thinking too much. This is also something you can easily practice any time, even in your room alone; just try to loosen your joints and strengthen your base. The basic concept is that standing like this," he placed his feet next to each other, "puts me in a position where my body's wider on top, if you look at my shoulders versus my feet.

"But if I put my feet apart and bend my knees a little," and he did so, "the base of my strength is in my lower body. Think of it like..." He tried to think of a way to make it click for Ryan. "Your action figures. You'll note they also stand with their legs apart and knees bent."

Ryan nodded and did his best to imitate Boyd. "I never noticed that about my action figures but it's totally true," he murmured and adjusted his body, bending his knees and rolling his shoulders as he tried to get comfortable in the position. "How's this? Any better?"

"Excellent." Boyd nodded approvingly. "Most of the hostiles we deal with are part of groups that plan ahead, and as a result the individual people likely do too. If someone intends to attack you, they'll probably have at least one scenario in mind that they'll be operating on. If you don't follow that scenario, sometimes you can divert or stop a situation from escalating because the attacker doesn't know how to react. We can work on that more another time if you wish; it's a lesson in its own right and works best if I give you examples."

"Sweet," Ryan said with a grin. He rolled his shoulders and shot Boyd a pleased look.

"For today, I'll give you some pointers for physical attacks. What you want to keep in mind is that, regardless of your opponent or his size, he's still human. He may be stronger or quicker, but he has weaknesses as well. Work with your strengths and aim them at his weaknesses. For instance..." Standing up straight, Boyd pointed to his head. "No human can attack for long if he can't breathe. If your aim is a person's head, think about the what would be most disruptive. Aim for the eyes, the nose... Clapping both hands over the ears can break an eardrum or possibly cause a concussion. You can strike into the mouth or up the chin to cause damage. You could use the edge of your hand on the throat."

Boyd pointed down to his chest. "Targets in the middle of the body are generally less serious and are more likely to disrupt your attacker's breathing rather than cause permanent injury. The solar plexus," he pointed to where his ribs came together in the center of his chest, "is a sensitive nerve area that you can aim for. You can also try the stomach, or, of course, the groin. It's generally more effective to knee upward into the groin rather than kicking into it."

"The lower body is best to aim for when you want to limit the mobility of your attacker. The knee is the most serious. You can knock a person completely off balance with a properly aimed strike at the side or back of the knee, or break their kneecaps if you go from the front. The bones are difficult to break at the shins and ankles but attacks there can be very painful. The top of the foot-- the instep-- is generally more sensitive and less protected than the toes. Bones are also small and breakable there, making them a good target."

Boyd paused. "I know this is a lot of information at once so stop me any time with questions. But does it make sense to you so far?"

Ryan nodded slowly, taking everything in. "Yeah it does, it's actually pretty easy to remember when you think of it in those terms." He looked Boyd over for a moment and focused on his chest. "So for someone like me, what would be the best to strike at first? The chest so that breathing is difficult or the lower body to temporarily immobilize?"

"It depends on the situation and the distance," Boyd said with a shrug. "When you attack, you'll need to keep in mind what weapons they may have and what your intentions are. If you're trying to get away, you'll likely want to limit their mobility. But if, for instance, they have a gun, even if they can't run they can still shoot you, so at that point you'd want to get away however you possibly can and run for the nearest cover. Consider two main questions: what do you have free and what targets are available? Your arms and legs are weapons in and of themselves, as is anything else you may have with you. Keys, a pen, a bag-- anything can be a weapon if you want it to be."

He walked closer to Ryan, stopping within the usual speaking distance. "That being said, in my experience, I tend to go for the head or legs. For you, I can't be certain until I see what would affect your lungs the most, but I feel as though short staccato attacks will be best. If you uncoil your limbs from beside your body and pivot your hips with the movement, you put more strength into the hit. By limiting yourself to quick bursts of energy, I think it may keep you from overexerting yourself. If that's the case, I would suggest going for the legs if it's a less serious situation, and the head if it isn't. The reason I say that is it takes more strength to affect a person seriously in the chest and if you want to disrupt breathing you can aim for the throat instead." Boyd tilted his head slightly. "It's difficult to answer since so much of it is dependent on the situation."

"I guess the only way to know for sure is to experiment or whatever, right?" Ryan paused and smiled sheepishly. "Don't be too hard on me, okay? I'm kind of a wimp."

"Attack me first and I'll see what your natural strengths and weaknesses are," Boyd replied, walking within reaching distance. Ryan looked a little uncertain, but Boyd waited. "Be confident; even fear or anger can be used against you, or make you an easier target. Your greatest asset is a solid base that allows you to breathe and access the inherent strength you have in your body."

After a few moments, Ryan suddenly lunged. Boyd stepped to the side easily, caught Ryan as he passed and pulled his arm up behind his back with his other hand held at his neck. He was smooth and firm with his gestures, but he didn't hurt Ryan at all.

"If I had a knife, I could have killed you there," Boyd said into Ryan's ear. "I wasn't able to evade because you're weak or useless. I was able to because I could easily anticipate your intentions from your body language. You haven't had proper training, so you were a little clumsy and you put yourself off-balance almost immediately, which gave me easy access to doing what I wanted. In the future, know exactly what you intend before you do anything and have several scenarios as contingencies in case I, as your attacker, anticipate your moves." Boyd released Ryan and walked in front of him. "Just now, I suspect your sole goal was to attack, right?" Ryan looked a little embarrassed. "I told you I sucked," he said almost apologetically.

"Not at all," Boyd said firmly. "How are you supposed to know what to do before you ever try it? That's why we're here. You can overcome me if you work against my weaknesses and use your strengths." He lifted a finger to his temple. "For you and me, our minds are the quickest part of us and you're more intelligent than I am. Use that to your advantage. Someone who relies solely on brute strength or a weapon may have power in the sheer force or terror of the attack, but a weapon can be disarmed and brute strength can be evaded. What can't be taken from you are your quick wits, your ability to think, and improvisation."

He paused, considering the way Ryan seemed to think as far as he could tell from briefings and hanging out with him. He added, "Think of possible scenarios like variables. Like a computer simulation. Don't imagine yourself to suddenly be able to do something that's not within the parameters of your abilities, but consider all the things you could do-- the actions you could take and the likely reaction-- and choose accordingly at the time. And if that doesn't work the way you wanted, try something else."

Ryan tilted his head, reaching up to adjust his glasses as he considered that. "That's a cool way of putting it. I mean, my brain is so on overdrive all the time that it could probably work, assuming I don't completely freak out. But, I mean... how many variables are there really in a fight?"

"There could be a lot. That's why you need to be ready to improvise. Honestly, many of my missions don't involve physical fights; I simply avoid any situation that I can because I'm better at distracting and confusing than I am at overpowering." Dropping his hands at his sides, Boyd moved back to the position he was before and nodded at Ryan. "Try again, but this time know exactly what you plan to do. Are you going to grab my arm? Do you plan to hit me in the throat? If I move from that, will you use the heel of your hand to hit my jaw upward? Do you plan to hit me in the nose? If done with enough force, that could temporarily blur a person's vision. Think this through, taking all the time you need, and then attack. I'll be ready."

Ryan stared at Boyd for a long moment, doing his best to follow the instructions. His gaze flitted around, resting in certain areas on Boyd's body as he considered what he could do and how. Boyd watched him with a blank expression and this time when Ryan attacked, he got closer before Boyd evaded. He tried a few contingency plans, but Boyd was there each time, blocking the hand to his throat and pushing his arm away before he was able to elbow him.

"Better," Boyd said as he stepped away after releasing Ryan from immobility again. "But you still don't put your full strength into it."

Ryan was already breathing a little hard after even that brief exertion and he shook his head. "I don't want to hurt you..."

"Don't think about that," Boyd replied, stepping back and shaking out his limbs. "Any enemy you face won't think the same back. You need to go into it as if I'm someone who would severely injure you. If you don't learn to go full force, you'll be more likely to hold yourself back against someone you need to attack. And then you may anger them more than anything."

Holding his hands loosely to his sides, Boyd stepped in front of Ryan once more and nodded at him. "Try again."

The training went on for quite some time. For the most part, Boyd was able to easily evade or withstand anything Ryan tried, but each time, Boyd stopped and

explained to him why he'd been able to do so. He illustrated to Ryan in slow-motion what should be done next time to improve and asked him to do the same back to him. Any time Ryan did something incorrect even in slow-motion Boyd grabbed his hands and showed him how to do it right and where to aim. Then he moved on to the next attack.

It didn't take long before Ryan was visibly affected. A sheen of sweat appeared on his skin and he got winded very quickly. He wheezed when out of breath and several times Boyd stepped back and talked about something that required a long explanation. Having an interim that did not require them physically interacting allowed Ryan to get his breath back without Boyd ever actually saying anything about how quickly he grew tired.

Boyd pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of each type of weapon he had used, all of them displayed along the walls. Telling Ryan when to use it and why was often accompanied by stories of his own experiences. He told him when he failed or succeeded, and the reasons he believed this was the case. If Ryan showed any sense of not understanding, Boyd asked enough questions until he understood what was confusing him and then addressed the issue. After awhile, Ryan looked ready to fall over so Boyd sat down on the mat and waved for Ryan to do the same.

"I'm tired," he explained when Ryan looked at him questioningly.

Ryan's breath drew in and out with a faint, rattling wheeze. Flopping onto the mat, he obviously worked on catching his breath. He looked exhausted and a little sick and Boyd wondered if he had inadvertently pushed Ryan too hard. Boyd waited to do anything until Ryan was a little calmer, when he could concentrate on Boyd and not on his inability to properly breathe.

"This should be enough for the day," Boyd said finally. "There's a lot for you to think about. I think you're doing well, though, and I'm not just saying that. I think your greatest issue right now is your lack of confidence and your fear of your own body."

That's understandable but it's also a good thing, in a way. That's something you can work on without overwhelming yourself physically."

There was a rustle of moment as Ryan shook his head, reaching a thin arm up to wipe sweat from his face. He looked so fragile lying there on the mat that it was hard to picture him actually fighting anyone extensively. Although Boyd himself had been thinner than normal at the start of his training, Ryan looked severely underweight.

"I feel like such a weak ass," Ryan said disparagingly. "How can I fight if I get so exhausted?"

"First of all, try not to fight. If you have to fight, try to make it short. Even though you tire more easily, with enough practice you're likely to improve. When I first started with David I felt exhausted right away but over time my stamina's increased."

Boyd leaned back on his hands, watching Ryan in consideration as he struggled to breathe. "You'll have to be careful about monitoring your health and knowing when it's time to retreat. But your appearance can also work to your advantage. You'll be underestimated often, and speaking as someone who has that happen a lot, it can be very helpful. I can walk straight into enemy territory because I blend in, or fumble awkwardly with things when people glance my way and in general just seem harmless. Even if someone stares at me, they seem to often think I look weak and they dismiss me. That's given me the advantage of surprise, and we may want to work on something similar for you."

Ryan squinted at Boyd as he panted, reaching up to wipe sweat from his forehead and damp hair. "Is that really what you do a lot? I'd imagined that you just... I don't know, I figured all of you field guys just went in and messed everyone up since you're all bad ass like Hsin."

Boyd shook his head. "No one's like Sin. I couldn't possibly win in a fight against him, and neither could anyone else. Since I can't fight the way he does, with brute strength and speed, I avoid fights where I can and fight dirty when I can't. It's not uncommon for me to get hurt on missions and often have to resort to hitting people on

the head to get them out of my way once it becomes physical. I don't have near the strength I would need to fight the way you would assume. I have to use my environment and knowledge of the situation to my advantage and go from there."

Ryan frowned, looking curious. "So should my goal be to fight like you or get as good as him? Er-- not like you fight bad or anything. I meant, should I try to fight like him, or anyone else who fights like that? How would you even describe his style of fighting?"

"I think your goal should be closer to my style for now," Boyd replied. "At least until you know your style better. If you wanted to go a different route, you may want to see if David Nakamura would take you on. He could train you in any style you liked, I suspect. But as for Sin's style..."

Boyd thought about it a moment, looking away contemplatively. "His is nearly impossible to emulate. He's incredibly fast and light on his feet, but he has the brute strength necessary to rip a person apart. There are so few people like him that I think he would be a poor goal even for the most skilled of martial artists. To be Sin, you would need extreme quickness, incredible strength, and be mentally prepared to take a human life." There was a pause as Ryan seemed to mull this over. He tucked unruly strands of sweaty hair behind one ear. "Does he always go in, guns blazing?"

"For the most part, yes. And even the times he doesn't, fights seem to erupt. He's killed dozens of people in my presence before. So trying to be like him..." Boyd trailed off and shook his head. "There isn't a right or wrong way. But you have to understand that his prowess comes at a price. Blood spills easier with each of his attacks than it does for mine."

Ryan frowned slightly. "Why do you think he kills when he could simply incapacitate? Wouldn't it be easier to not have to kill? Like... faster?"

Boyd considered that for a moment before he shook his head. "I don't know for sure but honestly, it's probably faster for him to kill than incapacitate. He's simply that

strong and quick. And if they're dead, he knows they won't come back to attack him. On the other hand, he's created enemies by slaying friends and family."

"I bet one day that will come back to bite him in the ass too," Ryan mumbled softly, not looking altogether pleased with the idea. "There are a lot of people even here who want to hurt Hsin simply because they assume he's a butcher without even knowing anything about stuff he's actually done. Imagine how people who've witnessed his actions must feel." Ryan was quiet for a moment before he shook his head. "I want to learn how you fight. It seems like it'd be the best for me."

"It probably is," Boyd said with a nod. "I can continue to help you, but I think you should really consult David Nakamura as well. I can talk to him if you want. I didn't see his name on the roster for awhile, so I can only assume he's on vacation."

Ryan opened his mouth to reply but before he could, the door opened. He looked over his shoulder and grimaced briefly before giving a forced smile. "Hey Annabelle."

Ann stopped in front of him, staring down disapprovingly, slender hands placed on her hips. "Why are you doing this again?"

Ryan frowned at her and got to his feet, breath still coming out in a wheeze. "I'm not trying to be a field agent anymore if that's what you're saying. I just want to learn and Boyd is helping me."

Ann's hazel eyes snapped to Boyd and she made a face. "Why would you encourage this?"

"He's my friend," he replied simply. "And he asked for help with training. I understand your concern, but I'm aware of his condition and I won't harm him."

Ann stared at him for a long moment before switching her steady gaze to Ryan. "You sound terrible. Did you take your medication?"

"Yes, Ann. God, I'm not retarded you know."

"Then why are you wheezing? Where's your inhaler?"

"Ann!"

She frowned at him, reaching out to touch the side of his face. "You're so sweaty and clammy. Why don't you just call it quits for now?"

Ryan grit his teeth, giving her a furious glare. "Why don't you just stop embarrassing me?"

Ann rolled her eyes and stood up straight. "I didn't realize that showing concern for my brother was so humiliating, but I'll keep that in mind."

She and Ryan stared at each other for a long moment, before her eyes slowly wandered over to Boyd. She looked him up and down clinically, meeting his gaze and holding it for an extended stretch of time.

"I just saw your charming partner."

"Where?"

Ann turned back to Ryan, smoothing a hand over his damp hair and shaking her head slightly. She opened the canvas bag she was holding in addition to her purse and extracted a bottle of water.

"On the seventeenth floor, going to the Marshal's office," she said, handing the bottle to Ryan.

"Oh." Boyd wondered if Sin had received another solo mission. With the thought came the question of whether he would ever receive solo missions as well-- ones with a valentine focus rather than the normal kind. And if so, how often? Would he have to go see Marshal Connors as well?

"Did he say anything?" Boyd continued after a second.

"Oh yes," Ann said, looking over to give him another long look. "He was as vile as ever. I was wondering how you work with him, but maybe he's less of a scumbag with you."

Boyd studied her for a moment and then shrugged. "We get along well enough for the most part. It just took some time to acclimate to his personality."

"Right." Seeming to lose interest in Boyd entirely, Ann focused on Ryan again. "If you want him to continue with this nonsense, I suggest you bring your inhaler and do it on a day when you aren't already breathing terribly. If you won't listen, I'll report this to medical and you can deal with them instead of me. Understood?"

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Yes, mother hen."

"Fine." She kissed his forehead and stood up straight. "Dinner tomorrow. Take care of yourself."

Ann didn't give Boyd another look as she strode out of the room again. Ryan shook his head and smiled a bit apologetically.

"Have you ever met her? She's pretty... abrupt."

"I hadn't formally met her before, no," Boyd replied. He stood and walked to the side of the room to grab some fresh towels that were stocked on a shelf. He walked back over to Ryan and tossed one into his lap.

Ryan nodded and finished the water, setting it aside and wiping his face with the towel. There was a thoughtful silence for a moment, and then he glanced at Boyd sidelong.

"Have you talked to Sin lately?"

"Not since after the debriefing," Boyd said, slightly subdued. He looked away from Ryan, his eyes narrowing. He wiped his face with the towel, his voice a little muffled when he asked, "Why?"

"I dunno..." the R&D agent trailed off slightly before clearing his throat and sitting up straight. He looked hesitant about whatever he was about to say but pushed on anyway. "I guess I just wondered if stuff was cool with you two after... Thierry."

Boyd watched Ryan for a long moment and then sighed. He sat back down on the mat, slouching forward as he looked away pensively. "I don't know. I don't think it is, really. He was angry with me for ignoring all his warnings. But I didn't know about valentines. I had no idea anything like that existed. If I had..." His expression pinched and he shook his head.

Ryan frowned slightly, seeming to think this over. After a moment he got to his feet and said slowly, "You know, I don't know if anyone really knows other than word of mouth. They don't really tell everyone everything until it's necessary, you know?"

"On topics like that I wish they had. I feel like an idiot for how this all turned out and I wish I could take it back. Now Sin says I'm going to get that status and they can make me do anything they want. And I don't know anything about it-- what I'd have to do, or how often, or what happens if I can't follow through on something they expect of me..."

He looked up at Ryan, not bothering to hide the worry that had been plaguing him. "Do you know anything? What should I expect now? And is it positive I'll become a valentine or is it possible they wouldn't assign me?"

Ryan grimaced and leaned against the wall, folding his arms over his t-shirt. He traced lines on the floor with the toe of his sneaker, lips eyebrows bunched together over the rim of his glasses. "Brutal honesty? Yeah, they're probably gonna give you valentine designation. It's hard to find people with the chops to pull it off, and right now it looks like you can and are willing to take that step without them even twisting your arm. It would be really weird if they didn't designate you, to be honest. But even if they do, it might be awhile before it even really matters. Like, full on valentine missions are pretty rare. Seduction may be the oldest tool in the book but there aren't many people around anymore who would buy it. Most people, especially in our world, like... are way too

suspicious, you know? Most valentines are just distraction missions. Smile at person A, while person B slips in the back, or do like a honey trap and draw someone into an alley and our guys are waiting-- you know?"

Boyd sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. He couldn't say he hadn't been expecting that answer but it was still disappointing, even if he couldn't blame anyone but himself. At least it didn't sound like it was something he would have to worry about happening frequently. Not that the thought was much comfort even in his own mind.

He was silent for a moment before he pushed himself to a stand and crossed his arms. He looked away with a brooding pull on his eyes. "You know the worst part? It was all meaningless. I never would've had sex with him if I hadn't thought it was necessary to get the information, but Thierry played me. He sent the Intel here before I even went to his house. And the whole night, every time I tried to get the information he just sidestepped until I felt like it was the only way. So I end up with that designation for the rest of my life because he wanted to fuck me, and I was so worried about the consequences of failing that I went along with it."

His expression tightened in anger briefly before it shifted to frustration. "And now, everything with Sin... I thought-- Well, we almost--" He frowned and waved a hand. "But it's all pointless now. He's disgusted with me and thinks I'm an idiot and he's right."

"What's pointless?" Ryan asked, eyebrows raising. "What happened?"

Boyd sighed again. He ran a hand somewhat restlessly back through his hair and turned to look at Ryan more fully. "We got into an argument when I got back from Thierry's. He had me against the wall and somehow from there we started kissing. We were nearly to sex when I panicked."

At this, Ryan's mouth dropped open. He made a few unintelligible sounds and gestured vaguely before shaking his head back and forth. "Whoa! Like-- whoa! I had a feeling he liked you but, I didn't know it was that... intense yet."

Boyd looked at Ryan with drawn eyebrows. "What gave you the impression that he liked me?"

Ryan shrugged, straightening his t-shirt and shifting slightly. A faint look of discomfort shrouded his thin face and he turned redder than the flush that already stained his pale skin.

"Well for one, he always watches you during briefings and stuff. Like, intently. But then again, he's so not like... socially normal that I thought maybe that's just a thing of his. But then... like, okay, so don't freak out on me about this it was a total accident and a total coincidence, but one night awhile ago I saw him storming back into the compound by himself after a mission. He looked so freaking pissed and upset, that I got really curious because I knew both of you were supposed to be together. So later on when I went home I kept thinking about it and I kind of saw you two on the feed..."

Boyd's eyebrows ticked up slightly as he thought back on that night. He wasn't surprised to know that anyone had overseen that, considering it had been right in view of the very same cameras he'd been using to watch Sin.

"Oh." Boyd paused. "That did get intense."

"Yeah... so I kind of drew my own conclusions," Ryan said sheepishly. "That he liked you in a kind of aggressive... alarming way."

Boyd let out a short, humorless laugh at that. "That's probably a good way of putting it. I don't even know what to do about it. I just--" He stopped himself, his eyes narrowing as frustration moved within him the way it always seemed to in regards to Sin.

"He makes me so angry sometimes. I've never met anyone who manages to get under my skin in a way that makes me react so poorly. But I can't stop being intrigued by him. And when we kissed--" He shook his head, his eyes narrowing in remembrance. "It was addictive and... hungry. It sounds stupid to say but it felt electric. Everything

about him riles me up, in good ways and bad, and there are times it drives me nuts and other times I feel like I never want to walk away even if I could."

By the time he was done talking, Ryan's eyes had widened slightly. For someone who had admitted to having a crush on Sin, he didn't appear envious at all. There was a kind of wonder in his expression, as if he was witnessing something miraculous.

"If it's like that for you, I bet it's the same for him which is pretty freaking wow considering... I dunno. You know how antisocial he is."

"I don't know what he thinks but I'm not going to assume he feels the same way," Boyd said, his tone more resigned than anything. "Obviously he must be physically attracted to me considering the situations we've been in but it seems more and more that he doesn't like me as a person. It took me so long to convince him I wasn't out to get him and even then he kept distrusting everything I did. And now after everything with Thierry..." He shook his head. "He thinks I'm an idiot and an asshole and I don't know if that will ever change enough for it to matter."

"But why?" Ryan pressed. "Because you did the whole valentine thing unknowingly?"

"Yes. And because I ignored him every time he tried to warn me. And--" He stopped and lifted his hands in a gesture before dropping them at his sides. "And before that we were already having troubles because of something else that happened. The more that happens, the less I feel like there's a way out of any of it."

They stood in silence for a few moments with Ryan watching him carefully. He was fiddling with his t-shirt and scuffing his sneaker against the floor as he appeared to turn something over in his mind. His expression went through a variety of metamorphoses before he finally sighed and shook his head.

"Y'know, I'm not a big expert on this stuff. I've never even been in a real relationship and I'm twenty-five, but like..." He trailed off for a minute, bit his lip and then shrugged before pressing on. "But I saw the way both of you guys were at the start of

this whole thing, and if you two could have that kind of intense fire stuff considering the way you both were... I dunno, I wouldn't give up so easy. But then again, maybe I read too much fanfic."

Boyd watched Ryan for an extended moment and then looked away. His expression was pensive and his fingers curled around one side of the towel before he pulled it off.

"We'll see," he said dubiously and turned toward the door. "I think I'm going to leave. Are you going to stay longer? We do technically have the room for another fifteen minutes."

"I'm pretty beat, I should probably go."

Boyd nodded as they started to walk to the door. "You did well for the first session."

Ryan didn't look entirely convinced but he smiled anyway. "Thanks. I appreciate you helping me. Everyone else thinks it's some huge waste of time with my condition and what not."

"Well, they're wrong," Boyd said firmly and without hesitation. "I'll help you whenever I can."

That earned him another sincere smile. "You're awesome. I don't care what anyone says."

Boyd smiled sidelong at Ryan. "Thank you," he said, truly meaning it. He'd been feeling so down on himself lately that it was nice to hear something good. "And thanks for listening to me about Sin and everything else."

"My pleasure," Ryan said with a grin, putting an arm around Boyd's shoulders. "And if any of these stupid toons have anything to say on our way out, I have ways of getting my revenge. Having access to the entire system is pretty cool."

Boyd's quiet smile inched up as the two of them left the room.

## Chapter 19

The sun was hazy and white, a wavering circle with heat felt even through the atmosphere. The clouds were thinner in Morocco; grey as they were the world over, but rescinding slightly from the pure power of the sun. The rays shot through the clouds like moonbeams through smoke and even with the muffled light the shadows quelled at the intensity.

Languages slurred the background noise into one completely indecipherable murmur of humanity. People from many religions and backgrounds walked the streets, chatting and babbling and gesturing with arms ringed in clinking jewelry. Many had their heads covered from the sun's rays, scarves and shawls that shadowed their expressions but did not hide the shining white of their teeth. Market places lined the alleys and streets, little carts and kiosks hastily stacked together with fruits and vegetables for sale right next to sturdy clothing and bottles of purified water. The bustle was almost overwhelming; people yelling prices and questions, the sound of trade and money overtaking the small streets crowded beneath the wide, overpowering sky.

Some buildings crouched against the ground like animals dying from the heat; dull browns and greys huddled beneath the overbearing sun, slowly shedding bricks and dust like sweat that fell to the ground. Foot traffic was heavy, wearing the dirt into paths as smooth as river stone where people walked the most. Only half the city had concrete or sidewalks; the rest of the structures had cracked and fallen apart during the chaos of the war.

The city center was the largest part, filled with buildings that were half-restored or brand new. Some loomed high above the wide boulevards, mostly white and designed in a distinct French, colonial style. Windows shone brilliantly, reflecting the glare of the sun into the eyes of unfortunate passersby. More people crowded along the main street than ever, many of them wearing sandals and some even without shoes as they padded along the packed dirt. Condos which had been built mostly in the last decade crowded old fashioned, white washed buildings and the city's poor mingled freely next to the city's wealthy.

Newspaper stalls erupted like weeds along the sides; little boys in ragged shorts and shoes a size too big ran amidst the pedestrians with crumpled papers, holding their hands out for money and shoving the news insistently in everyone's faces. Some of them slipped their hands into the pockets of the passersby, integrating some pick pocketing with their soliciting.

The city was filled with people moving through it like blood through veins. It was upbeat and proud and there was more laughter than there were hollow-eyed people crouched in the dark, watching the world pass by the way their lives passed them. Although the occasional woman screamed that her money purse was stolen and a pickpocket wailed when he was caught, for the most part the city was comfortable, genial, and alive. When people smiled, they meant it, and the heat only added to the atmosphere by making everything seem closer and larger.

Sin shoved his hands in his pockets and strolled idly through the Marche Central of Casablanca. Locals milled around the market stalls, examining meat, vegetables and turtles for soup. The place was almost overwhelmingly crowded and it would have been confusing to navigate for a first time visitor but it wasn't the first time he'd had an assignment in this city. It was one of the few remaining places that had been nearly bypassed by the wave of bombings that had swept the world and many people had rushed to settle there. The New Yorks and Londons of the world had been targeted first during the war and now a decade later, it was cities in Africa, South America, Oceania and Asia that boomed with business and attracted people worldwide.

His current target had been one of those people who'd reestablished himself here; a wealthy banker from San Francisco who'd become an even wealthier businessman in Morocco, relocating himself and revamping his child pornography ring to include young, Moroccan boys.

Sin ignored the peddlers in the market and made his way back to Boulevard Mohammad 5, following at a safe distance but not letting the tall blond man escape his range of vision. Peter Brunnell lived about ten minutes outside the main town square in old Casablanca where the white buildings were a little dingier and the streets were a

little narrower, but the old aged charm was still intact. It was close enough to the city center to remain somewhat clear of the extreme poverty and prostitution that plagued the other parts but far enough to avoid the throngs of tourists.

Sin trailed a block behind Peter, peering at him through dark sunglasses and feeling mildly amused that the man hadn't noticed him yet. He never did a particularly grand job at these undercover fitting-in-with-the-locals missions and he didn't really care. He just wanted to kill the man and get it over with. His assignment wasn't the typical, straightforward assassination. It had so far involved a string of hits in different cities all over the world and at this point he was growing weary of playing tag with his targets.

The purpose of this all was a man named Anderson McCall, a wealthy American who'd been in the clergy before the war but who'd dedicated his life to helping needy people afterward. He was well known nationally as a figure of hope and generosity so he was generally loved by the public. The only problem was that he was a big supporter of Janus and their efforts to overthrow the US government. He would not have been considered more than a mild annoyance if it hadn't been for the fact that 45% of Janus' arms had been purchased with money that he'd donated to them.

A straightforward assassination would turn the man into a martyr so the Agency was using a different tactic this time. For months they'd worked to create ties between McCall and several investors of questionable moral fiber. He thought they were interested in his restoration projects in Louisiana and in reality they were; but the seed of interest had been planted by Agency moles and the lengthy connections between the men would help to bring about McCall's downfall.

A direct connection between McCall and several men involved in drug trafficking and child prostitution rings in third world countries had already been established and already his name was becoming tarnished. In two weeks it would come out that he'd been systematically having these questionable business partners murdered in an effort to clear his name and ensure their silence but after he'd finished the job, guilt overcame him and he'd taken his own life.

It was a lie of course and Sin was the one killing his partners but no one would know that and the man's memory would be blackened forever. It was dirty work and Sin wasn't particularly pleased about having to involve himself in the business but he had to give a nod of credit towards the Agency; they covered every base. They'd managed to access bank accounts, phone records, create ties between McCall and known hitmen... it was disturbing how thorough they were.

His father had taught him how to do his job, taught him how to do the assignment, kill the mark and not question things even when they were obviously questionable. But missions like this got under his skin. He didn't mind straightforward assassinations of political figures and rebel leaders where he knew next to nothing about them. He didn't mind taking out rebels and destroying their bases. He didn't mind killing because it was his purpose.

He did, however, mind playing games and planting evidence, knowing details about a man's life and destroying every part of it. It was usually enough that he was ending it.

His irritation was heightened by the fact that he'd found himself wondering quite often how Boyd would go about a mission like this. He was sure that his partner would have a more clever way of tracking these guys down and planting evidence that didn't involve following them for hours in the humid market while trying to keep a safe distance. The annoyance increased even more when he'd idly wondered whether or not Boyd would like the cities he'd been to, if he'd want to explore them instead of just completing the mission and leaving.

Sin was disgusted with his preoccupation but no matter what he did, it wouldn't go away. He thought obsessively over every word that had been exchanged between he and Boyd on the mission in France and analyzed them over and over. He picked at everything until he shoved all of the assumptions, bitterness, and anger aside and came to terms with the reality of the entire situation.

One thing he couldn't change was the fact that he liked being around Boyd. At first he'd thought perhaps it was some bizarre desperation because Boyd was the first person to show interest in him, but Sin didn't necessarily believe that anymore. If it was as simple as that, he liked to think it would be easier to brush this entire thing off. With that came a close examination over Boyd's response to the remote, and the decision that maybe Sin had jumped the gun in his reaction because of everything else that had been going on at the same time.

The second thing he realized and came to terms with, was that he was sexually attracted to Boyd. This was a major problem. Even if Boyd wasn't being completely false about everything else, he'd shown on two occasions that when it came down to it, he was afraid of Sin. It wasn't something he could be blamed for; most people were afraid of Sin. He was capable of things that no man should have been capable of, and Boyd had witnessed every one of them. I

t wasn't surprising but the rejection still felt like a wound that wouldn't quite heal. He'd never been attracted to anyone before, let alone actually acting on that, and the bitterness wasn't something he'd been prepared to handle. His resolution to that had been, unfortunately, to keep his partner at a distance. It was better that way, regardless. One thing Sin had learned from this entire interaction was that he wasn't cut out for any of it. He didn't know how to be someone's friend. That had been proven by the brilliant idea of murdering someone as a present. He definitely didn't know how to approach someone as a lover. That had been more than proven by what had happened at the hotel in France. The entire situation had confirmed something he'd known since childhood; something he never should have forgotten or tried to move beyond. He existed solely to be a killer. It was what he was good at, and that was it. Everyone had a role to play in life, and that was his.

It had been obvious from the start, and it was why his father had known that he would make an amazing agent. He'd known that Sin wasn't normal. His weird psychotic episodes, and the events that had happened in China had proved that. Even at the age of eight, he'd distrusted everyone, thinking everyone had the worst of intentions. He'd

even felt that way about his father more often than not. It was something that hadn't changed much over time.

For years he'd been alone, he'd trusted no one and he'd liked it that way. He'd lived his life with a single purpose although at times that purpose had grown fuzzy in his mind. There had been times when he'd asked himself why he did the things he did, why he went back to the Agency, why he worked for people who thought of him as no more than a tool.

There had been times in his teenage years when he'd debated leaving, thinking there had to be something more... But the ideas had always faltered and disappeared when he realized that there was nothing else for him.

He didn't know how to interact with people and even if he did, he'd always found humans to be despicable, weak creatures. Something in him hated the idea of being close to others and something else in him shuddered at the idea of letting anyone near him. He'd quelled the ideas and the fluctuations in thought with training, exercise, self-inflicted punishment. He'd gone back to being unquestioning and doing what he was told to do, just because he couldn't figure out what he'd rather do instead.

The first real lapse in his training had been over the girl; the pretty, red headed young girl being raped by a group of men. Flashbacks had hit him, then darkness, then the feeling of watching himself from afar. The men died, then the girl ran from him, scared of his violence and his ability to murder, then the scavengers... the scavengers who'd allowed a girl to be raped but who came running to kill her rescuer just so they could loot his body afterwards. It'd ended with more bloodshed than he'd intended to cause.

He'd been thankful for the years he'd spent on the fourth floor after that. He'd used the time to re-evaluate himself. To retrain himself mentally. To rid himself of the weakness that had caused him to feel anything for anyone. To attempt to destroy the part of him with a soft spot for the helpless.

Then Boyd had come along; he wasn't helpless, but somehow he stirred those same feelings in Sin and caused more confusion than he'd felt in his entire life. Suddenly there was a person in his life who didn't treat him like a monster. Someone who inspired curiosity from him. Someone who shared interests and didn't show fear.

Someone who acted like a friend; the first friend he'd ever had. He didn't know why the urge to protect this new, strange being had morphed into something sexual and needy but he wanted the feelings to be gone and it was obvious that it was going to take more than one week of isolation to achieve that.

The shadows grew longer and Sin hid himself in the safety of them, stalking Peter Brunnell as he got closer to his home. The buildings in the residential area of old Casablanca were curvier, rounder and the white washed doors and window frames were splashed with vivid blues and reds. The setting sun shone through the stubborn clouds and caused the pale white walls to look faintly yellow in the dim light. It was picturesque and had an almost haunting, old world quality to it but Sin did not appreciate the scenery at the moment.

He slipped into the narrow alley behind the building Brunnell lived in and moved silently over the tiled walkway. It would have been easier to catch the man before he'd gone on his excursion through downtown, but he'd had a disturbingly young male prostitute with him that morning and Sin didn't find it necessary to kill a thirteen year old boy.

A majority of the buildings were connected, creating a wall of houses behind the two he currently stood between. The effect was mildly alarming since the buildings were less than a yard apart but he ignored the nausea that made his stomach churn, fought his claustrophobia and looked up at the side of the house. There were lines for clothing strewn between buildings and he noticed that they were attached to shutters or iron frames that bordered the small windows.

He slipped some gloves on and then jumped up; he grabbed hold of one of the iron frames, pulling himself up effortlessly as though he were climbing the rungs of a

ladder. He reached out and caught the frame of another window, pulling himself up again and repeating the process until he reached the window he needed. The brown, wooden shutters were open and the window was cracked open. He pulled his entire body up and slipped into it easily, silently wondering how much success he'd have had with that endeavor if he hadn't been underweight.

He crouched in the room and looked around, noting that he was in Brunnell's bedroom, which wasn't exactly what he'd intended. A part of him said in a mocking voice that if Boyd were there he'd probably have a detailed blueprint of every building in the area but he ignored it and stood up. He could hear keys jingling and a door opening somewhere in the apartment so he ducked quickly behind the long, deep red curtains which framed the window. The room was only lit by the setting sun but he saw that lavish rugs and artwork decorated the room in rich colors. Brunnell's bed was huge and had a wide canopy, while a state of the art computer sat on a large mahogany desk nearby.

Brunnell was either stupid or completely careless because he entered the room and didn't even give a second glance at the sheer panel that Sin stood behind. The blond stripped his clothes off and booted up the computer before disappearing out of the room again. There was the sound of another door opening, closing and then a shower being turned on.

Sin shook his head and went over to the computer, slipping a memory stick out of his pocket and plugging it into the machine's USB port. He uploaded some data, went through great lengths to make the files hidden and then removed the memory stick. He looked around the room again and spied a bag of miniature chocolate bars sitting on one of the intricately carved African nightstands. He grabbed the bag, opened it, filled his pockets and then wandered out of the room and towards the bathroom.

It was kind of depressing that he'd spent seven hours following this man to do something that was completed within ten minutes.

There was complete silence in the apartment until Sin opened the door and a startled cry rang out. A muted gunshot was followed closely by the sound of a body hitting the floor, and silence returned once again.

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It was February 9th by the time Sin was entirely through his list. Everything was going smoothly. The evidence was already pointing towards McCall. Information found in the homes of all seven businessmen and their bank accounts had linked their prostitution ring to McCall; it seemed as though the ex-minister was more deeply involved in the operation than authorities originally suspected. All of the murders had been completed execution style and linked to the Russian assassin Alexander Putin, a former lieutenant in Russia's Federal Security Services before the collapse of the Kremlin during the war. Putin was missing and presumed dead, but several phone calls made to his cell phone had been traced back to McCall's office in Baton Rouge, Louisiana before his disappearance.

During this time, it was widely reported, McCall had become withdrawn and a recluse in his New Orleans home. He'd discontinued all projects due to the worsening media storm. Interviews with family members described a highly depressed man who seemed to have lost all hope.

New Orleans had become a highly commercialized city during the past few decades, even more so than it had been in the earlier 20th century. Repeated flooding from hurricanes had destroyed 90% of the city's poor districts over the years and the end result had been an extreme reconstruction of the levee system which proved highly successful.

In the end, it resulted in a vast variety of businesses, hotels and casinos being built over the poor areas. It was rare for anyone other than the wealthy to live in or even visit the city; it was very exclusive and very expensive. It was one of the few major cities to remain untouched by the war in the US, but that was most likely due to the fact that nothing of note existed there aside from retired millionaires and rich artists.

Sin thought it was rather odd that this charitable clergyman lived in a city known for debauchery and excessive waste of wealth, but according to the man's files he'd grown up in the Lower Ninth Ward. McCall had become a self-made businessman and millionaire before finally retiring from his business at an early age and becoming a minister.

He'd lived his life peacefully in the Garden District until the government showed complete disregard for the city's needy and demolished most of the poor districts. Supposedly it was then that he became inspired to help rebuild poor neighborhoods that the government didn't care about. He began his campaign to reconstruct places all over the country that had been ravaged by the war.

The irritation that had been building during the entire course of the mission was beginning to boil over despite the fact that Sin was hesitant to put his finger on the exact reason why. He didn't want to admit to himself that he found this to be wrong; he didn't want to admit to himself that he cared either way.

However, this wasn't the first time that he'd found himself taking a side during a mission. He'd realized that he actually had morals on another mission as well. That had occurred when the Agency had told him to assassinate the Prime Minister of Italy in front of her three kids because she didn't agree with their solution regarding Italian rebel groups.

It was devastatingly easy to break into the man's house and Sin was becoming somewhat annoyed by the complete lack of security these people had in their homes. The entire house had some Greek revival feel to it and could have been quite beautiful, but the inside was rather plain and was anything but decadent. Most of the furniture looked secondhand and there weren't very many decorative ornaments anywhere. The walls were covered with pictures of children who benefited from McCall's various Urban Youth projects and framed awards for his deeds.

The nagging feeling in Sin's gut became more insistent and he gritted his teeth as he crept up the long, winding staircase to his target's room. He reminded himself that

this was an assignment and he wasn't supposed to question anything. He reminded himself that this man was supposed to be his enemy. It bothered him that he couldn't keep that in mind. It bothered him that he wondered if Boyd would be bothered by these things.

"I don't know, Nicole. I just—I just don't want to talk right now. No, I'm fine. I'll be fine. I don't know. I just need to be alone."

Sin followed the voice to the master bedroom and noticed that the door was wide open. He could see McCall's thin form facing away from him inside.

"It doesn't matter anymore. It's all over. Everything I've done—and now my own family doubts me? Listen, I'll call you later. I have some work to do, some arrangements to make."

There was a pause and Sin slipped into the room silently, closing the door softly behind him. He crossed his arms over his chest and watched McCall's back. The man didn't even seem to notice that he was there.

"I'll call you back later. Yes. --Heh. Do you? --It doesn't matter, Nicole. Goodbye."

McCall closed the cell phone and let it drop to the floor at his feet. He continued to stand silently, facing the window and did so for a long moment.

"Are you here to kill me, then?"

Sin raised an eyebrow and leaned against the door. "I'm here to make you commit suicide, actually."

McCall turned around and stared at him with a surprisingly fearless expression on his face. He looked older than he had in his picture, appearing to be in his sixties rather than fifties. It was as if he'd aged ten years in the past three months. His silver hair was uncombed and unruly, blue eyes red-rimmed and surrounded by dark circles. "So you mean to say," he began slowly. "That you're here to kill me."

Sin shrugged. "Semantics."

McCall nodded silently and moved to his desk, reaching for a bottle of Gin and a tumbler. "Would you like a drink? Or are we to get down to this right away?" His entire demeanor screamed of weariness and resignation.

"I don't drink but you're welcome to." Sin pushed himself away from the door and walked towards McCall slowly, keeping his arms folded over his chest. "It actually suits my purposes if you do."

"Oh?" McCall glanced up at him. "You're going to poison me?" He seemed almost amused at the idea of it. "How absurd."

Sin shrugged. "Hey, it wasn't my idea. I just do what I'm told."

"Ah." The older man nodded and poured his drink, sitting down at his desk and gazing at Sin through slightly narrowed eyes. "So you're not acting of your own accord?"

"Does it matter? It doesn't change anything." Sin stared down at McCall and uncrossed his arms.

"Ah, well I'd just hoped that the reason for this smear campaign would be explained to me before my death." He shook his head and picked up his drink although he just let it hover next to his mouth for a moment without taking a sip. "Oh yes, of course." He set it down on the table again and pushed it across the table at Sin.

"You're making my job very easy," Sin replied flatly. He pulled the vial out of his pocket and opened it, pouring the clear liquid into the glass slowly. "Drink."

"And what if I said no?" McCall asked curiously. "How are you planning to force me to drink it? I'm not really going to resist, trust me at this point I'm far from caring, but I'm curious as to what your plan was."

"I'd tell you that I'll kill your sister if you make this any more difficult than it has to be."

"I see." McCall was silent for a long moment before he grabbed the tumbler and downed the entire contents of it within a single gulp. He set it down on the desk again and peered at Sin. "How long do I have?"

"An hour."

"Ah." He nodded again and fiddled with the empty glass for a moment. "What precisely was it?"

"An overdose of the painkillers you take for arthritis."

"Ah." There was another silence. "Well, sit down, young man. No need to stand there hovering over me."

Sin looked at him blankly and then shook his head, sprawling in the chair that was placed across from McCall's desk. For several moments they just stared at each other. The only sound in the room was the ticking of the antique grandfather clock in the corner. He was quite surprised at the man's actions; even more surprised by the fact that he showed no fear whatsoever about the fact that he was going to die soon. The thought caused a jolt of unpleasantness to go through him and he turned, staring intently out the window.

"What's the matter?"

Sin looked at McCall again. "What?"

McCall spread his hands out in front of him and shrugged. "You looked angry just now."

Pale, green eyes narrowed into slits and Sin studied McCall. "Could be."

"Maybe because you've killed an innocent man?"

"Could be."

"Maybe you feel guilty because of it."

"Maybe," Sin said without emotion. He tilted his head to the side, staring at the other man. "But it changes nothing."

McCall leaned back in his chair and gazed at Sin. "You aren't how I imagined my assassin to be. You're too..." He gestured idly, trying to find the words. "You're too beautiful and tragic, I think."

"Are you kidding me?"

The older man shrugged again. "Well, there is no denying that you're a striking young man. I think you could be a model if you wanted. But there is also something about you that seems very dark, depressing, and the fact that you just admitted to feeling guilt... well obviously you're not completely callous."

"You do realize that I just poisoned you. That I'm not lying. That you will be dying very shortly?" Sin crossed his arms over his chest again, letting his legs remain splayed out in front of him as he slumped in the chair and glared.

McCall shrugged. "I know, but honestly I don't care anymore. My family has betrayed me, they don't trust me and they won't even believe me over the media. Of course I cannot blame them but... my sister-in-law has taken measures to prevent me from visiting my nephew." A bitter smile crossed his face. "After all the good I've tried to do for children..." He shook his head. "I don't care anymore. If suicide wasn't a sin, I'd probably have done it already."

"Sorry." The words were spoken coldly, flatly, but for some reason Sin knew that he meant it.

Somewhere inside him, he was sorry. Somewhere inside him, he hated the Agency and he hated himself for doing this. But he didn't let it show and his face remained perfectly blank despite the turmoil that roiled inside of him. He wanted nothing more, at that moment, than to be the cold blooded killer that everyone said he was. The monster who could take a life, no matter who's it was. He didn't want to care about this man's life. He didn't want to care about this man's death.

He was suddenly reminded of the night he'd killed Boyd's attacker, how the knowledge of ripping the man apart had haunted him even though it was deeply deserved. It was so strange how some things affected him while others barely niggled at his conscience at all.

"Well, I'm sure you don't want to hear about my troubles," McCall said softly. "I just wish you would tell me why. Why this has been done to me. Am I that much of a threat? Is it—" He hesitated and raked a hand through his hair. "Is it because I've shown support for anti-American factions?"

"I'd say donating millions of dollars towards Janus is a tad more than 'showing support'," Sin said idly, not giving away the fact that this entire situation was making his stomach twist uncomfortably. He was supposed to wait until the job was complete and McCall was terminated, but he really just wanted to leave.

"Ah." McCall nodded and poured himself another drink. "I see. So that's what it boils down to. The American government never ceases to amaze me." His voice still held the resigned note although it now had an edge.

"Well, technically you are a traitor to the nation that's allowed you to prosper and become a millionaire. You are aware that Janus purchases weapons to kill Americans with the money you donate to them? That they perform terrorist acts?"

McCall smiled at him. It was patronizing. Infuriating. "Trying to justify yourself to me?"

Sin suddenly felt a keen sense of déjà vu and his skin crawled as he realized who he sounded like. When he realized that he really was trying to justify his actions. He got up abruptly, standing stiffly with his hands balled into fists as he gave McCall a dark look. "Just accept the consequences. You knew it was a risk. Nothing more needs to be said."

"Then why do you keep responding to me?"

Maybe this was good; if the man made him angry enough he wouldn't feel this ridiculous sense of guilt anymore or this idiotic responsibility for a man he barely knew. There was another stretch of silence and Sin retreated to a dark corner of the room.

He thought about the last time he'd felt like this on a mission; thought about the screams of his target's children when her head had exploded into a mass of brains and blood. Sin stared at McCall silently, willing the man to keel over so the thing could be done with and he could leave this place and burn the ordeal out of his mind.

"Since I'm going to die soon anyway, why don't you talk to me? Your secrets will be safe and we'll have something to do other than sit here in boredom," McCall said calmly after a few moments.

Sin scowled. "What in the hell is the point?"

McCall shrugged and tapped his fingers against his desk. "Why does there need to be a point? I'm merely curious. Does it disturb you that I don't fear death?"

There was a stretch of silence as Sin debated ignoring the question. He had no idea what this was supposed to prove or why McCall even wanted to sit here chatting with his murderer, but the man was a study in all things unexpected it seemed. There was a part of Sin that wondered if suicide would have been McCall's fate even if the Agency hadn't come calling. No one, no matter how prepared they were, accepted death this easily when it was being handed down by someone else.

"It doesn't disturb me but it surprises me," Sin said finally.

McCall poured himself another drink, letting his gaze stray out the large window that sat behind him. "All living things die at some point, the war should have been evidence enough of that for anyone. I lost three younger brothers and twin daughters in the bombings in Houston. It seems fitting that my life should be lost in just as pointless a way as theirs were. A parent should never outlive a child."

Sin said nothing but he crossed the room and sat down in the chair again, folding his arms over his chest. If the man wanted to talk, he could talk. It seemed to bring him

some kind of bizarre comfort. Maybe it had something to do with having been a minister in the past.

"Do you have children?"

"No." Sin hoped he never would. He didn't want to create something like him.

"How old are you?"

"I was born circa 1991."

McCall gazed at him curiously, leaning forward ever so slightly. "How did such a young person get involved in this despicable business?"

Sin hesitated for a moment but then replied, "You could say my father recruited me."

"That's disgusting." The anger in McCall's voice was obvious and it was genuine. His lips thinned into a white line and his slender hands gripped the chair tightly. "How could a parent put his child into such a position?" He shook his head, eyes closing briefly. "I don't understand humanity." He looked at Sin again, pale blue eyes piercing as though he could see directly into his soul.

"How old were you?"

"What difference does it make? I don't need your pity. I don't make excuses for myself. If you knew me better, you wouldn't feel sorry for me. If you knew the things I've done, you wouldn't have that look on your face." Sin looked away, unable to meet the man's steady gaze any longer. There was something nagging at him now, a memory scraping at him and trying to push itself to the forefront. "My birth was nothing but--"

For some reason at that moment a memory erupted to the surface like the moon appearing from behind a group of clouds. A faint haunting voice and the tat-tat-tat of gunfire echoed in his ears, making him falter. Uncertain and confused, Sin abruptly stopped. The sounds were accompanied by an image assaulting him. It was his

reoccurring nightmare, but in flashes like a memory. Blood being streaked on grass, slack fingers, blank green eyes and thin fingers clawing at dark earth.

"Your birth was an act of God and inevitably, that is what my death is," McCall said softly.

Sin shook his head, trying to clear the memories, trying to shut the voice away when he stared at McCall. "What?"

McCall took in his expression and the sudden lack of composure. "I said your birth was an act of God; do not listen to anything anyone else tells you. Everyone is put on this Earth for a reason. Everyone has a purpose." He tilted his head and looked at Sin thoughtfully. "I don't think this is your purpose, but maybe it's mine."

Sin squinted at McCall, confusion still clouding his brain as he tried to ignore the voice and the mental image that kept reappearing in his mind. "What does that mean?"

"Maybe my purpose in life was to be killed by you. Maybe my purpose is for you to experience this moment." McCall looked pensive as he nodded to himself as if confirming some thought. "Tell me; did you kill those men they're saying I had murdered? Those men that I idiotically allowed myself to become associated with?"

"Yes." Sin closed his eyes briefly. He had no idea why this was happening now of all times. He licked his lips, shifting nervously in the chair, hands clenching and unclenching in his agitation. He tried to focus on pushing the memories away, if that was even what they were.

"I thought so." McCall nodded again. "Tell me, how long has violence played such a large part of your life? I've known children that were abused all of their lives and they became shattered, dark things, reacting to everything with violence because that's all they know. They always reminded me of alley cats, so skittish and untrusting, always ready to fight." He gave Sin a sidelong look. "More importantly, when's the last time you felt love?"

The question was so startling that it distracted Sin enough that he was jolted out of the turmoil in his mind. "What? I don't know. Never." Sin shook his head again and focused on McCall. "What does it matter?"

McCall raised an eyebrow. "You'll never know anything else but violence until you've felt love. When I was young, I was very angry. My parents were drug addicts and we were always needy. I hated the world for a long time but then I met my wife and everything changed. I changed. When someone believes in you, it's miraculous how you suddenly start to believe in yourself, how you suddenly want to become the person that they see. If it wasn't for her, I'd have never had the drive to do the things I did to get where I am today."

Just as soon as the memory receded, Sin's mind was overtaken by something else. The words made him think about the person he'd been trying so hard to push out of his mind. Now instead of seeing a strange, long forgotten death scene, he saw Boyd's smile and the way it lit up his face. Instead of seeing bloody fingers curling up defensively as green eyes that were so like his own stared at an unseen attacker, he saw Boyd's pale, slim fingers curling around the remote right before he threw it at Sin, telling Sin he didn't want to hurt him. Instead of a field of grass and streaks of blood shining under a huge moon, he remembered Boyd gazing at him with an amused smile and a softened expression.

He didn't know if these memories were any better or any more comforting but he didn't even care at that point. He was just thankful that the flashbacks weren't there anymore. That he wasn't seeing his father in that state anymore. That he didn't have to figure out what the hell that memory had even been or where it'd come from.

There was a question Sin wanted to ask but he knew he shouldn't. He knew that this was just what McCall did-- at-risk youth counseling, even though Sin was long past being a youth. But McCall seemed to want to pick his brain anyway. He seemed to want to understand what made Sin tick and in the process, his words were ringing true and making Sin want to say more than he knew he should.

"What about if someone seems to care for you as a friend?" The last word wound up coming out sarcastically and it made the entire question seem laced with bitterness.

"Sometimes the love of a friend is the purest kind. Unless you're rich and very generous, the love of a friend is usually unconditional and more genuine than anything else in the world."

For some reason the simple statement, so laced with unacknowledged truths that Sin didn't want to deal with, was the last straw. He couldn't sit there anymore playing therapy. He couldn't sit there getting schooled on how to feel and having it actually make sense in his mind. Not when the man who was schooling him was turning ashen; only moments away from death. So Sin stood up, hands once again balling into fists as he stared down at McCall.

Sin felt the slow burn of shame. The guilt that ate away at him during the entire mission was growing in intensity and he knew that he had to get away.

He hadn't known people could be like this-- He hadn't known men like McCall actually existed. He didn't understand why it was possible that someone he'd just met, someone he'd just killed, could evoke such feelings in him. Most of all he didn't understand how this man could know him so well. How he could say things that seemed so right. How he could explain six months' worth of confusion in two sentences.

He couldn't stand to sit there anymore and watch as McCall looked at him with pity. So he damned his orders and left without another word.

## Chapter 20

It was February 11 when Carhart called Sin and informed him that he was to meet Boyd at a motel in Toronto on the thirteenth. There was a small group there being run by an alleged core member of Janus named Alexis Denis; she was gaining support easily and expanding membership. It seemed as though they were now trying to set up a base in Canada. They were to negotiate with the woman, try to turn her to their side and if that was not possible, to attempt to bring her back alive for Intel gathering.

It was right on the tail end of his McCall mission and his mood had not improved. It had actually gotten worse as he watched the fallout unravel on the news, as McCall was demonized even further by the media even after his supposed suicide. It was one of those times where Sin knew that it would be better if he could just be left alone. He wanted to take his anger and frustration out on someone. Having a mission with Boyd was a terrible idea, and he knew it from the start. Not only was he still determined to just sever the connection that they'd previously had in an attempt to wipe the slate clean of all of his confusing feelings, but somehow the thing with McCall had made his irritation toward Boyd worsen.

It had started on the plane ride over to Canada. It had given Sin an unfortunate amount of time to ruminate on things. He hated the Agency, he hated having to do their dirty work, and at the moment he felt even more disgusted with Boyd for jumping to do anything to get their work done. Because of this, he wasn't prepared to face his partner especially when they hadn't even seen each other in nearly a month.

Sin got to the motel a few minutes early, stepping in and locking the door behind him.

Boyd was crouched over a table, a panel laid out in front of him while he made notes on a pad at his side. At the sound of the door opening he looked up, his eyes catching on Sin's face. There were some dark circles under Boyd's eyes and he looked a little more pale than Sin remembered. For a second he looked strangely almost

hopeful which quickly shifted to disappointed and then wary. That was gone the second Boyd flicked his eyes back down to the panel and his expression turned blank.

"Hello," Boyd said, flipping to a different screen on the panel with a swish of his fingertips.

"What are we doing?" Sin asked automatically, dumping his pack on the floor unceremoniously.

"Search and retrieve," Boyd replied without inflection. He didn't look up from the panel as he spoke. "I did some recon yesterday. The compound is monitored by microphones triggered to react to suspicious sounds. Cameras follow the motion. There are also live guards. More of it can be explained on site, but the compound is an old tourist attraction. There are four buildings, one story each, and I'm not positive but I think I have an idea of which one she may be in."

He reached into a bag next to him and slid a box across the table in Sin's direction, finally looking up at his partner again. "I picked up GPS wristwatches at the Artillery to aid us."

"And what's that supposed to do?"

"We can track each other." He pulled off the wristwatch he was already wearing and demonstrated to Sin as he explained. "She's likely to be in the northern or western building. If we split up, we can each silently search for her and whoever finds her first can alert the other. If you press the button, the other person has a very limited ability to track you through GPS. A light will flash red, and turn green as they get closer. The lines that will appear on the screen represent grid points on the maps and a compass is built in if you press the button twice in quick succession to change screens. If you hit it three times, a fake digital watch screen appears so the watch will not seem suspicious if anyone investigates you."

He put the watch back on. "I thought this would be the easiest way to stay in contact while remaining radio silent. They seem to be monitoring radio waves and I don't know what channels we otherwise would be able to use without being overheard."

"Why don't we just plan to meet at whatever point at a certain time and bypass all of this?" Sin asked impatiently, checking his weapons.

"It's not that difficult to use these," Boyd said with a shrug. "And we want to get in and out. If we set a certain time, we run the risk of not finding her before that or having to wait and possibly getting caught. This way we know immediately when she's found. There's an emergency signal built in, too. So we could plan to meet at a designated point off the compound once she's found and we've both found a point of egress, but if anything happens before then we could activate the emergency alert to call for backup from the other."

"Or we could just go in together and find her before bringing her in. At least then we know what's going on with the other if there's radio silence, unless you want me to text you every time something crops up."

"We could but we can cut the time in half and run less of a risk of being seen if we split up," Boyd responded. His tone was largely still neutral but it was starting to grow tight. "The buildings are large and don't seem like they have many easily accessible hiding places within so if we're together we may raise an alarm. I was thinking we would only alert the other in the event of needing backup or having found Alexis."

Sin made a face, shaking his head. "It just seems like over-complicating the whole matter. Besides, you said you pinpointed her possible location."

Boyd sighed explosively and shoved the panel away. "I said it was possible, not that I knew for sure. I have it narrowed down to two of the buildings with the likelihood higher in one. I spent two days trying to think of the best way to deal with this situation based on the compound layout, technology, guards and number of hostiles, and you

haven't looked at a single blueprint yet. Can you just not challenge my every idea for once?"

"Why don't you listen for once?" Sin replied sarcastically, flicking Boyd a once over before scoffing. "But I forgot, you don't have to. You know it all. And that's worked out so well for you lately, hasn't it?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed and his back stiffened. His voice was cold when he spoke. "When you show up and tell me I'm wrong and you know better without knowing anything about the terrain, layout, or situation, it makes me a little less likely to scrap everything to accommodate your delicate sensibilities."

"What the fuck were you rambling on about, if that wasn't telling me the situation and layout?" Sin demanded, turning to face Boyd again. All shreds of patience were blown and his face twisted into a scowl. "I think I got the picture-- you want to run around with no form of communication just because you're afraid you might get seen, rather than go in together and simplify the matter. And for someone who doesn't even have basic knowledge about the organization you work for, it's pretty hilarious that you have balls to be on a high horse talking down to me about how to run a mission."

Boyd slammed his hands on the table and stood up, his expression turning cold with anger. "You know what, Sin? I get it. I'm a terrible fucking agent, everyone's a better agent than me, everyone knows better and I should just fucking disappear. My plans never work and I shouldn't base anything on the successful missions I've had in the past because clearly I don't know what I'm doing. I can't ever be right because you've been at this so much longer than me. Everyone has. Is that what you want to say to me?"

Sin scoffed, unmoved by the outburst. "I said what I wanted to say to you. But if you want to be a dramatic little bitch about it, go right ahead. It wouldn't be the first time."

Boyd grit his teeth and his eyebrows lowered into a glare. His chest moved a little more quickly than usual and his fingers curled against the table, his eyes bright with anger as they centered on Sin. "Fuck you," he ground out.

"No thanks, sweetheart. That brief moment of insanity has passed." Boyd's lips parted, his eyes narrowing before he abruptly turned his back on Sin. His back was stiff and his movements were sharp as he threw the panel and other items into an open duffel bag. He zipped the bag with a jerk of his hand and threw the handle over his shoulder. He didn't say anything to Sin but his expression had hardened, his jaw set and eyes narrowed into slits. He walked out of the room.

The ride to the location was spent in silence. The tension grew stronger as they sat there, forced into close quarters where they couldn't ignore the other. Boyd drove, his fingers digging into the steering wheel and expression thunderous.

When they got there, the car rocked when Boyd hit the brakes harder than necessary. He put the car in park and unbuckled his seat belt in the same movement. His jaw was set in a hard line and Sin barely got a glance at his face before Boyd grabbed the duffel bag out of the back seat and slammed the driver's side door shut when he got out. He strode across the clearing in the forest without speaking.

When Sin followed, he took out one of his guns and looked around. He had no idea which plan they were following and by this point, he'd stopped caring. He started to turn to Boyd to see what he intended but realized that Boyd had started moving away.

He walked straight toward the perimeter, dropping the bag down into one hand and suddenly throwing it violently to the side. The whirring of cameras followed the bag's movement when it crashed into a tree and Boyd walked straight into the open without bothering to protect himself at all. He kept his hand at his side, but in the failing light of the day the glint could be seen off a gun he held. And Sin realized why the bag had been open; Boyd had armed himself.

"Oh, what the *fuck*," Sin muttered and stared at Boyd incredulously before following him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded, irritation heightening. First Boyd had treated him like a moron and now he wasn't even following his own plan. He felt fed up with Boyd and had a strong desire to leave him there.

Boyd looked over at Sin, reckless anger burning in his glare. "I'm making you happy," he said darkly. A flurry of snow drifted from the sky, twirling around him as he turned cold eyes back to the building. Alerted by the cameras, six people came out only to be confronted by the two intruders striding toward the front door. They looked startled but it didn't take them long to fall back into a formation, guns aimed at them.

"Stop immediately or we'll shoot!" one of the men yelled as a warning.

Boyd looked at the man sidelong but did not stop. "I'm here to negotiate," he told them loudly, and shot the man in the head without even bothering to wait for a reply.

The alarm Sin suddenly felt completely outweighed his annoyance but before he could even comprehend the fact that Boyd had just killed someone in cold blood, he was on autopilot. Five men were pointing guns at Boyd and that's all that really mattered to him at the moment. Especially considering the fact that Boyd was striding towards them recklessly, either not caring or not noticing that he was three seconds away from being pumped full of bullets.

In the brief second it took for the men to wrench their stupefied gazes from their fallen comrade and focus on Boyd once again, Sin was reacting automatically. Twin Rugers appeared in his hands between one blink and the next, and he took out the other five before they had a chance to fire a single shot.

The main door to the compound had shut behind the men when they ran out and as no one else appeared yet to attack them it was assumed they must have heard the gunshots and were preparing themselves inside. There could have been someone on the other side of the door with a gun aimed right at him but Boyd did not even stop to check.

He simply kicked the door open and strode into the front hallway, barely bothering to dodge a bullet that skimmed past his arm. He put only minimal effort into dodging anything aimed at him. It was solely the initial confusion of the moment and the fact no one had the chance yet to properly get to their stations that he was not overcome by a barrage of bullets immediately.

"Boyd, what the fuck are you doing?" Sin shouted as he ran after him. He burst into the compound and was nearly hit by two bullets as confused shouting echoed around him. Avoiding the fire was typically easy for him, but it became more difficult when he was also trying to keep Boyd from getting himself killed.

Boyd headed down the hall ahead of him but Sin was apparently seen as the larger threat at the moment because the hostiles immediately focused on him. They aimed their guns at him, yelling orders to each other and requesting backup. Sin's eyes flicked around quickly, taking into account the position of hostiles in the room. He ended up dismissing the threat, ducking out of the way of the gunfire and sprinting after Boyd again. He sheathed one gun and tried to grab Boyd but his hand missed by centimeters when Boyd moved to the side and the bullet he avoided nearly got Sin in the face.

Sin threw himself away quickly with a curse, but while Boyd kept walking ahead of him the men in the room finally got their act together to fire at them more accurately. He stopped trying to talk sense into Boyd and went fully into mission mode. Sin whipped out his second Ruger and turned his back to the wall, quickly eliminating one-third of the people in his perimeter with single shots to their heads. He had to keep moving to keep from being an easy target himself.

Ahead of him he saw Boyd stumble and the shadow of a hostile aiming a gun. Alternating between killing the people trying to kill Boyd and protecting himself from the fire behind them, Sin was caught at a standstill briefly. It took only seconds to kill the remaining people in the main room, but that was enough time for Boyd to get far enough ahead of him that Sin almost couldn't cover him anymore. Reloading his guns with spare magazines in the space of a second, Sin ran after Boyd again. They were almost immediately caught by another rush of hostiles who flooded into the next room.

He shot two men nearest Boyd in quick succession and simultaneously took out a hostile to his left, then whipped his gun around and got a fourth man between the eyes even as he had to dodge a bullet shot at his back. Dropping to the floor and rolling, he shot three more people who were aiming at Boyd and avoided gunfire from two different directions before he pulled back suddenly into the shadows of a nearby doorway.

He was barely out of breath but now that he was standing still he could feel two places on his body that bullets had grazed him despite everything he had been doing, though he ignored the pain. Pale green eyes scanned the perimeter ahead and he listened carefully. There was a pause in gunfire as his opponents tried to trace where he disappeared to. He quickly placed one man's hurried movements to reload at the top of the staircase and another's nervous panting behind a low receptionist desk in the room across the corridor.

His gaze zeroed in on the man at the staircase like a crosshair. He could hear the clicking of the magazine but before it could pop into place, Sin appeared in the hallway like the half-second flash of a phantom. Gunshots echoed deafeningly in the hallway as he shot the man at the top of the stairs, got the man who popped up behind the desk and killed two men down the hallway behind him. He ran down the corridor toward Boyd again, ducking in and out of crossfire and the shadows. He was phenomenally quick; his reflexes were triggered almost before he had even identified the danger.

Far ahead of him, he could see Boyd still striding down the hall purposefully, seeming uncaring of the violence erupting around him. Somehow he had managed to avoid any obvious wounds, which Sin could only put down to him wearing the body suit armor that Sin himself forsook.

Sin followed, but the situation became more difficult as the number of hostiles seemed to triple with each one he took out. Pain erupted from his thigh but Sin barely reacted to it as he spun around to take out three more hostiles who had rushed up the hall in quick succession. Looking toward Boyd, he quickly assessed the situation.

Although there was gunfire coming from ahead of him, most of the people up there looked to be rookies or new recruits who were hesitant to outright kill; instead, they seemed to be aiming for non-vitals. Even as Sin watched, Boyd was shot in the chest from afar; he jerked from the impact but the bodysuit seemed to have stopped him from receiving any lasting damage. Alarm lights started to flash as a warning, but Boyd jerked his hand up and shot a small box that was huddled against the ceiling near a major junction of hallways. The lights faltered and stopped.

Sin didn't even notice the blood oozing down his own leg as his boots pounded against the tiled floor. He fired quickly and efficiently, killing whoever got in his way and whoever so much as glanced toward Boyd. He was thankful for the lack of skill the recruits showed; it was the only thing saving their asses at the moment since they were completely surrounded and lacking the element of surprise.

Even with all the people Sin had killed, there were more appearing by the second. The situation was rapidly becoming uncontrollable; there were too many hostiles in the compound for him to hold off simultaneously, and too many angles from which they could strike.

If he was killed, there would be no one to watch Boyd's back. Given the way Boyd had been acting, how often he was probably saved only because Sin had managed to take someone out before they could get him, there was very little chance that Boyd would survive.

He ignored another bullet that grazed his cheek, firing automatically and watching as another teenage hostile fell to the floor. Gore and blood splattered the walls, the ceiling, and covered the floor in pools that oozed larger by the second. Dead bodies were littered around like flies swatted from the air, and some of the recruits could be seen running away from the action. People were screaming, a few were crying, and the deafening echo of gunfire created a cacophony of sound. Bullet holes dotted the walls, scattering drywall, insulation and paint flecks around them in a flurry like the snowfall outside.

The barrage of bullets stopped abruptly, the echoes still resounding around them of people crawling over their dead comrades and trying to drag them out of the way. It was unclear what caused the sudden ceasefire but Sin didn't bother to think about it; he took that time to finally catch up to Boyd. He grabbed his arm roughly, yanking him backwards with an angry growl and ignoring the blood that smeared across his fingers from a superficial wound on Boyd's face.

Boyd fell back against Sin's side but then pulled his arm away. His eyes were darting around, and the expression on his face was something that seemed to be a mixture of anger and shock. His face was pale but his eyes burned, and he didn't seem cognizant of the blood of the enemies that had splattered across his form.

There was the sound of footsteps running down the corridor and Sin raised his gun, preparing to fire. He'd almost pulled the trigger when he caught sight of brown hair and a female figure charging towards them, a pistol in her hand at her side. Either the woman was stupid, actually had interest in negotiating, or she had some ridiculous notion that she was going to kill Sin. Whatever the case, she did not pose an immediate threat, and despite her anger, she was probably the one that had called off the fire. She was unmistakably Alexis Denis.

"Some fucking negotiating, kid!" Alexis yelled as she approached.

Boyd's eyes shot over when he saw Alexis approaching. Before Sin could do anything, before Boyd even seemed to give himself the chance to think, his hand jerked up and he shot her in the head.

Sin's face was a study of shock. "You fucking moron," he hissed from between clenched teeth.

He dragged Boyd back the way they'd come, practically carrying him as he heard loud shouting from over his shoulder. The shouting increased in pitch, probably as they found their leader's body, and he could hear people running after them. He couldn't wrap his mind around what had just happened; couldn't comprehend the fact that not only had Boyd just pretty much murdered a woman in cold blood, a woman who held

her weapon at her side in a distinct, non-threatening gesture, but he hadn't even attempted to complete any part of the mission.

Boyd moved along with Sin, letting his partner lead him without any resistance. His eyes were jerking around quickly, almost frantically, and the shock Sin had noticed before in his face only seemed more pronounced. Even so, when several of the hostiles were gaining on them, Boyd reached into his pocket and pulled out a detonator with several switches covered by a plastic casing. He pushed up the plastic cover and flipped the switches.

An enormous explosion rocked the compound, followed closely by four others at varying lengths away. The people chasing them suddenly yelled in confusion, breaking apart to go search for the new attack. Although some still followed Sin and Boyd, their numbers were greatly reduced and they were hampered by the dust raining from the ceiling, coating them all.

When Sin and Boyd burst out into the courtyard, they were met with thick black smoke, the burning heat of intense fires, and a sudden, even larger explosion nearly throwing everyone to the ground. The few rebels still running around lost sight of the two in the chaos, and the raining debris and amount of people running everywhere covered their tracks through the snow. A few hostiles looked over at them suddenly and started to shout but Sin noticed them immediately. Sin shifted, released Boyd and spun around, feet sliding on the snowy ground as he did so. He raised one gun, whipped out the other and fired both simultaneously as he neutralized the remaining threats in their general area. He slammed one gun back in his belt and grabbed Boyd again, not even waiting to see if he would follow on his own.

The confusion caused by the blasts gave them the cover necessary to get out of the compound pretty much unnoticed. The snow had begun to fall heavier, which was annoying since he would now have to worry about leaving tracks outside of where the chaos covered them, but he ignored it and sprinted towards the forest. It was difficult running uphill through the woods with slippery snow, but Sin managed to keep going.

Even if they got away before anyone in the compound saw where they were going it was only a matter of time before they noticed the tracks so he tried to waste no time.

By the time they made it to the car, Boyd was reacting just enough to pull the keys out and unlock the doors, dropping into his seat and already turning on the engine before Sin even had a chance to get inside. Boyd waited just long enough for Sin to shut the door behind him and then he was already pulling away, driving quickly in a different direction than they came. He said nothing about his behavior and his expression had shut down aside from slightly widened eyes and fingers that trembled against the steering wheel.

Sin was silent for a long moment, his eyes narrowed and his body completely tense. Half of his face was covered in blood but he didn't notice. His mind was racing as he tried to understand what had just happened.

"Well," he began, his voice a study of quiet rage. "If you want to kill yourself, do it in a more efficient way and stop being an attention whore." He looked over at Boyd, green eyes practically glowing in the darkness.

Boyd watched the road, his eyes narrowing slightly at the comment. He did not reply at first, his expression becoming so closed off that it was impossible to know what he was thinking.

"Understood."

Sin glanced at Boyd again, but he didn't feel the need to say anything more and turned back to the window. The rest of the ride passed in relative silence. They didn't speak again that night, even when they returned to the Agency and went to get their wounds patched up. Neither of them made eye contact, but there was distinct tension between them. When they were bandaged and able to move, they parted ways without a word.

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Despite the night passing in growing horror, the next morning Boyd still couldn't comprehend what had happened. It all felt like a bad dream; like a nightmare he just needed to wait long enough to wake up from. He'd spent most of the night curled up on the couch, digging his fingers into his shins and burying his face in his knees, trying to come to grips with what had happened.

He'd killed in cold blood.

It wasn't the first time he'd had to kill on a mission. The first time had been an accident, when he'd meant to incapacitate instead. His aim had been off and he'd watched the man drop from the gunshot to the face. He'd watched in shock as the blood sprayed out around him and his body crumpled to the floor. He hadn't had the chance to fully deal with it at the time since it had been in the middle of a fight, but he'd dealt with the guilt afterward.

The knowledge that there was blood on his hands that he could never take back.

He'd thought that was bad enough at the time. He'd felt sick with the understanding that he'd taken a human life, but at least he'd been able to justify it to himself. The man had been aiming a gun at him and had planned to kill him. He'd been able to tell himself it was self-defense.

But Alexis...

The anger and shock had lasted him until he'd gotten home but then the guilt and regret had hit him full force. He'd ended up vomiting into the toilet, losing the little food he'd eaten while he'd been waiting anxiously for Sin to arrive at the hotel. Misery and nausea had eclipsed all else and soon tears had tracked down his cheeks as he'd clutched the toilet seat with as much pain as he had the nights he'd been trying to get over Lou's death.

What had he done?

What in the world had he done?

He'd killed people who had planned to negotiate with him. People who had shouted out warnings. And Alexis, known for negotiating, who had held her gun at her side.

He'd murdered them.

The weight of the world felt suffocating on him; blurring the room around him like the tears in his eyes, and everything began to feel more and more hopeless.

He still didn't understand why he'd done it. It was just-- Sin had made him so furious and upset, and on top of everything else that had happened the last month, he'd snapped. He'd thought, if they all knew so much better than him, if they all hated him and his ideas so much, then he'd show them. He'd do it their way. He'd do it Sin's way. He'd go in guns blazing and *prove* to them--

Prove... what, exactly?

That was what he didn't know. He didn't know what he'd been thinking because all his thoughts had left at the idea of Sin hating him. Of not having a second chance. Of not having what they'd had before-- that fragile friendship that he'd somehow so irrevocably managed to destroy.

It was all his fault. Everything was his fault. He'd fucked up so many times and every time he tried to fix it or ignore it, he only fucked up further.

He never should have let the anger overcome him. He never should have let the fear and frustration guide him, and he never should have reacted to the pain at the idea of Sin never wanting him again. Because of stupid mistakes of his. Because one or two things he did that were wrong or ill-advised over-shadowed all the good things he'd struggled to do before then.

Because the night with Thierry, Boyd's valentine status, and the fear born from the aftermath of Lou's murder could wipe away everything else between them. Because it could make all those moments of charged energy dissipate until when Sin looked at Boyd, all Boyd would ever see was impatience and disgust.

It was made even worse by remembering the danger he had put Sin in on the mission. He could have been killed trying to save Boyd. And he got injured. Boyd had seen the blood on Sin in the car afterward. What would he have done if he had gotten Sin killed? How could he have lived with himself? And how much more did Sin hate him now?

After Alexis, there was even less hope than there had been before that he could pull out of this. He'd sabotaged everything and he'd taken innocent lives in the process. The idea of Alexis having a family left behind, or a Boyd to her Lou running around, made him feel even more sick.

He spent the night in a state of wretched misery, wondering more and more why it was he'd lived past Lou's death. Depression was a black cloud of acrid smoke that made it hard for him to breathe properly. He stayed in his house, eyes squeezed shut against tears he tried desperately to repress, and he wished he knew a way to fix it all so none of this had ever happened in the first place.

When the debriefing came around the next morning, Boyd thought about not going. But the part of him that, despite everything, wanted to do the right thing wouldn't let him stay home. He had fucked up and he deserved anything he got. Alexis' spirit deserved revenge.

He washed himself up just enough to be presentable, but his eyes were dark and bloodshot from lack of sleep and his resolve felt shaky. He was afraid to see Sin. Afraid to see the cold, disgusted expression of his partner and have it all underlined to him that Sin had completely given up on him. That his latest actions, whether born of pain, panic, or fear, were all too damning for whatever relationship they had to be able to recover.

The drive to the Agency felt like he was heading to his own execution. Despite that, knowing how the people who hated him were likely to latch onto any insecurity he showed, he kept his expression closed off and head held high as he walked through the courtyard. It felt like longer than a few days had passed since the start of his breaking point had been reached thanks to Moua, and he kept his gaze straight ahead.

When he walked into the conference room, despite being on time, he saw that everyone was already there. He felt like their gazes were all accusatory when they turned on him, even though he knew logically that they were not. The sins of the mission felt like they would be easily readable; like the metaphorical blood that stained his hands would be seen by Carhart's keen eye. Boyd took his seat, the sound of the chair moving feeling as though it was too loud and echoing in the tense silence of the room.

Carhart sat at the head of the table, his hands folded in front of him as he stared at Boyd and Sin with a cold, angry expression on his normally pleasant face. His mouth was pressed into a hard line and he didn't say anything for a long moment. The others at the table were equally silent; Owen seemed more alert than usual and Jeffrey was giving Boyd strange, sidelong glances as Ryan's wide, alarmed eyes went from Sin to Boyd.

"You--" Carhart focused on Sin, voice quiet despite the obvious undertone of anger. He paused, closed his mouth and began again. "What did you do?"

Sin stared at him with a bland expression on his face and seemed in no hurry to defend himself.

Carhart slammed a fist into the table and leaned forward. "What the fuck happened? No report was filed and I want details, right now."

"It was my fault," Boyd said quietly from the side.

Everyone's eyes turned to Boyd collectively. Ryan seemed to be in a state of shock; he was one of the few people who knew Boyd well enough to realize something was very wrong with his behavior.

Carhart's anger seemed to dwindle a bit and he looked over at Boyd with an expression that was mostly confusion and surprise. "Was negotiation out of the question?"

Boyd didn't know what to say to that. He stared at Carhart, unable to lie; unable to tell him that negotiation wasn't possible, but equally unable to say he didn't even try.

In the end, he remained silent.

"This mission was extremely important," Carhart said, voice growing hot again. "Death was to be the absolute, last resort in this case. This woman could have provided valuable information to us about Janus, information about its leader and the core members. So this time you're going to give me more than some bullshit, half-assed answer. I want details, I want to know exactly what went down and why. I have to answer to Connors after this. You aren't just working for me." Carhart's eyes flicked over to Sin and they narrowed, as though somehow he couldn't completely believe that none of it was his fault.

"We were completely surrounded," Sin said derisively. "Did you people really think they were going to let us carry the woman out without a fight?" Boyd's eyes shot over to Sin. He was surprised to hear Sin covering for him but kept his expression blank so Sin wouldn't get in trouble by being found out.

"I'm not really surprised," Ryan spoke up suddenly, dragging his eyes away from Boyd. "They chose Alexis to represent their group in Canada because she was tough and because they trusted her to do anything necessary to ensure their success. It was very doubtful that she would have agreed and honestly, the compound was large and teeming with soldiers that came from the OR with her and new ones that she'd recruited."

Carhart absorbed the comments but continued to stare at Boyd, waiting for him to speak, to say that this was the case.

Boyd could not look away from Carhart, and something in him quelled at the idea of lying.

But if he didn't lie, then Ryan and Sin would be implicated too. He didn't know if he cared what happened to him anymore but neither of them deserved to get in trouble

for trying to cover for his idiocy. He was thankful that he had so many years of practice to keep his expression and gaze deadpan despite what was happening in his mind.

"It was a difficult mission. We were surrounded. Amidst the chaos, the danger to our lives, and the fact that the plan fell completely through, I made a decision based on the circumstances and shot her," he said tonelessly.

Carhart was never a difficult man to please, probably because he constantly tried to see the best in people. He rubbed his forehead and seemed to deflate somewhat. He still seemed irritated, something in him not quite seeming to believe what he was hearing but for some reason, he didn't press the topic. The edge didn't leave his tone though.

"What will become of the base in Canada? Will they send another representative?"

Ryan glanced at his laptop and chewed on his lower lip, a nervous habit, as his eyes flicked over the information on the screen. "Honestly all is quiet on this end," he said apologetically. "My contact in the OR has been distant of late and frankly, I'm not sure how long I'll be able to get information out of them. However, there's been a lot of scrambling and contact between Toronto and different countries in OR over night. But until I hear back from my guys, I don't really know what's up. I have ears in Toronto as well, but they don't seem to know much more than what was reported on the news. I still can't really get over the fact that one of her rookies called the local cops in..."

Boyd didn't realize they'd called in the cops and he found himself going over every bit of the mission to make sure he had left no details that could link Americans to it. He would definitely be in a lot more trouble if any connection appeared.

Owen scratched his head and leaned against the table, more alert than usual. "I doubt anything'll come from that, though. I had some Canadian cop-guy friends," he looked a little confused by his own wording but continued, "and it's not like they suck or anything but when it's shit like that, they usually don't find anything. There's enough

controversy with the rebels in the first place that even if they investigate, they have to be all political and shit about what they say."

"Beyond that," Jeffrey spoke for the first time, flipping through screens on his panel, "the accounts the rebels gave were scattered and incoherent. It sounds as though they were all so startled by the events that they did not properly see anything. There are about," he counted silently, "five conflicting stories. They can't even seem to agree on whether a bomb exploded or an earthquake hit, though the earthquake theory is pretty stupid given that it's Toronto."

He looked straight at Boyd with an expression that for once had nothing but professionalism in it. "Maybe they were just confused. Did they seem that way to you, Boyd?"

Boyd stared at him, and felt even worse knowing that it seemed everyone was covering for him. Why were they doing this? Why did they even care, especially Jeffrey? Why weren't they letting him take the fall he fully deserved?

"Many of them did seem like new recruits," Boyd offered after a moment. Jeffrey nodded to himself and flipped to a blank screen, looking over at Carhart. "Honestly, they're probably too scared to do much other than figure out if they want to regroup right now."

Sin remained silent and Carhart crossed his arms over his jacket, dark eyebrows pushing together in annoyance.

"Well Connors will be pissed," Carhart said flatly. "If this explanation doesn't fly with him, expect some kind of repercussions." He looked at Sin for a long moment and then at Boyd. "If this goes wrong it will not only be bad because of the loss of Intel, but it will be a PR problem as well. Discretion should have been key."

He shook his head, annoyance obvious in his expression. "Is there anything else on the table?"

Boyd knew the moment PR was mentioned that he would be hearing from his mother sometime soon. The prospect was not pleasing. He dropped his gaze to the table but said nothing.

"Yes," Jeffrey said, sitting up straight. "I have decrypted a little more of the flash drive. However," and he held up a hand as if to forestall any early signs of celebration, "it's not connected enough yet. So far I have a lot of information that isn't complete. Monterrey seems to be a large theme, and there appear to be details regarding security that needs to be created for some type of event. There's also a list of sectors and rebel groups from across the world, but none of it is completed enough to know what it's for. It doesn't have any addresses or names so it can't be a contact list." He paused. "Everything else is too incoherent at the moment to report yet. I'm still not positive it's all legit, but it seems more likely that it is. I won't be able to confirm this until I've had a chance to tackle the second file."

The tension in Carhart's shoulders seemed to visibly release and some of the frown lines on his forehead disappeared. The importance of the information seemed to completely overshadow the disastrous mission. Carhart looked almost relieved that he'd have good news for the Marshal. He glanced at Boyd again, his expression less severe and nodded. "Excellent. Perhaps my ass won't be completely handed to me after all."

The General stood up and uncrossed his arms from his chest. "But don't think this is over just yet. I'll be in touch. Dismissed."

Boyd relaxed slightly when Carhart left the room then pushed himself up immediately. He didn't meet anyone's eyes as he left.

## Chapter 21

Sin left the conference room soon after Boyd, walking quickly towards his apartment with a strong desire to get far away from everyone else. The entire mission had been an utter disaster and now, one or both of them would possibly be sent up to the Fourth or terminated as a result. His one hope was that Vivienne would intervene and Carhart would spin things the right way. Connors would never let them get away clean unless someone covered their asses.

Growling in frustration, Sin ran a hand through his hair and stopped pacing. He replayed the entire mission in his mind and didn't come up with any different of a scenario than he had the night before. He couldn't handle it when Boyd reacted negatively to him, and Boyd obviously couldn't handle the backlash. There was no doubt that their argument had been the cause of his little freak show, and that was something that Sin couldn't deny.

It would have been nice to claim no responsibility and wash his hands of Boyd altogether. It would have been nice to be able to dismiss Boyd completely like he had his previous dumb ass partners. But the catalyst of the previous night had been their rapidly deteriorating interaction. It seemed like no matter what happened, things just kept spiraling down further to make every situation worse. And he had no idea what to do about this situation. He turned the thing over in his mind again and again, but no matter what-- he came up empty. It was something that was beyond his grasp to understand.

Sin was still struggling with it when there was a quiet tapping on his door. Half hopeful but also half disturbed that it may be Boyd, Sin looked through the peep hole and saw that it was Ryan. Having no idea what the hell this could be about, Sin swung the door open.

"What?"

Ryan opened his mouth, looked at the guards that stood at each side of the door, and then gave Sin a hopeful look.

"Can we talk? It's about, ah... a mutual friend. Y'know."

Sin glared at him for a moment before stepping to the side, allowing the R&D agent access. He slammed the door shut almost immediately after and moved further into the apartment.

"To what do I owe this pleasure, Freedman?"

Ryan shrugged, taking off his gloves and rubbing his hands together anxiously. He was visibly nervous and his large indigo eyes flit around the apartment slightly, as if he couldn't or didn't want to look closely at Sin. For a long time it seemed that he wouldn't even spit out what he'd come to say but then he sighed, and looked at the senior agent fully.

"I'm worried about Boyd. I wanted to know what really happened on that mission."

"Why? So you can go write out a full report?" Sin asked caustically, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't think so."

A flash of annoyance colored Ryan's expression and he frowned. "You know, I'm Boyd's friend. I actually care about him, and worry about him, and want him to be okay. I'm not going to go running to report back to anyone, for your damn information."

This caused Sin's dark eyebrows to raise and he gave the younger man an assessing look. He seemed steadfast and genuinely angry about the implication. Ryan was so easy to read that it seemed impossible that he'd be capable of any kind of subterfuge anyway.

"What does this information mean to you?"

"I told you. I'm worried about him! He's had a really bad few weeks, especially the other day, and now he blew a mission this bad? I feel like--" Ryan faltered and looked away, twining his hands together as his lips turned down. "I just get the feeling... maybe he messed up on purpose. It's not like him."

Sin held up his hand to prevent Ryan from talking anymore. His green eyes had narrowed and he walked closer, only stopping when he was inches away from Ryan. "Bad few weeks how? He didn't even have any missions while I was gone as far as I know."

"He didn't," Ryan admitted a little reluctantly. He sighed and shifted from foot to foot, discomfort clear in his body language. "But like, whenever he did come to the compound for whatever reason... I dunno. People have been hard on him."

"People are always hard on him," Sin said flatly, not seeing where this was going.

"Yeah but it's worse now. Somehow the thing about him being a valentine got out. I have no idea how, and it pisses me off so much that maybe Jeff or Owen said something. I mean it's also possible that like... I dunno, maybe an admin somewhere saw paperwork or put in his status and changed it and word got spread that way but either way, people know. And the people who didn't like him before have been harping on it big time, man."

Ryan gave Sin an imploring look and shook his head of curls and cowlicks back and forth. "You know how most of these fieldies are! You know better than anyone! So many of them have that super testosterone homophobic attitude... and he's an easy target already. Last week-- last week was really bad. They made a spectacle of him in the courtyard right in front of everyone, I heard. Showing how he couldn't even take them all and he's supposed to be rank 9. They even spit on him when he was down. And like-- even the person who told me, didn't even step in to help. It was just like, they left him there on the ground with a mouthful of blood and no one even thought to help him up. And that is fucking harsh, dude! That's like... I dunno. I don't know how he must be feeling right now."

Sin's automatic reaction was to demand who had been there and go show them what a rank 10 would do to take them all, but he made himself stop. He closed his eyes briefly, trying to ignore the anger and tension that had built in his shoulders during the speech and took a slow breath. No matter what happened between he and Boyd, there

was a part of him that was unflinchingly protective of the boy. It was the same part of him that unhesitatingly almost took several bullets just to keep Boyd out of harm's way.

"I don't know what to do about any of this," he answered finally, evenly. "I completely fail at sympathy. My solution to this problem is gutting them all, and I've already tried the murder-to-avenge Boyd's honor thing, and it didn't pan out. He and I, we don't communicate very well. In fact, I'd say we rather fail spectacularly at it. It's better if I just stay the hell out of his problems at all."

"No, no, no!" Ryan snapped, his voice getting louder with each "no." He shook his head, eyes narrowing. "Jesus, you both do fail at communication. I don't know how two such smart, talented people can be so damn stupid. Either you ignore each other or you insult each other, that's basically what I'm getting here. And I know you both care about each other! He was so torn up about all of that France stuff--"

"What exactly do you know about France stuff--"

"And he thought you hated his guts, but I can tell just by your attitude that you obviously don't. The way you treat Boyd is like 500% better than the way you treated your previous partners and everyone damn else, but he doesn't want to see that, and you just want to be super dick and push him away! I don't. get it!"

Sin blinked, mouth parting and then closing. "And-- and what do you expect that I do to solve this?"

"Just go talk to him, damn it! Geez, is that so hard for both of you to understand? It must damn well be, because neither of you do it even though it's the easiest solution to it all." Ryan ran a hand through his hair, scowling and shaking his head as he put his gloves back on. "Just... just tell him what you told me if nothing else. 'Cause right now, I bet he doesn't think he has anyone on his side."

Frowning, Sin looked away briefly. Even as mad as he was at Boyd at the moment, the idea of that bothered him. Sin had spent most of his life being alienated

from the compound. The possibility of Boyd lumping him in with the rest of them was disturbing, especially when it wasn't true. Sin's issues with Boyd were pretty specific.

"Well then, where is he if you think this plan will be so easy and fail proof? Can you tell me that as well?"

"I dunno. Carhart said that he needed a full report within the hour so he probably is going to have to go do that since he took responsibility for the mission. You should probably do one too."

"Fine."

Ryan's face broke out into a hopeful grin. "So you're really going to--"

Sin walked out of the door without listening to the rest of what Ryan had to say.

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Boyd didn't even bother leaving the building as he knew his mother would be summoning him, so he was completely unsurprised to be alerted to go to her office immediately. Ann barely looked at him as she buzzed him into his mother's office.

He had just entered the room and barely even had time to close the door behind him when he felt a sudden stinging ache on one cheek. He blinked, stunned more from the act than the strength, and brought one hand up to his cheek as he looked over with widened eyes.

Vivienne stood to the side of the door, her entire attention focused on him for one of the few times in his life. Her eyes were like ice that had no bottom, absolutely frigid, and her posture was tense with fury. She had touched him so rarely for any reason that it took Boyd a shocked second to realize that she'd just hit him.

"What is the matter with you?" she demanded, her voice low and coldly furious in a way he didn't know he'd ever heard. It caused his throat to close and mouth to dry. "Have you no intelligence? No shame? Is there a shred within you worth saving?"

That cut through him and he felt any hope crumble for this meeting to resolve peacefully. Her words hurt him more than he expected. Did she really believe he was so worthless?

His mouth opened but no words would come. Even if he'd known what to say, it would been caught in his throat.

She raised a hand palm up to him, telling him immediately without words to stop. "Do not speak," she ordered coldly. "I do not wish to hear your excuses. I can hardly look at you. I am of half a mind to mark you for termination now and be done with the entire debacle of your existence."

Boyd swallowed but didn't dare speak, and that was the only thing that seemed to keep her anger from growing. She turned on her heel and strode back to her desk, jerking the chair out with white-knuckled fingers. He'd never seen her so obviously agitated. She typically kept a tight rein on her emotions even when angry. He couldn't help acknowledging that this was his fault too; this out of character display of his mother's.

"Where do I begin?" She leveled a hard stare at him that told him he had damn well better walk over to the desk and sit down immediately before she ordered guards to do it for him.

He followed the unspoken directive and lowered himself into the chair. He tightened his fingers around the arms of the chair and kept his back straight, but he couldn't stop the dread that grew in his stomach every second her unsympathetic stare drilled through him.

"Do you understand how difficult it is to be a woman and succeed in this type of environment?" Her eyes narrowed and lips tightened. "Can your insignificant brain even begin to comprehend how I struggled to be taken seriously? How much time and effort I exerted in order to reach this position-- the years I spent and the assumptions that were made along the way?"

She let the question hang in the air a moment and then leaned forward. "Years of despicable accusations of my integrity put into question simply for succeeding in a male-dominated world, and I was able to avoid it all. And you--" Her lips twisted into as close to a scowl as he'd ever seen, her typically calm face shifting to disgust. "You bring it all into question in seconds through your inability to consider the situation."

Boyd opened his mouth, automatically wanting to deny or apologize, but she stopped him with a raised hand again and a sharp, impenetrable glare.

"Do not patronize me, child," she said, voice dripping with contempt. "I am utterly uninterested in your reasons. While I cannot blame you for your dedication to the cause, I am disgusted by your actions. Do you realize the stigma of the valentine status? Do you understand the consequences of your actions?"

"But I didn't know," Boyd protested. "If I had--"

"Ignorance is not an acceptable excuse," she cut him off icily. "The fact that for all intents and purposes you volunteered for the status puts you in an entire class of your own. It is even more pathetic that you are in this situation without it being a necessity. If you had put more faith in your ability to negotiate through words rather than in bed, neither of us would be in this embarrassing predicament. Or perhaps you used his alleged recalcitrance as an excuse to engage in acts with the first known homosexual you encountered?"

Boyd's mouth opened and then closed. He shook his head, his fingers tightening on the chair. "It wasn't like that--"

"Because from my perspective," she continued in a hard tone over his protestations, "you wasted no time in establishing yourself as a promiscuous homosexual embarrassment to stain my record. And as we are, unfortunately, related by blood, every one of your incompetent actions is reflected on me." Her eyes narrowed. "A fact which I am steadily growing to detest."

"I was just trying to succeed in the mission," Boyd said, the words seeming so destined to failure once he spoke them. "I didn't want to disappoint you."

Vivienne actually let out a scoff at that. "If that is the case, your ability to achieve the exact opposite of your goal is astounding." She let the silence cut into him a second longer before she narrowed her eyes and sat back in her chair, her hands intertwining in her lap. "As I understand it, Jeffrey Styles is in the process of continuing to decipher the information, yes?"

Boyd nodded silently.

"Very well. That does imply that the information is legitimate. It is possible the debacle will end with a small measure of success. However, understand this much: you have officially been given the designation of a homosexual valentine operative."

Boyd's stomach sunk at that but he couldn't say he was surprised. He nodded again, this time in acknowledgment.

"As you were capable of acquiring information that we assume to be useful, it implies that your skills in that department are adequate." Her face took on an unpleasant quality, as if she did not wish to think about this but felt compelled to mention it regardless.

"However, with this new talent in your repertoire," her tone made it seem insulting, "I expect you to do what you must in order to be more than adequate in the future. Anything less than perfect success in future endeavors will only cause a humiliating renewal of questions. Should you refuse or fail, you will jeopardize your job, I will be held accountable for the fact that you are now apparently too good to do any dirty work, and it will only resurrect this debacle. If you had been intelligent enough to avoid this issue in the first place we would not be having this conversation. However you remain as incompetent as you have been for much of your life, and now I must do damage control."

She gave him a hard stare. "Do you understand?"

Boyd's mouth was dry and he nodded again. He didn't even bother trying to ask if there was a way to remove the designation. He knew there wasn't one without asking, and he knew it would only anger her more if he said anything about it.

He couldn't even be surprised by the fact that his mother was in essence telling him to be a better prostitute than the others. Her sense of duty to work above all else had been one of the few constants of hers in his life, and he knew better than to question it. He felt the sense of hopelessness that had been plaguing him before grow even stronger.

There was a pause as she regarded him coldly. "And should the topic arise, I expect that you will make it clear that it is your own degraded values that caused you to make that choice. I want nothing to do with your promiscuity in the rumors, do you understand me? I have already suffered enough fall out through no fault of mine. It is not my fault you grew up to be a homosexual, and equally not my fault that you so easily sleep with any male who for whatever godforsaken reason seems interested in you. It is especially not my fault that in such cases you apparently cannot keep the knowledge to yourself."

Her eyes narrowed as she scrutinized him. "Are you having intercourse with that creature of a partner?"

"What?" Boyd asked, taken off guard by the question. "No. Why would you--"

"I suggest you keep it that way," she said flatly. "Your reputation is poor enough without adding that abomination to your record." She didn't let him comment on that. She sat up straighter and regarded him with a piercing stare.

"Now. Onto your latest disaster. Do not attempt to lie so blatantly to me as you did to General Carhart. I am well aware that the fault is yours and yours alone for the failure of that mission."

When she saw his expression, her eyebrows ticked up. "Do not underestimate me, child. It is my job to be informed. I have an extensive network of contacts and have

access to more media outlets than you could imagine. After reviewing the varied reports, I am still at a loss as to your motivation. What on Earth possessed you to believe you could enter in such a manner? You had adequate time to formulate a plan. What happened?"

When Boyd did not answer immediately, not certain what to say, her eyes narrowed and a knowing look crossed her face. "Ah. I see."

"What?" Boyd asked suspiciously when she did not continue.

"You were feeling childish again, no doubt," she told him dismissively. "Did you feel the need to repeat the melodrama from a few years ago? Are you truly so pathetic that suicidal tendencies are your only means of coping with anything that does not go your way?" Her lips tightened. "I cannot believe your incompetence. If you are so intent on dying, be more efficient about it. Your behavior thus far is shameful and unacceptable."

Boyd actually felt the world go still at her words. He stared at her, shocked, and didn't know how to react. Her words echoed Sin's so closely that he felt his stomach clench. Knowing Sin and his mother felt the same way about him hurt far more than he would have anticipated.

She stared at him for one long, hard moment before she shook her head and looked away. "I am finished with this conversation. I expect marked improvement from you in the future. If you disappoint me, I expect to see you back in my office. You are quickly becoming the greatest weakness of mine in this agency and I will not have you bring me down after the time it took for me to reach this position."

Her tone was dead serious when she continued. "The Agency does not have time to deal with children and their incompetence and neither do I. Be thankful that I care enough about my reputation to sometimes protect yours."

She didn't wait for him to respond before she said flatly, "Dismissed."

Boyd stood and walked to the door, but when his fingers curled around the door handle he couldn't make himself walk out. He had a tenuous hold on his sense of self-worth, and maybe it was the need to feel like he had done one right thing some time in his life that made him turn back and look at her.

"Do you...?"

So many questions were rolled into those two charged words. Sentences he could not bring himself to finish. *Do you regret having me? Do you hate me? Do you ever remember loving me? Do you wish I never existed? Do you truly wish I'd die?*

His eyes burned at the thought of those questions; at the thought of hearing the answers he was afraid he would receive. His heart pounded and he felt the emotions intensify within him against his wishes.

He wanted her to care for him. He wanted to not disappoint her. He wanted her to look at him with approval. He wanted her voice to soften. He wanted her to look at him like he was human and not something caught beneath her shoe.

He wanted-- needed-- something to cling to in order to feel like this wasn't all hopeless. To feel like someone thought he was still worthwhile, on some minute level. That someone he cared about deeply could still see something in him worth loving.

"Have you ever once been proud of me?" The question came out more hesitant than he'd intended. His heart felt like it clenched now that the words were out in the open.

But if Vivienne noticed the vulnerability in him at that moment, she didn't let it show. She looked up at him, her expression unimpressed. "I have no time for your frivolity," she said flatly. "Leave my office at once. You have been dismissed."

He felt like she'd slapped him in the face again. He leaned back, as if to pull away from a physical attack, and he looked away with a subdued nod. When he turned and walked out, he felt like he was shutting the door on a lifeline.

He couldn't keep the same facade of complete confidence and a disregard of everything around him when he walked away. He felt like the world had stopped moving properly around him. The scathing anger and disgust he'd been seeing in too many expressions lately made him feel like there was no longer a point to any of it.

Depression overwhelmed him. He felt completely hopeless. Everyone who mattered to him hated him, or would grow to hate him when they knew what he'd done. When they understood about Alexis. He'd never asked for much in his life, although he'd been lucky enough to be born to a family that at least had the money to provide for him.

All he'd ever wanted, all he'd ever based his self-worth on, was being accepted by someone. Being wanted by someone. He'd wanted his mother to love him; he'd wanted his father to be proud; he'd wanted to live with Lou for the rest of his life.

But everything kept falling apart around him.

He'd survived something when he shouldn't have years ago and maybe now it was all catching up to him. If someone had to die that day, it should have been him, not Lou. It would have been better for everyone. He wouldn't have spent that agonizing time struggling through the verge of insanity and coming out deadened only to have it all be pulled away from him bit by bit-- Giving him hope at first that he'd found something, someone, to accept him, only for it all to be ripped away and thrown in his face.

Sin, his mother, the others on compound... They all hated him; they all wanted to see him broken down until there was nothing left. And soon, he thought as the pain welled and clogged his throat, they would get their wish. Wasn't that what he deserved anyway? After the things he'd done; after the mistakes he'd made-- he deserved everything that came his way.

He deserved to suffer and he deserved to die.

At the thought, he realized he may have a solution. He had to write that report within the hour. If he told the truth-- if he said that he'd sabotaged the mission on his own, and he somehow made it seem like he'd forced the others to cover for him, maybe

he could make everyone happy. The Agency would terminate him and no one else would be blamed. It would look bad for his mother that her son had messed up on a mission so bad he needed to be killed, but people would forget over time. Sin could be reassigned someone else, Adam Blake probably, and he would be happier.

Everyone would be better off when he was gone.

He turned and walked toward the fourteenth level. The huge reference library had become his safe haven over the past few months, which helped in this case when he felt so discouraged and upset.

When he walked inside, he was relieved to find it empty. He headed immediately for his preferred computer toward the back and dropped into a chair. When he was confronted with the log in screen, he realized what he was about to do. His only concern was that he write this properly so he took the blame for everything. So no one else would receive even a second of repercussion.

He stared at the screen, trying to think well enough to formulate what he would say. But he couldn't think of a way to believably explain away how everyone had covered for him in the meeting. He leaned forward, his hands digging in his hair as he dropped his head down.

Why couldn't he even do this right? Why was he so hopeless at everything? Why was someone like him who was so painfully fucking stupid still alive?

His breath felt shallow and echoing in his chest and he squeezed his eyes shut. Frustration and hopelessness flared within him and he pushed himself up. He walked away from the computer and sat down at a table. He dropped his head into his hands again, this time trying to make his mind work. Trying to think so he could figure out what to write.

He hadn't been there long before the door opened again behind him and footsteps moved into the room. Boyd felt so miserable that he didn't even bother to look at the newcomer. He was still slouched at the table when a familiar voice rang out.

"Well look who's here. The little blond bitch who doesn't know when to mind his own business."

Boyd glanced over. He couldn't even be surprised by Harry's appearance. None of it mattered. Maybe it was karmic retribution anyway. He turned away from Harry and kept his head in his hands.

Footsteps could be heard crossing the floor before Harry moved around the table and came closer to Boyd. He leaned in, grabbing Boyd's chin to turn his face to the side. He looked down at Boyd with narrowed, hateful eyes. "Thanks to you, my pay has been docked for months. The bitch in payroll just says to me, it's my own problem for getting temporarily demoted. She says, I shouldn't have gotten myself reported."

Boyd jerked his head away, not having the patience to deal with Harry interrupting his solitude. "Maybe you shouldn't have been a pervert in the first place," he said, uncaring. "That would have probably helped you more."

Harry's lips curled up and he leaned in further, running his hand up Boyd's cheek before twining his fingers in long strands of blond hair. He gripped them and yanked Boyd closer. "Do you ever think that maybe your partner... wants it? Maybe that's why he shows off for me. He knows it turns me on when those cocksucking lips start talking all of that trash."

Anger shot through Boyd on Sin's behalf as his expression twisted in disgust. "He doesn't want anything to do with you, you piece of shit," he sneered caustically. "You're a pathetic fuck who can't help seeing what he wants in the world even when it's a complete lie, because no one in their right mind would ever want to be near you." He reached up to disentangle Harry's hand from his hair.

"That's where you're wrong," Harry smirked, and used his foot to pull the chair out from under Boyd.

The sudden loss of stability caused Boyd to fall forward, cracking his chin against the table. Pain blossomed but before he could do anything, Harry slammed his face

against the table top and yanked him up. Boyd ended up bent over the table with Harry holding him down, their legs bent and pressed against each other. Boyd struggled to push Harry off him but the guard was much heavier and stronger than he was, so he settled with glaring mockingly at him as best he could with his cheek shoved against the table.

"Yeah?" Boyd challenged recklessly. "How am I wrong? Sin doesn't like you. He doesn't want you. He would kill you in a heartbeat if it wouldn't inconvenience him by being sent to the fourth. You're a psychotic sex offender who's been stalking him and is deluded into seeing bullshit that isn't there. If I had my way, you'd be castrated and forced to eat your own balls." He jerked against Harry's hold. "Or maybe you'd choke on them and make my day even better."

Harry's hand snaked around Boyd's hip and slipped down. Without pause, he grabbed Boyd's sack through his pants and squeezed hard. "What's that you were saying about balls, princess?"

Boyd felt equal parts fury and revulsion at the touch and he shoved his weight against the table, trying to find a way to push Harry off him. "Get the fuck off me," he seethed.

"This is what I'm talking about," Harry said in his ear, the shape of his mouth forming a smirk. He began rubbing his hand along the shape of Boyd's balls, massaging hard. "You all get me so fired up and then pretend not to want to play ball." He squeezed harder, bumping his groin against the back of Boyd's ass to make his growing erection obvious. "Maybe you're like Vega. Maybe you just want to play rough."

Rage overcame everything else. Boyd braced himself against the table and was finally able to get in a position where he could hook one leg behind Harry's. He knocked Harry's knee out from under him, throwing him off balance just long enough for Boyd to use the stability of the table to wrench himself away. He turned around and punched Harry furiously across the jaw but Harry just rocked with the motion, laughing.

"If you ever hurt him again I will fucking kill you," Boyd growled, glaring venomously.

"You think you can, princess?" Harry chuckled, seemingly unfazed by the attack. "Because I doubt it. You're nothing but a skinny little girl. My cock would split you in half if I fucked you."

He reared his large fist back and slugged Boyd across the face. Boyd fell backwards across the table, and rolled off to the side. Before he could get up into a defensive crouch, Harry jerked him up by his shirt and slammed him head first into one of the glass doors of a nearby bookcase. Pain exploded in Boyd and for a moment he was blinded by blood. But he still fought furiously against Harry, twisting in the other man's grip and attempting to strike him in the throat or face.

Harry grabbed his wrist and twisted his arm back violently, causing intense pain to radiate throughout Boyd. He shouted and tried to escape the hold but the pressure made it obvious that his shoulder would pop out of place if he moved wrong. Taking advantage of the situation, Harry yanked Boyd around once again and kicked his feet out so that he was half bent over and supported by the broken bookcase.

Harry's free hand snaked around Boyd's waist to undo his pants. The guard's breath began to quicken as the zipper lowered, and he seemed to become even more excited as Boyd tried to twist away.

"Stop-- You fucking--" Boyd snarled, trying to ignore the panicked voice in his mind that pointed out he may not be able to stop this. He tried to crane his neck, looking for the surveillance cameras. Surely someone had to have seen this by now. Someone had to be sending help.

Harry yanked at Boyd's pants and underwear, shoving them down to his thighs and exposing his bare skin. Boyd hissed and jerked away, feeling his arm stretch unnaturally in the movement. Pain was white noise that eclipsed his thoughts for a second and he automatically stilled.

As Harry's breath quickened further into a harsh pant, Boyd heard the rustle of Harry undoing his own pants. Within seconds, Boyd felt a hard erection press against his bare ass cheeks and he automatically tensed his entire body. He started to protest but his words were cut off when Harry shoved his face against the glass with a crack that made the glass shudder but not break.

Temporarily stunned, Boyd realized he was going to have to dislocate his shoulder to get away. His face was pressed against the glass, making it impossible not to see the reflection in it. The vilely anticipatory way Harry was looking at him was sickening in conjunction with the feel of Harry dropping a hand to his own erection and starting to steer his cock toward Boyd's ass.

Boyd was just bracing for agony-- either of Harry raping him bareback or of his shoulder being ripped from its socket-- when through the glass he suddenly realized he saw something.

Shadowy hands appeared around Harry's head in the brief seconds before he was able to penetrate Boyd and with a simple movement the snapping of a neck could be heard. Boyd could hardly breathe in shock. For a moment he didn't move, even when he felt Harry drop to the floor behind him and he found himself staring wide-eyed into Sin's reflection. Boyd's legs felt unstable beneath him as the entirety of the situation hit him. He'd almost-- He'd just been-- And Sin--

He leaned against the bookshelf, unable to stop from shaking, and was almost afraid to turn around. Feeling exposed, he fumbled with his pants until he could jerk them up. Only then did he turn. His face felt ashen and sticky with rivulets of blood and his eyes were still widened when he took in Sin. His gaze was caught on his partner and the rush of shock and relief he felt at seeing him there.

Sin stood there silently, the hands he'd just used to break Harry's neck dangling loosely at his sides. Harry's body lay at his scuffed boots, but Sin didn't even glance at the dead man. He stared at Boyd with a completely alien expression on his face. His

mouth was slightly parted, eyes wider than usual and glittering strangely in the dim light of the room.

For the first time, emotions were clearly visible on his face and he didn't seem to be trying to hide them.

Sin looked away for a brief moment, eyes finally dropping down to Harry's body before he once again met Boyd's frightened gaze. The fury was in his eyes, the cold deadliness that made them glow like green fire, but the strange thing was the insanity that normally accompanied that look of black anger was missing. In its place was guilt. His eyebrows drew together as he gazed at Boyd and he opened his mouth, starting to say something. Before he could speak the door burst open and a high-pitched whine shot through the room.

The moment that had been developing between them was gone in the space of a breath. Like a snapped rubber band, the next few minutes seemed to jerk forward and move too fast for proper reactions or comprehension. Suddenly guards were surrounding them and Sin was falling to his knees, hands clutching at the collar as they sent shock wave after shock wave through him mercilessly. The guards were shouting and cursing as someone began frantically trying to revive Harry.

Boyd was too stunned to react at first; Sin had not broken eye contact and for a moment he could only stare. Sin wasn't even struggling against the collar or the guards. Although chaos surrounded them, the sounds were removed and distant until it finally clicked in Boyd's mind what was happening.

"Wait," Boyd said urgently. "Stop it!" His expression turned frantic as he started to look away for someone to stop torturing Sin with the collar. But Sin shook his head at him wordlessly, his expression telling him not to interfere.

Boyd looked at Sin desperately-- not understanding and thinking he must be seeing wrong. He opened his mouth to protest but Sin's expression remained firm. Boyd's eyes brightened and the words he meant to say, the words he was going to shout to defend Sin and protest that he'd only been saving Boyd, died on his lips. He

shook his head wordlessly at Sin, begging him with his eyes and the way his eyebrows twisted up for Sin to let him say something. But Sin looked dead certain and Boyd's protests remained caught in his throat.

All Boyd could do was watch helplessly as Sin began to spasm. Blood began to spill from the sides of his mouth and Boyd wanted to wrench his eyes away but he couldn't. He felt sickened by what he was seeing and he didn't understand why Sin stopped him; why he continued to watch Boyd firmly for as long as he could. It seemed like forever until Sin's eyes finally rolled back in his head and he fell unconscious. Even then, the collar continued to shock him for several seconds.

Boyd's arms wrapped around his stomach and he stared at Sin even as the chaos continued around him. Someone yelled that Harry was dead, someone else was asking what happened, and one of the guards suddenly kicked Sin violently in the side. Boyd couldn't keep himself from jerking forward at that, shouting, "Stop that!"

He intended to shove them all away from Sin, to protect him when he couldn't protect himself, but a hand caught his arm and pulled him back firmly. Looking over a little wildly, Boyd was surprised to see Luke Gerant staring at him with a somber expression and shaking his head, one hand holding him gently but firmly in place.

Darting his attention back to Sin, Boyd watched as several of the guards hoisted him up and dragged him away. One of the other guards pulled Harry's pants up before they picked his body up and carried him away as well. It didn't take long for Gerant and Boyd to be alone in the room. Boyd's breath was quick and a little uncontrolled. His mind was reeling from everything that had just happened, seemingly all at once. He was incapable of looking away from where Sin had disappeared and his hands dropped at his sides, curling into fists.

Gerant surveyed the bruises and cuts all over Boyd's face and the way he held himself gingerly. He glanced quickly at the surveillance cameras in the room.

"You're bleeding," Gerant said not unkindly and pulled lightly on Boyd's arm. "You need to go to the medic."

"No," Boyd said, shaking his head. He pulled away, heading toward the door. "I need to see Sin."

"No," Gerant said firmly, walking with him. "You can later. Right now you need to see the medic."

"But Sin--"

"After a shock like that he will be unconscious for awhile," Gerant told him softly.

Boyd felt horrified thinking about the pain Sin must have been going through and the idea of him waking up on fourth. Not only that-- almost positively in the box. There was no way they were bringing him anywhere else.

The sentiment must have shown in his expression because Gerant only shook his head firmly.

"Listen, you won't do him any good if you pass out from blood loss. Your face is pretty messed up; you need to get it looked at and is that glass stuck in your forehead?" He frowned at Boyd's wounds but Boyd only shook his head silently and let Gerant pull him along.

He said nothing as Gerant brought him down to the medic's office and left him there, nor would he explain any of his injuries to the staff. They were used to his silence and did their best to clean him up. Boyd stared pensively into blank space, ignoring the hands moving in and out of his vision and the distant pricks of pain. His mind was racing. Sin had gotten hurt for him again. No matter what else had happened between them, no matter how depressed and hopeless he had felt just an hour earlier, he felt resolve harden his mind for what was to come.

Sin had helped him. He'd come back for him. And he didn't seem to hate Boyd anymore-- not if that stretch of time before they'd been yanked apart was anything to go by.

And knowing that, there was only one thing he could do. He would save Sin because Sin had saved him, and he didn't care what he had to do in order to achieve that.

## Chapter 22

Boyd headed straight to Carhart's office, wanting to free Sin as soon as possible. He knocked firmly on the door.

Carhart called out for him to enter in his usual gruff tone and didn't look up from his computer monitor when he did. "Yes, Boyd?"

"Sin's been taken to fourth but he shouldn't be there," Boyd said without preamble the moment he shut the door behind him. "How do we get him out?" He was so intent on the idea of freeing Sin that it took him half a second to think to add, "Sir," on the end.

Carhart looked up at Boyd from under his eyebrows, taking in the obvious signs of recent injury, and flicked his eyes back to the computer. "And what, pray tell, has happened to you in the past two hours since we parted?"

"Harry Truman," Boyd said evenly, eyes narrowed and intent on Carhart. "The man who assaulted Sin on fourth multiple times. The sort of thing that is probably happening right now unless we can get him out of there."

"According to my knowledge Sin has just killed the man so apparently he is no longer a threat." Carhart stopped his work and sat back in his chair, gazing at Boyd with an unreadable expression on his face. "What happened?"

Boyd stared at Carhart. He felt impatient and worried about what the guards would do. He wanted to tell Carhart that none of that was important now. But he knew that would get him nowhere.

"It will all be on the surveillance tapes, sir. I was summoned to my mother's office and when I left I went to the fourteenth floor library to write my report. Harry Truman came in. He was angry with me for reporting his mistreatment of Sin earlier, which apparently caused him to have suspended pay. He attacked me and was attempting to rape me when Sin arrived and killed him." He paused and added intently, "So you see, Sin was only doing his job protecting his partner. He shouldn't even be in there."

Carhart was silent for a moment and an weary look slowly appeared on his face. "Unfortunately the decision is not up to me. And I do not think Connors will feel especially generous about helping Sin after what happened last night."

He uncrossed his arms and rubbed his temples slowly, eyebrows knotting as he closed his eyes. "I've already attempted to reason with the higher powers but since I am apparently seen as Sin's blind protector, my word has very little weight with his punishments anymore. They think I'm soft when it comes to him."

"Last night was my fault as was today," Boyd insisted. "These are both things that I should be held accountable for instead of Sin. With all due respect, sir, I think it's ridiculous that he was put there for helping me in the first place. When the guards arrived to take him away they didn't even bother asking what happened. They just wanted to vilify him like they always do."

He paused. "I understand that you're in a difficult position, but I'm willing to do whatever it takes to get Sin out of there. What should I do instead? Should I contact Marshal Connors, or someone else? I won't mention your name at all if you wish; they can think whatever they like of me but I want to help Sin."

Carhart continued to stare at Boyd, still rubbing his temples. "Let me ask you a question Boyd." He dropped his hands and leaned across his desk, staring at Boyd intently. "Why are you so determined to help him? For the past few weeks the two of you seemed to dislike each other. Is it because of some sense of gratitude that he saved you?"

Boyd watched him for a moment and then looked away, eyes narrowing pensively. "I don't know," he said honestly. "But if he hadn't come then--"

He cut himself off, not wanting to get into what his options had otherwise been. The plans he'd started to make in his mind to kill himself. If Harry had followed through with that and he'd gone home in that mindset, he wouldn't have even waited for the Agency to terminate him. He would have shot himself in the head once he was home and been done with it.

He shook his head and met Carhart's eyes. "He's my partner and he's important to me. Whatever the fall out is for Harry's death, I'm involved. The second I intervened on Sin's behalf, I put myself in the middle of it all and I'll be damned if I let Sin take the fall for something that he shouldn't be blamed for in the first place. Harry was a sex offender who probably hurt more people than we even know. He deserved what he got."

Carhart sighed and stood up abruptly, folding his hands behind his back. "If only things were that simple," he murmured. "But it doesn't work that way in this organization." The General stopped for a moment, before frowning slightly. "I cannot comprehend a world where Connors would care whether or not an idiot like Harry Truman lived or died but this happened at the perfect time for him to punish Sin for not getting what he wanted out of the assignment last night."

He looked at Boyd with a scowl. "Unfortunately, my hands are tied. I've already requested the surveillance video be brought to me but there are more people against us than for us in this matter and I suspect that it will get lost along the way."

The answer felt like a verdict. Boyd couldn't let this lie like this. He'd been the one at fault for the Alexis mission. He'd been the one to push the issue with Harry by reporting it. And although he knew that had been the right thing to do, Sin had so far managed to avoid being sent to the fourth on account of Harry. Yet as soon as Boyd got involved, that was exactly what happened. The fact that the guards had kicked Sin when he was down, that they had tortured him with the collar into unconsciousness, did not bode well for what may be happening while Boyd stood there in Carhart's office arguing his partner's innocence.

He had to do something.

He had to think about this clearly. Like a mission. He had attempted to negotiate with the first leader and although Carhart was amenable to his plight he also was unable to do anything. Connors was mentioned several times already, and Boyd knew that ultimately he was the person he had to convince. His expression turned neutral and he nodded.

"Understood, sir. If it's possible, I would like to know if the tape arrives so I can make my own copy if it's needed for evidence."

Carhart continued to frown thoughtfully and went back to rubbing his temples. Although he wasn't outraged and screaming, it was obvious that the man was upset.

"I want you to stay here," Carhart said slowly, narrowing his eyes at Boyd. "I'm going to make another attempt to plead his case but I do not want you wandering this compound at a time like this. Not until I can get my hands on the video and make an official report. The rumors already associated with the two of you will worsen and unfortunately, right now the unofficial story places the entire blame on you. McNichols is spinning a tale that you had it out for Harry after witnessing him having a disagreement with Sin, and have had a vendetta ever since. He is saying that you deliberately provoked Harry so that Sin would have an excuse to kill him. I don't believe it, but there will be people who do. I have no idea why Harry is so popular among the men, but I can only assume it's because people are weak and will follow anyone who tries to take charge."

He moved towards the door, still watching Boyd steadily. "Do not leave this room until I come back. Call Ryan if you want. He has clearance to access my office."

Boyd nodded and took a seat. He wanted to leave immediately and find Connors but he forced himself to stay in the office. He didn't want to make matters worse. Still, the idea of calling Ryan sounded like a good one. He needed someone to talk to in case he needed to start making contingency plans.

It was at that point he realized he must have left his cell phone at his house. He glanced over at Carhart just before he could leave the room. "Could I use your phone to call Ryan, sir? I don't have my cell."

"That's fine. And you can call me Zach, you know." He said the last part almost absently. "I'm not positive how long I will be gone; it's not easy to get an interview with Marshal Connors, even for me. While I'm gone, I also plan to get the surveillance video

myself. Try not to speculate too much on the treatment Sin is receiving at the moment. Just keep in mind that he has dealt with a lot and it is very difficult to break him."

With those words, Carhart disappeared out the door and a lock clicked into place a few seconds later. Being assured that Sin had dealt with a lot didn't exactly make Boyd feel any better. The fact that Carhart had told him to call him by his first name and had seemed pleased earlier was a marked difference from the more removed way he had typically been around Boyd. He could only assume it was because he was trying to help Sin.

He waited around for a bit but he didn't make it long before he decided to call Ryan. The phone rang three times before Ryan answered and when he did, his voice was weary sounding. "No, I haven't finished yet, Sir."

"This isn't Carhart," Boyd said, wondering what the general had Ryan working on. "It's Boyd; I'm just using his phone."

"Boyd!" came the excited exclamation. "Did Hsin find you?"

"Yes but--" He stopped, deciding it was better not to talk about on the phone. "Can you come to General Carhart's office? It may be better to talk in person."

"What?" Ryan's tone switched from excited to worried in a single breath. "Of course, I'll be right there. Give me ten minutes."

With Ryan on the way, Boyd sat back in the chair. He wondered how Ryan knew Sin had been looking for him; they must have spoken at some point. He idly looked around Carhart's office, not seeing anything that caught his attention. When Ryan burst in, only about seven minutes later, Boyd looked over, slightly startled by his sudden appearance.

Ryan looked more unruly than usual, his thin face scrunched up in concern. "Boyd, what the he--" Ryan's face froze and then paled. "Did fucking Hsin do that to you?!"

"No," Boyd said, slightly taken aback by the vehemence. Ryan had been a fan of Sin's for so long that it hadn't occurred to Boyd that were there ever an issue between he and Sin, Ryan may side with him. Although it was all a hypothetical situation, it still felt good to realize.

He gestured to the cuts dotting his face and the ginger way he was still holding the arm that had been twisted. "It was Harry. How did Sin know where to find me?"

Ryan frowned and reached out as if to touch Boyd's face but he stopped and shook his head. "I went to him. I told him about everything that happened while he was gone and he went to find you. I'm sorry if I um, if you didn't want me to but I couldn't help it. What the heck happened now?"

"No," Boyd said, shaking his head, "it's probably good that happened. It's just--" He gestured vaguely. "Sin's on fourth and Harry's dead." He saw Ryan's shocked expression so despite it being an awkward thing to talk about, he explained. "Harry ran into me in the library and assaulted me. Sin came in when he was attempting to rape me so he killed Harry. But the guards came and took him to fourth, and General Carhart doesn't think he can get him out."

Ryan looked predictably horrified, his mouth falling open although no sound came out. His fingers stiffened, entire body growing tense as he seemed to take in what Boyd had just told him. The anger that flashed in his eyes was the most surprising thing. Boyd had never seen that expression on Ryan's face before.

"That bastard. I'm glad Hsin was there. I'm glad Hsin killed him. I wish it would have been me who did it, though."

"I'm glad he's dead too," Boyd said honestly. "Even more because he wouldn't have stopped harassing Sin."

Ryan watched him for a moment before a look of alarmed realization overcame his features. "Okay, we have to get him out of there. All of those people on the fourth, the guards, they were Harry's friends."

"I know," Boyd said darkly. "General Carhart is attempting to get the surveillance footage of the incident to prove that Sin was protecting me, but I doubt he'll be able to."

"I'm not surprised," Ryan said with another angry scowl. "God, this place is so fucked sometimes!" He ran both hands through his hair and heaved a big sigh. "Okay, two things. First of all, whatever the guards did with him, if they put him in the box-- they'd need clearance from Connors to do it. Second, if Connors agreed to it or whatever, we can't really count on him for help."

Ryan gnawed on his fingernails as he thought, beginning to pace the room. "If we think like Connors, Harry wasn't valuable enough to the Agency to cause an Agent as valuable as Hsin to be locked away for good, however this act gives him the reason he needs to get back at you guys for the way the assignment turned out last night. Nothing can really happen unless Connors decides to do it-- or your mom since her word has a lot of leverage with him."

He stopped pacing and looked at Boyd a little helplessly. "Other than begging Connors to suddenly turn into a reasonable human being, I doubt we can do anything other than wait until a mission comes along that needs Hsin."

"I can't do that," Boyd said without hesitation. "Sin's in there because of me. It doesn't matter how, I'm going to get him out."

He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. He dismissed the idea of approaching his mother immediately; there was no way she would help. He would be lucky if she didn't berate him for the latest fiasco as well. "More than likely, General Carhart will return unsuccessful. How do I get an appointment with Connors? Will he be more likely to let me in if I just appear on the floor, or would he prefer I go through the red tape and call his assistant with the request?"

"Yeah, that'd be the best thing to do honestly. I mean, you could try just going up there but a lot of times he won't even see Ann or me without us warning him days in advance..."

Boyd looked to the side, his eyebrows furrowing. It would be best to be proper and polite about this just to impress Connors more. If Connors was angry about how terribly the last mission went then Boyd needed to prove that he was a respectable person whose opinion mattered, especially given his recent reputation. It would be easier to represent himself properly in person, though, and a little more difficult for him to be turned away.

So he would go in person to ask Connors' assistant directly; that was the best compromise.

"Alright," he said aloud.

Before Ryan could say anything else, the door opened again and Carhart reappeared. His face gave very little away, but the tension in his shoulders and the stiff way he carried himself made his aggravation quite obvious.

"No go," he said shortly. "He already has the video and he claims that he will view it when he has the time. Sin is to stay where he is until he decides otherwise or until an assignment comes up that is imperative enough for his release."

"Fucking *bullshit!*" Ryan yelled in annoyance. "Man, your boss is a dickhead."

Carhart glanced over at Ryan. "Hello, Ryan." He narrowed his eyes. "Did you finish what I asked for?"

"No! Why don't you focus on what's going on now!" Ryan snapped uncharacteristically.

Carhart seemed neither impressed nor angry by the display and walked over to his desk. "There's not much more I can do, Boyd."

Inclining his head, Boyd said calmly, in total contrast to Ryan, "I understand. Thank you for trying. Marshal Connors definitely has the video in his custody, though?"

"That's what he said. However he didn't appear to be in any rush to view it." Carhart sat down at his desk and steepled his fingers together as he looked at the two young men in the room. "At this time, there isn't much more I can do. I appreciate your concern for Sin, but at the moment the best course of action is to wait or the situation could be further exacerbated. Despite that, I already sent out a notice about the pending investigation of both Harry and Hsin, so I doubt you will receive any harassment for the time being."

Carhart looked at Boyd and then at Ryan. "Boyd, I suggest you return home and rest. Ryan, I suggest you finish your assignment."

Ryan made a face but didn't disagree. "Is there really going to be an investigation?"

"It's already being looked into."

"I'm willing to testify if they need anything for the investigation." Boyd looked over at Carhart. "If there's nothing more..." He trailed off almost questioningly; he wanted to leave so he could start his next attempt to get Sin out.

Carhart nodded. "Of course. Just remember to take your own needs into consideration. You are no good to anybody in the medical unit." He stared at Boyd intently for a moment before looking at his computer, an obvious dismissal.

Ryan made another face and went out into the hall, waiting for Boyd outside. "What are you going to do?" he asked knowingly.

Looking down the hall with an intent expression, Boyd shifted his gaze back to Ryan. "I'll head to Connors' office before I leave today and ask for an appointment in person. I know it's unlikely I'll get anywhere with that but I have to try."

Ryan nodded, face pinched with worry. "Please go home afterwards. Or you can come to my place and stay there..."

Boyd looked over at Ryan, touched by the fact that he cared enough about him to worry. Less than an hour earlier, he'd been planning his own death; certain that the world was better off without him. Certain that no one would care. But looking into Ryan's face, he knew now that wasn't true. Sin's appearance had saved him more than physically, and in part it seemed Boyd had Ryan to thank for that.

He smiled genuinely at Ryan and nodded. "I'll go home. I promise. Thank you, Ryan," he added sincerely. "You don't know how much you've helped me already."

"Okay. Just call me, okay?" Ryan began backing down the corridor. "Good luck."

Boyd nodded, raised a hand in a silent farewell, and headed immediately for the nearest elevators with access to seventeenth. He focused on what he needed to say to get Sin out and how he could go about requesting an audience with Connors. He barely noticed the other people in the elevator despite the long looks they gave his battered face. By the time the elevator reached the seventeenth floor, he was alone again.

He knew the layout of the floor well enough to know the direction Connors' office was, even if he'd never had to visit it before. It took him a little bit to find and there were quite a few doors he had to swipe his keycard through just to get clearance, as well as explanations given to the guards.

He finally found the main office area dedicated to Marshal Jacob Connors. He walked directly to the assistant's desk, but made sure he stopped at the correct distance away and waited patiently to be acknowledged. If there was anything that having Vivienne Beaulieu as a mother had taught him, it was proper protocol and how to act respectfully. Even if he didn't always follow her advice.

Connor's assistant sat behind a large glass receptionist desk. The entire area was the picture of elegant minimalism and the man behind the desk was no different. He wore a perfectly cut designer suit that was fitted precisely for his slender build and silver glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. The man, Samuel Goldberg according to his nametag, had a polite smile plastered across his face but the look in his eyes was one of absolute disinterest.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Beaulieu. How may I be of help to you?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Goldberg," Boyd replied politely. "I would like to request an audience with Marshal Connors. Could you tell me when he is next available?"

Samuel peered at him through his glasses, disinterest mingling with smug amusement. "In reference to what?"

Boyd's expression did not change, nor did his voice slip even a little from the polite professionalism. "The incarceration of Hsin Liu Vega today."

The man raised thin, dark eyebrows and a knowing looking appeared on his pale features. "Ah, him." Samuel smiled at Boyd but once again it did not reach his eyes. He glanced down at his computer and typed something briefly. After a moment he spoke into the headset he wore.

"A Mr. Beaulieu is here to see you, sir. In regards to Agent Vega." Azure eyes flicked up to Boyd again and the vapid smile remained intact. "Very good, sir." It was obvious that the connection had been severed without Boyd having to hear the other end of the conversation. "Would you like an appointment? I'm afraid he is unable to see you at the present time."

Inclining his head slightly, Boyd did not break eye contact. "Yes. When is he next available?"

"Mmm, let's see," Samuel hummed to himself. He glanced down at the computer again, nodding to himself. "April 15th, 2020. Does 0700 hours sound good to you?"

Boyd's eyes narrowed very briefly before he returned to his calm expression. It was mid-February; that was two months away.

"Marshal Connors must be incredibly busy for the next available booking to be so far out," Boyd observed. "Is he going on vacation?"

Samuel blinked at him. "I don't see how that could possibly be any of your business, Mr. Beaulieu. Marshal Connors is the head of this organization; he is a busy man. It is foolish to expect him to cancel dire meetings to discuss the incarceration of a known killer."

The smile widened a bit and then the man went back to looking at his laptop. "If you would like to see him in April now is the time. The spot will close soon."

"Ah," Boyd said smoothly, "but if he left, having such an important man gone from the Agency could jeopardize the stability of the entire organization. I should think it would be the business of anyone working for the Agency."

Samuel gave him a haughty look, not seeming moved by his words. "And the fact still remains that there isn't an opening until April. Imagine that. Would you like to see for yourself?" Cool, detached amusement was quickly turning into irritation and Samuel spun the LCD screen around so that for a brief moment, Connors schedule for the next three months was visible to Boyd. "Now if there's nothing else..."

Boyd looked at the screen, memorizing the schedule as best he could at the glance he had; it was true that it looked booked. He wondered if he could get more information from Samuel.

"Surely those are not all day events," he said with his eyebrows raised. "I can't imagine he couldn't afford a few minutes to meet with me between meetings. He's only moving from floor to floor, is he not?"

Samuel gave him a completely withering look. "As a matter of fact, no. You are a fool if you believe all of his business is carried on in this building. Later in the week he will be gone from the compound for three consecutive days for meetings."

"Then I can have a phone conversation," Boyd insisted. "Or I can catch him before he leaves; when will he be gone?"

Samuel glared at Boyd, his polite facade evaporating into cold impatience. "Unacceptable. Take the appointment in April or take none at all. Unless Marshal

Connors specifically asks me to make such exceptions it's impossible for me to make them."

"Why not?" Boyd asked, not letting up. "He can't even be contacted between meetings or before he leaves?"

"Marshal Connors turns his phone off during meetings so he is completely unavailable during that time. Now if you don't mind, I would appreciate it if you would stop pestering me."

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as he considered the situation. "Very well," he said evenly, and crossed his arms. "If you will pass a message along for me, word for word and in front of me so I know you did it, then I will leave you alone."

Samuel watched him impatiently but ultimately seemed to decide that it was better to take him up on that offer and get him out of his sight than to keep arguing the point. He put his hand up by his headset and arched an eyebrow. "What do you want to say?"

"Tell him that I know he's there and I know he's ignoring any lobbying on Sin's behalf. Tell him that seems like it's indicative of an even greater problem here at the Agency. Letting low-ranked agents and guards abuse high-ranked agents and not only ignoring it but doing nothing about it when it's brought to his attention..." His eyebrows raised and he trailed off meaningfully. "That doesn't bode well for him or the Agency."

Samuel had been taking notes as Boyd spoke and he glanced up with narrowed eyes at the end. Boyd couldn't tell if he was annoyed, affronted, or what, but he didn't care. He watched closely as Samuel told Connors over the headset that he had a message from Boyd, and relayed what had been said. When he got to the end, there was a beat of silence and then Samuel nodded. "Yes, sir."

He dropped his hand from the headset and raised his eyebrows. "Your message is relayed and the Marshal still does not have time for you. Now. I believe you said you'd leave..."

Boyd had expected as much. "Write me in for April," he said and left without waiting for Samuel to reply.

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The resolve Boyd felt only strengthened overnight. The next day he sat down with his panel and a cooling mug of jasmine tea, and poured over everything he knew.

Since he was considering this as a mission, he knew that the best thing he could do was start creating contingency plans. If he could not negotiate with the leader, he or Sin generally just killed them. He obviously couldn't do that here, so he had to go at it a different way.

Rescue.

Boyd spent a few hours on his panel going over every file he had collected regarding the structure of the Agency. He logged onto the secure server and flipped through every page that would not be suspicious for him to be viewing, and started compiling in his mind as complete a blueprint of the levels as he could.

If Connors was going to sit on this and Sin was in danger every moment he spent there, then Boyd was going to have to be creative. Although he knew nothing permanent was liable to happen, like Sin being killed, he still didn't want Sin to suffer at all. Every second he spent on fourth was a second too long.

Although he was impatient to save Sin, he knew he had to let the situation run its course to some extent. Connors had legitimately appeared to be busy for a few days and he needed time to be able to view the evidence and make his prediction. Pissing him off by doing something right away would only negatively affect the verdict. Right now, he was probably helping Sin the most by disappearing from everyone's minds at the Agency.

Still, he wasn't going to waste that time. He spent the next few days at home, planning what he would do. He had to take the time to do this right-- if he went into it without planning for every contingency, and if something went wrong, he was likely to

only make matters worse for Sin and probably get himself killed in the process. And while that had been acceptable to him earlier in the week, now it wasn't. It was probably a good thing that he was forced into taking the break. He hadn't realized how exhausted he was until he had the opportunity to sleep in every morning, and had something worthwhile to concentrate on when he was awake. The last several weeks had been stressful and difficult, riddled with depression, hopelessness, and on and off nightmares. He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to wake up in the morning and not feel like he wanted to go right back to sleep, or find a way to disappear.

On the fifth day since Sin's incarceration, Boyd was startled away from looking at the panel when his cell rang. He looked down at the display and didn't recognize the number. Doubting that it was Connors but still feeling somewhat hopeful, he held it up to his ear.

"Hello?"

"Can you talk?" The voice was low and urgent, as if whomever was speaking was trying not to be heard by anyone in their vicinity.

"Freely." Boyd thought he recognized the voice; he just couldn't quite place from where.

"It's Officer Gerant."

"Ah, Gerant," Boyd said, mildly surprised to be getting a call from him. The surprise swiftly changed to worry. "What's wrong?"

"It's about--" There was a brief pause as though Luke was reconsidering at the last moment. "Listen, I shouldn't be telling you this. It's about... your partner."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "What is it?" he asked, alarm making it into his voice.

There was a long pause and a rustling sound. When Luke spoke again his voice was still low but it sounded a lot closer to the phone, as if his mouth was pressed against it. "He-- hold on."

Boyd remained silent, although he gripped the phone. The longer there was silence, the more time his imagination had to paint vivid pictures of the horrible things that could have happened to cause Luke to call him. He started to worry that something terrible had happened-- maybe Sin was seriously injured or even dead... He cut that thought off immediately because if that were the case, he highly doubted he'd be hearing about it first from a guard he rarely spoke to.

He gave Luke ten full seconds of silence before he said, "Luke, I realize that you must be in a difficult position, so I appreciate that you called me... But you're starting to scare me. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry." His voice sounded genuinely apologetic. "I was trying to move to a secure spot so I can tell you in detail." There was another brief pause but this time when he spoke, it wasn't as muffled. "He's in bad shape right now and they aren't reporting his injuries, so he isn't receiving medical attention. I tried to put an order in for him but no one has showed up and I'm not sure what's going on."

Frustration was evident in the man's voice, either because of the lack of response by the proper officials or because he was putting himself at risk for a man who had killed his boss.

Alarm turned to anger within Boyd. This was exactly what he'd been worried about. He'd tried to go the official route. He'd tried to let the system work and he'd tried to believe that the guards wouldn't take advantage of the situation. He gave Connors plenty of time to change his mind. He was done with that. He couldn't sit idly by while Sin was forgotten in a place that tortured him.

His mind raced through the scenarios he had created over the days. "If I need your help," Boyd said seriously, "in a manner that won't implicate you, can I have it? Something subtle that can help me get Sin out of there before they do irreparable damage?"

"Well--" There was another pause. "I didn't mean to alarm you. Honestly I think he's done most of the damage to himself."

That did not make Boyd any happier. "What do you mean?" he asked, an edge in his voice. "As I understand it, they drug him so heavily he can't even defend himself when he's attacked. Unless," his eyes narrowed, "did someone assault him and he attacked them in return, hurting himself?"

"As far as I can tell when he was first brought up they roughed him up a bit but nothing over the top." There was another pause. "I'm not sure what's going on, if it was a direct order or not, but for some reason he was not drugged until yesterday night because he was apparently trying to kill himself, which is typically *why* they keep him sedated in the first place."

"What?" Boyd burst out, loudly and incensed. "He's horribly claustrophobic-- what sort of asshole would--" Boyd stopped and forced himself to take a deep breath, the indignation buzzing through his limbs like blood. He gritted his teeth and slid his eyes closed, tilting his head to the floor and gripping the phone tightly. He couldn't even imagine what that must have been doing to Sin. He must have been terrified, he must have been--

"Luke." The determination in Boyd's voice made it come out very firm. "I'll be frank. I'm going to get him out of there soon, and I'll do it by fucking force if I have to. First, I will make a second appeal to the Marshal but I doubt he will help. I already tried once and he couldn't even deem to lower himself to open his fucking door." By the tight twist in his voice, it was clear what he thought of Connors.

"It was rude of me to ask you if you wanted to help so suddenly, and I apologize," he continued reasonably. "If it doesn't work with Connors, I'll get Sin out myself. I'd like you to think about it carefully, though I want to give you time. I'll contact you again if I need help, and I'll understand if you say no. I promise I won't implicate you at all in having told me this. That being said, you clearly already have more humanity and intelligence than it seems many of your peers do there. I'd like to think that I would have a friend up there when I get him out."

Luke was silent for a moment, presumably thinking about what was being said.

Boyd paused just long enough to let his words sink in before he continued. He knew his indignation and anger was only going to get worse when Luke answered the question he was about to ask but he needed to know. "Now, when I confront Connors, I'd like to know what I'm talking about. Could you explain to me better what you mean by 'apparently trying to kill himself' and what his status is now?"

"Well..." Luke trailed off for a moment. "He was cooperative at first despite the fact that they were being rather abusive as they escorted him up. But they deviated from standard procedure and did not hook up the IV, which they use for feeding and to keep him sedated--" He broke off, his voice mildly disgusted as he explained.

"This time they just tossed him in there with nothing. After the second day they'd apparently remembered that a human being needs water and food to survive, but by then he was hysterical and they were too frightened to open the box. They described loud banging, hysterical screaming in foreign languages and apparently by the third day they were severely alarmed because there was no sound at all for several hours. They knew that if he died it's their ass, so they gathered the courage to open the box. He'd knocked himself out slamming his head against the side of the toilet, apparently trying to either commit suicide or make himself unconscious."

Luke sounded frustrated and he paused once again. "Finally they hooked him up to the IV but they pumped him full of an alarming dosage of drugs and I'm afraid that combined with his head injuries, it will be enough that he never wakes up. I'm sure that's not the case but..." He trailed off.

"I didn't have a shift on fourth until today, I'm sorry I couldn't do something sooner," he said apologetically, but his voice firmed. "I will help you in any way I can unless it will jeopardize my own security."

Boyd's stomach twisted sickeningly at Luke's description, and he couldn't bring himself to answer for a few seconds. He was too furious, disgusted, and upset. He kept thinking about Sin's vulnerable expression that time he was in his kitchen, or the wild fear in his eyes when he woke from the nightmare. He knew what it was like to be

terrified of something to the point that one would do anything to escape it. It was for that reason he'd been so afraid of failing the missions; so afraid of what his mother had threatened him with on fourth. The worst thing that could happen at a time like that was to have no respite-- no control.

Knowing all that, he felt such pain for what Sin must have been going through that it was difficult not to hate every person who had hurt him. But focusing on that wasn't going to help him. What he had to focus on was what he could do to help. There was absolutely no way he would let this last any longer.

"Thank you," he said tensely. He paused, had to draw a deep breath to steady himself, and managed to sound calmer when he spoke again. "I don't know yet what I'll need you to do, but I will make sure your role seems coincidental. Will you be able to call me again tomorrow at this same time, or is there a number I could contact you at?"

"Of course," Luke said and rattled off the number to his cell phone quickly and quietly. "Just let me know where I should be and what precisely I should do. Thankfully though, General Carhart has discreetly managed to ensure that none of Harry's friends are on the fourth right now. For the moment he has most of the guards suspected in the surveillance investigation on paid suspension."

"That's good, at least," Boyd said mostly to himself. Especially that it was paid suspension; he knew that if it was unpaid, they would just try to take it out on Boyd or Sin again and it would start all over again. He memorized Luke's number. "I'll be in contact." He paused, then said again sincerely, "Thank you. I realize I said it before, but I truly do appreciate that you help us."

"It's no problem, really," Luke insisted. "We're not all bad guys up there; it's just that the bad overpower the few good ones. There's a rookie up there now who thinks the whole situation is completely disturbing, but we'll see how long that lasts before the rumor mill gets to him. There's another guy, Travis, he's up there now and he isn't a complete asshole either. The three of us have shifts together today and tomorrow

during the day. Whatever you're planning-- it might go better if it's while we are working."

There was another long pause. "Call me," Luke said in a rushed tone and the line abruptly disconnected.

Boyd flipped his phone closed and looked back at his panel with narrowed, contemplative eyes. Tomorrow was also the day he remembered that Connors would be going on his three day business meeting out of the building. Which meant if Boyd could not get to him today, then he was breaking Sin out tomorrow. And since Connors apparently didn't answer his phone during meetings, it was an even better time because it would take longer for him to realize what happened.

He gave himself just enough time to clean up properly and then headed to the Agency. Once at the compound, he didn't stop for anything until he reached Connors' reception area.

"Is Marshal Connors in?" he asked without preamble.

Samuel gave Boyd an unimpressed stare. "You again. His schedule hasn't changed since the last time you were here. In fact, you're lucky I did mark you for April 15th because now the earliest meeting is Ju--"

"I need to talk to him," Boyd cut Samuel off flatly. His eyes narrowed seriously. "And I won't leave until I'm given the chance."

"Then you'll be here for several months," Samuel said unconcernedly.

"I want you to call him," Boyd insisted.

Samuel's back straightened and his lips thinned. "If you think your existence even registers for Marshal--" Samuel started, affronted.

Disgusted, Boyd didn't let Samuel finish. He strode around the assistant's desk and right up to Connors' door, where he looked up at the camera. "Marshal Connors, I

would like to request an audience." His tone was determined but he was careful not to be too disrespectful. Connors held all their lives in his hands and he could easily just have Sin terminated if he got angered.

Samuel stared at him with angry, narrowed eyes and hurried over to him. "Mr. Beaulieu, you are taking this too far. If you don't leave now I will call security."

"Feel free," Boyd said dismissively, having no time for him. He turned back to the camera. "Can you hear me, sir? Please, this is very important. I don't mean to be disrespectful of your time but Sin may be seriously injured. I would really like to talk to you-- only for five minutes, or whatever time you can spare."

"You're being ridiculous," Samuel stormed at him, eyes flashing. "If you think for one second that Marshal Connors is going to fall for yo--"

Before he could continue, there was a buzz and the light next to handle of the door turned green. Samuel went silent and stared at it in shock, his mouth slightly ajar.

Boyd ignored Samuel and walked into the room. He shut the door behind him and glanced around, his gaze finding the Marshal at his desk. He kept his expression and posture completely respectful, and paused by the door.

Connors stared at him calmly, his eyes slightly narrowed although there was no real expression on his face. "Sit down."

Following the direction, Boyd walked to the seat and sat down. He watched Connors calmly; he had never actually met the man before and what he was confronted with was somehow surprising. Connors' hair was black with liberal amounts of silver near his temples and his eyes were steel grey. Seeming older than Carhart by at least a decade, Connors also looked far less generous. The impression was largely in the tilt of his lips. Even so, he looked distinguished and, to Boyd's mild surprise, was actually wearing a suit. For some reason Boyd had expected him to be fully encased in military paraphernalia with an ugly expression on his face the moment they met. Instead, they had a brief moment to simply observe each other.

"Your display has certainly captured my attention," Connors said flatly, not much emotion in his voice although there was a distinct edge to it. "I'm sure Vivienne would not be pleased with your behavior."

"She likely would not but she rarely is pleased with anything," Boyd said honestly. "So I admit I didn't take it into account. Some things are more important than what others will think."

Connors' expression did not change. He leaned back in his chair and surveyed Boyd clinically, taking in his injuries without commenting on them. "An interesting response. But it leads me to ask, how did you think I would interpret the message you sent for me?"

"I hoped you would take the time to consider the impression the situation gives, if you had not already," Boyd replied.

"Ah, so you mean to say you didn't intend it as a threat? What were your exact words?" Connors stared at him flatly, tapping his thick fingers on the desk. "It didn't bode well for me?"

"It doesn't," Boyd said, and shifted forward a bit in his seat. "This organization is run very hierarchically. There are certain privileges associated with the higher ranks, and the people who spend years working their way up to that level expect a certain amount of respect and protection. The fact that ongoing, targeted harassment can exist and everyone ignores it doesn't look good and could breed resentment. Right now, the fact that Sin is the victim and he is already maligned means that most people may not be paying attention to it. But if the perpetrators start to feel that they can get away with whatever they want because they'll never be held accountable, it seems destined to only end in unnecessary trouble for all levels of management."

Not looking very impressed, the Marshal leaned back in his chair and glanced down at his computer screen. "It's interesting that you think I am unaware of anything you just said. Do you think that your existence here will suddenly serve to enlighten me

on how to run this organization? And that is aside from the fact that you did not answer my question."

"I'm not threatening you, Marshal. I'm humbly asking you on behalf of my partner to please consider releasing him from confinement. I have reason to have concern for his health."

Connors stared at him blankly for a moment before an almost irritated expression began to form on his otherwise stony face. "I'm fully aware of Vega's condition, mentally and physically. According to his tracker, his vitals have not dropped yet so for the moment he is still alive. Other than his possible discomfort and what you perceive to be the unfairness of the situation, why should I release him? More importantly, why do you feel this need to put yourself in danger for him? And believe me, Boyd, you can consider the failure of last week's mission as a considerable mark against you both."

Boyd considered that question, wanting Connors to know he was taking this seriously. "Because he's my partner, sir. And because no one else does. Everyone deserves someone who will speak up for them when they're unable to do so themselves. And because the reason he's in confinement right now is due to helping me when I was being attacked. He didn't do something unprovoked; he was reacting to a well-known threat."

Connors stared at him, bushy eyebrows rising slightly. "I admire your tenacity, Boyd. However, I regret to inform you that I have no intentions of releasing him early and I would appreciate it if you would not waste my time with such matters simply because you feel the burning desire to root for the underdog. Although with his ability to snap a neck with considerable lack of effort, I would hesitate to even describe him as such."

Although the comment could have referred to anything, the way Connors said it led Boyd to believe that it was a reference to the video. Boyd took to that immediately, hoping to be able to use the situation from the video to prove his point. Although it was

a little embarrassing to know Connors had viewed the footage, it was a necessary evil in order to protect Sin.

"Sir," Boyd said earnestly, "not to belabor the point, but if you've viewed the footage than surely you see that Sin was only protecting me? Officer Truman had a documented history of sexual assault, and he had accosted Sin in the past. He was a predator who targeted victims who he felt were vulnerable, which most often was Sin. Does that context not factor into his treatment?"

"I do not see why it should be deemed acceptable that he killed a man who could have just as easily been incapacitated or knocked unconscious. You may try to put Vega in the role of innocent victim, but he's anything but. He's a menace, and he only remains at this organization because at the moment, he is not replaceable."

Connors pulled a pack of cigarettes from his desk and extracted one, although he didn't move to light it. Boyd's gaze flicked down to follow the movement, and in the process he noticed Connors' seal for official documents had been pushed closer to his side of the desk by his panel computer.

Boyd took that information into account. With the way this meeting was going, he was likely going to have to do one of the contingency plans, and the seal may be just what he was missing in one of them. Despite the quick thoughts running through his mind, his gaze did not linger even the slightest and when he looked back up at Connors, none of it had made it to his expression.

Connors' gaze remained on Boyd and his eyes had narrowed with impatience. "The extreme nature of his responses are inappropriate, and he will be punished until he understands that."

"But how will you know when he understands?" Boyd pressed. He sat forward in his seat, watching Connors intently with his eyebrows drawn up. "Sir, please. I understand what his reputation is and I know the types of acts he has committed in the past. I am not ignoring those aspects, but I think there is more to him than many people have the opportunity to see. I think he does already understand when his actions are

inappropriate. And while I understand that he has to be held accountable for killing another member of the Agency, how long will be deemed long enough? The place he has been put does not give him the chance for self-evaluation. He's put in a place that tortures him. If the point is for him to understand, couldn't he at least be moved to a holding cell or isolation of another sort?"

"No," was the flat response. "This is not a correctional facility. He will learn through punishment, or he will be disposed of in the future. It is as simple as that. Further commentary on the methods in which the Agency instills obedience is unnecessary and unwanted. As I said, these methods have been in place long before you were here, long before your mother birthed you-- and it is very successful. Is there anything else?"

Boyd leaned back in his chair and shook his head, letting a hint of defeat make it to his expression so Connors would think he was ready to give this up. "No, sir."

"Good." Connors finally let his cigarette, taking a drag as he watched Boyd through the smoke that drifted between them. "I do have one question, however."

Boyd paused with his hands on the arms of the chair. He'd been about to stand up and he looked over at Connors curiously, having expected to be dismissed. "Yes, sir?"

There was another pause as Connors watched him thoughtfully. Then he said calmly, "There has been speculation of an involvement between you and Vega that extends beyond the realm of partnership, and even friendship. What's your opinion on this rumor?"

Boyd's expression was perfectly blank aside from a slight frown, as if that hadn't occurred to him before and he was considering it. Inwardly, he was slightly worried that the topic had come up; especially after he'd probably done himself no favors by arguing so passionately on Sin's behalf. He didn't know what would happen if Connors had it confirmed that he and Sin were sexually attracted to each other and had almost acted on it, but he doubted it would be good.

"Well, sir, I think there are a lot of things people say that is exaggerated. And the fact that both of us are high profile makes us easy targets for a disgruntled person's wandering mind."

"I see."

Connors ashed his cigarette and looked at his computer again. "That's all."

Relief moved through Boyd at that; knowing that Connors wasn't going to press the issue. Although, he could only hope he'd given the correct answer.

Nodding, Boyd dropped his eyes to the floor, his gaze passing so casually past Connors' desk that it was unnoticeable when it lingered for half a second. He leaned forward and used the desk as a brace to push himself up, though he acted as though he was trying to hide the pain his body was in. Connors did not seem to notice or care, and Boyd palmed the seal discreetly. He slipped his hands into the pockets of his trench coat as usual when he was upright.

He tilted his head forward politely. "Thank you for your time, Marshal Connors. I appreciate you accommodating your busy schedule for a few minutes with me."

Connors nodded, watching him for a moment with a look that was difficult to interpret and turned back to his work.

When Boyd left the office he noticed Samuel's indignant glare, but neither of them spoke. Calmly striding through the complex, Boyd waited until he was several floors down and out of the elevators before he flipped his phone open and dialed Ryan's number. He watched his surroundings seemingly idly as he waited for him to answer.

"Is everything okay?" Ryan asked as soon as he picked up.

"Yes," Boyd said, eyes tracking a few of the people passing by. "But I need your help."

## Chapter 23

It was good that Boyd had taken the time to consider every aspect of the rescue mission because otherwise he easily could have missed a crucial step along the way. Clearance to the fourth floor was highly monitored, as was access.

It was not possible to gain access even to the elevator that accessed the floor without full clearance afforded to the user's key card. Beyond that, there were many checks and balances in place that did not allow any unauthorized entry onto the floor, including checking the thumbprint of the person against the identity listed on the card and verifying information only they would know. In this way, no one could simply steal a card with clearance and gain access.

And even having passed through all that, there were highly trained guards who scrutinized anyone who gained access to the floor. Boyd strode through the halls with seemingly complete confidence, while his heart beat quickly at the knowledge that at any second, his charade could come crashing down around him. And if that happened, he would be lucky if all he received was the torture his mother had been threatening him with since day one.

He'd already passed through a few checkpoints but he hadn't yet entered the areas of fourth that were even higher clearance than others. The area where he'd learned Sin was being held.

He turned down the hallway and saw the first guard he would have to convince to let him through. He walked straight up to the man, who had turned a calculating stare on him the second his footsteps had echoed down the hall. He didn't look too friendly, which wasn't going to help matters but wasn't surprising. Although Luke was working with friends around Sin's room, the rest of the floor wasn't necessarily being worked by others who would be equally approachable.

The guard watched him like a hawk and held his arm out so Boyd couldn't pass, even though Boyd had already been slowing.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded. "You can't be up here."

"I was given one-time special clearance," Boyd said. He held up the official white document that was a little crinkled from being in his pocket.

The guard scrutinized it. Once he realized Marshal Connors' signature was on the bottom. He checked the back of the sheet where the indentation from the pen pushed through, showing it was real. He then held the paper up to see the watermarks used only on legitimate documentation, and frowned when he saw Marshal Connors' official seal by the signature. Giving Boyd a suspicious look, he brought the sheet down and studied very carefully what it said. It was an order for Boyd to release Sin from confinement and to escort him back to his apartment.

"I didn't hear about this," the guard said with a frown, eyeing Boyd.

"I'm just following orders," Boyd said with a shrug.

The guard scowled, keeping the document in his hand. "This is strange. Why didn't General Carhart come down himself?"

"The Marshal is off compound for a few days on business and General Carhart was indisposed," Boyd explained, looking bored. As if he didn't care about any of this. In fact it was torturous to be this close to his goal and to have to affect such nonchalance that allowed him to be delayed minutes at a time.

The guard's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I'm going to have to clear this with General Carhart."

"Do what you have to but I don't imagine either of them will be pleased. They purposefully sent me, as Agent Vega's partner, to follow through on the order because they were too busy to do it themselves." He shrugged unconcernedly. "So feel free to question official documentation all you want, but personally I wouldn't want to be the one making that phone call."

Fingers tightening on the letter, the guard looked down at the document one more time. He was probably searching for anything to show it was a fake. After a moment, he frowned and handed it back to Boyd, who folded it back up and put it carefully in his pocket.

"Fine," the guard said flatly. He stepped to the side, giving Boyd access to the floor.

"Thank you," Boyd said and the guard only gave him an unmoved stare. Boyd turned and continued on his way, feeling his heart thud in his chest as he passed the first hurdle of his goal.

No one gave him quite as much trouble as the first guard since the initial guards were supposed to screen the people who made it to the floor. Once past them, it was assumed they had a reason to be there. In fact, the floor was nearly empty save some psychiatrists wandering around and one guard who Boyd vaguely recognized but didn't know by name. He glanced at the paper and was actually nice and helpful by telling him which direction to go to the cell. Boyd already knew where he was headed but he acted as though he didn't and thanked the guard.

Gerant and another man stood at the entrance of Sin's cell, looking through the bulletproof glass warily while they murmured a conversation too low for Boyd to understand. His stomach leapt briefly at the expression on Luke's face, but he didn't let the worry show on his face.

"Guards," he said as he came upon them. They both looked over, startled. "I have my orders to release Agent Vega." He held the document up, surveying them both with detachment. He didn't give any indication that he even recognized Luke, let alone was working with him.

Luke stared at Boyd for a long moment before responding. "We were not informed of this. Typically we are sent direct orders about the release of one of our inmates."

The other guard looked from Luke to Boyd apprehensively. "Who's Agent Vega?"

Luke flashed the younger man, obviously the rookie he'd spoken of earlier, a mildly reproachful look but didn't reply.

"Vega is Sin's last name," Boyd informed the rookie almost casually, and turned his attention back to Luke with one eyebrow raised. "I realize it's unusual but I'm just following orders. Your friend at the entrance already examined it, but," he held the document out, "feel free to examine my orders as long as it takes for you to be satisfied."

Luke took the paper and examined it. Boyd remained silent as Luke scrutinized it with as much care as the first guard had. After a long moment, he shook his head. "While this is unprecedented, the documents are in order."

He looked at the rookie and jerked his head in the direction of the paper. "When a prisoner is released, unless Marshal Connors or General Carhart is here himself, the person would have a document such as this," he explained, not seeming in a hurry to release Sin. "When checking the document make sure it has the Marshal's seal, signature and watermark on the back otherwise it is not authentic. In that case, back up should be called immediately and the person arrested."

Boyd was pleased that Luke was following his request from the day before; he'd wanted him to treat Boyd as he would have if he didn't know him and wasn't helping him. It was for the same reason Boyd made sure that although Ryan changed the clearance code on his keycard, it would not be traced back to him. Since he'd stolen the seal himself from Connors' office, he should be the only one implicated should this all fall apart. His expression remained remote and a little irritable, however. He felt it best to play into the well-known discord between guards and agents.

"I suppose this is as good a time as any to train," he said shortly. "I've heard a lot about the way people can be treated on this floor, especially my partner. Maybe you can teach him a little humanity while you teach him the rules. Or is that out of your job description?"

"Humanity isn't on my itinerary today," Luke replied blandly. The rookie looked mildly mortified by Boyd's words and shifted uncomfortably at Luke's side.

Boyd ignored the comment and glanced very briefly into Sin's cell, but all he could see was the windowless box. He was almost thankful though, he wasn't certain he'd be able to keep up his unaffected air if he knew exactly what Sin looked like. "Why do I hear nothing in there? Did you kill him while no one was looking or is he just too traumatized to think after what you people do to him?" The question was challenging.

Luke looked at Boyd and frowned, ignoring most of his tirade. "That's actually what we were discussing before you arrived, Agent Beaulieu. We are concerned that he may be dead by now."

Boyd blinked and only partially covered the startled expression he turned to Luke. He couldn't tell if Luke was just acting or serious, but he knew anyone watching would expect Boyd to react the way he did. "What do you mean?" he demanded, looking to the box again with narrowed eyes. "Let me in there immediately; you've had enough time to peruse the document. Why do you think he's dead?"

Luke returned the document and walked closer to the cell, glancing at Boyd. "He had a head injury and then he was sedated. It has been quiet since and we are not to enter or unlock the box unless given direct orders, which we now have."

Luke hovered before the keypad by the door, blocking it from view and quickly input the code. There was a long beep and then the light turned green. Luke pushed the door to the cell open and beckoned Boyd to follow him as he walked around the 6 foot by 4 foot box that sat in the center of the cell. An IV disappeared into a small hole in the side, hooked to a set up mounted on the side of the box where they could refill it without having to open the door.

Narrowing his eyes, Boyd felt his heart thump louder as he approached the box. Sin would not even be able to stand in there, he would barely be able to move. For someone so claustrophobic, it had to be torturous. Boyd was sickened by the knowledge that the box even existed as a form of punishment for Sin at all.

"Open it." Boyd's voice was darker than usual. If he'd waited too long-- if he'd given Connors too much time to respond and something irreparable had happened...

The thought trailed off ominously even in his own mind.

Luke hesitated, hands poised over the keypad to the door. He looked at Boyd and for a moment, the apprehension was clearly visible in his eyes. He looked as though he wanted to tell Boyd to stand back just in case, to prepare himself, but he shook his head and kept to his act. He hovered before the door once again to block the code he punched in.

There was another long beep but this time Luke had to punch in another series of digits, this one longer than the first, before the light flashed green and he was able to open the door. The sheer amount of precaution surrounding Sin seemed almost ridiculous, although it wasn't necessarily unwarranted considering what he was capable of at times.

"Shit," Luke hissed when he looked inside and for a moment, he froze.

Boyd moved in behind him immediately to see, alarm growing so suddenly that it actually hurt by how fast his heart leaped and beat. Sin was half slumped against the wall, his legs splayed awkwardly because the box was too small for him to even properly sit with his legs fully extended. His hair was hanging around his face and large purple bruises covered a huge portion of his forehead and one temple. A wide bracelet circled one wrist, and the IV disappeared into it. The bracelet was wide enough to hide the needle so that Sin could not possibly remove the IV while the tube itself was made of a special material that could not be torn or ripped apart. Sin's hands rested at his side, fingers curled and bloodied, raw and jagged. Judging by the sickening smears of blood on the walls, it was from trying to scratch his way out. There were bloody hand prints all over, as if Sin was slamming his hands around repeatedly, to the point that even his palms were scratched and torn.

His skin was ashen and, worst of all, he did not seem to be moving at all.

He looked dead.

White noise seemed to fill Boyd's perception of the world and he didn't even realize how incredibly alarmed his expression became, or that he hissed, "What the *fuck?*" while shoving Luke aside.

He was at Sin's side in the space of a blink, one slightly shaky hand feeling for a pulse at his neck with the other at Sin's free wrist while he stared with widened eyes at Sin's completely slack expression. His blood was thundering through him, tingling his hands in his fear, to the point that he couldn't think well enough to feel Sin's heartbeat at first.

It took him a moment, but he finally realized he could feel Sin's pulse faintly beating.

The relief that swept through him was nearly debilitating. Boyd slumped to his knees with his head tilted to the floor, his hair hiding his expression. He had to take a deep, even breath before he was able to murmur, "He's alive. But I need to get him out of here immediately and get these drugs out of his system because what the *fuck--*" "What had started as calm and reasonable twisted into a snarl at the end. Boyd cut himself off and had to take another moment to try to get his panic back under control. It was difficult, with Sin looking closer to death than life in front of him.

"I'm already on it," Luke said, disabling the IV with yet another code that was punched into the bracelet. He pulled it off Sin and threw it on the floor, his face twisting in disgust now that he was hidden from the cameras.

"Fucking ridiculous," he was muttering to himself. He moved forward awkwardly, the top of his head brushing the ceiling of the box as he walked around Boyd, avoiding Sin's long legs and the toilet which was smudged with blood where Sin had repeatedly smashed his head. There was only a small space that wasn't occupied and he knelt there for a second, gripping Sin's chin in one hand as he studied him.

"What are we doing?" he asked in a low voice.

It was bizarre seeing someone being able to so casually touch Sin, and that more than anything caused Boyd to be unable to respond for a moment. Sin had a pulse but he had to be almost entirely dead to allow that, to not respond, to not...

"We're taking him to his apartment," Boyd said as calmly as he could, his voice still a step distant to his ears. "I can't carry him on my own. I need help, I don't care who, I just need it, even it's a gurney or someone dragging him with."

Boyd stopped himself abruptly when he realized he was nearly rambling, something he rarely did. He took a deep breath, held it, and let it out slowly, staying out of Luke's way. He was going to have to close this all off once he was back within the cameras. He was going to have to find a way to stop the trembling of his hands, too. But he couldn't look around the box without some evidence of blood showing the pain and panic Sin had to be in. And that made a voice in his mind wonder with increasing alarm whether Sin was going to be okay after all.

Luke nodded shortly and slid both of his arms under Sin's, grunting as he tried to hoist him up. He stumbled for a moment, almost falling under Sin's weight. He caught himself and only managed to tilt awkwardly against the wall. Sin sagged against him, hair falling in front of his completely slack face that temporarily blocked the vivid bruises covering his head.

"Damn," Luke muttered as he backed out of the box, half carrying and half dragging Sin with him. "He's a lot heavier than he looks."

"He's a lot of things one doesn't expect," Boyd said almost absently, and moved in on the other side to take half of Sin's weight as soon as they were out of the box where there was enough room. He looked at Luke sidelong, his expression composed once again under the cameras, even if his eyes were narrowed seriously. "Will you be able to escort him to the apartment or do I need someone else? And regarding the drugs," there was a twist to his words where he couldn't quite keep the disgust from his voice, "will there be any side effects now that they've been stopped?"

"James!" Luke called to the rookie as he shifted to get a better grip on Sin. "Radio Travis and tell him I need him to cover me while I give Agent Beaulieu an escort."

The rookie stared at the scene with wide eyes before grabbing his radio and fumbling with it, trying to find the right switches.

Luke glanced at Boyd over the top of Sin's bowed head. "It would be wise to take him to the medical unit for further evaluation. He might have a severe concussion or worse and he has been unconscious for quite some time. However, if the orders are to return him to his quarters I would advise that you request further instruction. I assume he is to be watched in some way to monitor his condition. While he has never shown side effects before, I'm not sure what will happen in this case. He has a strong tolerance to the drugs and they normally wear off quickly once they are no longer constantly added to his system, but given his head injury I am not sure what his response will be."

Boyd nodded but his mind was racing furiously. He really should take Sin to the medical unit but could he afford to? What if Connors discovered his ploy? Boyd's entire plan rested on the fact that he could barricade the two of them in Sin's apartment, which was built so securely that it should be easy to defend when it became apparent what Boyd did.

But at the same time, what use was it to get Sin somewhere safe if he only died there, or was permanently damaged? Thinking of the blueprints, Boyd quickly ran through a few scenarios in his mind and tried to consider where the most traffic would be according to the time of day.

He calculated that he could probably count on about twenty-five minutes leeway before anyone thought to contact Samuel, and then it would take at least that long for him to contact Connors and for an order to be given to the rest of the guards to go return Sin to the box. He would give the medics that long to check him over and give him the supplies he needed, and that was all he could afford.

"Follow me," Boyd said firmly and started dragging Sin and Luke both toward a back hallway.

Luke didn't resist although he looked back towards the main exit. "Where does this lead? I don't normally take this route."

"A shortcut to the medic unit," Boyd said calmly and Luke just nodded. The next half hour passed in a blur despite the awkwardness. They were able to take an old set of elevators that were rarely used once they left fourth, but even with the back route that Boyd chose, they still ran into some people who looked at them in alarm. Boyd ignored them and tried to rush Luke as much as he could without being obvious about it.

The medics seemed surprised at the sudden appearance more than Sin's condition; they had probably seen him many times in a terrible state after being in the box, though never quite like this. After a quick but thorough check, it was concluded that Sin would be fine with rest but just in case they gave Boyd a few things that may help. Luke and Boyd were told to inform them immediately if Sin seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, but they felt that he was resilient enough that even with the damage he would ultimately be fine.

Boyd didn't feel comfortable saying anything until they were in the open air of the courtyard on the way to Sin's apartment, the only place they were free of constant surveillance that could overhear conversations.

With his head tilted forward so his hair half-hid his expression, he looked at Luke sidelong and with eyes that expressed the emphasis of his words, he whispered, "Thank you."

Luke glanced at him and nodded, supporting most of Sin's weight as he tried not to drag his bare feet along the cold ground. "You're welcome," he replied. There was a brief silence before he spoke again. "I don't agree with some of the things he has done, I don't even agree with the fact that he is free, but I also don't believe that any human being should be treated like this and I don't wish for him to die."

There was another long silence and just before they reached Sin's building, Luke looked at Boyd again. "And I think being around you helps him."

Boyd's lips stretched humorlessly. "I don't think I help anything at all," he said softly, "and I know he's done terrible things. But he'll never stop if he isn't given the chance."

Luke grunted as he carried Sin up the front stairs. "You're not giving yourself enough credit," he replied but didn't have a chance to say more as they entered the building and approached the guards.

Boyd wasn't carrying as much weight as Luke was; somehow it'd just happened that way. Maybe Luke was trying to keep Boyd, who didn't look much better than Sin, from having to put too much stress on his body. It was easier for Boyd to pull the official document out though without having to fumble too much with Sin, and after minimal scrutiny by the guards, the two were finally able to make it to Sin's apartment.

Swiping his card through the lock on Sin's door, Boyd shoved his way into the apartment and had Luke help place Sin on the couch. He didn't want to bring him back to the bedroom where he couldn't see him clearly from everywhere. Stepping back, Boyd stared at Sin for one long moment before turning to Luke and affecting the same composed detachment as before. "I'm fine now, guard," he informed him almost imperiously. "You can return to your post."

Luke's mouth quirked up into an almost amused smirk but he hid it quickly. He nodded and backed towards the door with one final glance at Sin. "Good luck with your... friend." He let the words roll off his tongue sarcastically and turned around, disappearing from the apartment and leaving the two alone.

If he weren't so aware of the cameras and the situation weren't so serious, Boyd would have been amused by the act Luke put on even until the end. As it was, he had to get several things done before he would let himself rest. The moment Luke was gone, Boyd shut the door firmly behind him, though he could not lock it from his side in a way

that anyone with keycard access would be unable to enter. That was unimportant until they discovered his ruse, however, and he needed to get the surveillance off them first.

He had watched Sin through the live feed enough to know exactly where to find the cameras.

They were a little difficult to remove, but Boyd had done some research during his planning period and he knew what types of cameras they probably had installed and how best to deactivate them. It damaged the walls and took quite a bit of pained wrenching on his end, but he eventually managed to rip every one of the contraptions down.

The camera in the bathroom mirror was most difficult, as he had to figure out where it was located. It took him awhile and he eventually had to pry the part of the mirrored cabinet off the wall before he found the camera tucked in a recess behind. That also came out, though it was hardest to do because the angle was incredibly uncomfortable for him to try for any amount of leverage, and he had to attempt this all without breaking the actual mirror unit off the wall because he had no way of putting it back on if he did. He could have just shattered the mirror and gone through the front, but he didn't want Sin to know that the camera was there.

It seemed evident from when he'd watched the feed in the past that Sin did not think anyone was watching him in there. Boyd did not have the heart to take away that last shred of privacy Sin had thought he'd retained.

Every time he passed through the living room, Boyd looked at Sin very carefully to make sure he was still alright. Through the duration of taking the cameras down, Sin stayed almost entirely still, but as time passed he started to move a little more. By the time Boyd had the cameras in a pile in the middle of the living room, Sin was starting to twitch. He didn't look in pain so Boyd kept an eye on him as he considered the pile of electronics.

He didn't want Sin to know about the mirror camera and he was also angry with the Agency for watching Sin so invasively and denying him so many simple human

comforts. There really had never been any other option than to destroy them. He sat on the floor and dismantled them one by one, using tools for some but for the most part just breaking them. He tried to stay as quiet as he could, so as not to wake Sin or alert the guards to what was happening. Even with that intention, he couldn't help the occasional crack as plastic snapped, or his subsequent hissed curses when he hurt his hand or smacked an elbow against the floor.

Movement caught his eye and he looked over suddenly to see Sin's eyes slit open and turned toward him. Seeing Sin seemingly conscious caught Boyd off guard and for a second he stared back at him, slightly wide eyed, before he thought to drop the camera he'd been working on.

Even within the handful of seconds it took Boyd to get by him, Sin had already fallen back asleep. Sweat broke out on his forehead and his skin turned a little clammy. Even so, the sight of Sin showing even that much life was relieving. Boyd let out a shaky breath he didn't realize he was holding, and he couldn't stop himself from tentatively touching Sin's forehead. He tensed, half expecting a hand to grip his wrist painfully but Sin didn't respond at all. Boyd felt as comforted by the ability to touch him as he was alarmed because it was so unlike Sin to allow it.

For the next few hours, Boyd was constantly on edge. He watched Sin carefully, almost fiercely protective. At the slightest sound of movement at the door he turned immediately, ready to intercept anyone who stopped Sin's recovery, but no one came and no one even called him on his cell. He could only assume that Connors did not know yet what happened, or there was some other interference that was delaying the inevitable confrontation that would take place.

Boyd knew he'd placed himself in grave danger with this act but it didn't matter. He was determined to make sure Sin was alright and aware before he would let himself be dragged away, if that was what they intended to do. He wouldn't mind too much as long as Sin was alive and well-- and out of that horrible box. Someday, Boyd wanted to destroy that as well.

Sin woke up a couple times, but he was in such a state of disorientation that all he could manage was slurred speech and mumbling. He looked very confused, his eyes glassy any time they opened. He seemed even more baffled whenever Boyd came near, as if he could not quite believe it was him.

A few times he suddenly jerked and threw himself around as if he were having a nightmare or thought he was still in the box. Boyd was there each time to put a gentle hand on his forehead and a quelling one on his shoulder to keep him from hurting himself.

"It's okay, Sin; it's Boyd," he assured him each time. "You're out of the box. I'm here."

It was clear several times that Sin was almost aware of Boyd's presence but then he slipped back asleep for varying lengths of time and Boyd just took to gently threading his fingers through Sin's overgrown hair to soothe him even when he was asleep. He felt strangely liberated by the idea that he could touch Sin without reprisal; he didn't want to stop stroking his hair, even though it was greasy and dirty from Sin being in the box for so long. He trailed his hand softly down the bruises on Sin's temple, smoothed his hand over his forehead, then found his fingers in Sin's hair again.

At one point, Boyd realized he had been staring at Sin quietly for long enough that his knees cramped against the floor where he knelt and one leg had fallen asleep, so he shifted and forced himself away. Sin stirred and mumbled something that sounded a little cranky, but otherwise did not respond. He was so out of it, so incredibly different than his usual self, that Boyd didn't know what to think. On the one hand, he felt special to be privy to such a moment but on the other, the vulnerability frightened him. As if he could do something now that would break Sin when he didn't have the chance to defend himself.

The idea of anyone taking advantage of Sin in this state was utterly repellent to him. At one point, he stood over Sin, looking down at him on the couch and thinking darkly about how he would have killed Harry himself if Sin hadn't taken care of it for him.

Sin stirred on the couch again, murmured something sleepily and fell back unconscious. Boyd walked to the kitchen and grabbed a large bowl from the cupboards. The plastic bowl made a dull sound as he set it in the sink and filled it with warm soapy water.

He spent the next hour sitting on the coffee table next to the couch, gently cleaning Sin's face, torso, arms and feet-- the parts he could reach without disturbing the only clothing Sin wore; his pants.

Although Boyd could have removed Sin's pants to wash him, he didn't feel comfortable doing so and he decided Sin could shower all he wanted when he woke up. He didn't want to take advantage of Sin's helplessness when it wasn't absolutely necessary. The fact that others had probably removed his pants when he couldn't defend himself, others like Harry and his disgusting friends, made it impossible for Boyd to even consider performing such an act. Boyd left Sin's hands for last. The water had already been bloodied multiple times, causing him to pause and dump it out and refill it.

He was very gentle with Sin's hands. He ran his fingertips lightly along them a few times, comfortingly, to see what such powerful hands felt like when they weren't gripping him painfully. He was lost in the feel of Sin's skin, his expression relaxed and entranced, when something made him look up suddenly with guilt, like a child caught doing something wrong.

Sin's eyes were open and trained on him, but they were glassy and he still looked half out of it, half confused. He searched Boyd's face vaguely, as if looking for the point that would prove him an illusion.

"You're not real," he murmured, slurred.

Boyd stared at him, caught by the open, confused expression on Sin's face. "Yes I am," he said softly.

Sin watched him in sleepy, drugged confusion, and he almost looked upset. "Sorry," he mumbled, struggling to keep his eyes open.

Shaking his head, Boyd smoothed Sin's hair gently from his forehead. His expression twisted briefly. "Why?" He didn't expect an answer and he didn't get one. Sin fell asleep within moments and did not wake again until long after Boyd finished cleaning his hands.

The night passed slowly, with Boyd refusing to leave Sin's side for longer than absolutely necessary. He was exhausted and his eyelids felt heavier by the hour but he would not go to sleep until he was certain Sin was safe from the drugs as well as someone trying to take him away. He was in a state of half-sleep himself, kneeling by the side of the couch with his head tilting further down when he heard talking on the other side of the door.

Boyd leaped to his feet suddenly, wavering a little, when Vivienne appeared in the doorway with a glacial expression and shut the door behind her. Perhaps due to Boyd's abrupt movement, Sin slipped half-awake and was just able to tangle his fingers in Boyd's sleeve.

Boyd looked down at Sin in surprise, temporarily distracted from his mother. Sin was only half-conscious but his glassy-eyed stare was locked on Boyd. "No," he muttered.

"I'm not going anywhere," Boyd assured him.

Either comforted by the answer or too tired to care, Sin's fingers dropped from Boyd's sleeve and he collapsed back onto the couch, apparently asleep before he even properly woke. Boyd stared at him before turning to his mother, his expression becoming remote.

She watched them with an unreadable expression, then flicked cold eyes up to Boyd. "What did you expect to gain from this?" she asked flatly and without preamble.

"Exactly what I got," Boyd said staunchly. "Sin's freedom for now."

Her eyebrows raised and she crossed her arms. "Oh? Your wish was for temporary respite that would lead to worse consequences than if you had simply been patient?"

"Maybe that's all it will be in the end but I couldn't stand by and do nothing."

Her lip lifted, clearly showing that she was unimpressed. "Do you have any concept of what you have done?" she demanded. "The charges against you are severe. Insubordination, stealing from the Marshal, forging official documentation, entry to the fourth floor without permission, misappropriation of Agency assets, destroying Agency equipment--"

Her eyes narrowed and her jaw tightened. "I could continue. Do you not understand the consequences of your actions? Forging the documentation alone could be grounds for termination."

Boyd had known going into this he was putting himself in danger, but at the time all he'd been able to think about was Sin. Now that Sin was relatively safe, he had the chance to focus on other aspects. Hearing her lay it out only underscored to him how serious it all was.

Still, it didn't change anything for him.

"It doesn't matter."

"Because you wish to die?" she asked with disgust.

"No," he said firmly. "Because this is more important."

Her lips thinned and for a moment she only stared at him in clear distaste. "You are a short-sighted fool." She turned around and strode back toward the door.

"You're leaving?" Boyd asked, surprised. He didn't think it would be this easy.

"I am remedying the situation," she said coolly.

"How?" Boyd asked, eyes narrowing in suspicion. She didn't respond and he started after her. When he saw her reaching for the doorknob, his hand snapped out and grabbed her wrist before she could open the door.

"How?" he repeated in a hard demand.

She looked over at him at first with indignation that soon shifted to an icy glare. "You will unhand me at once," she ordered.

His fingers only tightened. "Not until you tell me what you're going to do."

She jerked at her hand but Boyd didn't release her. Her eyes narrowed to slits. "I will have your partner removed by force and deal with you later."

"No you won't," Boyd said coldly, hardly realizing that it was the first time in his life that he had told his mother no.

Vivienne went still, turning a disbelieving stare onto him. "What did you say to me?"

"I said I'm not letting you have him." Boyd's grip firmed on her wrist. His eyebrows lowered darkly over a dead serious stare. "Not until he's better. He was nearly killed in that box because of the discrimination against him and Connors wasn't doing anything to help. If I let Sin out of my sight now, with the mood on the compound as it is, he could die. So I won't let anyone touch him, I won't leave his side, until he can defend himself. I will fight to keep him safe with every ounce of strength I have."

His jaw tightened. "After he's capable, if you need a scapegoat, target me. But until then, if you're getting reinforcements, you'd better get a lot and you'd better expect a fight." He released her wrist abruptly with a jerking motion that made her hand fall away from the door.

She stared at him, her face a mask of ice. He couldn't tell what she was thinking and he realized he didn't care. Although it should have scared him to defy her for the

first time in his life, especially since he'd always wanted nothing more than to please her, he found that instead he felt only resolve.

They measured each other for a long, tense moment. Her back was stiff and his shoulders were tense; they each held their heads high and their narrowed eyes met each other. Their jaws were each set with a hard line. They were a mirror of each other in some ways, but while Vivienne looked coldly remote, Boyd was unwavering and steadfast.

At length, her hard blue eyes shifted to look over Boyd's shoulder at Sin, still lying defenseless on the couch. Her lips thinned and she seemed distinctly displeased, but the fact that she didn't speak immediately gave Boyd the impression that she was running through something in her mind. She turned unreadable eyes onto Boyd again.

"You intend to make a massacre if necessary in order to preserve one man's safety for even a short few days?" She spoke without inflection but when Boyd only nodded resolutely, her eyes narrowed and she continued sharply, "Why?"

"He's my partner."

"That answer is not acceptable," Vivienne said curtly. She crossed her arms and stared him down. "Answer me why you would go to such lengths for such a paltry goal."

"Because saving him from torture and possible death is the furthest thing from insignificant to me." Boyd's expression set in hard, stubborn lines. "I know you don't believe human connection is important. I know you've never cared for my taste in friends. I know this may be foolhardy and I know it may end in tragedy. But I don't care. He protected me when no one else gave a shit what happened to me and I'm going to do the same back for him no matter what it costs me. He's my partner and he's my friend and no matter how stupid this may all seem to you from the outside, it won't change my mind."

There was another long beat of silence. The tension was strong in the room and Boyd wondered how long he was going to end up having before she ordered him

forcefully removed to the fourth floor. Good thing he'd brought some weapons over to Sin's ahead of time just in case.

At length she looked away. Her eyes narrowed and eyebrows lowered faintly but it seemed to be pensive more than anything. Her lips turned down on the edges and then she half turned toward the door again. Her intent stare did not waver on Boyd.

"Very well," she said without inflection. "Agent Vega has already served most of his punishment and it would not do to have him incapacitated indefinitely. I will see to it that you both remain undisturbed for the minimal time it requires for him to recover. However," she added in a hard tone, "I can make no guarantees for you. I will speak with the Marshal, yet given your astounding disregard for protocol it should not come as a surprise to you should you meet with dire consequences."

Boyd's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Some of the tension left his shoulders and his hands dropped to his sides. He had hoped she would give him some more time before calling in the reinforcements. He'd never expected her to talk to Connors on his behalf, and he'd certainly never expected her to help him keep Sin in the apartment.

"Thank you," he said in shock.

She shook her head, jaw shifting as if she were annoyed by his words. She turned her back on him and reached for the door, but paused with her hand on the doorknob. "You have tried my patience far too often of late. I expect you to consider your actions more carefully in the future. And Boyd--"

She turned a cold stare on him. "If you lay a hand disrespectfully on me once more, I will not be this lenient again. I am your superior. You will treat me as such."

Boyd could only nod dumbly, still processing the fact that it seemed he'd actually gotten away with this. "Of course, mother."

She gave him a thin-lipped look of warning, and then she was gone. He heard her already making clipped orders to the guard as the door swung shut.

Boyd stood in the middle of the room, staring at the door in a mixture of disbelief and wonder, and then looked over at Sin. His partner had not stirred again. He was half on his side, lying along the couch with one hand dangling over the edge. His fingers were curled and his eyebrows twitched down occasionally, his expression shifting with his dreams.

Boyd walked over, looking down at Sin and then crouching at his side. He couldn't help pushing some of Sin's hair back from his forehead and letting his hand rest there a moment, feeling the heat of his partner's skin.

"It'll be okay, Sin," Boyd said softly. His fingers sifted through Sin's hair and then he let his hand fall away. "I promise."

He sat there quietly, feeling a little silly to be making such statements to such a strong person like Sin, and especially when he was unconscious. Yet he couldn't deny the relief he felt at being able to say those words, and for the first time truly being able to believe them.

He moved further down and knelt by the couch at Sin's legs. He watched his partner, long after his eyes had grown heavy and his mind had started to piece by piece let go of the stress of the last few days. When he rested his arms against Sin's legs, the comfort he felt in knowing Sin was safe and would be for now made sleep inexorably draw him near.

## Chapter 24

It was completely dark when Boyd awoke. At first he felt disoriented and it took him a second to realize why. First, he realized he wasn't in his bed. Right after that, he realized his body was sore from leaning against the end of a couch. He straightened his back, rolling out some painful kinks in his neck and shoulders, and looked over.

Sin was lying on the couch, his hair half-covering his closed eyes. One hand rested in front of him with his fingers curled laxly. He looked exhausted but better than he had before, and he seemed to be deeply asleep.

The events of the day before hit Boyd and for a moment he felt a mixture of anxiety and relief. He'd actually gotten away with it, he thought, at the same time as he wondered whether his mother had changed her mind or lied. Whether there were agents gathering to break into Sin's apartment and kill or capture them.

And what if they did that when Sin was still unconscious? It was all well and good to lay down a threat at his mother's feet, but when it came down to it, would he be able to protect Sin in the event of a strategic attempt to recover them? And if not, was he putting Sin in more danger by having done this than if he'd just left him alone?

At the thought, worry was a niggling doubt. Knowing the severity of his crimes, he could only hope he hadn't made matters worse for Sin.

He stayed there, crouched and watching Sin. He was unable to pull himself away, as if any second he spent not watching him would end up being the second it took for someone to show up and drag Sin back to the fourth floor.

As he watched the gentle rise and fall of Sin's chest, he couldn't help noticing how Sin's eyebrows and fingers twitched, as if he were having bad dreams. Yet there was something almost innocent in the slight parting of Sin's lips, the fall of silky black strands across his face, and the movement of his eyes behind his eyelids.

It made Boyd want to touch him, and after a few moments his hand rose of its own accord. He ran his fingers down the side of Sin's face, brushing along those high

cheekbones and down through the scruff on Sin's cheeks toward his strong jawline. His fingertips danced along his jaw and paused at his chin. His thumb shifted, rising up to brush against Sin's full lower lip. Sin's dry lip caught briefly against Boyd's thumb, showing a flash of white teeth.

Sin shifted, his eyebrows drawing down and fingers jerking. Boyd let his hand drop away but not before the thought crossed his mind that Sin was beautiful to behold.

He sat back and planned to settle in for awhile but his touch must have drawn Sin out of sleep.

Sin's expression twitched, his eyebrows drawing together, and his fingers curled and then hand shifted down. He squinted and then blinked his eyes open; that vivid green slightly glassy but still searching the room until they centered on Boyd's eyes.

The sleepy, tousled confusion Sin regarded him with made any hesitation Boyd may have felt for waking him dissipate. Having the opportunity to see Sin look at him so openly, without any guardedness or suspicion, made any words Boyd may have planned to say die in his throat.

A smile drew across Boyd's face. "Hey," he greeted Sin quietly.

Sin frowned in confusion, taking in Boyd and then shifting his gaze over Boyd's shoulder. He looked around the room questioningly and started to push himself up.

"We're in your apartment," Boyd explained.

The drugs seemed to slowly be working out of Sin's system. Once he was upright and could look around better, he seemed to be coming back to himself more. Still, it was clear he was having a difficult time grasping the situation. "How did I get here?"

Boyd's hands twitched on the edge of the cushion. For a moment, he wanted to reach up and brush that hair out of Sin's eyes. He wanted to feel that smooth hair and skin again, the same way he'd been able to when he'd been reassuring himself that Sin

was okay when he was unconscious. But he knew this wasn't the right time. Maybe it hadn't been when Sin was asleep either.

"Luke Gerant and I brought you here."

Dark eyebrows drew together and Sin shook his head, a bewildered look on his normally guarded face. "Gerant-- what? Who released me?"

"Well..." Boyd paused, his eyebrows drawing together as he tried to determine the best way to explain. "That's harder to answer. Technically no one did but they thought Marshal Connors gave the okay."

"Why the hell would they think that?" Sin asked, his deep voice hoarse from disuse but still managing to sound incredulous.

"Because I stole his seal and forged official documentation for your release."

There was a brief pause as Sin brought a hand up to his head and braced in slightly. His pale green eyes narrowed as he squinted at Boyd, as if he were replaying what he'd just heard.

"I'm not at my best right now because of the drugs but even then, that makes no sense to me. Can you just explain?"

"Sorry." Boyd shifted back until he could sit on the edge of the coffee table to avoid cramping his knees. He leaned forward, his forearms resting on his knees, and studied Sin. "I tried to ask General Carhart and Marshal Connors for help in your release. Carhart wanted to but couldn't do anything about it and Connors didn't answer my request. I thought it would be safest to wait until Connors contacted me, but a few days later Luke Gerant called and told me he was worried about your health. He was afraid there would be lasting effects from the combination of overdosing on the drugs and possible head injuries."

Boyd's eyes narrowed as he remembered the scene he'd been met with in the box. "I'm glad he called. I was worried enough already but it was even worse when I saw your state."

Sin opened his mouth, closed it, and then frowned slightly. He wet his dry lips and ran a hand through his unruly hair. He looked worn out and battered, but his eyes were slowly becoming more alert.

"How did you get the seal?"

"After I heard from Luke I knew I couldn't wait around any longer," Boyd replied. "I managed to get a meeting with Connors but he obviously had no intentions of releasing you or listening to any of my requests. I'd been expecting that possibility and had some plans in place. His seal was on his desk and it worked even better than any of my options, so I stole it."

Once again Sin brought his hand to his head but this time he massaged his temple. His brow puckered again, lips pressing together as he looked away briefly. After awhile he exhaled slowly and sat up straighter on the couch, pushing his shoulders back.

"You're insane."

"Maybe," Boyd said somewhat absently, his attention focusing instead on Sin's face. "How are you feeling? The medics seemed to think you would be okay but I didn't know what to expect."

"I'm fine," was the dismissive response. After a breath Sin dropped his hand. "And what happened with Truman?"

Boyd grimaced and sat up straight. He looked away with narrowed eyes, unable to ignore a flash of remembrance of Harry's disgusting words and groping hands. "Nothing much. Just--" He raised a hand in a vague gesture. "A stupid situation. I was alone and he was angry. He attacked me and then you came."

"Yes but why did he attack you?" Sin demanded, still frowning at Boyd. "I'm kind of interested considering how this all played out."

Boyd sighed and looked over at Sin. "He was angry because his pay had been suspended for months in response to the report I filed. I was going to ignore him but," his eyes narrowed, "then he started saying all this bullshit about you-- how you wanted it and you liked to play rough and maybe I did too." His lips lifted in disgust. "I was so furious. I tried to fight him when he came at me but he was stronger, so..." He shook his head and trailed off.

During his explanation, Sin had gotten up and started to slowly pace the room. His steps were unsteady but he didn't seem to notice. His expression had darkened and his fingers raked through his hair, making his already unruly hair turn into complete disorder.

"You should have just left. Better yet, forget Harry-- you should have just left me up there." Sin stopped and stared at Boyd. His lips were still turned down as a flash of concern appeared on his face. "Boyd, do you realize how much trouble you can be in? Unless your mother manages to convince Connors to do otherwise..."

"I know," Boyd said soberly. His gaze shifted away, focusing on the windows across Sin's living room while his eyebrows drew down. "But I couldn't sit there and do nothing. If you hadn't come when you had, I probably--"

He stopped, frowned, and then waved a hand impatiently. He turned serious honey brown eyes on Sin. "It doesn't matter. The point is, I knew they were punishing you for something you did on my behalf and I couldn't let them do that. Especially since I didn't think you deserved it given the circumstances. All I cared about was getting you free from that. Now that I've achieved my goal, I'm fine with taking responsibility for my actions."

Sin raised his eyebrows, full mouth still pushed down, and crossed his arms over his chest. "So you're fine being terminated?"

Boyd took the time to actually consider that. "When this all started, I would have been," he said honestly. "Now..."

His eyebrows lowered and he looked away, pushing himself up off the coffee table. His gaze was drawn to the windows along the far wall, overlooking the compound and part of Lexington beyond. He walked over to the windows and crossed his arms looking out, a pensive frown on his face that was partially reflected against the sheen of the glass.

He didn't know what he felt anymore. He didn't even know if it had been stupid in the long run to do all this. But he couldn't say he would have changed his mind. Knowing Sin was being tortured for him had made it impossible for him to ignore. Especially since he suspected claustrophobia, and therefore the box, were to Sin what those harrowing days or weeks or whatever period of time had been to him after Lou's death.

And yet, the burning despair that had made him give up on his life, that had made it seem like everyone would be better off without him, wasn't there to suffocate his thoughts anymore. After Ryan had cared about him, after Carhart and even his mother had tried to help-- After Sin had appeared and had shown he didn't hate him, he didn't want him to die...

Boyd sighed as he turned around. How ironic that the possibility of his death was even higher now, when it wasn't what he was actively seeking, than it had been when he'd wanted it.

"I don't know," he said finally. "It may be best to say I wouldn't regret it if it has to happen. But I'd rather they didn't."

Sin's eyes narrowed at that. Once again he opened his mouth to say something but paused and seemed to think better of it. Instead he walked over to Boyd and looked at him for a long moment.

"I'm going to shower." Another pause. "Thank you."

Boyd's face broke into a genuine smile. Some of the earlier doubt about whether he'd made things worse for Sin disappeared at those two words. "You're welcome."

Sin looked at him for another extended moment before finally turning away and going into the bathroom.

Boyd watched the door for a few seconds and then turned and headed into the kitchen to make something for Sin to eat. He checked the fridge first and was greeted with raw fish and meat. He raised his eyebrows and pushed items around, trying to find something that wouldn't require preparation. He'd expected to find sweets and easily microwaved options, or maybe even something to make a salad. He didn't find anything there or in the freezer.

What the hell was he supposed to do with any of that? He had no idea how to make anything on the stove or oven or whatever he was supposed to use for those kinds of things. He was almost resentful of Sin's fridge and freezer for its complete lack of ready-made meals.

The freezer door made a quiet whumping noise when he closed it. He frowned and looked around. There wasn't anything out on the counter and he started to check a few cupboards. There was nothing of use in the first two, except a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of bread missing a few slices. He put both of those on the counter and was reaching for another cupboard when he heard his cell phone jingle.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. The display told him that he'd received a text message. When he pulled it up, he saw it was from Ryan, warning him that Carhart was looking for him. Boyd frowned, worried about what Carhart would have to say, either on his behalf or to inform him of what the administration had decided. He stared at the phone cradled in his palm for a moment, mind racing down the tracks of what if's, before he stopped them.

None of that mattered and worrying about it wasn't going to help. He'd made his decisions and he was going to stick by them, regardless of the consequences. He sent

a quick thanks back to Ryan for the heads up and tossed his phone on the kitchen table.

He realized after he turned back to the counter that he no longer heard the water running in the bathroom. Knowing Sin was going to be coming out soon, he decided to make a peanut butter sandwich for the moment until he could determine what else was available.

A few moments passed before Sin came back into the main area. He was adjusting a pair of loose sweatpants and tying them in the front.

"I see you made a garbage heap of my cameras," he commented.

Boyd looked up as he twisted off the lid on the peanut butter. "I did." He put the lid down and opened a drawer, looking for the silverware.

"Good."

Sin walked over to the kitchen area and leaned against the counter. His head was still terribly bruised but he looked more alert than he had before. He crossed his arms over his chest and watched Boyd. "You sure went out of your way to do everything possible to piss them off."

Boyd smiled slightly to himself and pulled a butter knife out of the silverware drawer that he finally found on the third try. "It seems I did, although it wasn't done to anger them." He found a plate and set it on the table. "I know my mother was angry. I suspect Connors will be even more so."

Sin stared after him contemplatively, eyes narrowing slightly. "Was your mother here?"

Boyd nodded as he opened the plastic on the loaf of bread. "Briefly." He pulled out two slices of bread and put them on the plate.

"Ah," Sin said finally, slowly. "I thought I'd heard her voice."

He looked away again, face unreadable. He walked over to the kitchen counter. Boyd finished making him a peanut butter sandwich and slid it across the counter. Sin picked it up and ate it in a few large bites. After he was finished, he grabbed the container of peanut butter, scooping it out with his fingers and eating it plain.

"Why haven't they brought me back yet?"

Without intending to, Boyd's gaze lingered on the sight of Sin's fingers disappearing into his mouth. "I don't know," he said absently, distracted by the way Sin's lips curved and the faint sheen of saliva on his fingers when they pulled out.

Realizing what he was doing, he dragged his gaze away. He decided to check the rest of Sin's cupboards to see if there was anything more substantial that he could make.

"My mother planned to help," he continued as he opened a cupboard and saw a can of soup.

"She said she would allow you to recover here. I imagine it has to clear through Connors, though."

Sin lifted himself up and sat on the counter, legs dangling over the side as he stared at Boyd and continued to spoon out peanut butter with his fingers. He swung his legs idly and his feet bumped into Boyd as he did so. Whether it was on purpose or accident Boyd didn't know, but it was such a relaxed, childlike thing to do that it made him seem nothing like a man who'd been delirious and on the verge of death just a day prior. "Why in hell would she do that?" he asked mildly. "She doesn't particularly care for me, you know."

Boyd set the can of soup on the counter, trying to ignore the light jostling of Sin's foot. It was impossible to keep from looking sidelong at Sin and being once more distracted by that damn jar of peanut butter. The casual way Sin slipped his fingers in and out of his mouth made Boyd remember their tongues clashing in France; the way Sin tasted. With it came the unbidden question of how it would feel to have Sin's lips--

Suddenly reaching out, Boyd snatched the jar away from Sin and put it out of his reach. "Stop," he said abruptly.

For a second he didn't even know if he was talking to himself or Sin. He peered at Sin and did his best not to stare at his mouth. Sin was still recovering from serious health issues. He didn't need Boyd thinking about what it would be like to taste his mouth again-- and after that, taste a whole lot more.

"That's— unsanitary," Boyd added after a second, trying to cover for the thoughts he was having. "Eat it with something that's not... Your fingers..."

"Tastes better this way," Sin replied and licked his hand clean, staring at the jar longingly for a moment. He seemed completely unaware of what was going through Boyd's mind.

Boyd shook his head to himself and grabbed the can of soup out of the cupboard. Once more he thought about how unfortunate it was to have such an attractive partner. It made it difficult to concentrate on anything else at times.

Sin watched Boyd and raised an eyebrow. "So?"

"I don't know." Boyd opened the utensil drawer looking for a can opener. "I didn't expect her to agree, let alone help. She did say it would be inconvenient if you were incapacitated indefinitely." He found an old hand-crank one half buried under a vegetable peeler, some spatulas, and a dull-looking knife. He set the can opener on the edge of the lid and started opening it. His attention was on twisting the gear and holding the turning can.

"And I suppose I did tell her that I refused to leave until you could defend yourself and to expect a fight if the issue was forced before then," he added absently after a second. "I doubt that changed her mind but it's possible the idea of another scene was irritating to her and added another reason."

Sin nodded slowly and continued to sit on the counter, his shoulders slumped as he stared into space. There was silence for several moments aside from the quiet skid of the can's edge against the counter top.

"What I don't get," Sin said at length, eyebrows drawn together, "is why you did this at all. I get that you're grateful that I killed Harry, and I'm not trying to be an asshole here, but I don't down shift this fast. You had me on ignore for awhile now, and we've barely been getting along. It seems a little odd that you're suddenly my white knight after that, unless it's residual guilt over almost getting my head blown off a few times in that mission."

Boyd looked over at Sin, studying him contemplatively. There was a pause and then he shook his head. He found a microwavable container drying in the sink and poured the soup inside. "I won't lie; the fact that the majority of this is my fault was a large factor in it. But it wasn't only that. I..."

He trailed off briefly, trying to figure out how much he wanted to say or even how to explain what rightfully so had to seem like an extreme shift of his actions. His lips thinned in a twitch and his eyebrows drew down as he shook his head. He turned around to meet Sin's eyes.

"For however it looked to you, aside from individual moments of frustration, my opinion of you never changed throughout any of this. Even if there had been a way for these circumstances to have occurred without that mission or Harry, I would have lobbied for your release if not done more. I know what it feels like to be left in terrible circumstances and I would never do that to you. You're my partner and that means something to me."

There was a long stretch of silence which passed with Boyd putting the soup in the microwave and setting it for a few minutes. Sin scratched the back of his neck somewhat awkwardly. It seemed to occur to him that he was supposed to say something because his face went through a variety of expression changes before he just said, "Ah."

Boyd watched Sin for a moment and then turned to start searching the cupboards for the bowls. "Now that I think about it, why were you in the library anyway?"

Sin had gone back to idly rubbing his forehead, eyebrows drawn together as if he was in pain. It wasn't too surprising considering the bruising. What was more shocking was that Sin was so functional in the first place.

"Oh, that. Ryan came to my apartment to inform me of some things that had occurred while I was on my solo. I wanted to speak to you about it."

"Oh." The word carried some weight. Boyd's hand paused in the act of opening a cupboard. He looked over, wondering what exactly Ryan told Sin. "Did we already talk about what you wanted to talk about?"

"I don't really remember what it was anymore. I guess I just wanted to make sure that uh," Sin paused, staring down at the counter. "I guess, that you knew I didn't actually hate you or anything. I just think you're really annoying a lot."

Boyd's lips pulled to the side in a wry smile. "Ah. Thank you. I think."

Sin sighed. He looked frustrated and shook his head, reaching out to grab Boyd's shoulder. Sin tugged him closer, meeting his eyes with a slight frown.

"I had more to say but it doesn't come out right when I try."

The curl of Sin's fingers over Boyd's shoulder surprised him. Boyd let himself be pulled over, his stomach brushing faintly against Sin's inner knee as he breathed. He brought his hands up without thinking and nearly rested one on Sin's side before he realized what he was about to do. He placed his palms on the counter on either side of Sin's thighs instead. His lips parted but Sin's eyes were so green as they focused on him that for a second he forgot what he was going to say.

"It's alright," he said after a moment. "As long as I know you don't hate me, it's enough."

"I never--" Sin stopped and frowned, although he didn't break Boyd's gaze. He brushed his hand up and squeezed Boyd's shoulder before raising it hesitantly until he was touching Boyd's chin. "I never hated you. It's the fucking opposite. And it's really hard for me--"

He stopped again, looking frustrated. He released Boyd's chin but didn't pull his hand away; it hovered there for a moment, uncertain, and then his fingers brushed Boyd's face. They slid up his jaw hesitantly before cupping Boyd's cheek, his thumb stroking one of the bruises that was slowly fading.

The feel of it made Boyd's heart beat faster. His hand lifted to touch Sin's; staying there as if to stop Sin from pulling away. Sin's calloused fingertips, lightly brushing against his skin, contrasted against the smooth back of his hand. It put Boyd in mind of the night before, when he'd spent an undetermined amount of time gently cleaning those long fingers of blood, thinking about the vulnerability and strength contained within those hands.

It almost felt like this couldn't be real; like there was no way Sin in reality would pull him closer and say that. Boyd shifted, subconsciously bringing himself closer to Sin. His lower stomach pressed against the edge of the counter, his sides hemmed in by Sin's knees.

The sound of someone new clearing their throat was abrupt and unexpected.

Boyd jerked back, automatically pulling away as he looked over his shoulder in surprise.

Sin dropped his hand and shot an unwelcoming glare at Carhart. "What do you want?" he asked moodily.

Carhart stood by the doorway. His eyebrows were raised as slightly as he stared. "I see you are feeling well enough to be rude," he said flatly.

Boyd stepped fully away from Sin, his expression shifting to default neutral as he watched Carhart. With Sin's proximity, he'd completely forgotten about Ryan's warning.

"General," he greeted respectfully, hoping to avoid angering the man even further than he likely already had.

Sin slid off the counter, leaning against it and crossing his arms over his chest as he eyed Carhart suspiciously.

"I'd like to know what the hell you thought you were doing?" he demanded, cerulean blue eyes focused on Boyd. "And I don't want to hear about how dire Sin's situation was and how you had to do everything in your power-- save the bullshit. You brought yourself and Sin three steps closer to termination. His concussion could have goddamn waited."

"I--" Boyd started to say, but any answer he had quelled at the words. For all that he didn't regret his actions, he had to admit that it did all seem a lot more rash looking back than it had at the time. He stopped, glanced at Sin, and then shook his head. "I have no excuse, sir."

Carhart shook his head, glare switching from Boyd to Sin. "If you were anyone else, you would be dead now. Don't let that make you cocky. If you pull a stunt like this again, the Marshal won't let you off the hook a second time. You made him look like an idiot, and you're lucky it was something that was easily covered up. The general population thinks Sin was officially released."

Sin smirked at that. "The guards will know."

"And they'll know to keep their mouths shut. It isn't difficult to get rid of the lot of them and replace them with low ranking and not progressing field agents," Carhart replied coldly. "You're lucky that can't be said for the two of you. You're currently irreplaceable in your own rights. It would be a mistake to use that information and let it turn you into a liability instead of an asset."

"I understand, sir," Boyd said, subdued. He didn't know how irreplaceable he was, really, since Adam Blake could be brought in. It was continually hitting him more as

time passed that he was damn lucky to be alive and free. "I'll be more mindful of my actions in the future."

"You had better."

Carhart gave them a hard look, and then turned and left without another word.

Boyd looked at Sin after Carhart had left. Before he could say anything, the humming of the microwave ended with a ding. He pulled some bowls out of the cupboard and opened the microwave door. "That went... well," he commented.

"Yeah, his bitching was down to a minimum."

Boyd nodded and gingerly pulled out the hot container by holding it on the very edges. "Sin," he said with a drawn expression, keeping his eyes on the soup so it wouldn't slop over the side. Although that was partially an excuse so he didn't have to see Sin's face when he asked his next question. "You're not-- angry with me for all this, are you? I know it may be a stupid thing to ask but if my actions did make it worse for you than just leaving you alone..."

"What? No," Sin replied quickly, his voice sounding surprised. "I appreciate what you did for me. No one's ever tried to help me before."

Setting the bowl carefully on the counter, Boyd looked over and studied Sin. When he saw nothing but truth written on his face, Boyd felt some of the tension relax within him that he hadn't fully realized was there. He ran a hand back through his hair.

"Good," he said with relief, and dropped his hand at his side. "If you'd been angry with me over this too, I would have felt like I may have done the wrong thing."

"You did the wrong thing to the Agency," Sin replied, eyes flitting over Boyd's face. "But you did something good for me. They wouldn't have let me out until there was a mission that needed me, and with as slow as things have been, that could have been weeks, maybe longer."

Boyd smiled, a somewhat solemn expression. "That was the main reason why I did it. I didn't know how long the delay would be, but..." He paused, lifting a hand in a vague gesture before shaking his head. "Any delay would be too long."

Sin didn't answer but Boyd wasn't expecting him to. He turned back to the drawers, locating the silverware drawer he'd found earlier when searching for the can opener. He pulled out two spoons and as an afterthought a ladle.

"I don't think even I can ruin microwaved soup but I suppose we're about to find out."

Sin looked at the soup almost suspiciously. "What is this anyway? They order all of this crap for me."

"Vegetable beef," Boyd replied. He held up the loaf of bread and added as if it weren't obvious, "We're having it with bread."

"Vegetables, huh?" Sin looked into the bowl disapprovingly but said nothing else about it.

Boyd didn't answer but he shook his head slightly in faint amusement. He brought the bread, container of soup and the two empty bowls for them as well as the spoons over to the kitchen table, balancing everything carefully. Once it was all set down, he pulled out a chair and looked at Sin expectantly, who was still hovering in the middle of the kitchen.

Sin stared at the table as if it were some strange, alien creation and scratched the back of his neck before throwing himself down into the chair opposite Boyd. He propped his elbows up and stuck one of his fingers in the container, sucking the broth off. "Not bad."

"Have you never heard of spoons?" Boyd asked with an arched brow, nudging the utensil closer.

"Spoons are for the weak," Sin declared mildly although he picked up the ladle and dumped some of the soup into his bowl. He looked at Boyd through his hair and then poured the rest into the other.

Boyd looked down and noticed that his had more. Reaching over, he switched their bowls and pushed the fuller one to Sin. He looked up with raised eyebrows, as if challenging Sin to try to reverse his actions.

Sin made a face. "You're skinnier than me," he pointed out, but didn't argue.

"You need it more than I do." Boyd ripped off a chunk of bread and dipped it into the soup, watching as color spread across the white.

Sin snorted and looked skeptical but said nothing.

The rest of dinner passed simply, with the occasional back and forth.

As time passed, Boyd felt more and more comfortable with what he'd done. He'd started to worry for awhile that the repercussions would outweigh the good, which he only cared about if Sin had regretted that Boyd had gotten involved. Seeing Sin feel more at ease in his own apartment, free from the constant surveillance and able to relax in some fashion, made everything worth it. Knowing that he'd helped Sin when no one else had ever really tried, and that Sin appreciated it, made it even better.

Although it seemed the consequences were diverted for the moment despite the enormity of the stunt he'd pulled, even if it all came back to bite him later he wouldn't have changed anything. Seeing Sin slouched at the kitchen table, comfortable in his own home for probably the first time ever, Boyd knew he could never regret what he did.

## Chapter 25

The days after Sin's release from the fourth passed in a blur. He thought it was strange since it did not typically take so long for him to shake off the effects unless he was incarcerated for a much larger period of time. The only explanation was that either they'd given him much larger doses than usual or that the drugs combined with his concussion were responsible for the majority of his sluggishness. Whatever the case was, he'd been unable to do much other than sleep and wander around his apartment for the first three days.

Although a support agent had brought him up several bags of food and other things the day after Carhart's visit, Boyd had continued to drop by every so often to ensure that he was improving in strength. He never stayed for long and they never spoke much, but Sin had found himself once again craving Boyd's presence. The feelings and confusion surrounding Boyd, which had mostly disappeared and turned to animosity after the mission in France, had returned in full force. Only, this time Sin did very little to fight or analyze it.

Sin accepted the fact that he wanted Boyd around and it no longer bothered him. The part of him that was angry, suspicious and emotionless screamed at him. That part told him he was being weak and foolish and demanded if he'd forgotten the remote and the way Boyd had treated him. There were times when Sin listened to that voice and felt the familiar stirrings of anger and resentment that had dominated him for the past several months. But then he remembered what Boyd had done for him and the suspicion, anger, and bitterness faded away.

If Boyd had forgiven him for all he'd done and said, he could do more than forgive Boyd in return. Boyd had proven himself to be more than trustworthy. Boyd had lied for him, risked his own freedom and life by defying Connors, stood up to his mother and to the entire Agency... what more proof did he need?

Sin spent his time wandering around his apartment, feeling liberated by the absence of the cameras and thankful that Boyd had thought to get rid of them. He didn't

feel pressured to hide his physical pain anymore and that alone allowed anxiety that he hadn't even realized existed to disappear. He found it hard to believe that Connors had allowed it, that they'd given Boyd everything he'd demanded without questions or consequences, but he figured it had something to do with Vivienne's influence.

Whatever the case was, things were going a lot better between them now. They'd mostly gone back to the comfortable familiarity that had been between them before Thanksgiving, but something about it was different. The moment they'd shared before Carhart had walked in had confused him. Not only had he unconsciously touched Boyd but Boyd had allowed it and had seemed to even want to touch him in return. It was a drastic difference from previous incidents and Sin wasn't entirely sure what it meant. It nagged at him constantly, especially when Boyd was in his proximity, but he didn't do it again and they never brought it up.

Sin found himself not really knowing how to react to someone who had managed to get so close to him despite all of the things they'd gone through to get to that point. However, despite his confused thoughts and hesitation, he didn't show any of it.

When he wasn't silent, he found that something had subtly shifted between them. Maybe it was relief from having gotten away with this all with the Agency, but the freedom he felt in his apartment seemed to affect his interactions with Boyd to some degree. He didn't cut to suspicion and near rudeness as quickly and Boyd, who had once been so serious, was in a lighter mood, even showing more of a sense of humor at times.

It'd taken Sin most of the week to come to the point where he could freely admit those things to himself. By the time Saturday afternoon came, he found himself extremely bored with nothing left to analyze or do. He lay on the white carpet, staring up at the ceiling in silence or pursuing his manuscript of *Paradise Lost* for most of the day before deciding that he needed to do something else. He'd exercised for the better part of the afternoon but soon lost his focus as his mind began to wander.

He gave up on sit ups after awhile and sat on the floor, picking at the scabs on his lacerated hands and trying to ignore the fact that he wanted to see Boyd. The desire wouldn't leave and after while he grabbed his cell phone and dialed Boyd's number. It rang three times before Boyd answered. Even then, there were rustling sounds and a long period of silence.

"Boyd?"

"Ah," Boyd's voice said mildly after a moment, sounding faintly amused. "Sorry. I couldn't find my phone and then I dropped it. It was very dexterous of me."

Sin cradled the phone between his neck and shoulder and began to pick at his hands again. "You're too clumsy; I don't think this partnership can work anymore."

Boyd chuckled. "Well. If that's all you called to tell me, I think I'll go cry in the corner now..."

A smirk tugged at Sin's mouth and he stopped messing with his hands, opting instead to flop backwards on the floor. "Entertain me before you do that. I'm bored."

"I don't know," Boyd drew out. "Maybe I only feel like entertaining myself today. But just for you, I could play video games and set the phone next to me with the TV turned up loud. You could let your imagination run wild making up what each noise means."

"I could do the same for you but it wouldn't involve video games," Sin drawled. He made a face at himself and closed his eyes. "Anyway..."

There was a bit of rustling noise. "I can't tell if this is a break-up call or sexual harassment. Are you really that bored? Why did you call?"

Sin snorted softly before speaking again. "I'm bored. Go buy me reading material."

"Reading... Do you want me to get you so you can buy books?" He sounded confused.

"You get it. I never asked about my account."

"You should look into it. Interest has probably accrued a decent amount for you by now." There was a hissing noise, more rustling, and a loud clank.

Sin shrugged even though Boyd could not see him. "I guess. There's money left over from my father's account as well but I do not see a point, as I do not have need for money usually. Except for instances such as this one, when I am bored and have no reading material." He paused and asked almost as an afterthought. "What's that sound?"

"I'm making tea. So you're saying even though you probably have more money than me you still expect me to pay for all your entertainment?" Boyd tsked. "How unfortunate. I must not have read my contract thoroughly enough."

"I don't know how much money I have," Sin replied before adding, with a small amount of playful pleading: "Come on, Boyd."

"I don't know," Boyd drawled, dragging the words out. "I'm not certain yet this partnership is good enough for me to spend my hard-earned money on things I never benefit from."

"You'll benefit from it," Sin insisted, a smirk crossing his face. "I'll continue to be well read and we can enjoy literary discourse over cookies and tea. You're making tea already-- it's perfect."

"See, it's already starting. First you want my money for your books, now you want to drink all my tea. I suppose I will provide the cookies as well?" A sigh. "I'm beginning to think you like me only for my material possessions."

"I like you for many reasons. However, your wonderful sense of generosity is a bonus." As soon as the words left his mouth, a large amount of irritation spread through Sin. He didn't even have the drugs to blame his loose tongue on anymore.

Boyd chuckled and didn't seem to notice anything strange with the comment. "Now you're just trying to use flattery. I'm onto you, Vega. I've seen your tricks."

Sin resisted the urge to say another innuendo and replied sullenly. "I guess you don't have to go..."

"Alright," Boyd said after a moment, sounding amused and resigned. "You never told me what to get you."

"You pick."

"That could be dangerous, you realize. I could get you anything. Wedding gown books, a children's book about frogs... The possibilities are endless."

"It's okay. I trust you."

There was a long pause. "I can't disappoint you, then," Boyd said. "Give me a few hours and I'll be there."

"Excellent. I expect you here in three hours exactly."

Boyd snorted quietly and Sin could imagine the wry smile on his lips. "I'll be there," was all he said. The line went dead as Boyd hung up.

Sin flipped his phone closed and continued to lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling once again. He wondered what books Boyd would bring him and found that although he'd mostly used it as an excuse to call Boyd, he really was looking forward to having something else to read.

When he'd been a child in his mother's care, he'd had little else to do with his time but peruse old copies of classic literature. There had only been a few books in the common room of the house and he knew them all by heart; among the fashion

magazines and romance novels had been a collection of works by Dickens, Stevenson and Bronte, left behind by one of the girls who'd made it a habit of picking them up when she went shopping, trying to 'get smarter' as she'd always say. He'd reread them countless times while his mother had entertained in her bedroom, when he'd been desperate to distract himself from the things that went on around him.

Although it seemed odd, Sin thought that books had done more for him than anything else when he'd been a child. Through them, he'd broadened his thoughts, his perspective of the world outside of the small Hong Kong brothel he was born in and they'd taught him how to read in English when he hadn't ever even been taught to read in Chinese.

Even after his mother's death and his father had taken him far from Hong Kong, he'd continued his obsession with reading. It was actually his withdrawn, bookish qualities that had at first motivated his father to begin teaching him how to fight. It was his shocking ability to mimic everything his father showed him the first time he saw it that had encouraged his father to train him to be an agent.

"The best agent," he'd said. "Even better than me."

Sin closed his eyes and massaged his head, trying to block out the flood of memories that came with his father's phantom voice. There were things he didn't mind remembering, things he didn't mind talking about, but then there were the things that lived in the darkest parts of his mind that only showed themselves in his nightmares.

Those were the memories that he never wanted to recover, the ones that Lydia had determinedly tried to make him relive when she'd climbed on top of him and effectively signed her own death warrant. Although he'd had no respect for the woman as an agent, a doctor or anything else, he was positive that he wouldn't have reacted so violently, wouldn't have slipped into an uncontrollable episode, if she hadn't touched him at the exact moment that she'd asked him about his mother.

Sin sat up and stared into space for a moment, lost in thoughts about his parents although that was something he usually wanted to avoid. He remembered back when

he'd first entered the Agency, back when certain memories were deeply repressed and in no danger of escaping. Back when he'd told doctors the truth because he hadn't remembered why the truth about his parents were better left a secret.

He wished he could go back to that time. He wished his memories would stop pushing to the forefront of his mind. He wished they would stay hidden where they belonged; in the darkness, with the shadowy thing that took over his body when he felt threatened and lost control. He stood up with a frustrated scowl and ran both hands through his hair before moving over to the window, staring down at the early March frost; it seemed that there would be one last snowstorm before spring. To his dismay that simple thought automatically led to yet another memory of his father, one that involved early morning jogging during an ice storm, building up stamina for missions that would require him to run around in some of the coldest parts of the world.

"Russia," Emilio would say, "is full of frozen, heartless pricks. If you wanna beat 'em, you gotta be able to tough it out in their kinda conditions. So basically, you gotta know how to not bust your ass on a shitload of ice while half frozen and drunk."

Sin swore under his breath, trying to force the man's image away. He didn't want to remember. He didn't want to think of it.

He didn't want to see Emilio's face glaring at him disapprovingly, an expression that just as easily melted away into a large, disarming smile. That huge grin had always haunted Emilio's face and he'd often teased his son for never cracking the smallest smile. Sin had never been good at it and he'd never bothered; in the past he'd never had a reason for laughter or smiles.

Despite their differences in personality, there were times when he loathed seeing his own reflection because it automatically reminded him of his father. He hated whatever course of nature had decided that their DNA should be so exact. While he had his mother's slanted eyes and full lips, he had his father's olive complexion and strange, green eyes.

It was a constant reminder of who he was, where he came from and what he was meant to be. He was supposed to be a sharper image of his father; a killer but without the weakness for women, drugs and alcohol. An assassin without flaws. Despite the fact that his father had been dead for fifteen years, the goals were deeply ingrained in him and the training that he'd endured since he was eight years old would always be at the back of his mind.

There were times when Sin wondered what Boyd's father had been like. He'd seemed to care about his family in the video Sin saw; like he'd really loved his son. Sin wondered what he would be like if his father had been Cedrick Beaulieu. What he'd be like if he hadn't been taught to kill.

Sin turned away from the window and headed for the door, grabbing his phone as an afterthought. He needed to be out of the apartment, he decided. He needed some kind of distraction or the ridiculous thoughts would haunt him for the rest of the night.

He didn't know why the thoughts of his parents came so frequently now. It had something to do with the flashes he'd seen during the mission in New Orleans but he didn't want to think about that. In fact he wanted to avoid it at all costs. What he'd seen had scared him and he wasn't normally scared by much.

He left the apartment and went downstairs, glancing at the usual guards who stood at the entrance before heading outside. Once again the guard warned him that it was freezing, but Sin ignored him and stepped out into the biting wind with no jacket or sweater to protect him. He ignored the temporary discomfort caused by the cold and walked in no particular direction. He thought about going to the gym but he'd already exercised once that day and if he was honest with himself, he'd admit that it did very little to clear his mind anymore.

As he wandered around the courtyard, he saw several agents wrapped in heavy coats giving him strange looks but he wasn't sure if it was because he was underdressed or because he was... well, him. The thought was effective in allowing him to

forget about his father but it turned his mind towards Boyd again, and the things that had happened since the mission in France.

The idea of people harassing Boyd, physically as well as verbally, made Sin hot with anger.

*"--it pisses me off so much that maybe Jeffrey or Owen said something."*

Sin froze in mid-step and felt himself go still. In the midst of being incarcerated and drugged he'd entirely forgotten Ryan's comment. Until now.

Anger coursed through him, warming his body enough that he completely forgot about the cold; he turned around and began to walk towards the building where Jeffrey lived. Even though Ryan had added the possibility of it having been Owen, Sin seriously doubted it. Jeffrey had never liked Boyd, and it was more likely that he would be the one talking about it than Owen.

Sin's stride was like that of a predatory cat and the people who passed him didn't take their time moving out of his way. He knew where Jeffrey lived for the same reason that he knew mostly every agent's identity and residence; they were his enemies and any good killer knew his enemies almost as well as he knew himself.

He entered the building with relatively few problems from the guards, claiming he was going to one of the common areas. He ran up the stairs to Jeffrey's apartment on the eleventh floor. He knocked several times to no avail and he wasn't sure whether Jeffrey was not home or simply ignoring him. The idea made his temper flare even further and for a moment he could only stand there with his hands balled into fists, frustrated and annoyed and with no way of relieving it. He didn't know if his anger was irrational and at the moment he didn't care.

Sin didn't know what he intended to do once he had Jeffrey alone but for the moment he didn't care and was only focused on the fact that he didn't plan to hang around in the hallway waiting for the idiot to return. Instead, he began moving

automatically down the hallway, not really sure if he should just come back at a later time or kill time in the complex until he saw Jeffrey.

But he didn't want to come back later.

He wanted to confront Jeffrey now when the realization of what the man had done was fresh in his mind; now that the anger was burning hot within him. He didn't want his temper to cool. He didn't want the next time he saw Jeffrey to be when Carhart was there to intervene. But at the same time he had to admit to himself that perhaps it was better if that was the case. Boyd had gone through a lot of trouble to free him and it was entirely possible that a confrontation with Jeffrey could wind up putting him right back in the box.

He'd almost decided to leave, to follow the part of his brain that was telling him to just walk away and let it go, when a supply clerk pushing a huge cart full of laundry came out of one of the apartments on the floor. Before Sin even realized what he was doing, he was stalking behind the young man silently in the shadows. It was painfully easy to lift the man's wallet and remove his keycard. Sin was already disappearing down the hallway before the man even noticed that there was someone else in the hall with him.

The keycard that supply clerks possessed served as a kind of skeleton key for whatever wing they were in charge of and opened every door in that area. Sin found it somewhat amusing that it'd been so easy to lift the damn thing but supply clerks weren't exactly trained to be as aware of their surroundings as other agents were so it wasn't really that surprising.

All thoughts of abandoning his temporary mission fled his mind and he used the card to enter Jeffrey's apartment without further problems. It was stylishly decorated in an elegant, minimal way, with furniture that was either red or brown. Everything he could see had an earthy feel to it and Sin was quite disgusted by the sheer amount of creativity Jeffrey had put into decorating the place. He stalked around the apartment, expression as dark as his mood.

He realized that Jeffrey really wasn't home. He hung around for nearly an hour brooding, reflecting, and effectively growing angrier, until finally there was noise outside the door and it swung open.

Jeffrey had his arms filled with files and panels and was watching the floor as he talked on a cell phone held to his ear by his shoulder. "Yes," he said impatiently. "I realize this, but I can't possibly get it done in two days. ...No, that's unacceptable."

Kicking the door shut behind him, he automatically flipped a light on as he passed and carefully set the pile on a table next to the door. He didn't seem to notice Sin, but it had been dark when he entered and he had yet to look in his direction. "Listen, I just got back to my apartment and I haven't even had the chance to check my messages. I'll see if he called. Yes. I'll do that too."

Without even saying goodbye, he flipped his phone shut and turned around as he looked up. He was so surprised when he saw Sin that he actually jumped and yelled, "Holy--!" Glancing around wildly as if searching for exits or back-up, he turned wide eyes back to Sin. "What the *hell*-- How did you get in here? What are you doing here?"

"I came to chat," Sin said flatly, standing up and walking towards Jeffrey.

Automatically starting to back away, Jeffrey gripped his cell phone as if it would protect him. "What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously, eyes narrowed. He glanced around quickly once more then returned his stare to Sin as he grew increasingly more paranoid. "We can talk later. Why are you in my home?" Sin continued to walk towards Jeffrey who kept backing up without looking where he was going. Briefly, Jeffrey looked toward the door as if he wanted to run but that exit was quickly intercepted by Sin. There was no way Jeffrey would go past him and Sin kept moving closer until he was effectively invading the other man's personal space and had him backed against the wall.

"I want to talk now."

The second Jeffrey hit the wall he started to slide to the side as if in the hopes of escaping. "We can talk just fine across the room. Why the hell are you getting so close?" The last question came out as an alarmed hiss.

Strong hands grabbed the front of Jeffrey's shirt, pulling him forward and then slamming him against the wall. "Shut the fuck up and don't move again," he said flatly. Sin's face darkened and his eyes narrowed as he placed a hand on either side of Jeffrey's head and leaned in close.

Jeffrey stared at him, eyes very wide and mouth a little slack. Even so he said as calmly as he could probably manage, "Alright. You have my attention... What do you want?"

"Why are you afraid of me?"

"Because you're a fucking psychopath who just pushed me into the wall," Jeffrey snapped, some of his attitude appearing impatiently. He seemed to realize that it was not the best thing to say, however, because immediately he frowned and looked a little apprehensive.

"You've never seen me become a fucking psychopath." Sin dropped his hands and leaned back for a moment as if to give Jeffrey some room. Without warning, he wrapped a hand around the man's throat, lifting him clear off the floor with surprising strength and slamming him against the wall again. "But you will if you fuck with me."

Jeffrey choked and his head smacked against the wall. Eyes widening in fear and anger, he tried to pry Sin's hands off his throat while his feet kicked helplessly against the wall. "What the fuck!" he managed hoarsely, panicked. "I didn't do anything. I haven't fucked with you!"

"I don't care what you people do to me. I don't care what you think of me," Sin continued as if he hadn't heard Jeffrey, ignoring the way the man clawed at his hand helplessly. "I don't care that you think I'm a depraved killer who murders and rapes for

sport. I don't care that you hate me and probably want me dead. Your words hold very little consequence to me."

His eyes narrowed further and his hand tightened around Jeffrey's throat. "But I do care about what you do to Boyd."

Eyes widening, Jeffrey tried to say something but he only choked. He tried to kick Sin away but he was not particularly strong and it did nothing to alleviate the pressure on his neck. Tears started to gather at the edges of his eyes as he struggled to breathe and he shook his head a little; though it was unclear whether he was denying doing anything or just trying to silently ask Sin not to kill him.

Sin stared at Jeffrey coolly for several moments before abruptly releasing him and allowing the man to fall to the floor at his boots. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that."

Coughing and drawing in deep, shaky breaths, Jeffrey crouched and didn't answer for a minute. "What," he gasped finally, anger and fear making his voice quake, "the hell are you talking about? I haven't done anything to him!"

Sin's temper flared and he fought the urge to smash in Jeffrey's face with a kick. He opted instead to press the steel toe of his boot against the man's chest, once again pinning him to the wall. "Who told you to open your fucking mouth about the assignment in France?"

A flash of guilt passed through Jeffrey's face with a faint grimace. He took a moment to respond, still panting to catch his breath. His eyes were narrowed when he looked up.

"What are you, going to beat me up about that? I'm not going to talk to you like this. Let me up and we'll have a civilized conversation." " *You asshole*" seemed to hang in the air.

"You're lucky I don't rip your arms off about it," Sin replied but released Jeffrey. He took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest and glowering down at him.

Jeffrey stood with all the dignity he could muster after being thrown around and he straightened his shirt rather importantly. Giving Sin a sidelong, very suspicious look, he skirted around him and headed for the living room. He paused before sitting down, as if waiting for Sin to come over and sit first as he was the guest.

"Tell me what your actual problem is and we can discuss it," Jeffrey said with a hint of irritation. One hand rose to rub his throat unconsciously. "Threatening me won't ease your mind and it certainly won't make *me* happy."

"Your happiness is not my concern," Sin retorted. He followed Jeffrey over to the couch, looking at it dubiously without sitting down. "Are you aware of the fact that Boyd was jumped in the courtyard, among other things, because of your burning desire to spread the word on his sex life?" Jeffrey narrowed his eyes, looking affronted. "If you must know, yes, I am aware of it. I didn't mean for it to happen. I told only two people in passing, but sometimes even one is enough."

Sin stared at him for a moment before exhaling slowly. "What the hell is your problem with him anyway?"

"I don't like him," Jeffrey said bluntly, though it twisted easily to his usual taunting nature. "Are you going to attack me again because I'm saying bad words about your little... partner?" There was no doubt he meant that more than one way. "Or would you like to sit down and be a normal guest?"

Sin made a face and sprawled onto the couch, slamming his dirty boots down on the coffee table. "Better?"

Glaring at the boots, Jeffrey sat down rather primly on the edge of a chair. "Well. I can hardly expect more, I suppose." He sighed, irritated. "What were you wanting out of this interrogation, anyway?"

"I'd intended to break your nose and possibly other body parts as well," Sin drawled. "But I'd like to know exactly how these rumors came about before I make a

decision. I normally wouldn't give a fuck what who said about what, but at the moment, I do."

"How eloquent." Jeffrey sighed and sat back in the chair, one hand moving to cover his eyes. "You likely won't believe me, but I truly didn't intend for it to go so far. I simply told my two closest colleagues about it because I thought it was funny."

He raised an eyebrow and surveyed Sin from beneath his hand. "Many of us dislike both Beaulieus, although you didn't hear me say that. She's been ruthless as long as I've known but suddenly her son appeared and now it's nothing but favoritism. He rose through the ranks despite not deserving it. In fact, there's absolutely nothing special about him at all, yet he gets whatever he wants due to his mother. So when he messed up in such a scandalous way, of course I wanted to share. I never told my friends to tell others but apparently they did. I thought it served him right for everyone to know but after the courtyard incident, I did feel a little bad."

Sin wasn't happy with this information but he wasn't any angrier either. In truth he found it to be unsurprising that people on the compound felt that way. It was exactly how they'd felt about him when he'd arrived at the age of fourteen and had immediately risen in the ranks.

"Jealousy is a terrible thing," he said, sounding bored. "But I could care less about who dislikes Boyd. It would be perfectly fine with me if no one liked him at all as long as they kept their fucking hands off him."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow. "Careful. It's precisely that sort of talk that will only exacerbate it further."

Sin stared at him blankly for a moment before frowning. "What? Why would that exacerbate anything? What exactly are these stupid rumors anyway?"

Another raised eyebrow and Jeffrey looked at Sin as if he were an idiot. "One would think you didn't spend your life on the compound. Amazing."

He straightened in the chair. "For months there have been rumors that you and he are sexually involved. Apparently there was something to do with your apartment, I don't really know what it was and I don't particularly care to know the sordid details." His expression twisted in distaste.

"So it was already believed Boyd or you were homosexuals, but the moment it became known that Boyd had slept with a man for information, it was confirmed. Being a homosexual is not exactly something a person advertises around here." He shrugged and looked bored.

Sin stared at Jeffrey doubtfully, mouth twisted into an annoyed frown. "You realize," he said slowly, "that all of that is bullshit. Or are you an idiot too?"

Jeffrey grimaced and waved a hand impatiently. "What should I care? The point is, everyone believes that there's obviously something wrong in his head to have put out for the Agency without even having been asked, and it's made worse by everyone thinking he's involved with you. It gives him zero credibility. So when the most recent rumors surfaced, people believed it. After all, it's clear from the mission to France that he'll do whatever it takes to achieve his goals, just like his mother. So, their thoughts go, who knows what kind of sick person he truly is?"

"And what exactly are the 'most recent rumors'?"

Jeffrey hesitated a moment, as if wondering whether he should continue. "Well," he said, watching Sin carefully. "Mind you, I don't necessarily believe this; I'm just relaying the rumor. Apparently he baited Harry until the idiot man attacked him, and had set it up so that you would arrive just in time to take Harry out. It was all related to some issue that had happened before and he used you for his dirty work."

Sin glared at Jeffrey and didn't know if he wanted to laugh or hit someone. On one side it was so ridiculous that anyone who believed such a thing was obviously mentally deficient in some way. On the other hand the idea that there were people actively harassing his partner over such utter foolishness made him even more pissed off.

"That is by far the stupidest thing I've ever heard," he said and made a face. "I snapped Harry's neck because he was assaulting my partner. Protecting Boyd is my job and that is why I am no longer being incarcerated. If anyone else decides to pull the same shit, I won't hesitate to do it again, consequences be damned."

Sin stood up, irritation practically radiating off of him in black waves. "Next time I suggest you keep what's said in a briefing inside the conference room. I'm surprisingly pleased that I won't be forced to hurt you but that doesn't mean it will stop me if this kind of thing happens again."

He turned abruptly and headed for the door but not before pausing and glancing back at Jeffrey. "Thanks for the information, by the way."

Jeffrey's eyes narrowed as he studied Sin, as if trying to determine whether he was being sarcastic. In the end he just shrugged. "You're welcome this time. But next time I expect a warning phone call and far less proximity. It makes me not want to help you out in any way."

Sin snorted. "Yeah, yeah," he said over his shoulder and went out the door.

He stood outside the apartment for a moment with his hands shoved in his pockets, staring at nothing in particular. He'd almost forgotten how ridiculous people could be when faced by someone younger and more powerful than they are.

He'd felt that particular kind of anger directed at him when he'd first joined the Agency. People had hated him long before he'd earned the reputation of being a bloodthirsty monster. They'd hated him just because he'd earned the prestigious level 10 rank at the age of fifteen when there were people in the Agency who'd been striving to achieve that for years.

He was damned lucky that no one had ever found out about his embarrassing display at the hotel in France. It probably would have made the situation unbearable.

Sin scowled and strode down the stairs, casually dropping the keycard on the floor before he exited the building. He didn't like to think about anything that had happened in France because he didn't really know what to think about it anymore.

On one hand it made his temper flare dangerously as he remembered Thierry's condescending comments and Boyd's flirtation, but now he wondered if he'd ever had any right to be angry over it at all. Now that he reflected back on the entire incident he was pretty sure that the dejection and bitterness that he'd felt had more to do with the fact that it'd seemed like Boyd had trusted a man he'd just met more than Sin, rather than the fact that he'd actually slept with that man at all.

On the other hand, thinking about France also made him remember other things... Things that were better left forgotten in the hateful haze he'd been in that night. Things like the feel of Boyd's body pressed against his and the taste of Boyd's mouth on his tongue. The sound of his panting breath and sudden moans.

Sin had thought he was able to completely forget about it but ever since that day earlier in the week when Boyd had allowed him to touch him... he couldn't get it out of his mind.

Sin scowled and walked back towards his building. Once again, people avoided walking near him but he didn't blame them; he probably looked like he was ready to snap. It was barely ten minutes later when he approached his building and saw Boyd standing outside of his building talking to the guards. None of them seemed to notice Sin approaching; he was still too far away and walking too silently.

"What's that, presents for your boyfriend?" one of the guards was saying. He reached over and pulled on the edge of a paper bag Boyd held in one hand.

Boyd didn't let it go; he only narrowed his eyes slightly although his face was mostly blank. "Don't you ever grow bored with this?" His voice was tinged with weary irritation as he dragged the bag closer, away from the guard. "Come up with something more creative at least."

The guard yanked on the bag so abruptly that it almost ripped. "I'm just doing my job, princess."

"Stop it," Boyd snapped, sounding outright annoyed now. "You don't need to inspect this; what the hell would I even bring in that would be a danger? These are just books-- you can tell from the feel and weight, unless you've never been literate enough to pick one up."

The second guard present was one Sin recognized, Officer Allen, who sometimes warned him of the cold and tried to tell him to bundle up. Although he didn't go out of his way to interrupt the other guard, it was obvious from the way he rolled his eyes that he was exasperated and annoyed by the scene.

"Oh ho." The guard seemed to thoroughly be enjoying himself now as he smirked. "You're getting pretty hot and bothered, aren't you, blondie? Must be getting yourself ready for some railing now that you took the cameras down."

"You don't even know what you're talking about," Boyd said coolly. "I took them down because it was a blatant violation of his privacy."

The guard snorted. "Yeah right. You know, I've met a lot of valentines with this job but none of them as sick as you, willingly taking it from that freak and even going out of your way to get the status." His eyebrows rose. "What are we going to find out next about you? You like a good gang bang once in awhile? If so, I'm sure you can find some people who'd be willing to finish what Harry started."

Boyd's eyes narrowed into a glare and his fingers tightened into fists against the paper bag.

Sin didn't know if it was the fact that he'd just heard about all of this crap in detail from Jeffrey or if it was seeing someone harass Boyd at all. Whatever the case, something in Sin snapped. He crossed the remaining distance so fast that no one had properly become aware of his presence before he suddenly appeared in front of Boyd.

Grabbing the guard by the neck, he lifted him up and slammed him violently against the side of the building with the same strength he'd used on Jeffrey. Only, this time the danger radiating off of him implied that he would do a lot more than simply scare the man.

"Is there a problem?" he asked flatly.

The guard looked thoroughly startled and a little frightened. "The *fuck*--?" he hissed.

Allen moved over immediately to intervene. "Put him down," he said sternly but not unkindly. "You could get in a lot of trouble for this."

Sin ignored Allen and stared up at the man who dangled from his iron grip. "Because I could have sworn that it looked like there was a problem."

"Vega, put him down. Please man, don't make me have to do something I really don't want to do," Officer Allen pleaded.

"Then I suggest you keep this idiot in line." Sin squeezed harder, resisting the urge to crush the man's windpipe, before letting him drop to the cold ground. "Next time keep your fucking mouth shut and your hands to yourself," he said coldly, eyes narrowed into slits.

After a long, tense moment that seemed to last for an eternity, Sin finally just walked over the guard and entered the building. He heard the guard hiss vehemently behind him, "I'll see that fucking animal back in his cage."

Sin automatically took the stairs, assuming Boyd would follow him, and stormed up to his apartment silently. He swiped his keycard in the door with more force than was necessary. His hands were balled into white knuckled fists and fury was a cloak of tension surrounding him. Once he was in his apartment, he took a long, deep breath and raked both hands through his hair, closing his eyes briefly.

"What's wrong?" Boyd asked the moment he shut the door behind them. "Did someone say something to you?"

"No."

Boyd gave him a sidelong look and headed past him toward the table. "Okay..."

"I'm just tired of people fucking with you," Sin snapped, agitated.

Pausing as he set the books down, Boyd gave Sin a look that was difficult to interpret. "Oh. The guards." He shrugged and turned toward the window, but there was tension in his back that Sin didn't miss. "Thank you for the help but it's nothing to worry about. It's not very important and what happened downstairs was a fluke."

Sin turned his dark glare onto Boyd, eyes narrowing. "What the hell do you mean it isn't important? And how the hell is it a fluke?" He shook his head, mouth turning down. "Why don't you defend yourself?"

Boyd shook his head. "Why should I?"

"Becau--" Sin broke off abruptly and stared at his partner incredulously before taking a slow, calming breath. "Because you could wipe the floor with that idiot and he has no right to treat you that way. He's a fucking useless, lazy guard and you're a level 9 operative. You contribute a lot more to this idiotic Agency than he does and you were not trained to be a fucking doormat to those morons."

"Well the last time I tried it didn't work out so well for me," Boyd replied darkly, crossing his arms. "So what's the point? They'll grow bored with it eventually. The more I struggle against it the more entertaining they find it to be." His shoulders were tense and for all that his jaw was set stubbornly, there was a troubled look in his eyes before he looked away. "And anyway, there's some truth to it."

"Which parts are true? I know I've been gone but please feel free to fill me in."

Boyd sighed and turned toward the window, peering out at the compound laid out before them. "I don't know. I did get the job primarily due to my mother, even though I never asked her to do anything for me. They may be right that I don't deserve my rank."

"You got the job," Sin began in a flat, irritated tone, "because you were good enough. Your mother submitted your name but Carhart had no intentions of taking you seriously until I told him to give you a chance. And then you proved yourself. End of story." Boyd studied Sin quietly for a moment. His eyebrows drew together as he looked away with a silent nod.

Sin turned around, walking to the table with his books. "What did you get me?"

"A variety of books, some of which are given in jest," Boyd replied, his tone becoming more normal and losing the pensive quality. "You'll have to guess which ones are serious."

Sin stared at Boyd suspiciously for a moment before picking up a purple book with what looked like a large image of a peanut butter sandwich on it. "The Ultimate Peanut Butter Book." He stared at it, turned it all around in his hands and then looked up at Boyd with raised eyebrows and a smirk. "Excellent."

Boyd seemed amused by his reaction and the rest of the tension that had lingered in him disappeared. "So you can be more creative."

"What's not creative about eating with my fingers?" Sin asked and opened the book, flipping through the pages. "Besides, I think you should make this stuff for me."

Boyd scoffed. "I am not as skilled in the kitchen as you may believe, so you'd best watch what you request." He gestured to the bag. "Keep going."

Sin pulled out two more books. A Terry Pratchett book and a large, wide hardcover anthology of Neil Gaiman's best novels. Both were from the earlier part of the 21st century. He sat on the floor absently, folding his legs as he read the back of each book. His face took on a thoughtful expression and he began picking through the pages, becoming completely engrossed for several long moments.

Boyd leaned against the counter and watched.

After perusing the books, Sin stacked them on his pile and looked into the bag again. He reached up to the table and caused his shirt to ride up slightly, a movement which Boyd's eyes followed. Sin pulled out *The Art of War* from the bag. "I've wanted to read this for a long time. I first saw it when Kassian had a copy during his rank 10 training."

"Kassian?" Boyd asked absently as he watched Sin. "I haven't met him."

Sin added it to his pile before reaching into the bag once again. "You are not missing much by not being acquainted with Kassian. He is a poor attempt at a replacement for me." He pulled out more books, and glanced at Boyd. "How much stuff did you buy?"

"Enough to not fail your test," he said with a faint smirk. "You told me you were bored and needed entertainment so I decided to provide you with plenty of material."

Sin didn't answer, instead opting to look at a book about animals. He'd liked animals since he was a child, likely because he could interact with them without having them actually speak. As a child he'd never been able to own a pet, but he clearly remembered times when he had wanted one before leaving China.

A smile growing across his face, Boyd sat on the counter and watched.

After several long moments, Sin looked up at Boyd and closed the book abruptly. "What are you smiling at?" he asked defensively.

"No." Boyd waved at the book. "Go back to looking at the animals. It was endearing."

"Endearing?" Sin asked disdainfully.

"Yes." Boyd's smile spread further, and although he seemed amused his expression seemed largely genuine. "You were very intrigued. I wasn't expecting that."

Sin gave Boyd a withering look and nudged the book towards his pile.  
"Whatever..."

He turned his attention to the bag and the last book inside. He pulled out a copy of Milton's Paradise Regained.

There were very few things that ever embarrassed him or put him at a complete loss for words but for some reason Boyd was having that effect on him at the moment. It was humiliating in a way and for a moment he almost wished that he could go back to his completely untouchable act and his removed attitude. But the satisfaction alone he got from the knowledge that Boyd knew him well enough to understand his taste in literature and to remember his preference for Milton... He knew returning to that mentality wasn't going to happen any time soon.

"You did very well on this test," he observed, casting an appreciative glance at his partner and not giving away his thoughts.

Boyd smiled, appearing to be pleased. "Good."

Sin stacked the books and looked over at Boyd again. "Thank you," he said again. "That should satisfy my boredom for a long time."

Boyd's smile increased briefly as he slid off the counter. His feet made quiet thumping sounds when they hit the floor. "I'm glad to hear that." He turned toward the door but didn't yet leave. "Now that I've done what I came here for, I suppose I should leave."

"You--" Sin cut off abruptly and crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't want Boyd to leave, but for some reason it was apparently difficult to say this out loud. "Do you have somewhere to go?" he asked instead.

Boyd's gaze caught on Sin's face, his eyebrows lifting briefly. "Well--" He glanced at the door as if it held the answer to the question. "No..." "Well, you don't have to leave then. Not right away or anything." Sin shrugged, feeling awkward. "Unless you want to."

Mild surprise flitted across Boyd's face followed by a smile that softened his lips. He turned away from the door, his body tilted toward the living room. "No, I'd be happy to stay."

"Ah. Well. Okay."

Sin looked around, not entirely knowing what to say after that. It occurred to him that this was the first time he'd invited Boyd to stay longer, and he didn't really know what to do as a result. Even so, he couldn't deny that it was pleasing that Boyd agreed.

## Chapter 26

The downtime lasted until the end of March. When he finally received notice about a briefing, Sin was almost thankful. In the month-long lull he'd reread most of his books, some twice, and had succeeded in getting very little else done. He'd returned to his regular exercise regiment although it didn't seem wise to go to the gym after the Harry incident so for the most part he'd stayed confined to his apartment. Confinement had never bothered him considering the fact that he'd spent large periods of times in much smaller spaces, but this time the lack of cameras caused the isolation to be almost pleasant.

Even so, Sin couldn't deny that he had been becoming slightly stir crazy. As he wandered to the conference room with his hands in his pockets, he was pleased to note that most people no longer bothered to look at him or comment on anything other than the usual 'monster' or 'freak.' He hoped that Boyd had noticed a change as well.

Harry's death had finally been investigated by Connors. Carhart had posted several notices as a warning to anyone who chose to act in the same "disgraceful" manner as Harry and to any other guards who got any bright ideas about messing with the surveillance cameras around the compound. Sin noticed that many of the guards had been replaced or demoted and he didn't really care what had happened to the old ones. He'd have gladly disposed of them himself if given the opportunity.

When he entered the conference room he noticed that Carhart and Jeffrey looked incredibly pleased with themselves. Despite the usual cocky expression on his face, Jeffrey gave him a wary look when he entered.

Sin flashed a disarming smile and threw himself down into a chair unceremoniously. "Hello, cupcake."

Jeffrey rolled his eyes and didn't deign to comment.

Ryan looked at Sin and then at the door. "Where's Boyd?"

Sin's gaze flicked to Ryan in an almost disinterested manner. Despite the fact that Ryan obviously meant well, there was something about him that irritated Sin as of late. Perhaps it was the fact that he apparently was allowed to hang around Boyd's house while Sin had never been invited there. His irritation over that had grown considerably over the past couple of weeks although he'd never shown it the few times he'd seen Boyd. He'd decided instead to accept it as yet another oddity that came with this friendship thing.

"How should I know?"

Ryan blinked at him for a moment, nonplussed by Sin's tone. "I don't know?"

"Well I thought you were his new best pal. Perhaps I should be asking you about his whereabouts."

Ryan's face turned from confused to amused in an instant. He raised one dark eyebrow over his square rimmed glasses and gave Sin a small, knowing smile. "Ah, I see."

Sin narrowed his eyes. "What is it that you see?"

"Jealous, are we?" Ryan asked, voice light, teasing and a far cry from the awed tones he'd previously used when speaking to Sin.

Sin leaned forward and smirked lecherously. "Yes. Very. Didn't you know? I want you all for myself."

Ryan's smug expression vanished and he reddened, mouth dropping open silently as he stared at Sin in surprise. "W-What—"

Before he could continue, the door opened and Boyd appeared in the room. He nodded at everyone in silent greeting before taking his place beside Sin. Ryan stopped speaking, blushing furiously, and offered a weak hello to Boyd. Sin smirked at him and winked. Boyd gave Ryan a strange look and glanced curiously between the two of them.

"I hope you two had a good vacation," Carhart began as he typed commands into the laptop in front of him. "Because it's officially come to an end with a big assignment." It seemed that he was going to begin the briefing without Owen present, most likely because the man was still working on whatever large project he'd been assigned.

"It's still a vacation if you ask me," Jeffrey said rather snidely.

Sin raised an eyebrow at him but didn't comment. When Boyd didn't either, Carhart continued in the same self-satisfied tone. "After months of working diligently on the files that Thierry provided, Jeffrey finally decoded it in its entirety." He looked up from the computer as if waiting for the impact of his news to set in.

When he was only met with two blank stares, he made a face and brought up an image on the projector. The image appeared to be a colossal building in the middle of a metropolitan area. It was mammoth; the building itself and surrounding courtyard appeared to take up several city blocks.

"Do you recognize this building, Sin?" Carhart asked, his tone casual although his eyes appeared more intense.

Sin gazed at the image dully. "Should I?"

"I assume you've been to Monterrey considering it was where one of your father's residences was," the General continued in the same tone.

"I wasn't allowed to leave his home," Sin replied acidly and his green eyes narrowed at Carhart. He had no desire to speak of his father or anything relating to his father, but Carhart never seemed to remember that. "Does this have relevance?"

Carhart held his gaze for a moment before sighing in defeat and gesturing to the projector. "This is the Joel K. Solar Convention Center, located in the heart of Monterrey, Mexico," he explained and hit a few more commands on the computer, causing several other images to slide past the screen in slow succession.

"Before the third World War, Monterrey was an important industrial hub in Mexico and one of the leading centers of business in the country. It was one of the few cities in Mexico that sustained heavy damage during the war but within years of the destruction, there was a large scale restoration operation headed by former mayor Joel Solar. Because of that the city is now one of the few booming places of industry and commerce left on this side of the globe. Unfortunately the mayor died before the project's completion due to complications from radiation, but the convention center was named after him."

Carhart paused and looked at the two agents as if to make sure that they were paying attention before he continued. "As with most major cities in the post-war era, although Monterrey is in Mexico only 50% of its population is made up of Mexicans. The other half is a mix of nationalities from countries around the globe, mostly wealthy artists or businessmen who do not wish to linger in dead cities such as New York or London. Because of this it is not uncommon for large businesses to be run by or owned by people of foreign descent."

"And?" Sin asked impatiently, wanting to get to the point of this. "So there was a history lesson on the disc?" There was a reason why he'd never bothered showing up for briefings before.

Jeffrey glared at him. "Don't interrupt and he will get to the point."

Carhart continued before Sin had a chance to reply. "So it is unsurprising that at this time, the JKS is directed by a former American who has the privilege of being related to a core member of Janus."

"So... you want us to blow it up?"

Carhart glared at Sin. "No," he snapped and paused for a moment as if collecting his thoughts. "Anyway. The place sits on a lot that is 2 million square feet, rivaling New York City's once famous Jacob Javits Center. There are hundreds of exhibition rooms, conference halls and auditoriums. On November 11 of this year, eight months from now, there will be a large event at the JKS called the Global Arts Exposition, an exhibition of

works by several famous artists who specialize in works visualizing freedom, hope and the new world. It will be so grand in scale that no other events will be held at the JKS that evening."

Carhart paused and folded his hands. "Or there shouldn't be, anyway. According to the data on the disc there will be a large conference on the night of the Expo held in a separate wing of the Convention Center. Representatives from all of Janus' cells will be there as well as its core members and leaders."

Carhart paused again and looked at Boyd and Sin, not speaking until he was satisfied with whatever expressions he saw. "This is a chance of a lifetime. Never have we had Intel this good about something this confidential. We cannot locate a single member of Janus' core group usually; let alone the whereabouts of all of them at once." He shook his head and gave Boyd a mildly impressed look before glancing down at the information in front of him again. "I'm sure you both have figured out the purpose of this assignment."

"Wide scale assassinations?" Sin asked in a bored tone.

"Precisely," the General replied and slid a packet of information towards Boyd, who pulled it closer but did not look through it yet. "There you will find the names of everyone who is supposed to be in attendance. Our key targets are marked off at the top of the list. This is our chance to decimate this organization and we are taking every measure to ensure that it is handled delicately. The eight men at the top of that list need to be taken out and then that entire wing of the building is to be destroyed, hopefully taking care of the rest as well. So yes, Sin, you get to blow something up." Carhart smirked at him. "And you're going to love this part."

Sin raised an eyebrow dubiously. "Oh?"

"In order to effectively accomplish this mission, you will both go deep undercover in Monterrey," Jeffrey said smugly. "And we all know how you love undercover assignments, Sin."

Boyd blinked and looked mildly surprised by the proclamation. Sin, on the other hand, just stared at them blankly, the corners of his mouth turning down into a dark scowl.

"There will be tons of security around the time of the Expo, not only because of the Janus meeting but because the real event will attract the wealthy and the aristocracy from many nations. Three months prior to the event, as with all of the JKS' major events, they will begin hiring and specially training new security specifically for the Expo. Sin will be one of those new trainees." Carhart slid a folder across the table at Sin. "And that is your cover."

Sin opened the folder and stared at the picture in front of him. The guy was his height, complexion and had a similar build but that is where the similarities ended. He had brown eyes, choppy black hair that was streaked with white, as well as various tattoos and piercings. "No."

"Yes." Carhart dismissed Sin and continued. "Jason Alvarez was an American citizen who had family in Northern Mexico. He was back and forth between both countries quite frequently and had various jobs in the security field at major companies and two museums. I'm not precisely sure how he was able to obtain such prestigious positions considering his appearance and notorious bad attitude but he was a very hard worker and good at his job. However for reasons that are not relevant, he was arrested during a skirmish between our agents and rebel forces. After it was clear that he was not involved, he was offered a position here. He was on the compound for three months before dying during training. He had no friends since he was constantly on the move, and he no longer has any living relatives so it is not known that he is deceased. His background fits the qualifications for a position at the JKS completely."

"He looks like an idiot," Sin complained.

"That isn't the issue here," Carhart continued. "You will arrive in Monterrey in the first week of April. You will find an apartment and you will seek similar employment until the JKS sends out the notification for their hiring fair. That gives you six months to lay

down roots and connections in Monterrey that will prevent you from looking conspicuous to anybody connected to Janus."

"And what the hell is he going to do during this time?" Sin asked as he glared over at Boyd, highly irritated by the description of his duties. He hated undercover missions, even short term ones, and now he was expected to work around civvies for months at a time and pretend to be a normal person. With stupid hair and body art. Wonderful.

"During this time Boyd will be learning the city. After the Expo, if everything goes successfully, it is likely that Monterrey will be in chaos. It is quite possible that you will be unable to leave the city and you should both be familiar enough with it by that time to find a place to lay low or find alternate routes out. It is also likely that you two will become separated after the mission's completion so he will also need to school you on the ins and outs of the city."

"Wow." Sin wasn't impressed with Boyd's role. Boyd, however, smirked.

"He will also have a cover," Carhart continued and slid another folder across the table at Boyd. "Kadin Reed, a member and the chosen representative of Sector 53, has agreed to let Boyd impersonate him at the Janus Conference. During this time he will be holed up and under heavy surveillance in Hawaii."

Looking down at the folder, Boyd quirked an eyebrow and sounded bemused as he asked, "Is his name truly Kadin?"

Carhart nodded. "Yes. After 53 was successfully recruited as a Janus cell, he was chosen as a representative for the conference. Once there you will be able to mingle at will and get to know the faces of your targets. However, you are not expected to arrive in the city until three days prior to the conference and it is highly unlikely that they will keep track of Reed or any other representative's movements, so until then your main concern is learning the city. For this operation to work we need someone who knows the JKS and someone who knows the city itself. Mr. Reed has always been an adventurous man who loves to travel and experience new things. It will not seem out of

character that he is in the city early since he has been known to make sudden moves in the past."

"I can handle that." The hint of a smile played on the edges of Boyd's lips as he perused the information. Sitting next to Boyd, Sin saw some of the details as Boyd flipped through. "No tattoos," Boyd noted, seemingly mostly to himself. "Ah, but I'll be a redhead. Scandalous."

Looking back up at Carhart, Boyd frowned. "If Kadin was recruited, has anyone from Janus personally met him? I'll need to know his mannerisms if I'm expected to impersonate him."

"No, nobody has met him. This will be the first time that 53 and Janus has real contact with each other or will physically meet," Ryan piped up. "Since they've hooked up, they've mostly passed information back and forth usually regarding the events of Sector 89 and us. They've spoken to Andrews on the phone but that's it."

Ryan paused and peered over at the image of Kadin Reed. "You'll be scandalously cute as a redhead."

Sin made a face but said nothing.

Boyd just seemed amused. "I'm always cute," he informed Ryan.

Jeffrey rolled his eyes but said nothing.

Ryan glanced over to Sin, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "I think we can all agree with that."

Sin steadfastly studied Jason's picture, apparently ignoring Ryan.

Jeffrey, however, could not help releasing an annoyed breath. "When you're done flirting, can we move on?" he demanded impatiently with only one quick, furtive glance at Sin as if to make sure he would not freak out at him for somehow insulting Boyd.

"I did have a question, actually," Boyd said more seriously. "How am I to maintain contact with Sin? Will we be communicating through code as we pass in the street...?"

Carhart shook his head, seeming horrified at the idea. "Monterrey is a large city with a very big population. There is no reason for the two of you to remain that discreet and in fact it is expected that you two will have a residence together until just prior of the conference when Reed is to arrive at his hotel. However do not expect luxurious accommodations; signs of wealth draw attention to you and you are expected to live in the working class districts on a small budget."

Boyd stared at Carhart in surprise. "We're living together?" His expression was hard to read when he glanced at Sin and then almost immediately dragged his eyes away. "Where is the money for the rent coming from, Sin's job?"

"No, not entirely. A reasonable amount of money will be deposited into a dummy account in Jason Alvarez's name. It should take care of all necessary expenses but do not assume that this is an extended holiday and spend extravagantly. When the funds run out, there will not be more. In fact, there will be limited contact between the Agency and the two of you during your stay in Monterrey. We have already rented a place for the two of you under Jason's name under the guise that he will soon be moving to Monterrey with his roommate. You will both receive phones under your assumed names but we will not contact you unless it appears that there is a problem."

Sin tried not to let the surprise he felt show on his face. He'd be living in the same apartment as Boyd for eight months. The idea both startled and appealed to him. "What about my collar? Are you planning to remove it?"

Connors stared at him for a moment before shrugging. "Yes and no. Although you will no longer have a collar, your GPS will be implanted more discreetly. It will still provide the same functions. Boyd will also receive a new tracker."

Sin rolled his eyes. "Wonderful."

"A new tracker?" Boyd asked, blinking.

"An anklet," Carhart replied. "It will be more discreet."

Boyd stared at him. "More discreet? On a man?"

"Are you planning to wear a dress and high heels?" Carhart replied with an arched eyebrow.

Jeffrey suddenly laughed, leaning back in his chair.

Boyd's eyebrows shifted up and he looked at Carhart somewhat oddly. In the end he simply shook his head. "I suppose it works."

"Both of you will need to see Cynthia," Carhart said.

Sin grimaced at the idea, having barely paid attention to any of the conversation. "You do not seriously plan to deface me with these tattoos, do you?"

"Your beautiful skin that you have nurtured so lovingly for a lifetime will be ruined forever," Boyd commented idly at Sin's side. "Such woe has befallen your existence." Sin sent him a dark glare. "It has."

"You are also a smoker," Carhart added with a smirk. "Jason was a notorious chain-smoker."

Sin's glare darkened and his mouth pressed into a thin line.

"I am aware that you are not used to these kinds of missions but I highly suggest you do not play your usual games. Now if there are no further questions, I suggest the two of you go over your information and head to Cynthia."

Flipping through the papers in his folder, Boyd looked over at Carhart. "Are there any similar surprises I should know about for Reed? What will Sin and I have for reference regarding how to act like them?"

"Other than the fact that he's an artist, no. Sin will have access to Jason's entrance interview. For you, we could possibly arrange a meeting with Reed."

Dropping his gaze to the picture, Boyd nodded a little absently. "A meeting would be very helpful." He flicked his eyes back up to Carhart. "When do we leave?"

"Next week," Carhart replied. "So you both need to get ready quickly," He said with a pointed look at Sin.

Sin snapped his folder closed and stood up. "Fine." It came out more sullen than he had wanted but at the moment he didn't care. He glanced over his shoulder at Boyd as he headed towards the door. "Are you coming?"

Boyd gave him a somewhat startled look but then nodded. He threw the Intel into his bag and followed behind Sin with only one quick parting glance toward Ryan. "This is bullshit," Sin snapped automatically when they were out the door. "I hate this assignment."

"We haven't even started it yet," Boyd said with a shrug.

"It's not going to work anyway," Sin said. "They're stupid for thinking I will be able to get along with civvies."

"You'll be fine," Boyd assured him, and he really did seem to believe it. He watched him as they walked, a small smirk playing at his lips. "It will be good, actually. You'll have the chance to test your skills at blending in while I'm there to give you advice. Unless it's so terrible to have to spend most of a year in Mexico with me?" He asked the question with an eyebrow raised.

Sin glanced at him. "It's the most terrible idea I've ever heard of."

"Well then, we'll have to find you a replacement." Boyd looked around as they walked, as if searching for one. "Ah, what about him?"

He pointed to a man at the base of a set of stairs they were passing. The man stumbled as he tried to jump down too many steps at once; he caught himself just before he ran into a set of patrolling guards. "He seems charming." Boyd managed to

keep most of the amusement from his tone when the guards gave the man such a scathing look that his embarrassed tension could be felt even from that distance.

"He doesn't have your dashing good looks or dexterity," Sin replied dryly. "And I don't think he'd make a very good redhead." He shoved his hands in his pockets and looked petulant. "I'm going to look like a fool." It seemed a strange thing to say considering the fact that Sin had never cared about his appearance before but he wasn't particularly looking forward to completely mutilating his skin with ink and holes.

Boyd looked over with interest. "What sort of tattoos does he have? Did I see something about piercings?"

They walked toward Unit 16, affectionately known as the Civvie Squad, which was headed by Cynthia Watts.

"Stupid shit," he said dully. "Some idiotic religious symbol on his hip and the typical barbed wire nonsense wrapped several times around the upper arm." Sin had surprised himself years ago by getting the Paradise Lost tattoo while on assignment but it had held a specific meaning to him; he wasn't fond of the idea of looking like some punk kid who just wanted to follow the trends and get 'inked.'

"He has a lip ring and several earrings. It's ridiculous. Cynthia will enjoy doing it, though."

He glanced at Boyd and wondered what his partner would look like with red hair. He couldn't picture Boyd not being blond. For some reason the thought reminded him that he would be spending nearly a year living with Boyd and that was enough to make the rest of his irritation bleed away. He noticed that Boyd was watching him with a thoughtful air, his gaze dropping to Sin's lips. There was something intent in his honey brown eyes-- something that Sin almost thought seemed interested.

"I don't know," Boyd said absently, hardly seeming to realize he was speaking aloud. "I don't think it will be so bad..."

They arrived at Unit 16 before Sin could respond. The door led into a large reception area and several closed offices. There were already a couple agents lingering inside but Sin ignored them and slapped the paper with Jason's stats down onto the desk. The secretary looked at him from under long eyelashes and then took the form. A smile quirked on her lips but she quickly covered it. "This will take some time."

"No shit." Sin glared at her evilly. "You can remove them afterward, yes?"

"Yes, of course." The woman looked at her computer and typed some things into it before beckoning to Boyd.

"Mine will be much easier," Boyd assured her.

She smiled at Boyd openly and glanced over his form, nodding to herself before going back to the computer. "You can go to Area C, Agent Beaulieu. Michelle Phillips will be helping you at this time. There are smocks in the room. Put one on and she'll be with you in a moment."

The woman looked at Sin again. "Cynthia isn't with anyone right now. You know where to go," she said with a deeply amused tone. "Bring the form. She will need it for reference. It will be a few hours."

Sin didn't appreciate the amusement everyone seemed to be showing on his behalf so he grabbed the form and glanced at Boyd. "Have fun," he said flatly.

"I'll be in a smock," Boyd said with one eyebrow raised. "How could I not?"

Sin shook his head and turned around, heading in the direction of Cynthia's office. Despite his irritation and everything he couldn't help noticing the fact that Boyd appeared to be in much higher spirits than usual. The fact that he wasn't the only one with a change in behavior following the Harry incident eased Sin's discomfort for some reason.

When he got to Cynthia's office she did her usual teasing spiel and gushed over the changes that had to be made. Sin ignored her and went over Jason's file as she

began trying to match eye and hair color from Jason's photograph to tones she had on a large chart. As usual she would be in charge of those changes but she told him that one of their tattoo artists would be performing the others to him. As annoyed as he was by the tattoos, he knew it was necessary.

While Boyd wouldn't need to expose his body during the assignment, Sin would undergo training for three months and would inevitably have to either remove his shirt or wear something that might expose his skin around people. He'd been concerned that they would take measures to remove his current tattoo or cover his variety of scars, but he supposed that someone like Jason would be expected to have scarring and it would not be surprising for him to have new tattoos.

As he read more about Jason Alvarez, he realized that the man had endured several difficulties in his life. Most of his family had died during the war and his remaining relatives in Mexico had all been elderly and had not survived very long after being exposed to radiation. He'd been in street gangs as a teenager and had been in and out of juvenile hall before finally being sent to boot camp. His experience in boot camp had apparently piqued his interest in physical jobs so he enrolled in a short program for security guards. Despite his unprofessional and rebellious image, he'd proven to be quite formidable at his job. He had gone from working in office buildings to being hired at large government compounds and had even moonlighted as a bodyguard on more than one occasion. He had a reputation for being a smart ass with a bad attitude but people hired him nonetheless.

At some point four years ago Jason had abruptly dropped off the radar after the Agency had raided a compound he worked at. It had turned out that his employers were involved with rebel activities and he was picked up in the confusion. Since his last employer had been arrested by agents and at the time he'd had no living family or real friends, his disappearance had not been noted by most. To anyone who remembered the bodyguard with the bad attitude, it was as if nothing had happened. He'd been hired by the Agency to become a Level 3 guard but had soon after begun training for the

position as a field agent. During the intense training he'd been killed accidentally but that was one of the risks trainees always took.

Boyd had been one of the rare ones to come out relatively unscathed; there was a 25% chance of dying during the Agency's vigorous training and a 50% chance of getting seriously injured during the course of it. Boyd's resilience had proven that he was more than a little talented and a fast learner. It was one of the reasons why Sin grew so irritated when Boyd said he only got the position because of his mother.

Sin stopped reading briefly as Cynthia began working on his hair. The process only took a little over two hours and the end result was hair that was shorter and somewhat choppy than usual with several random streaks of bleached white through the jet black. He thought it looked ridiculous and he sneered at Cynthia's insistence that he looked 'cool.' The light brown contacts were the easiest part of the ordeal once he managed to put them in without taking an eye out. When she was finally finished with everything he was not very impressed and let her know that in scathing tones. She ignored him and praised her own work before sending in Manny, the body artist.

Seven ear holes were put in his ears along with small, silver hoops which were scattered randomly in both ears, at the top and bottom. Manny warned him that the lip ring might "hurt a little" but Sin didn't even blink as the procedure was performed. Manny seemed impressed by his fortitude and was chattering idly as he ordered Sin's shirt off so that he could begin with the tattoos.

"You look familiar," Manny said after awhile. He was working on the embarrassing rings of barbed wire which would loop around Sin's bicep three times.

Sin grunted, not bothering to respond.

"Yeah, you know who you look like-- that crazy guy who works here. The--" Manny broke off abruptly and froze in place for a moment.

Sin looked down at him coolly, one eyebrow raised. "The what?" There was a distinct challenge in his tone but despite that he was anything but offended; when it

came to things like this he was always darkly amused. He found people's fear of him to be hilarious, especially because he never did anything particularly fear inspiring until they messed with him in some way.

"Nothing," Manny said in a slightly strangled tone. He concentrated on his work intently, his chatter ending abruptly.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Cynthia informed Manny from the other side of the room. "He's harmless." She smiled at Sin and winked.

"Uh huh." Manny looked at Sin doubtfully.

"He's a cuddly little bunny," Cynthia continued despite the look on his face. "Or at least he is with his cute little partner."

Manny shot her an obvious 'are you crazy?' look and cleared his throat nervously.

Sin made a face but declined to comment, opting to look over his file instead. By the time all of his tattoos were done several hours had passed and for once he'd read the entire mission outline from start to finish. They put bandages on both tattoos and ordered him to put ointment on it for a couple of days, saying they should be healed within the week. Manny still looked alarmed but Cynthia waved enthusiastically and bid him a warm farewell as he left the unit.

Boyd was gone by the time Sin was finished and he didn't see his partner at all during the next several days. While Boyd was apparently in Hawaii meeting with Reed, Sin was watching the videos of Jason Alvarez and trying to figure out how he could possibly impersonate the guy.

While he and Jason shared the same sarcasm and black humor, Jason had a mouth like a drunken sailor, a limited vocabulary, and slouched. It seemed that although Jason sometimes dressed oddly in dramatic clothing with chains and straps everywhere, his typical street clothing consisted of little more than ragged jeans, tennis shoes and t-shirts; something that Sin could handle easily. The appropriate clothing was

purchased for him by another one of Cynthia's team and dropped off at his apartment the day before he was to leave.

As he sat around his apartment that night, he found that he was unable to sleep at all. Sin lay on the floor under the large window in the living room and idly smoked a cigarette. He'd never smoked before in his life but over the past week he'd realized that it wasn't entirely unpleasant. Despite the fact that he'd hated the taste at first, chain-smoking had come easily to him; perhaps because his father had always smoked around him.

As he lay there comparing the taste of menthol to mild, he tried to figure out why he was so anxious about the coming assignment. As much as he hated to admit it, he realized that he was nervous. He was typically very confident before missions but undercover work was out of his realm. He was unable to fit in with local people and didn't think he'd be able to pull it off.

Despite that, it wasn't performance anxiety that he suffered from-- it was Boyd anxiety. The next evening he'd be sharing an apartment with his partner and the idea startled him. He had difficulty enough keeping his behavior in check the few times Boyd came to his apartment and that would be even more difficult when they were in such close quarters.

Neither of them had commented on the strange flirtation that sometimes seemed to occur between them and he had no intentions of doing so on their assignment. It would only complicate an already convoluted situation, and that wasn't something that needed to happen when they would be stuck living together for nearly a year.

## Chapter 27

Dust was thick in the air, making the arid temperature feel even scratchier against the skin. Laredo, Texas was still half-intact, with buildings scattered along the riverbed like abandoned toys. Several of the bridges spanning the Rio Grande were destroyed in the impact of the war, but with the passing of years and slow degradation of borders, rickety replacements had been created. Boyd had done as much research as he could on the plane rides between Hawaii and the Agency, then the Agency and Laredo, but there was only so much he could read in books, especially since most of them were written prior to the bombs. So there were still surprises.

A transit station that was little more than a large parking lot with pot holes lay adjoined to the airport, and Boyd and Sin hung around the shadows of a nearby building while Boyd flipped through a decade-old Spanish travel, culture and phrasebook, trying to teach himself as much of the language as he could. There were enough similarities to French that it wasn't completely confusing to him, but he did wish they'd had a bit more warning before taking off to Mexico. He could have attempted to become fluent before going there. He should have plenty of time to learn while over there, though.

They had to wait around for nearly an hour before their transport arrived, but eventually it came trundling from the horizon on tires that looked threadbare and two shades darker with mud. A cloth banner covering the dirty bus read in handwritten scrawl, 'Viaje México.' Boyd looked at Sin questioningly and asked under his breath what that meant in English.

"Journey Mexico," Sin translated absently. He was standing in an idle slouch as he watched other passengers drag their suitcases with broken wheels across the dusty pavement to load on the bus.

Boyd nodded and moved to slip his hands into his pockets but was met with empty air. He'd had to abandon his beloved trench coat and the skinny jeans he wore were too tight to comfortably fit his hands. Sighing to himself, he tried to ignore the annoyances of this cover. He'd been amused in the Agency when he'd seen how

irritated Sin was about his own cover, but now that his own transformation had taken effect he had to admit there were some downsides.

His hair now mirrored Kadin's: layered and framing his face, with the longest layer reaching barely past his chin. His bangs were at an angle that constantly fell into his eyes but were not long enough to be held back. It meant constantly having to shove hair off his face and he was starting to wish Kadin had had the decency to go long or really short, and not do this obnoxious in between.

Hitching his duffel bag higher on his shoulder, Boyd watched Sin finish his cigarette.

It was so strange seeing Sin now; he looked completely different. His clothing was vaguely similar-- ragged jeans with holes in them and a sleeveless shirt that showed off the new barbed wire tattoo encasing his upper arm. Despite that, his muscular build was much more visible now that he was not lost within a scrappy long-sleeved shirt. Boyd more than once excused the way he eyed Sin's arms as saying he was just looking at the tattoo.

Sin's hair was now shorter, choppy and a little spiked, and the natural jet black was randomly streaked with white. His ears were pierced, with several small hoops randomly distributed in each ear. A lip ring curled out from the center of his lower lip, a silver color that worked well with his olive skin tone. Boyd often found his gaze drawn to the lip ring. He had always been a little fascinated by Sin's mouth, but this brought his attention to it even more.

On the plane ride over he had realized a few times that he was staring and had to force himself to look away. If he did not stop himself in time, he started wondering what the lip ring would feel like against his lips and tongue, and what the metal mixed with Sin would taste like, and that just reminded him of the way Sin tasted back in France, and from there it was a very uncomfortable few minutes while Boyd tried to change his thoughts before it became obvious that he was affected. The stupid skinny jeans did very little to hide an erection and it was one more reason he wished he was

impersonating someone who had the decency to wear loose clothing and keep hair he could hide behind.

He didn't know how he was going to make it through the majority of a year in Mexico alone with Sin in an apartment. Every time he actually thought about their situation, about being around someone who fascinated and attracted him more with each passing day, his mind derailed.

What would Sin look like in just bathing shorts and a tan? What would his body look like with these new tattoos? What would he sound like, murmuring Spanish fluently with that bedroom voice he slipped into sometimes? All these questions slid around Boyd's mind and he found himself more than once meticulously mentally reviewing the blueprints of the Agency or his house just to focus on something that was not in any way related to Sin.

But each time Boyd started to distract himself, Sin did something else. Whereas before he stood ramrod straight, with a glowering and alert attention to the world around him, he now slouched and peered around almost sullenly. He had taken to holding a cigarette in his fingers even when he was not smoking and Boyd was impressed with how natural he already looked with the cigarette between his lips when he did. He looked even more bored with the world, leaning against the wall and idly tapping the ash from the cigarette. In just one week he already seemed comfortable with chain smoking, and Boyd was not entirely certain what he thought of that.

Boyd was not a fan of the cloud of smoke that now lingered around Sin, but that was mostly because he had never realized before how much he enjoyed Sin's scent until it was covered by something else. He didn't even know how to describe how Sin smelled, other than cheap soap and a hint of sweat. That should not have seemed unique, but Boyd was just now realizing he really liked it. On the other hand, even if he smelled of smoke, Sin looked casually alluring while smoking. Every time his fingers shifted and brought the cigarette to his mouth, Boyd tracked the movement with his gaze and often found it difficult not to linger on those full lips.

"Let's go," Boyd said suddenly, not waiting for Sin to finish his cigarette before he strode across the crackling hot pavement toward the bus. He was frustrated that he was so preoccupied with Sin's appearance, but he couldn't help it. Although he preferred when Sin had longer hair with the red in it, he had to admit that Sin looked very good as Jason too. He suspected Sin would always be undeniably attractive.

They were able to get two seats next to each other near the back; an easy feat, as there were only seventeen passengers including them and the bus could hold up to forty-five. It was not surprising that the public transit from the United States to Mexico was so underutilized. Very few people lived in Laredo or Nuevo Laredo just across the border, but the few who were interested in traveling were almost certainly headed to Monterrey.

Although the ride was only about three and a half hours, it seemed to take longer. The bus had no windows, just holes where glass would have been. Instead, tarp with loops on the bottom was rolled along the ceiling, and hooks were perched beneath the windows in case rain caused the passengers to unfurl and secure it. The seats were hard-backed and uncomfortable, but no one seemed too concerned as it was a relatively short ride.

The bus was rickety and jolted around a lot, making it harder not to rub against Sin's bare arm with his own. Judging by the literature, even with the clouds it would be far too hot in Monterrey to wear long-sleeved shirts, and Boyd would have been conspicuous if he tried, so he had to wear short-sleeved shirts for the first time in years. He felt vulnerable and naked even with that bit of skin showing, but he was incredibly thankful that he'd noticed Kadin wearing wide, leather bands on each of his wrists. He'd decided to follow suit and do the same.

Now, with skin he had not revealed for years other than a few minutes at a time during showers, Boyd felt entirely too aware of the heat and sweat on Sin's skin, or the way the smoke and underlying faint smell of soap passed cloyingly in front of him each time the wind gusted. Boyd let Sin have the window seat because he'd had it on the plane, but now he was regretting it. He had nothing to lean against and could not keep

himself from running into Sin each time the bus jumped over any holes ground into Mexican Federal Highway 85. He tried to brace one hand against the seat in front of him, but it was uncomfortable and awkward, and after fifteen minutes he just gave up and tried to ignore the feel of Sin's muscles against him.

He slid his eyes closed and held his bag on his lap, tilting his head forward and trying to concentrate on something less... again, *Sin*-related. He didn't know why he was so preoccupied with him. This year was going to be terrible. Every time he saw Sin walk past he would think inappropriate thoughts and have to force himself to think of something else. His usual ability to completely close off his emotions and ignore his body's impulses was failing him miserably, and he had to blame it on the heat, Sin's proximity, and the admittedly exciting idea of spending a few months resting in a new place after so many months of working diligently.

He was looking forward to being away from so much stress and even those things that unconsciously pulled down his mood. Like knowing his mother was probably watching his every move to see when he would mess up, or the lingering looks of some others in the Agency and what they were thinking about him.

Moua's group had started to lay off Boyd following the fight in the courtyard but after Harry, it had renewed. The harassment had dropped considerably following the findings Carhart had posted, but Boyd suspected that was only because of the actions taken on the guards. As an agent, Moua had been unaffected and he and his close friends still sometimes gave Boyd looks when they passed.

A particularly rough jolt sent Boyd running into Sin so suddenly that he automatically threw one hand to the seat to catch himself before he could fall. His hand landed on Sin's thigh and the feel of those muscles flexing actually made Boyd lose all sense of thought for a moment. His eyes snapped open and he stared blankly at the seat ahead of him. He was quite thankful he had the foresight to hold the bag on his lap as well.

Realizing his touch had lingered, he pulled his hand away with a mumbled, "Sorry," and immediately dug into his bag for something, anything, to distract himself. He did not look over to see Sin's reaction because no matter what it was, it would just catch his attention again.

The Spanish book was the first thing he found and Boyd pulled it out gratefully to study. Maybe it would help him concentrate if he considered this to be a mission and the book was his plans. Skimming through the geographical notes, he softly told Sin factoids in hopes of distracting them both from the hand incident.

"Interesting. The Rio Grande was formally called 'Río Bravo del Norte' in Mexico, which means," he drew the word out as he flipped around for a translation, "ah, the Big River of the North? ..No, I see it here. 'Great Northern River,' apparently. Though usually it is just referred to as Río Bravo."

He silently read a bit more, his eyebrows furrowing down as he concentrated. The more he read and memorized the information, the easier it was for him to think about something other than his ridiculous infatuation. Sin looked over and watched him, his own expression intent but a little hard to read. He had been sullen through the plane ride and waiting for the bus and it did not seem ready to change any time soon. That was probably good, because Boyd honestly did not know what he would do the first time those pouty lips stretched into a smile.

Narrowing his eyes in annoyance at himself, Boyd said perhaps a little more firmly than was necessary, "Millions of years ago, the Rio Grande ended at the bottom of the Rio Grande Rift in Lake Cabeza de Vaca," he still did not quite have the Spanish pronunciation down but it would come to him quickly as did everything else. "But about a million years ago the stream was diverted through natural erosion that brought it to the east and the Gulf of Mexico."

"Okay?" Sin said, giving Boyd a look as if he had no idea why he was telling him this.

Boyd shook his head slightly to himself once, not wanting to explain, and he continued reading silently for a bit. Although the facts were helping Boyd to think of something else, it was becoming a problem because now he accidentally succeeded in turning Sin's sullen glare out the window into intent, watchful silence focused on him. As Boyd read aloud random facts about the Mexican Federal Highway 85 they were currently bouncing across, he could not help noticing movement out of the corner of his eye. He flipped to the history lesson in the hopes of finding something filled with more dates to keep his attention.

"The French intervention in Mexico, also known as the Maximilian Affair, began in 1861 and lasted until--" Boyd stumbled when he realized that Sin was idly running his tongue along the ring in his lip. "Ah..."

With narrowed eyes that were now tinted brown from the contacts, but as intense as ever, Sin stared at Boyd and switched to sucking on the metal, twirling it in and out of his mouth.

"Uh..." Boyd tried again.

Boyd refused to look over from his book but he couldn't think properly and automatically tilted his head down further. Usually that hid his expression from view, but with his shorter hair it was only partially successful. It left him feeling flustered since he couldn't get away from Sin's gaze.

"Napolean..." Boyd tried almost helplessly, reading random words from the pages in front of him. "Second French Empire... And the, ah, Veracruz and... Cuba in Spanish control..." Noting that he just sounded like an idiot, he finished lamely, "Perhaps I will just read silently now."

Sin continued to toy with his lip ring, eyes trained on Boyd's face although they were mostly unreadable. "You don't have to."

"No," Boyd said with very slight strain. "I really think I do." He stared intently at the book.

Sin shrugged and ran a hand through his hair, shifting in the seat. He was sweating and his skin was likely sticking to the imitation leather seats. "It's hot," he muttered and looked out the window again.

"It's fine," Boyd retorted, trying very hard not to watch him. It was true that he could see sweat glistening on his skin, and that was also a distraction. He was glad no one was sitting anywhere near them because even if Sin was probably oblivious to Boyd's sidelong looks, the others wouldn't be.

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

Sin looked over at Boyd through sleepy looking, heavy lidded eyes. "*Callate la boca, blanquito.*"

Hearing Sin speak Spanish didn't help any; he sounded especially sexy when he was drawling those words fluidly in his low, velvety voice. "What does that mean?" he asked, half with an edge and half just curious.

Full lips turned up into a small smirk and Sin raised an eyebrow at him before turning back to the window. "It's a secret."

"*Putain de beau gosse,*" Boyd muttered under his breath in mild annoyance, flipping forward several pages.

Sin looked at him again, eyes slightly narrowed suspiciously. He opened his mouth to speak but before the words could come out, the bus hit a decidedly large pothole. Sin slammed into Boyd violently, nearly causing him to go flying out of the seat.

Before Boyd could actually fall, Sin grabbed his arm and pulled him against his chest to steady him. Boyd stilled as he tried not to feel too keenly the heat and strength of Sin's body. It was made even more alluring by Sin's calloused fingers curled over his bare arm. One of his hands was awkwardly resting near Sin's thigh and the other held his bag very decidedly over his lap. His eyes unconsciously falling half-closed, Boyd

concentrated on the back of the seat in front of him and breathed slowly in and out. This felt good. This felt too good. He pulled away.

"Thank you," he murmured as soon as he was certain his voice would remain steady.

Sin's eyes stayed on him for a long moment and his fingers brushed against the bare skin of Boyd's arm when he finally released it. "No problem."

Boyd could not be certain but it didn't seem necessary for Sin's fingers to have slid across his skin in that manner. Despite the heat he shivered. He was so unaccustomed to anyone touching his bare arms that his nerves were hypersensitive. It would have been enough with the firm grip, but with the second Sin's touch became more casual and gentle. Even as brief as it had been, it was all Boyd could think about.

He rearranged his book from where it had fallen by his stomach and, with as much concentration as he could muster, he devoted himself solely to reading about Mexico's history and the state of tourism at the time the book was written. No one else on the bus seemed to be paying them any heed, which Boyd was very thankful for; the other passengers were asleep, talking to each other, or staring out the windows quietly.

The ride to Monterrey was relatively uneventful after that point. Although a few more potholes jolted the bus, nothing was quite severe enough to warrant Sin touching Boyd's bare arms, which was good, because Boyd rather thought he may do something embarrassing if Sin kept rubbing and brushing against him. By the time they arrived at the sprawling edges of the city, Boyd's wandering thoughts were mostly under control and to an extent he was even able to ignore Sin playing with his lip ring.

The bus driver dropped them off at a public transit terminal where taxis waited on the other side. Although Sin muttered something about them taking one, Boyd said it was better they get to know the city by walking. From what he could tell on the map their apartment wouldn't be too far away and they didn't know yet how much money they had anyway.

During the reconstruction of the city, large areas had been renamed and shifted around. The street they were searching for was called Veracruz, but the map Boyd had was from before much of the reconstruction and the landmarks and surrounding streets were not where it said they should have been.

Although the ash remained over Monterrey as they did everywhere in the world, the sun was burning through them with enough intensity that a few beams could be seen breaking between the silvery white. By the time they had walked for an hour and a half, both of them were soaked in sweat and Boyd's mood was going lower each time Sin shot him an irritated look whenever a taxi or bus passed them.

The neighborhood they were heading into seemed to be in disrepair. There was graffiti scrawled across buildings, although in some places it had been painted over by some intrepid individual. The buildings were crumbling in some places, stucco having fallen off to reveal the cement blocks beneath. The city rose and fell in stark angles at times. Some streets were flat while others were at such an angle that all the buildings along it seemed as though they were cockeyed or crooked. Apartment buildings and tiny houses were butted right up against small businesses that looked as though there was no way they could be legitimate and get enough traffic to afford to stay in business.

They turned a corner and finally reached Veracruz. Relieved beyond measure, Boyd gave Sin an 'I told you so' look to which Sin replied with a 'No you fucking didn't, you were just lucky' look. Boyd turned his attention pointedly to the map and Sin casually strolled at his side, though the sullenness remained as it had since he was transformed into Jason Alvarez.

It took them awhile to find the correct address since most of the numbers and letters were hidden or lost, but after about half an hour they finally found the place. Balconies stuck out at varying heights, making the squat building look rather like an awkward cactus. A small air conditioner was running inside the main door and though it did not drastically change the temperature, it was enough that Boyd and Sin were able to breathe a little easier without the heat suffocating their lungs.

Boyd held his hand out silently and after a moment of staring blankly at it Sin reached into his pocket and pulled out the envelope with the key that Carhart had given him before he left. They trudged up a small enclosed staircase in the far back of the building, which they found only after opening every door in the vicinity. On the third floor, Boyd suddenly veered into a hallway and, looking at each dingy yellow door they passed, searched for the correct number. He stopped in front of their designated apartment and fumbled with the lock before he was able to jiggle it open.

The door caught and that was their first clue that it would not be all they were hoping for.

Boyd's arm muscles tensed as he pulled and then shoved with all his strength against the door. With a disgruntled squeal it jerked open and Boyd nearly fell into the room. He caught himself and stood, unconsciously airing his torso by grabbing his t-shirt at his solar plexus and jerking it away from his body a few times to let bubbles of air beneath the cotton. Pushing his sweaty bangs from his eyes and pulling away the bit of hair that reached his neck, he idly wandered into the room before Sin.

It was a studio instead of an apartment; just a single room that was decently sized but still smaller than he had hoped for. There was what looked to be a small room for a bathroom in the far right corner, but that was the only area that was closed off. Two single beds rested beneath a set of dirty windows along the wall next to the bathroom, nearer the front door. The kitchen was along the far wall, a window letting in soft light over a set of counter with another long counter acting as an island divider between the kitchen and the room. To the left of the kitchen, a sliding glass door let in quite a bit of natural light and just outside they could see the rickety balcony they now had to their name.

There were no lights installed in the ceiling. The apartment would clearly have to be lit from outside and by lamps they would probably have to buy. At the moment there was only one weak-looking lamp shoved in the corner. There was no other furniture except a small table and two chairs near the kitchen where they could eat. The walls were stained and off-white, the floor was dirty and cement although that wasn't entirely

bad since it would probably feel cool against their feet. Thin cloth curtains hung to the sides of the windows and door; the only protection they had from the outside world. A small air conditioner sat by the windows near the beds, looking so dusty that Boyd wondered if it even worked.

Boyd surveyed the studio with a blank expression. This was definitely going to be awkward; there was absolutely no privacy except the bathroom and even then that meant one of them had the ability to shut himself away but the other was at the mercy of whenever the first decided to reappear. That meant that even if Sin went into the bathroom, Boyd would have no idea when he would suddenly come out. So he could do nothing embarrassing until he was in the bathroom instead.

This was going to be... interesting.

Sin pushed past Boyd and dropped his duffel bag onto the floor with a resounding thud. "This is a fucking joke," he said flatly, glaring at the room as if it should be blamed.

"That would be nice," Boyd said in disappointment. He let his own bag slip to the floor and tried to kick the door shut behind him. It caught again. Turning, he braced his feet against the floor and shoved as hard as he could. With another groan, the door slammed shut and Boyd leaned against it for a moment, panting and letting his forehead rest against the wood.

"Well," he said dryly as the heat made him feel exhausted and not very athletic. "That will make it difficult to be stealthy."

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

"If you break that I will kill you," Boyd informed him absently as he studied the sliding glass door.

He unlocked the door and tugged experimentally on the handle, pleased to see that at least the sliding door opened with no problems. The balcony, on the other hand, looked a little dubious. He stared at it before daring to step onto the rusty metal.

Sin said something particularly nasty sounding in Spanish and plugged the unit into the wall. He pressed the power button after a moment and a low hum filled the room, although no cool air came out of the vents. Sin stared at the machine in dismay and smashed his finger against the buttons violently, setting it to the coolest temperature.

"This piece of shit doesn't work," he snapped at Boyd.

Boyd turned around just in time to see Sin hit one button so hard the whole unit rocked against the window. "Wow." Sliding the door shut behind him, he strode across the room and slapped Sin's hand away so he could lean in to peer at the unit with one hand held up to feel the air. "The filter probably needs to be cleaned but I don't know how to do that. We can ask someone."

Sin threw him an annoyed look and pushed him out of the way. "It's easy."

"What, you can't diagnose the problem but you can fix it?" Boyd asked skeptically, growing irritated by Sin's attitude. "An idiot savant of mechanics; how lucky of me to be roomed with you."

"Shut the fuck up," Sin snapped back. "Do you really want to make this worse than it already is going to be?"

"Excuse me, but I believe you've been the instigator so far," Boyd said, crossing his arms.

He wasn't particularly happy about the accommodations either, but it would be nice if Sin didn't act as though it were the worst thing in the world to be there. The heat

and cramped quarters were irritating Boyd too but it wasn't going to help anything if they couldn't even get along. And, he had to admit to himself, for all that he wasn't pleased with the apartment he still couldn't help looking forward to this year, even if it was likely to be awkward at times.

Sin grunted and unplugged the air conditioner, taking it out of the window and setting it on the floor. He sat down next to it and removed the grill. Dust exploded from the inside of the unit and he made a face, pulling the filter out. It was filthy and covered in a layer of dust that was several inches thick. He continued his task silently although there was obvious tension in his shoulders.

Seeing that Sin had it under control, Boyd decided to look around the rest of the studio. He discovered that the fridge was unplugged so he plugged that in, but it would be awhile before he could see if it was even working. The bathroom was tiny, but there seemed to be working water in the sink, toilet and shower, even if at first the water came out dark brown.

A small, cracked mirror hung above the sink and Boyd stopped as he started to leave the room. He stared at himself in the mirror, flipping on the sole light bulb that hung from the ceiling without a cover. This was the first chance he had to actually see himself and it was very strange. Even such a simple change as dark blue contacts, a haircut, and light red hair completely seemed to change his complexion.

Not long after Boyd had paused, Sin appeared in the doorway behind him. He didn't look any more amiable than he had ten minutes ago and his brown eyes narrowed at Boyd. He watched his partner for several moments before saying anything.

"It's clean. Don't know if it will make much of a difference, though."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Boyd said. He brushed past Sin to get out of the bathroom.

In the future maybe he would be able to use the balcony as his space to be alone; he could shut the door behind him and grant some sense of solitude. After living

for years in the shadows of an empty house, he was just now realizing how alarming it was going to be, stuck in a small space with someone else constantly around.

Sin followed him into the main room but didn't come any closer. "We should probably get supplies before it gets late," he said in the same annoyed tone. "I don't know what time things close around here. Even if we were to put faith in the state of the tap water here, we have nothing to put it in and water is a necessity in this heat."

"Alright," Boyd said, looking longingly at the balcony. He headed toward his duffel bag and shook his annoying bangs out of his eyes as he pulled the Monterrey map out. "Do you have your account information?"

"I have an ATM card and some cash," Sin replied. "But we need to convert to pesos at some point." He stood in the middle of the room with his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans, staring sullenly at the air conditioner. It was blowing cooler air now and although it relieved a small amount of the unbearable heat, it wasn't nearly as cold as it should have been.

"I saw a currency exchange down one of the streets," Boyd offered. He stared at the map in his hands, then stood and held it out to Sin. "I can't read most of this. You should probably navigate."

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

Nodding, Boyd followed Sin into the hallway and yanked the door shut behind them. He made a note to himself to find some tools in the hopes they could do something about the door. They did not see or hear a single person in the entire building as they left despite the fact that Boyd guessed there were probably twenty apartments.

Navigating Monterrey was a little frustrating. They took several wrong turns, even with the map in front of them; it was just outdated enough that it was misleading although it was also just helpful enough that they could not entirely ignore it. Sin noticed an ATM during their wandering and they stopped.

"I have a money belt," Boyd told Sin as they headed toward the ATM. "So take out a lot. We can exchange it all at once and lower the withdrawal fees. I imagine they are astronomical from Mexico."

Sin nodded and pulled the card out of his pocket, slipping it into the decrepit looking machine. The machine welcomed Jason Alvarez and asked for his PIN. Sin stared at the screen blankly for a moment before inputting '0666.' There was a long pause before the machine informed him that his pin was incorrect. Sin made a face at the machine and shook his head. "Oh. That was Ryan's."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow but said nothing.

Sin frowned at the machine and rubbed the back of his head before inputting another combination of numbers. Once again the machine informed him that it was incorrect. Sin glanced down at Boyd and said nothing.

Boyd stared at him, although he could feel frustration starting to rise. He was trying to make the most of the situation but so far everything was going wrong. If they couldn't even withdraw any money because Sin didn't know the right number...

"Why are you looking at me? I don't know the PIN. Try something else."

The annoyed look returned to Sin's face and he glanced back at the ATM. He didn't do anything for a long moment and when he finally tried another combination of numbers, the machine informed him that not only was it incorrect, but that he was locked out of the account for an entire 24 hours.

Sin stared at the machine for a long moment before slipping the card and his hands into his pocket. "Well."

"How did you forget--?" Boyd started to say but he cut himself off. He couldn't stop the spike of annoyance at this predicament. This was a mission the same as anything else; how could Sin have not thought to have such basic information available? Without access to that account they had extremely limited funds, and it only added even more stress to an already tense situation.

Boyd sighed, trying to not let it get to him. Turning toward where he thought the currency exchange was, he stared narrow-eyed at the street, a slight frown pulling down the edges of his lips. "Never mind. We'll have to ask about that. There may be a bank that can help too."

Sin shrugged and pulled a handful of crumpled bills out of his pocket. He shoved it at Boyd and remained stonily silent, eyes narrowed and pissed off looking.

"Thank you," Boyd said automatically. He discreetly placed the money in the money belt and slid it beneath his clothes again. He was quick; the money was tucked away and hidden within the space of a breath. "Let's go." He turned toward the currency exchange and started walking.

Sin mostly trailed behind him the entire way, not bothering to speak or even help navigate anymore. It wasn't entirely clear why he was in such a bad mood and Boyd didn't know if it was solely because of the heat. Sin had wandered around in subzero weather wearing not more than a thin shirt without complaining. Maybe he was just angry with himself over forgetting the PIN. Whatever the case, Boyd was now in an unpleasant mood as well and didn't care to ask.

The walk to the exchange office was uneventful and when they arrived, there were several representatives who spoke English so Boyd was able to handle the transaction. They left the office with nearly 600 pesos and he had no idea if that would be a sufficient amount of money for whatever they needed. Sin grunted out directions to the outdoor market he'd spotted and they arrived there fairly easily.

It was roughly the size of an entire city block and had several stands which were covered by large umbrellas or cloth. Big, industrial strength fans blew through the stalls

as Boyd and Sin wandered around. Despite the fact that it was mostly hot air being blown, it was a much needed relief from the stifling heat.

Boyd decided that in order to tide them over for the night or at least until they got the ATM business straightened out they would at least need food, dishes, and some cases of water. In reality he knew they would require way more than that for their extended stay but he figured he could take care of that later while Sin was job hunting.

An hour passed as they looked at the various stands. Sin carried a large case of bottled water and hovered nearby as Boyd examined various sets of dishes and flatware. They were at that particular stand for a couple of minutes.

"For God's sake, just pick something," Sin growled at him impatiently.

"I can't just 'pick something,'" Boyd told him a little peevishly. "Give me a moment to decide the one that's the best usage of our funds."

Sin stared at him. "Just get the fucking cheapest one."

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

"Well I'm sure it will survive the violence of you scraping your fork against it," Sin said flatly, making a face.

"Just--" Boyd glared over at Sin. "Shut up and let me think."

"Just get the cheap one," Sin repeated in obvious irritation. "There's no concentration required."

"Jesus," Boyd snapped, picking up the cheap set of plates and shoving them at Sin. "Fine. Get them your damn self if you're so obsessed with them."

Sin snatched the items without looking at Boyd and turned to the vendor who seemed very alarmed at the two angry men in front of him. "*Dame estos*," he snapped and counted out the correct amount of money before slamming it down on the table.

The poor, alarmed man took the money and cast glances in Boyd's direction as he packaged the plates for them. "I speak English, you know," he said with a slight Mexican accent.

"Sorry," Boyd said curtly. "Thank you for the plates."

The vendor stared at him skeptically and handed the bag over silently. Sin snatched it, managing to juggle the carton of water as he did so, and turned on his heel. He stalked off in the direction of the groceries, not giving Boyd a backwards glance.

Boyd strode after Sin as they headed toward the fruit stands next. His irritation level was at an all time high and the longer they spent outside in the heat, the worst it was growing. What was bothering him the most was how impatient Sin seemed. More and more it was making Boyd feel like Sin's biggest issue was all the time he had to spend around Boyd, and that thought only served to fan his already strained patience.

It also did not help that there was food on the tables he had never seen in his life, including one large, misshapen bright green thing that looked rather alarming. He looked at the fruits and vegetables surrounding them and tried to remember if he'd read about any of them in his book. Even if he had, there were no pictures and he had no idea how to pronounce half the names.

"What are we getting?" Boyd asked Sin when they both ended up next to a stand.

Sin shrugged, staring at the tables. "I don't eat any of this."

"Well, I don't know what any of it is." Boyd noticed a banana as they passed and shrugged in a rolling sort of way that mimicked Kadin's movements. "Well. Most of them."

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

"Thank you for putting such rude words in my mouth," Boyd said with annoyed sarcasm. "I appreciate that you thought I meant that."

Sin was silent which somehow didn't do anything to improve Boyd's mood. Focusing all his attention on simple details like how many vegetables were in front of him and how many pesos it would cost, Boyd tried to ignore how agitated he was becoming but he was largely unsuccessful.

They finished shopping quickly. After that, Boyd ended up grabbing whatever he saw that looked relatively good but was cheap. He hoped they would be able to do something with it all because he was damned if he could think better about any of it at the moment. A very quick stop at a few other tables got them a few more essentials they needed, including sheets and pillows for their beds. It was all bought rather quickly and cheaply, and Boyd didn't even bother trying to find the best quality for the best price.

They didn't speak as Boyd strode back toward the apartment and Sin moodily followed in his wake. Their icy silence continued all the way to the studio, where Boyd slammed himself against the door more violently than even the stickiness required. The second they were both inside and the door was shoved closed behind them, Boyd strode to the kitchen and dropped the bags unceremoniously on the table.

He turned around suddenly and, with all the irritation and hurt he had been ignoring coming to the forefront in the form of anger, he demanded, "What the hell is your problem?"

Sin dropped the carton and the bag onto the floor and glared at Boyd. "Among many other things that are horrible about this mission, you are annoying as hell," he retorted.

"Why?" Boyd asked impatiently. "Because I made you wait two minutes to buy a plate? You're the one that made us wait in line at the bank because you couldn't be bothered to remember the damn PIN."

"No, because you automatically try to fucking control every situation or mission we're in. I make a suggestion, you completely goddamn ignore it and seem to think for some reason you are always in charge," Sin snapped. "It would have been a lot smarter to go back out and explore after the damn sun went down some. It's not like we're on limited time here."

"If we're not on limited time then why did it matter so much anyway?" Boyd crossed his arms. "It wasn't supposed to be that far and now we know our surroundings. And anyway we were out and about far longer with the market than we were trying to get to the apartment."

Sin shook his head, running a hand through his newly cut hair. "As usual, you miss the fucking point and latch on to whatever you think can twist the argument your way. It's really amazing how predictable you always are." He glared at Boyd and bent to jerk a bottle of water out of the carton.

"Walking around in mid day when it's hot as fuck? Unnecessary, and stupid. Going to the store to get purified drinking water and essential supplies for the apartment? Completely necessary."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Excuse me for ever making a mistake. I forgot that you're beyond reproach on everything you fucking do."

"Missing," Sin said from between clenched teeth as he slammed the bottle down. "The point. And if you think you're going to be playing mission manager or whatever the hell for this entire time, you can think again. You need to get it out of your head that you make all of the decisions regarding what we do, when we do it, and how money is spent."

"I'm not missing the fucking point!" Boyd snapped angrily. "You fucking piss me off. It never matters how many things I do right with you-- every goddamn time you latch onto when I do something wrong, and then you're so accusatory." His voice shifted to a mocking tone, "Boyd, you're such an idiot. Boyd, why don't you ever listen to me? Boyd, if you'd done everything I said then we'd never have any problems ever."

He glowered at Sin. "So you know what? I do react defensively. But don't try to act like you wouldn't have a problem with me only ever obsessing on mistakes you make and acting like I never do any myself. You keep trying to tell me I think I know better than you but you're the one who's always lording it over me if I do anything wrong or go my own way. And for the damn record, I wasn't planning to look at every peso. I assumed we were each taking responsibility of half."

Sin made a face, rolling his eyes. "How does any of your dramatic bullshit change the fact that you never take my suggestions into consideration, and always try to assume the mission leader role?"

"This is exactly my point," Boyd said in annoyance. "If something goes wrong, it's my fault because I didn't listen to you. If I have a problem with anything, it's because I'm dramatic or it's bullshit. You won't ever acknowledge anything you do yet I'm expected to bend over backwards kissing your feet and telling you how fucking sorry I am for putting you out for an hour or two. It's aggravating. Especially since I don't always ignore you and I only take the leadership role when shit isn't getting done, yet you conveniently ignore any of those times when you have the chance to throw this argument in my face if I ever do anything even remotely wrong."

"No Boyd, it's dramatic bullshit because that's what it is. I make a statement, and you start ranting about every random theoretical or alleged occurrence you can think of. Most of which is nonsense, anyway. You only take the leadership role when shit isn't getting done? Right," Sin scoffed. "If this is how it's going to be for the next several months, I seriously would have risked termination and opted out."

"So you'd rather die than be around me?" Boyd asked incredulously, jerking back as if he'd just been hit. "That's real fucking nice."

Sin stared at him, gestured vaguely, and then made a disgusted sound. "I'm going back out."

"Go ahead," Boyd growled, turning his back on Sin. His back was ramrod straight with tension as he crossed his arms. He couldn't even look at Sin anymore. "I'll be waiting to hear about what else I've fucked up on and how you wish I was gone."

Sin didn't say anything but Boyd heard the door jerk open and get shoved shut when he left. Boyd stood in the same place for a long moment, his fingers curling into fists and his face a mask of anger and indignation. He wanted to focus on his anger and his indignation and he wanted to lash out.

He dropped his arms and leaned over, jerking open the bags and starting to put things in their place in the kitchen with more force than necessary. The bottles of water were extracted and practically thrown into the fridge. The fruit and vegetables were tossed on the counter at an angle that made them roll back and rock against the backsplash.

Every movement was jerky and angry but as the minutes dragged, he couldn't ignore that part of the reason his shoulders were so tense and teeth grit so hard was because at the heart of it all, that argument had hurt. He didn't want to feel like he'd been stabbed in the gut.

But no matter what he wanted, it didn't take long for him to be unable to deny there was distinct pain beneath it all. He couldn't ignore the sting of Sin's words-- the idea that being around him was so abhorrent that even death was preferable.

"Fuck," Boyd hissed to himself and threw the balled up bag onto the floor. His hands jerked up and he scrubbed at his face.

After a moment he dropped his hands at his sides and walked over to the balcony, opening the sliding door and stepping out. The balcony made an alarming

squeaking noise near the hinges but it held his weight. And at that moment, that was all he cared about. He pushed the sliding door shut to preserve what little cool they could scrounge together inside, and sat down sideways within the small balcony as best he could. He drew his knees in and looked out at Monterrey.

Everything here felt so foreign. The heat, the population density, the prosperity in some areas-- and the signs surrounding him in a language he didn't fully understand. He was hours away from his home, his life, playing someone he barely knew, living with someone who could hurt him more than anyone else because above anyone, Sin was someone Boyd wanted to like him. He was someone Boyd wanted to be respected by, and someone Boyd wanted to be friends with.

And yet, this.

He rested his elbows on his knees and ran a hand over his face.

What the hell was wrong with them? Why couldn't they ever get along? Why did every fucking moment of disagreement have to end with them tearing each other apart?

It was made even worse because the prideful side of Boyd hated to admit when he was wrong. At least, when someone told him he was wrong, it was hard for him not to respond with reasons why he wasn't. He tended to believe his way was best; he did know that.

Still, he told himself, that didn't mean he completely ignored everyone else like Sin always seemed to imply or even outright said sometimes. He'd listened to Sin's input on many missions, and the only reason he'd ignored him upon coming to Monterrey was because he'd been so certain it was a short walk to the apartment. He hadn't wanted to be stuck in such close quarters with Sin again right after finally getting off the bus, with Sin's arm brushing against his and those damn, impossibly attractive features turned his way too often for Boyd to ignore.

But as he sat there he had to admit that he did tend to take over. And he hadn't listened to Sin's input. It didn't matter why he hadn't; in fact, the reason was part of the problem.

He did tend to think he was right, and especially when things weren't going his way he did tend to try to take control of the situation. He'd automatically denied Sin's suggestion of taking the cab. He'd been too set on figuring out what was the best price to listen when Sin wanted to buy the cheapest one, which is what they ended up doing anyway.

There had been times when he had listened to Sin and had incorporated his suggestions into mission plans, or had let Sin take over on missions, which was part of why he felt resentment whenever Sin accused him of never doing anything like that-- Yet rather than blaming Sin for saying such a thing, maybe he needed to wonder why Sin felt that way in the first place.

At the time when they'd first arrived and Sin had been angry about the taxi, it had annoyed Boyd. He'd thought to himself that Sin was an adult and could just take a taxi himself if it bothered him so much. But now that he was sitting on the balcony thinking over the day he had to ask himself why Sin should have to do that. Sin was trying to be a partner with him. He was trying to give suggestions rather than tell Boyd what to do; the latter of which was exactly what Sin felt Boyd was doing to him.

He couldn't help taking things personally when Sin accused him of never listening and in the process he couldn't help feeling like Sin was mocking him for being wrong, because it was usually framed by pointing out times something would have been better if he'd done what someone else said. He felt like that happened whenever he messed up and it bothered him coming from Sin. He already got that from his mother and he wanted to be past that remnant of his and Sin's early partnership. He wanted to simply be able to rely on Sin; to trust him with anything. But there were things he felt like he couldn't say or do because Sin wouldn't receive it well.

Yet for the times he'd thought that about Sin, he now had to start thinking about how many times Sin may have felt the same way back in other circumstances. The times when Sin had tried to help him and Boyd hadn't listened. The times when Sin had made some suggestion, even something small, and Boyd had barely considered it before he dismissed it because it didn't fit into the plan he'd already started forming in his mind. It seemed like every time they got in an argument, it came back to Sin thinking Boyd was trying to take over.

It truly wasn't the case that he thought Sin's suggestions were worthless or he always knew better but he was starting to see how it may seem that way to Sin.

Boyd scowled and dropped his head, his hands sliding back and fingers digging into his hair. This was so stupid. Thinking of Sin only reminded him of how much he wanted to just enjoy his time around his partner, and how impossible that somehow often ended up being.

He didn't want whatever fragile friendship they'd managed to gather to be destroyed irrevocably by close quarters and harsh words.

A few hours passed in the dragging heat before there was any sign of Sin. The main apartment door made enough of a racket when it finally opened that Boyd was immediately alerted to Sin's return. There was an annoyed mutter and then the door was kicked closed again. Silence lasted for another long moment, followed by odd crinkling, the sound of a bag being dragged across the floor, and the creaking of bed springs. It wasn't immediately obvious what Sin was doing but he wasn't making any moves to come towards the balcony where Boyd sat.

Boyd didn't move or acknowledge his return for a few minutes. The heat had drained him of most of the energy he'd even had left and now he just didn't want to have to interact with anyone, especially the person who put him in this mood in the first place. But the longer time passed, the more awkward it seemed to him it would be when he finally walked into the room.

He sighed and pushed himself up to a stand, taking a moment to stretch out the kinks. He could feel the heat from the surroundings settled in his bones. It wasn't until he opened the sliding door and walked back into the apartment that he realized exactly how hot it really had been out there, and how much humidity disappeared once he was inside.

He only looked at Sin in his peripheral vision when he walked in. He headed toward the bathroom with the intent to possibly take a shower or at least be somewhere quiet and out of view for a few more minutes.

Sin was sitting on one of the twin beds with one of his duffel bags on the floor beside it and a variety of weapons lying around his bed. It wasn't exactly an arsenal; he'd had to bring only a few to avoid conspicuous cases and bags. But he did have his favorite .44 Ruger, two .45 Brownings, a couple of knives, some explosives and an M24A2 SWS which he had just finished assembling for no apparent reason other than possible boredom.

Sin aimed the sniper rifle at Boyd and looked through the scope, tracking Boyd's movements across the room with it. "Hey, you."

Boyd paused, looking over at Sin with warily narrowed eyes. He didn't know what to make of the mixed messages of a greeting and a gun but he did know he didn't want to get into another fight.

"Hey," he said in return after a beat of silence.

Sin held up a plastic bag. "Would you like a gummy bear?"

Boyd eyed him. "Sure," he said after a moment, and walked over.

Sin tossed him the bag and put the gun down as he started to disassemble it.

Plastic crinkled as Boyd opened the bag and pulled out one of the gummy bears. He twisted the bag closed and set it back on the bed in front of Sin. He watched his partner for a moment as he chewed.

"Let's make a deal," Sin said, raising his eyebrows and giving Boyd a long look.

Boyd's eyebrows shifted up slightly. "What deal?"

"It's easy." Sin had already disassembled the weapon and he began packing it back into its box. "I'll stop being a hostile dick, and you stop being a bossy asshole."

Boyd stared at him for a long moment before his eyebrows twitched dubiously. "Just like that?"

"Yes. Simple." Sin finished storing the weapon and looked at Boyd evenly. "I don't feel like dealing with another long drawn out who's more fucked up battle of wills. We just finished one, and I'm not looking forward to another, especially not in one room for almost a year."

"I don't want that either." Boyd paused, thinking about spending the next year like they had this day as opposed to trying to be more civilized. There was no question that he would rather avoid more arguments. He didn't know if they would actually be able to pull off following through on such a proposal but it at least didn't hurt to try.

"Alright," he said after a moment, holding out his hand. "Deal."

Sin shook, looking pleased that his truce had worked.

"I also got you some crap. It's on the counter."

Boyd gave Sin an odd look that lingered before he looked over at the counter. A bag was there that hadn't been there before. He walked over, wondering why Sin got him anything and what it was. When he opened the bag, he found a box of his favorite tea inside and a water heater. His eyebrows shot up in surprise. He turned around to regard Sin.

"Thank you," he said, truly meaning that. He hesitated, his eyebrows drawing together as he absently held the box against his stomach. "But-- why..?"

His response was another nonchalant shrug as Sin began checking his other weapons. "I knew you'd want it."

Boyd smiled genuinely at Sin, struck by the thoughtfulness even in the middle of a fight. He turned around and started to open it. Despite the heat, a mug of tea sounded perfect to him. As he opened the container for the tea, the smell of jasmine wafted up around him.

Maybe this truce would work after all.

## Chapter 28

It seemed that the next week passed extremely slowly, but for the first time in awhile the stagnation didn't bother Sin. What did bother Sin, was his stupid assignment and cover.

Although interaction came easily when he was around Boyd, it was difficult around other people. Sin said any ridiculous thing that came to mind when he spoke to Boyd but as he'd roamed the city looking for a job that entire week, he'd realized how difficult it was around strangers. The first few days he'd automatically lapsed into his Agency attitude around people in the city and his quiet hostility had alarmed people. It was as if he'd had an aura of danger around him that kept people away and even as he'd walked down the street, people had gone out of their way to avoid him as if afraid to accidentally bump into him.

He'd realized that his attitude was actually bringing more attention to him and he'd tried to tone it down as the days passed, often asking Boyd what he should do in certain situations. Apparently he was supposed to be respectful to potential employers and maintain friendly eye contact while keeping his body language amiable. It was obvious why his tactic of glaring them into submission and demanding a job had not worked.

Finding a balance between Jason's lazy sarcasm and his own cutting severity was more difficult than he'd anticipated but the fact that he was forced to speak to civvies constantly helped him practice. By the time Saturday rolled around, he'd managed to keep the annoyed scowl off his face as he walked through the throngs of people on the sidewalks. He even maintained a neutral, unreadable expression when he'd wanted to knock the teeth out of some teenage punk's mouth who had shoved into him and then proceeded to shit talk, even when it'd been his own fault.

After five hours of wandering around, Sin stopped and sat on the grass in La Gran Plaza. The Plaza had always been one of the centerpieces of the city but after the war it'd been renovated, modernized and vastly expanded. It was a crowded place

usually but at the moment, at the height of noon, Sin was the only one sitting there in the blistering heat. He didn't mind though; he'd nearly grown accustomed to it after days of walking around in it. It seemed as though finding employment in Monterrey would not be as easy as he'd hoped. Since it was one of the few booming major cities on this side of the world, people flocked to it and made the job market extremely competitive. That combined with his pathetic lack of people skills was making the task incredibly difficult.

Sin closed his eyes briefly and ran a hand through his damp hair, causing it to spike out wildly. Despite the fact that he was wearing a sleeveless shirt and threadbare jeans, he was still extremely hot. Normally he was able to deal with any kind of weather without blinking but he was not used to constant exposure to this much sunlight, humidity or stifling heat. Somewhere in the back of his mind he cursed his father for focusing so much on training in subzero temperatures and leaving out the fact that the country he'd been born in had such extreme heat. Although it made sense in a way—the temperature would not hinder his fighting ability, all it did was provide annoying discomfort. If he'd complained about such a thing during his training his father would most likely have mocked him for being weak and ordered him to sit under the sun for hours with no water for punishment. That was just the way he'd been.

Although, Sin found that the heat didn't annoy him so much when he was alone than it did when he was in Boyd's presence. It didn't make sense really and he figured it was because he was latching onto something to blame his frustration on, not wanting to admit what his real problem was. That's what had started the entire argument the day they'd arrived in Monterrey; he'd been unable to take his eyes off Boyd, unable to look away from the exposed flesh of Boyd's toned arms. He'd never seen his partner without a long sleeved shirt and to his dismay, it'd distracted him endlessly. That combined with the realization that he missed Boyd's naturally honey brown eyes had driven him crazy.

When he'd first seen Boyd on the airplane he'd been momentarily struck speechless. His hair, eyes and especially his clothing had been entirely different and it was as if he was someone else entirely. Despite the fact that Sin had found himself nearly mesmerized by the contrast of pale skin, red hair and deep blue eyes, he'd also

begun wishing that Boyd had been able to keep his natural eye color; that striking light brown that looked golden in certain lights. The attraction he'd already felt for Boyd had increased dramatically and he'd found it difficult to keep his eyes from straying towards him. It'd irritated him immensely and that had only increased when he'd seen the room they'd be sharing. He didn't know how he was going to keep his behavior under control there; he was barely able to do it on the compound when he only saw Boyd two or three times a month.

That frustration combined with self-consciousness about his own idiotic disguise had boiled over in anger that wound up being directed at Boyd. He regretted the things he'd said for the most part but now in a way, he was glad that they'd finally talked about it. Just the fact that he'd shown so much emotion and that he'd confessed so many things to his partner showed how much Sin had changed. Just the fact that he was able to feel so much and actually identify his emotions was a far cry from the empty void he'd been before; or at least, the empty void who'd only been capable of feeling anger and who had never touched anyone in a way that wasn't violent.

But he didn't want to think about that now—he didn't want to think about the way Boyd's soft flesh felt under his fingers or remember the way those blue eyes shooting angry sparks had somewhat turned him on. He was supposed to be working, not agonizing about his ridiculous infatuation.

Sin stood up again and looked around the plaza; it was surrounded by museums, government buildings and expensive restaurants, clearly the trendiest part of the city. He was supposed to be searching for a job that would fit with Jason's background but unfortunately he didn't really know where to start.

Most people were not hiring and the people that were had not been very impressed. He wasn't dressed professionally at all and despite the fact that Ryan had created an extremely detailed CV for him, his lack of etiquette seemed to repel people. Although he'd managed to improve that aspect somewhat over the days, he realized that if he didn't find something soon he'd just have to buckle down and wear the suit that they'd insisted he bring.

He didn't expect to go into a museum in ragged jeans and expect to be taken seriously, but he'd hoped that somehow it would happen. The idea of walking around in a black suit in the heat would most likely degrade the slight improvements he'd managed to make on his people skills.

With another disgruntled scowl, he shoved his hands in his pockets and set out again. He'd only walked a few blocks when something caught his eye; a woman was tacking up a sign on the window of one of the businesses along the street. The building was wedged between a restaurant and a sky rise and it seemed to be some kind of lounge or night club. Sin began walking in her direction when he saw that the sign clearly said "Help Wanted, Security for Evening Shifts."

The woman was tall, willowy and would probably be considered ravishing to any normal person but Sin paid that no heed. He ignored the tiny cut offs she wore and the way her breasts bulged out of her low cut shirt. He stood a short distance away from her with his arms crossed at his chest. She appeared to be having trouble putting up the sign and had short strips of tape stuck to her fingers as she struggled to get the paper straight on the window. Sin remained there silently, waiting, but she seemed to notice him out of her peripheral vision and stumbled backwards, startled.

"God, you nearly gave me a heart attack!" She complained, resting a hand across her chest. "Make some noise or something!"

Sin bit back the sarcastic comment that wanted to escape and shrugged, saying in what he hoped was an apologetic manner, "I didn't want to interrupt."

The woman's frown faded a bit as she looked him over and she began messing with her hair absently, pushing back the strands that had escaped the rest of her long, black mane. "Can I help you?" Her tone was decidedly nicer, red lips curving upwards into a welcoming smile as her blue eyes twinkled. It was hard to tell if she was Mexican or Caucasian and really she looked like a mixture of the two. "Or did you just want to watch me?"

Sin raised an eyebrow and pointed at the sign, once again fighting the rude denial that he'd almost let slip out. "Actually I want a job."

She made a face and put her hands on her hips, disappointment evident. "Of course you did." She studied him again but this time it was in an almost clinical matter and two arched eyebrows lifted. "Do you have experience?"

"I've had various jobs in security for the past ten years," He replied automatically, trying to remember what Boyd had suggested he do and keep his tone respectful, polite. He uncrossed his arms and let them dangle at his sides loosely. He didn't like the way the woman was examining him but as he couldn't really do anything about it, he just stood there and let her look.

"Well, come in then and we'll talk. But just so you know, we do a background check and call references. If you're some insane killer from the States thinking you're going to come down here and start over, think again. We also do a drug test before anyone gets hired." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Still interested?"

Sin stared at her oddly, wondering if this was her usual approach. Perhaps that was typically the kind of people they attracted, although it was not really surprising considering the amount of foreigners who lived in Monterrey. He found it amusing that although Jason's record was pretty clean, his own had him listed on several most wanted lists as a serial killer. "Yes."

"Good." She smiled and entered the building again, waving him in. "I'm Jessica Ramirez, by the way but everyone calls me Jess."

He followed her into the building and realized that it was indeed a lounge of some sort. There was a long bar across one side of the room, a dance floor and a section with couches and tables. The club seemed to go up three floors and had a long, spiral staircase in the middle of the room. It was mostly empty at the moment, save for a few business men who were engaged in a heated discussion as they sipped drinks at the bar. "Jason Alvarez."

Jess nodded and led him to an Employee's Only door on the far side of the room. She input an access code to get in and he trailed behind her, looking around idly and wondering if this was a bad idea. A security job at a club was not exactly what he'd been hoping for, although he wasn't exactly sure what he'd wanted.

She led him past a row of lockers, an employee bathroom, a break room and finally input another code to what appeared to be an office. "Do you have a resume or CV? And on a disc, I hope. I hate people who still carry around paper copies." She frowned and flopped down behind a large metal desk. Surprisingly it seemed as though she was the owner of the establishment, or at least the person who conducted the hiring.

He pulled the small disc out of his pocket and handed it to her, taking in the wall of monitors that took up one side of the room. There appeared to be cameras in every part of the club and he saw that there were three floors, all of which seemed to have different themes. There also appeared to be two private areas which hadn't been visible from downstairs. The building had several security flaws but he supposed that a nightclub in a trendy part of Monterrey had no use for top notch security. They most likely needed someone who could intimidate people into behaving, not ensuring protection against terrorists.

"The silent type, eh?" Jess smirked and popped the disc into the computer. "I like it but then again I'm a sucker for the tall, dark and broody types." She winked at him and clicked a few things with her mouse.

He stared at her blankly and decided that it was best not to respond. He had very little experience with this kind of thing but he wasn't stupid enough to think that her flirtation was professional. He put his hands in his pockets and instead focused on the fact that the air conditioner in the building was extremely strong, a far cry from the pitiful thing they had in the apartment.

"Wow, this is really impressive," Jess was saying as she scrolled down the document. "Bodyguard for two senators, security for several major corporations in

America—even a brief stint at a government compound." She looked at him dubiously, raising one eyebrow again. "You realize we can in no way compete with what you probably had for a salary in the past? This would be a huge step down for you, Jason."

He didn't like the way she said his name, even if it wasn't really his name. "That's fine."

She stared at him for a moment and looked at the computer again, face skeptical. "Why is that fine?"

"Because I need a job and no one else is hiring." He stared at her through heavy lidded eyes, trying to keep his body relaxed and his expression neutral as she looked up again to study him.

"Well that makes sense," she said with a laugh. "It's hard to get a job down here—everyone's moving here lately." She nodded to herself and began to nibble on her thumb as she eyed him. "You realize this will be like—pulling apart drunks, kicking people out of the club who get rowdy, sometimes working the door? It's not the kind of thing you're used to."

If only she knew what he was used to. "That's fine."

She made a face at him. "Well you certainly have the intimidating silence down, I'll give you that."

Sin stared at her and shrugged again, mildly annoyed that somehow he was still coming off as intimidating. "Sorry."

Jess laughed and sat back in her chair. "Don't be sorry. It's sexy." She winked again and looked him over, eyes focusing on his arms and mouth. "You'll definitely draw in some girls though, I can tell you that. Hot bouncers are hard to come by."

Sin blinked at her. "I see." But he didn't really see why anyone would be drawn in by him when people typically just seemed to want to run in the opposite direction.

She burst out laughing and waved her hand dismissively. "Never mind. This all looks good but like I said, I'm going to check references and do a background check before I call you in for a real interview. I hate hiring someone only to find out that they were a rapist or a drug dealer back in the States. It's happened to me more times that I can count—one time I even almost got my license revoked over it." She shook her head and saved the document to her hard drive, pulling out the disc. "That should take me probably until tomorrow evening depending on whether or not I can actually contact the people you worked for and then I will contact you soon if everything checks out. After that we'll hold an interview and if that goes well, we'll do the drug test."

Sin nodded and took the disc back, slipping it into his pocket again. "Okay." He wondered if she'd prefer a trained assassin to a drug dealer.

Jess giggled and led him back the way they came, seeming endlessly amused by his quiet behavior. As they walked, she gave him a brief history lesson on the club and how she'd come to run it. She was only in her early 30s, a couple of years older than him, and had grown up during the wars although she'd managed to escape it relatively unscathed. She and people in her family, which was apparently full of activists of different sorts, had all dedicated themselves to trying to make Monterrey a place where people wanted to live again. Various relatives of hers ran employment agencies, shelters, soup kitchens and orphanages but she'd decided after awhile to rekindle her previous passion for event planning and business by buying, at the time, a relatively cheap dive bar and transforming it into a club. In a few short years and with the help of her family she'd turned it into one of the biggest hot spots in the city and one that she hoped brought some joy to people jaded by the war.

He remained relatively silent during her speech, only nodding when she looked over at him and when they finally got to the main room again she laughed out loud, seeming amused by his serious demeanor. "I hope you don't turn out to be a weirdo—it'd be fun trying to get you to relax."

"I never relax," Sin replied flatly.

"If you end up working here you will," She promised, blue eyes twinkling mischievously as they approached the door.

He gave her a doubtful look and shrugged. "If you say so."

Jess smirked and poked him in the side, not seeming to notice when he tensed and stared at her stonily, or at least not seeming to care. "I'll call you by tomorrow. Now go get a drink or something—loosen up."

Sin ignored her comment and muttered a goodbye before leaving the club, briefly taking note of the name before he started down the street. He noticed that as he left, she ripped the sign down and disappeared back into the door.

He had no doubts that Jason's background would check out and he knew that the references would be good as well. Despite that he didn't feel satisfied or accomplished at all; he'd hoped to at least find a job where he would be relatively left alone without having to interact much—working at Lunar would most likely be a hassle and he'd constantly be surrounded by people. It irritated him but he had very little choice in the matter since it was his best bet so far.

He wandered around for a couple more hours in the hope that he would find something else but much to his annoyance, he didn't. By the time five o'clock came around, most businesses were closing down for the night and he decided to head back to the studio.

Boyd wasn't there but that was not uncommon; every time Sin had returned that week there was something new from Boyd's daily shopping trip. The kitchen was now filled with pots, pans, silverware and dishes and there were a few cookbooks crowded in the corner but they had yet to be used. The fridge had food in it, and a magnetic notepad with a pen hung from the freezer with Boyd's neat handwriting listing more items they needed. A large and very soft deep red rug had appeared yesterday much to Sin's pleasure; he already found himself going out of his way to walk across it barefoot. They also each had a light, colorful blanket on their beds, though they were folded

nicely at the bottom because in the Monterrey spring heat even a sheet felt like too much.

Sin decided to take a shower to get rid of the grimy sweat from walking around all day. Grabbing a towel, he disappeared into the bathroom.

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Although Boyd's arms ached from carrying around too much stuff, he was in a good mood. As much as he teased Sin about getting to sit around doing nothing all day, in fact he was gone almost as often as Sin. The main difference was that Sin was trying to find a way to make money while Boyd was running around spending it.

It was a little ironic that he was so obsessed with getting the best price for the dishes earlier in the week -- something they would be using a lot and they truly did need good quality for -- and yet here he was spending that money they saved on some of what could be argued as extraneous items. But having a week of not needing to worry about anything except getting to know the city was strangely relaxing, and Boyd was able to study the layout of Monterrey by wandering through the shops and markets for good buys.

He'd never had his own place, even though Lou at one point really wanted them to get one. At the time, Boyd was too practical; why try to scrape together money for a place when he already had one paid for? Boyd's family home was very Spartan, though, with clean lines on all the furniture and nothing out of place; there were hardly any decorations and certainly nothing frivolous.

Boyd had never bought anything for the house except things like dish towels or the occasional mug if he dropped one and had never cared to, so he'd never really bothered paying attention to interior design or the sort of things normal people purchased for their homes. But now that they had this empty studio and he knew they'd be there for most of a year... It was strange; he should have felt like they should be leaving no traces, that there was no point in making a temporary shelter look any different than it had been when they'd arrived. Yet they also had to keep up

appearances by making the place look lived-in or else it would look too clean and militaristic if anyone stopped in unannounced. Not to mention that there was no harm in making the place more livable. Besides, he would be lying if he denied feeling strangely gratified by the fact that he could control what his environment looked like.

Maybe that was why Lou had been so insistent; he'd wanted something of his own, something he could mold and shape where he could see reflections of himself, something tangible that was his and Boyd's, that they could retreat to. Even his newfound interest in buying household items did not, of course, mean Boyd had any style or even necessarily had good taste. He just bought whatever he thought would be good for practicality or just would be interesting to have and for some reason found himself often buying things that were brightly or boldly colored. It was probably a need to distance himself from his typically dark, subdued home life in the States. Whatever the case, nothing particularly matched in the studio but it led to a much homier feel.

The door jammed again but Boyd just threw his back at it until it screeched open. With his awkward load he almost fell over from the abrupt give but he caught himself and shuffled into the room. Kicking the door shut violently, he made a note to himself to definitely buy tools the next day and attempt to fix the door. He'd not yet found a place that seemed to have what they needed at a reasonable enough price and he'd also been a little distracted by other merchants and stores.

He could hear the water running in the bathroom and he smirked to himself. Boyd enjoyed putting something new in the studio before Sin got back every day, just to see if he commented on it. So far he had not, but he'd bought something that was impossible to ignore this time. If Sin didn't notice this then his powers of perception would have become ridiculously poor.

Dropping the bags on the ground, Boyd wrestled his largest purchase over by the beds and balanced it against the floor and his body as he started to unfold it. At one of the markets Boyd had managed to find a cherry rosewood Japanese screen room divider. It was seventy-one inches tall and partially transparent, with a simple tree design spread across it. It would have been heavy and awkward enough for one set but

Boyd had to buy two to be sure it would properly wall off the bed area. After the balancing act with the screens as well as the few bags he'd hung on his wrists, and the fact he'd walked several blocks, his arms now burned with stressed muscles. He didn't pay much attention to the feeling, though.

Boyd was just finishing arranging the panels when he heard the door from the bathroom open behind him. He started to turn automatically. "Hey, how—" Boyd stopped and stared as he realized Sin was walking around naked except for a towel he was currently using to dry his lower body off. He glanced casually at Boyd, who tried very hard not to watch Sin's hands.

Turning back to the screen immediately, Boyd silently cursed Sin for his lack of modesty. For months, Boyd hadn't been around him when he'd showered so he'd almost managed to forget that he tended to walk around naked afterward. It was bad enough before, but now that they were alone it was just exacerbated. Not to mention the constant heat which was draining his energy and making him feel a little stupid. He'd been struggling with what he thought of Sin for awhile, and regardless of anything they'd said to each other it was true that he'd found him attractive for months. Over time that had developed into Sin's image somehow inevitably infiltrating his mind when he didn't expect it and from there he often found himself thinking of Sin even when he jerked off. This Monterrey mission was going to be full of a lot of awkward moments if Sin didn't at least cover himself up after he showered.

Boyd was just thankful that he had on looser pants and an over-sized shirt today. Concentrating on the tree pattern on the screen, Boyd said distractedly, "Ah. I bought us more things. Are you done with the shower? You should put some clothes on."

Sin wandered closer to him, still idly drying himself off as his eyes focused on the Japanese screens. "Why? It's hot. Where'd you find those?"

Tilting his head toward the floor, Boyd rearranged the panel in front of him just to have something to do with his hands. He was entirely too aware of Sin's presence, making it rather difficult to do anything that would not just make the entire situation more

awkward. "A market," he managed to say calmly. He took a moment to breathe slowly. "It's just... better... to wear something. More modest."

Sin made a face at him and walked over to where his duffel bag still sat at the side of his bed. He grabbed another pair of equally ragged, faded jeans and stepped into them. They were too large for him and they sagged dangerously low, dipping far below his hipbones. "Happy?"

Well, that was hardly better at all, but Boyd would take what he could get. Dragging his eyes away, Boyd looked toward the bathroom in distraction. "I'm going to take a shower... I've been out in the heat all day."

Sin seemed taken with the screens and stood next to one, running his fingers along the rosewood frame idly. "I think I got a job today."

The news surprised Boyd enough that he looked over at him. "Really? What will you do?"

Sin finally moved away from the screen and sat down on his bed, stretching out lazily and gazing up at Boyd with a frown on his lips. "It's stupid."

"Why, what is it?" Boyd asked, his eyebrows drawing down.

Sin lifted a shoulder and his mouth turned more into a pout than an actual frown. He sighed, looked away and then refocused pale green eyes on Boyd again. "Security at a nightclub..."

Boyd was a little distracted to notice that he had apparently taken his contacts out when he showered; Boyd far preferred the natural pale green to the dull brown he had to wear for Jason. But it also meant that when Sin had the contacts out, somehow the green seemed more striking after Boyd continually saw him with brown. It took him a moment to realize what Sin said and when he did he blinked in surprise. "Secu—at a *nightclub*?" He stared at Sin blankly. "Well. The security detail certainly fits Jason's profile and at least if you fall silent or do not feel like talking to people then any natural

intimidation you may have will work in your favor. It's just the nightclub part that seems strange. Have you ever been to one?"

"Yes, I've been in one," Sin replied, voice petulant. "But I will have to interact with people a lot more than I would want to. And the woman who will eventually hire me is disturbing. I would prefer to get employment at a more professional place."

"This nightclub you've been in," Boyd said with faint amusement, "was it the one you just applied at? And why is she disturbing?"

Sin turned up his nose at Boyd and didn't answer the first question. "I believe she only wants me to work there because she finds me to be attractive for some ridiculous reason."

Boyd paused at that and looked away. While he could certainly see why someone would find Sin attractive, he wasn't entirely pleased with the idea. If Sin spent his nights around people out to drink and have a good time, how many would he meet that would get taken in by his intense eyes and personality? He would probably have people hanging all over him and who was to say Sin wouldn't welcome the treatment eventually?

Although Boyd had not analyzed that yet, now he wondered if Sin would realize eventually that he didn't like men. Maybe the only reason Sin had reached out for Boyd at any time was because he was just a body that was there, because Boyd was the only one who treated him like a human being. But here in Monterrey there were thousands of people who had no reason to do anything but that, and a nightclub would be saturated with them. He couldn't imagine that Sin could be there for longer than a week before at least one woman would want more from him.

It's not like Boyd had any hold over Sin but he also couldn't deny the fact that he didn't like the idea of others being able to touch him. But he had no right to in any way take this chance for normalcy away from Sin by saying anything about that. It would be awkward if Sin brought anyone back to the apartment, but maybe Boyd could just leave the building for awhile if it happened.

Realizing he had fallen silent, Boyd returned his attention to Sin, though he didn't really know what to say. "Well... If it's the only job you can find, I suppose it will have to do. Just... There is such a thing as 'sexual harassment' so of course if she is doing something you don't want, you should remove yourself from the situation as soon as possible but refrain from attacking her."

Sin shrugged, looking moody. "I don't know if it's a good idea. I will be around intoxicated people, people will be touching me and I will be expected to react in ways that I am not capable of. I think I will inevitably fail this mission."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched down slightly. "React in ways you are incapable?"

Sin raked a hand through his damp hair, looking frustrated. "Yes. I am supposed to be a normal man. I am supposed to not kill the drunk people who will inevitably be attacking me. I am supposed to be able to deal with people coming on to me and not be awkward and irritated by it. You should be doing this, not me."

Watching Sin, Boyd sighed and walked over to his own bed, sitting on the edge and tilting his head. "This will probably be good for you; it will give you time to grow accustomed to being around others. I can't say it is an ideal environment; you're right that it would have been better to ease into if you were in a more professional setting. But if you are a bouncer, then you at least do have some leeway. Your profession alone will be the excuse if you accidentally get a little overzealous. Besides, you have been working on these sorts of assignments far longer than I have. I had to learn everything when I started at the Agency, so you could think of this as another form of training."

"I'm bad at undercover assignments," Sin insisted and turned on his side, looking at Boyd. "I don't know to act normal. It's ridiculous that they expect me to know how. I've never been around people in a social setting." He shook his head and sat up abruptly. "It doesn't matter."

"It will be difficult at first," Boyd allowed, inclining his head. "But you will learn. You can also ask me later about any situation that arises and I will help if I can." He watched Sin and lifted one shoulder in a helpless shrug. "I'm sorry it's not an easier

mission for you but we can't really avoid it. Maybe you will find a better job tomorrow. I imagine the market must be flooded, though."

"I don't have high hopes although I will keep trying." Sin got to his feet and began wandering around the studio, going to the fridge and opening it. He stared into it for a moment and then closed it again. "No food."

Boyd could not see Sin very well from his bed with the addition of the screens so he stood and walked around them. Crossing his arms and quirking an eyebrow, he said mildly, "On an interesting, related note, most people would label fruits, vegetables, bread and meat as 'food' and candy as 'snacks.'" He pointedly looked at Sin's stomach, which was entirely too thin compared to how well-built his upper torso was. "You will not be healthy if you just eat gummy bears and cookies. Eat something normal first and then we will talk."

Sin crossed his arms over his chest, looking defiant. "I've been fine all of these years. If you want me to eat something else, you should be the one to cook it."

"Clearly that may end up being the case, but it will probably be a disaster. I hardly know the difference between a pot and a pan." Boyd paused with a blink, looking thoughtful. "Actually, I don't know if there *is* a difference..."

"That is sad." Sin gave him a disapproving look. "You have nothing else to do so you may as well cook. And also, you should do laundry as well."

"What am I, your wife?" Boyd asked him, highly amused.

Sin seemed to consider that for a moment. "You would need to exchange bodies with my new boss for that. You can be my slave instead."

Boyd could not help a startled laugh at that. "I don't know if I like the idea of being your slave," he informed him with one eyebrow arched in challenge. "The very nature of that relationship would imply I get no compensation and I just can't agree to that."

"You get to be in my presence. That should be sufficient compensation." Sin walked around the island again and frowned. "If you're going to be sitting around here while I'm working at some ridiculous nightclub, you better make me some food."

"Excellent," Boyd said with laughter in his tone. "We have now transported ourselves to the 1950's." He shook his head and smirked teasingly. "And what will you do if I decline?"

"You will be treated poorly."

"Oh really?" Boyd drawled. "What will you do?"

"I will be dissatisfied and belligerent."

"Yes, but you can be like that anyway even without me being labeled as your slave." Boyd quirked an eyebrow in an amused challenge. "If I were your slave, that's a lot of power you want over me just for you standing around at a nightclub. Surely I'm worth at least a second job on the side too?"

Sin made a face and walked towards his bed again, brushing past Boyd rudely. "It's fine. I don't really want you to be my slave anyway. You are disobedient and I would have to beat you frequently. I will find my own means of nourishment." He lay down on his bed again and folded his hands over his chest, closing his eyes.

Boyd shook his head to himself then walked around the screen to reach his duffel bag for a change in clothing. He grabbed the clothes, watching Sin lie there in sullen silence ignoring him. Rather than being hurt by it, Boyd was amused and pleased that Sin was comfortable enough around him to do things like act childish. Since Sin was actually looking for food, he probably truly was hungry, and Boyd would end up making something simply because they didn't currently have many snacks and Boyd doubted Sin ever did anything more than open a bag of candy or a jar of peanut butter to 'prepare' his meals. But it would be awhile and Boyd had bought a present for him when he was out so he may as well give it to him in the meantime.

Dropping the clothes next to the bags he'd brought in earlier, he dug around until he found two small packages. He'd initially intended to give the gift in a different, more innocuous way, but if Sin was going to torture him by running around naked while implying that Boyd should be his subordinate, then Boyd was going to give him a taste of his own medicine. Standing up while hiding one package in each hand behind his back, Boyd walked to the side of Sin's bed and leaned forward until his face was close to Sin's. He didn't say anything at first; just smiled enigmatically and waited to be noticed.

Sin's eyes opened slightly and he stared up at Boyd with a look that was half surprised and half... something else. It was hard to say whether or not he was pleased by the proximity, but he made no efforts to move away. He gazed up at Boyd through long, black eyelashes and his lips parted slightly although no sound came out.

"I bought you a present," Boyd murmured lightly and something in the timbre of his voice made the moment seem intimate. He leaned just a little closer, red hair framing his face and hanging between them. "Which do you want? My left or right?"

Sin blinked slowly and he began to speak but no sound came out. He cleared his throat and shifted slightly, temporarily causing them to move closer together. "Your left or right... what?"

"My left hand," Boyd said softly, not breaking eye contact as he tilted his head slowly toward his left. His hair shifted in the movement, swinging between them and lightly tickling Sin's skin. "Or my right." He tilted his head toward his right. Quirking one eyebrow, he murmured with a smirk, "It's a difficult decision. Choose wisely."

Sin didn't respond at first and his eyes flicked over Boyd's face, focusing on his eyes one moment and then his mouth the next. He swallowed convulsively and shifted again, dragging his eyes away although they wandered right back not even a second later. "I want whatever you want to give me."

"Mm." Boyd's lips spread into a slightly wicked smile. "Good choice." He leaned forward slowly and it was unclear what he intended; though his eyes sparked with a

strange emotion, his expression was difficult to interpret. Drawing close enough for his breath to just make it to Sin's skin, he stared into Sin's eyes for a moment with a half-lidded gaze that slowly moved to study Sin's lips.

"Don't eat them all at once." He pressed a crinkling bag of cookies into Sin's chest and within seconds had disappeared with his clothes into the bathroom. The sound of the shower turning on was almost immediate.

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The rest of the evening passed relatively uneventfully mostly due to the fact that when Boyd returned from the bathroom, Sin was already asleep or at least pretending to be. Although Boyd was somewhat relieved that he didn't have to attempt any adventures in the kitchen, he was mildly disappointed that he didn't get to question Sin further about the club he would be working at and he stopped at his partner's bedside for a long moment to simply watch him sleep.

After wandering around the studio for the rest of the afternoon and putting away the various items he'd purchased, Boyd retired to bed himself although as usual, his slumber was anything but peaceful. He didn't know if it was the fact that he wasn't used to sleeping in such a vastly different environment, but several times throughout the week he'd woken in the middle of the night disconcerted and confused, not remembering where he was or why. That night was no different and he awoke with a jerk, gazing up at the ceiling blankly for several long moments as he regained his bearings, sweating uncomfortably under the sheets.

It took a long moment for him to figure out that he'd actually woken up because of a strange sound in the studio. He didn't move at first, didn't show any outward signs that he was actually aware of his surroundings just in case someone was in the room with them, but he finally realized that the sound had come from Sin's bed.

Boyd could hear low muttering coming from Sin and once again he was speaking in Mandarin so Boyd had no idea what he was saying. Although he didn't have a translation, there was no denying that the man was visibly distressed in some way and

his voice rose slightly at random, hands twitching oddly as though he were trying to grab something, or maybe make a fist. His entire body was tight with tension and it seemed as though one wrong move would cause it to snap like a rubber band. His eyebrows were drawn together tightly, a fine sheen of sweat coating his bare chest and his hair was damp, tendrils clinging to his forehead. It almost seemed as though even in his sleep, Sin was trying to fight showing any outward signs of discomfort, but it didn't seem possible at that point.

Boyd pushed himself up on one elbow and watched uncertainly. He didn't know what Sin would do if he woke him from a nightmare. The last time he'd woken Sin up in this state he hadn't reacted violently but that was most likely due to the fact that he'd been pumped full of sedatives. Even if Sin said he'd never meant to hurt Boyd it didn't mean he couldn't kill him simply through instinct if Boyd wasn't fast enough, and he couldn't quite forget the first incident when something like this had happened when he'd nearly had his neck broken. It was a fifty-fifty that this would not end up in him being flung around the room again but at the same time, Sin seemed better now, more trusting and before he hadn't grown accustomed to Boyd's presence yet. Now he was, now he let Boyd touch him and he even reached out on his own... and Boyd didn't think he'd be able to lay there and listen to Sin suffer even if he wanted to.

Tilting his head, Boyd thought about it for only a second before he put his legs over the side of the bed and padded closer. He had gone to sleep in loose pants made of very light fabric and a short-sleeved shirt this time because he learned early on that the long sleeves were entirely too hot to sleep in. His wrists chafed from the bands he wore and he unconsciously rubbed one hand over his bare arm as he stared down at Sin.

"Sin," he tried saying to wake him, but he knew there would be no answer. Sin jerked just a little, mumbling something that sounded particularly upset, and Boyd braced himself for what could possibly be another moment of amazing stupidity. Reaching out, he said, "Hsin," as he hesitantly brushed his fingers gently across Sin's cheek.

He didn't even have time to blink before one strong hand grasped his wrist violently and Sin's eyes snapped open; just as before, they were unfocused and not entirely conscious or sane. In the dim light, his green eyes almost glowed and were filled with a prowling darkness that Boyd felt caught in. It was impossible for Boyd to look away so he just stared, knowing there was no recognition in that gaze, knowing in less than seconds he could be running for his life.

Boyd held himself very still, barely daring to breathe too heavily so it wouldn't seem like a sudden movement, and tried to give off as non-threatening an aura as he could. Despite himself, he felt his heartbeat start to increase and the beginning of adrenaline curling through his blood. He ignored Sin's painful grip on his wrist and his own automatic reaction to want to pull away so that he could assess the situation from a safer distance.

"Hsin," he murmured instead, as soothingly as he could, "It's just Boyd. You were having a nightmare."

Sin's hand didn't move but he didn't do anything else either; his entire body was tense and he stared at Boyd with those same unfocused, insane eyes for a long moment. Whatever was going through his mind was absolutely unreadable and the longer the moment dragged out, the more time it gave Boyd to think about what he would do if this ended terribly. He didn't know if he could get his wrist away from Sin easily but he had a free hand so he could at the very least grab his duffel bag just within reach and try to swing it at him. He would just need enough time to somehow remind Sin that he wasn't an enemy before Sin neutralized him like he was one.

But as suddenly as the crazed look had been there, Sin blinked and awareness returned. His body started to relax but his fingers did not release their hold.

"Boyd?" His voice was low, uncertain and sounded slightly strained as his chest rose and fell faster with each moment.

Although relief flooded through Boyd at the sound of his name, something in him twisted slightly at the tone it was said in. Somehow it was especially striking hearing

such uncertainty within seconds of that insane lack of recognition, something that usually was a precursor to violence.

"Yes."

Sin was breathing hard, sweat glistening on his face and chest as he stared up at Boyd with a bewildered and concerned look on his face. "Wha-- did I hu--" He stopped speaking, eyebrows drawing together and he still did not pull his hand away.

It surprised Boyd that Sin would be worried about his health at such a moment. He shook his head and, not really knowing why he was doing it but not stopping himself anyway, placed his free hand on Sin's and lightly ran his thumb along it. "No," he assured him immediately. "I'm fine." He paused, feeling drawn into Sin's vulnerable, lost expression. "You looked upset so I woke you."

Sin stared at him, breath still coming fast and suddenly pulled Boyd down onto the bed next to him. Boyd was so startled that Sin actually wanted him closer that he let himself fall forward. Sin kept one arm on Boyd and raised his other hand, raking it through his sweaty hair and then pressing the heel of it against his closed eyes. "Fuck." He swallowed and took a breath, as if trying to control his breathing. "You shouldn't-- What if I--"

After a few seconds of staying very still in surprise, Boyd relaxed against the bed slowly so Sin wouldn't think he was frightened. He didn't know what to do other than that so he stayed still. Watching Sin struggle to regain control really struck him. He didn't want Sin to upset himself further by trying to appear impervious.

Boyd took a moment to respond. "It doesn't matter. I know I said some... cruel things the other day... but I could never just go back to sleep if you were upset." He hesitated just a moment. "You don't— If you're... hurt... you don't have to act like you aren't. I know I don't handle nightmares very well, and... I don't want you to think that I think you're weak if they distress you. Because I don't."

Sin did not respond at first but some of the tension bled out of his body and he took a shaky breath, swallowing noisily. He didn't move his hand and didn't look at Boyd, but he shook his head slowly. "You don't have to... worry about me. I don't want to unintentionally hurt you."

Boyd shook his head and frowned slightly. "It's alright. I understand potential consequences if I wake you from a nightmare; you're disoriented and confused, like anyone would be. I'd know you didn't mean to, that it's not really your fault." He tilted his head so he could watch Sin through the darkness. "So I won't stop doing it."

Sin moved his hand away finally and he turned his head slightly so that he could look at Boyd. His hair was splayed across his forehead and the pillow, jaw clenched and eyes raw with some strange, wild emotion. He looked angry, unhappy-- everything about his expression screamed misery although it wasn't exactly apparent why.

He looked away from Boyd suddenly and pressed his hand to his face again. "I'm so weak," he said from between grit teeth.

"You aren't," Boyd said firmly. He watched closely and hesitated just a moment before asking softly what he wanted to know. "What did you dream about? Do... you want to talk about it?"

There was a stretch of silence before Sin exhaled slowly. "I dreamed about how weak and pathetic I am." He moved his hand away so he could turn to look at Boyd.

Boyd waited a moment and wondered if it was okay that he was asking these questions; Sin did not seem angered by it so he took that as a sign that he could continue. He didn't know any other way to help Sin in these cases unless he had more information, knew more of what was going on. And sometimes, people just needed to talk about it. "How so? What was happening?"

Sin dropped his gaze to the sheet, eyes shadowed by his hair.

"My father... was there. My father-- my parents--" He paused, seeming unsure of himself. "That night, when I hurt you, my dream was about them. And now-- my father

was angry about my weakness, my training-- I was ruining everything so he was retraining me."

Sin had never really talked about his family before, other than an aside here or there. Although Boyd read the information Ryan provided him, there was still a lot he didn't know. He wasn't sure what would be good or bad to talk about, but he decided to just do his best and keep his voice gentle. "Why did he think you were ruining everything?"

"Because I'm a failure. I'm not turning out the way I was supposed to be." It was all said in the same hollow voice and Sin did not look up again.

"What were you supposed to be?" Boyd asked carefully. "What did he train you for?"

A humorless smile flitted across Sin's mouth. "To be him-- to be the better model of him. To be all of his strengths and none of his weaknesses but he said-- he--" Sin frowned, confused. "I mean, in the dream, I was weaker than he ever was. He knows-- knew, where I am weak and he will exploit it, just like he did during my training."

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly. Despite the good memories Carhart may have of Emilio, Boyd didn't think he liked the man. Someone who trained his son to be a perfect model of himself without even allowing for the same weaknesses? He smoothed his expression almost immediately though, not giving away his annoyance. "What did he say?" he asked Sin calmly.

Sin looked up at Boyd finally, face blank and eyes unreadable once again; it was an expression that had been absent from his face for a long time. "I'm not supposed to make myself vulnerable to others-- to care for others. Eventually my weakness will be used against me and I will regret ever trying to be like other people."

Boyd stared at Sin for a moment and once again tried not to let his displeasure show. Seeing that expression resurrected made Boyd unconsciously want to anchor Sin in the present, in a time that didn't turn him inaccessible and unreadable. He reached

out without really thinking and laid his hand firmly but gently on Sin's bare shoulder, where he let his thumb slide comfortingly along his skin.

"Was your father always like that?" he asked quietly.

Sin closed his eyes briefly when Boyd touched him and when he opened them again he seemed less blank, less empty although the remoteness was still there.

"Yes. When we first met, he didn't know what to do with me but once he found a purpose for me, that's how things were."

"When you first met?" Boyd blinked and shifted up on his elbow just a little to get a better view of Sin's expression. "What do you mean?"

Sin traced his finger against the sheet, studying it intently. For a moment it seemed like he wouldn't respond, that he didn't want to talk about it, that he'd shut down with Boyd just like he did with Carhart, but he didn't.

"My dad took me when I was eight," he said slowly. "I'd never met him before then-- he wasn't accustomed to being with children so he didn't have use for me and didn't know what to do with me."

Sin's mouth lifted into another strange smile. "The first time he spoke to me he asked if I wanted a cigarette."

"Where were you before that?"

All of the muscles in Sin's body seemed to tense up and his eyes flicked to Boyd briefly. The moment stretched but then Sin looked away and it ended.

"With my mother." There was another silence and he raised his hand slowly, letting it rest on top of one of Boyd's. "He took me from... there."

It was surprising and a little alarming that even though his father apparently trained him ruthlessly since he was a child, Sin was actually reacting more to the idea of his mother. Boyd almost stopped himself but... if he didn't ask now, he may never know

and for some reason, he really wanted to know. He wanted to know about Sin's past, about his life, he wanted to understand all of the things that had turned Hsin into Sin.

"Where was she? You sound... as if that was a bad place to be."

The answers came slowly and it was obvious that this was uncharted territory, something that hadn't been touched on in awhile. "In Hong Kong."

Sin paused, eyes focused on the sheet, his hands flexing. "When I was a foolish, misled child, I used to wonder what my father would be like. I never thought I would meet him, I wanted him to take me... away. To protect me and save me. And when she died, I thought that he had finally done that."

Boyd shook his head and tightened his hold on Sin's shoulder, feeling a mixture of emotions were difficult to distinguish between. "You weren't foolish or misled. That's the way it should have been. You can't help that your father was so... different." He ran his thumb along Sin's skin again, hoping he was saying the right thing. He wasn't very good at comforting people; he was far better at ignoring or being cold to them. "Your father... Where did he take you? When did he start training you?"

Sin shifted so that he was on his side facing Boyd although he kept his eyes downcast. "I'm not positive but I suspect he brought me here. That's why Carhart was asking me questions about it, although we never stayed in one place for too long. Often we were in Europe for one reason or another. At first he just ignored me, he stared at me and seemed at a loss. I think he regretted taking me away; maybe he thought it would be an adventure and then realized I was useless to him. After a few months he decided that-- he thought that I had potential. He told me that he would train me so that it would not be wasted-- that I would become like him."

Sin was quiet again and looked up at Boyd again. "It made sense to me. I knew even from that age that I wasn't really normal. I'd already been... violent. The people me and my mother had lived with were always disturbed by me." He paused for a moment, seeming to be trying to work it out for himself, struggling with his own memories. "Anyway, I was misguided, I thought my father would be my ally but he taught me to

trust no one, not even him. If I confided in him, he just used my weaknesses against me."

"I'm sorry," Boyd began carefully. "But he shouldn't have done that... He can't expect you to be perfect if he was not himself. I'm not saying that humanity is perfect, but not everyone will automatically hurt you." He shifted and reached out to slowly push Sin's hair from his eyes.

"But it's true. I was always weak-- as he trained me, he constantly saw my weakness and he tried to rid me of it. He taught me so much, taught me how to be strong. He taught me how to survive, how to fight, how to protect myself. Even when he realized--" Sin broke off suddenly and looked somewhat surprised by what he'd almost said.

"Even when he saw the severity of my weakness," he amended. "He continued to try to improve me, to show me how to handle it, but I always disappointed him, even when my weaknesses became my strength. But he didn't like that either and so--" He stopped again, eyebrows drawing together, confused by his own rambling.

Boyd paused then hesitantly ran his fingers through Sin's hair, a comforting gesture. "You were eight, Hsin," he said quietly, his gaze caught between searching Sin's face and becoming entranced by the dark, smooth hair falling between his fingers. He didn't really know why he called Sin by his real name, but it somehow seemed appropriate and he liked the way it felt on his tongue.

Sin seemed to lean into his touch, seemed to crave the gentleness of it with an almost sad desperation.

"No," he said again. "I wasn't. I was... unstable and as I got older, it's just gotten worse. He realized it and tried to counteract it by intensifying my training, by making me stronger, by teaching me control. I tried to maintain it, to control myself in that state-- but I was never able to make it go away."

He didn't say specifically what weakness he was referring to, but it seemed that he was speaking of his mental instability, the way he could snap and lose control.

Boyd frowned just slightly but the expression was gone quickly. He was not particularly happy about what he was hearing, but he didn't dare let his voice or expression show anything but calm reception in case Sin misinterpreted it and stopped talking. He continued to play with Sin's hair, dropping his hand down to his temples and forehead occasionally to caress his skin absently.

"What exactly was this training?"

Sin's eyes looked distant as he remembered things from long ago.

"Just... training. To teach me how to be a capable fighter, assassin-- to teach me how to enhance my strength, my endurance. We would spar-- at one of his houses, he would spar with me outside in the cold to show me what I would possibly endure on an assignment where warmth was not an option. When I was older, eleven, when I showed that I was capable of using my body as a weapon, he began to show me the proper usage of weapons."

He stopped talking for a while and stared into space, eyes narrowed slightly. When Boyd just looked at him encouragingly, Sin just shook his head before going on. When he spoke, he didn't seem particularly upset about what he was saying; there was no hostility at all in his voice.

"From the beginning of my training he taught me the importance of distrust. He taught me not to sleep too soundly because it was the most vulnerable time and anyone could slip in and kill me in the dark. He would come into my room while I slept and attack me-- it was my biggest failure for many years. If I complained of an injury he would exploit his knowledge of it while we sparred-- teaching me to never show weakness in front of others, no matter who they are, to never trust the people closest to me or open up to them too much."

At that, Sin's gaze flicked over to Boyd and he smirked slightly, ironically.

"Anyway, he was sure that someday I would be everything he'd hoped; with time and practice, I would become the agent he'd never been. Already I had been a suitable match for him in a fight although I had never been able to overpower him, but still he had faith in me even if he never praised me when I succeeded in bypassing the goals he set. Even when he realized that I was fucking insane, he thought that strength of the body could overpower weakness of the mind. He was wrong. Obviously."

Sin fell silent, seeming broodingly contemplative and it was obvious that he still considered himself not up to par with the standards his father had set. It was fascinating that where others saw a man who was completely impervious, a walking lethal weapon who was to be feared and controlled because of the power he wielded, Sin saw weakness. It was almost disturbing to imagine what Emilio would have had him become, what he actually wanted him to be.

It was entirely possible that if it were up to his father, Sin would have been a blank slate, a soldier with no concerns or interests other than strategy and violence.

Boyd's fingers paused only briefly in playing with Sin's hair before he resumed. His father sounded... inexorable. What had started as distaste for Emilio's training grew to something closer to anger. The memory of Sin, pale-faced and slightly sweaty, staying completely silent in the passenger seat about wounds that had him crying out in pain when he thought he was alone. He was so good at concealing his pain, at guarding himself completely from the outside world and deflecting anything that was in any way invasive... How could Emilio do that to him? Even if he didn't know how to deal with children, even if he wanted a legacy, even if he realized that Sin wasn't always stable... How could he look at a small child and decide his future for him? How could he tell him he had to be a perfectly controlled killing machine while ignoring the fact that what he really had was a vulnerable, hopeful human who wanted to believe in a future he'd only imagined before?

His touch remained gentle through Sin's hair and he stayed relaxed lying on the bed next to him, but he couldn't help some of that heat making it into his voice.

"But if you were unstable in any way that must have made it worse. Pushing you so hard, not giving you a chance to rest or just... be yourself." He narrowed his eyes and shook his head to himself.

"He just... He couldn't expect more from you then he was even able to give himself. Did he even ask you if you wanted to train, if you wanted to learn anything he decided to show you? It's as if he was punishing you for... for just being *human*."

Sin shook his head slowly and his face grew a bit darker; a brief flash of that frightening person shining through although it wasn't immediately obvious why.

"I was never just human," he said softly. "He didn't know that at first but-- I think somehow he saw it in me; that was the potential he saw, even if he never completely identified it at first. His training-- it showed me how to control myself, it gave me purpose. Without him, I think I would have truly become what everyone says I am."

Watching him quietly, Boyd did not respond at first. "If you think it helped, then I can't disagree," he said finally, a little doubtfully. "But I don't believe you were never just human. I don't care what happened; you were still born just like everyone else. You were a baby, you were a child, you are now an adult." He watched Sin's hair fall through his fingers and frowned, his brown eyes looking especially dark in the shadows. "You'll always be human to me." He didn't entirely realize he said the last part aloud; it was an absent, truthful comment.

There was a brief silence and Sin stared at Boyd for a long moment before slowly, uncertainly, he raised one strong arm and wrapped it around Boyd's waist, pulling his partner closer to him. He let his head rest on the pillow, looking over at Boyd quietly.

Sin closed his eyes and muttered a very quiet 'thank you' before saying nothing more.

Boyd's eyes closed, warmth moving through him at the whispered words. He slid one arm around Sin and held him a little closer, marveling for a moment at how close

they were, at the fact that Sin had been the one to initiate it. He ran his hand gently around to the back of Sin's neck where he continued to let his fingers slide through his hair. He could feel Sin's heart beating a little faster than usual and he let that calm him even more.

Silence overcame the room, but it was comfortable and relaxing. Boyd felt surprisingly at ease with Sin in his arms and he tightened his hold on him. Eventually Sin's breathing became slow and even and together they fell asleep.

## Chapter 29

Midnight was the waking hour for many of Monterrey's party goers and that was the time when the club was at its fullest. Lines of hopefuls waited to be admitted to Solar; it was the most exclusive club in the city so if you wanted to get in, you either had to be on the list or had to really impress the doorman. The music emanating from the interior could be heard blocks away and strobe lights sat on either side of the door, sending streams of light dancing across the misty clouds that hung in the night sky.

Although the club was huge, it drew quite a crowd and was completely packed. Bodies pressed against each other on the dance floor, writhing together in the flashing lights and pulsing to the beat of the music. Different genres of music played on different floors and the mixture created a melting pot of sound, one which was disconcerting if you were not used to it. The smell of sweat and alcohol was almost overpowering but the patrons didn't seem to mind as they laughed, danced and drank.

Behind the Employees Only door and down the long hallway, Jessica Ramirez and her two assistants were sitting on her desk watching the monitors. Typically she would watch for any signs of trouble, eyes flicking back and forth between each screen to take in any possible illegal or disruptive activity that was going on, but this time they were watching for another reason.

"Damn, where'd he go?" Estella asked with a frown. "He just disappeared!"

"I know, he always does that," Jess said and despite her amused smirk, there was an impressed undercurrent in her tone.

"Oh he's on main now," Frankie said, pointing at one of the monitors. "How the hell did he get down there so fast?"

"Who knows? He's quick like that. Yesterday night I was on main speaking to him, turned away for a minute and then he was gone just like that. He has definite talent," Jess replied, blue eyes trained on her new bouncer with a smile playing on her lips. "I wonder if he's talented at everything."

"Probably," Estella said with a smile of her own. "And did you see—in two weeks he's managed to develop a fan club although they seem to be having trouble following him around. Ever since the first night he started working, that same group of girls became regulars all of a sudden."

Frankie rolled his eyes. "I don't see what the big deal is." Frankie's attraction to Estella was notorious even though it was obvious she would never give him the time of day. "Why is every woman that works here acting like he's God's gift?"

Estella looked at him from under half closed eyes and smirked, tossing her long red hair over one shoulder. "Because we like the bad boys and it doesn't hurt when the bad boys are fucking unbelievably hot."

"Bad boy?" Frankie asked skeptically, glaring at one of the monitors where 'Jason' was lingering in the shadows before disappearing just as suddenly as he always did.

"His attitude—he has that bad boy 'I don't give a fuck, I don't care what you think of me, fuck the world' thing going on. It's hot. He also has that silent, broody mysterious quality that we're a sucker for." Estella grinned at Frankie and smacked him on the back playfully. "I know, girls are dumb, but the bad boys are so much more interesting than the good guys."

"Especially when they look like that," Jess said, not looking away from the screens. "His lips are perfect and his eyelashes—god, it's not fair for a man to be that beautiful."

"Whatever—he's just a pretty boy," Frankie said, obviously irritated.

"A pretty boy with an absolutely perfect body," Jess replied.

"Looks a little scrawny to me."

"Lanky is hot, I hate beefy guys. And—"

"—did you see the way he handled the Anderson brothers last night?" Estella finished Jess' sentence, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet like an excited school girl. "You know I usually hate violence, I'm a total wuss when it comes to blood, but they were shooting up in the gallery and when Jason came to do an escort, they tried to resist and fight and he totally kicked both of their asses with like two simple moves. It was crazy and totally hot."

"You think everything is 'totally hot'," Frankie grumbled.

"When it comes to Jason I do," Estella admitted with a grin.

"So why don't you fuck him already then?" Frankie snapped at her. "Why don't all of you just fucking line up and let him go down the line?"

Estella rolled her eyes at him. "I'm just admiring him from afar, calm down already. I don't have the balls to actually approach him; if you haven't noticed he's a little intimidating. And I make a habit of not dating men who are hotter than me." She glanced over at Jess who was still watching Jason intently. "Besides I think boss lady wants him for herself."

Jess' attention snapped over to them and her pretty face reddened slightly, mouth turning down into a disapproving scowl. "Don't be ridiculous, I don't date my staff."

"Who said anything about date?" Estella asked teasingly.

Frankie made a disgusted sound in his throat and turned to go. "Whatever, have fun drooling. I actually have some work to do around here."

Jess crossed her arms over her chest and gave Estella a pointed look. "I think you do too."

Estella rolled her eyes and made a face, hopping off the desk and following Frankie out the door. "Sure, keep all the fun for yourself. Enjoy being a voyeur," she called teasingly before shutting it behind her.

Jess shook her head and dragged her eyes away from the monitors, going to sit behind her desk instead. She had a ton of work to do and it'd been piling up all week. But much to her chagrin, every time Jason came in for a shift she found herself distracted and watched him intently through the surveillance cameras. If she wasn't watching him on the monitors, she'd go down to the floor and actually find a reason to go talk to him. It was unprofessional and somewhat embarrassing, but for some reason she found herself drawn to him.

She couldn't put her finger on it but there was something about him that was mysterious, dangerous, something that intrigued her and made her want to know more. It was the way he slipped in and out of the darkness with ease, the way he disappeared in the space of a moment, the way he walked silently and handled men three times his size with no difficulty whatsoever. It was the intensity in his eyes, the way he seemed to look right through her as if he was seeing into her soul and the way it made her heart pound whenever that raptor-like gaze fell on her. Most of all it was his attitude; he was obviously an unbelievable fighter and a beautiful man but he didn't brag, he didn't seem conceited, he didn't even seem aware of his own appeal. The brooding silence that surrounded him was alluring but when he spoke, even the simple straight forward words were enough to make her shiver when they were spoken in that low, sexy voice.

Jess covered her face with her hands and groaned loudly, annoyed at her own infatuation, or obsession which was probably a more accurate term. She hadn't been this crazy over a man since her ex-husband and even then it hadn't been this distracting. Despite the lovers she currently had and the fact that she knew she could have any man she wanted, she couldn't focus on them because her thoughts were consumed with Jason. She fantasized about how those powerful hands would feel on her body, how those perfect, pouty lips would taste, how that deep voice would sound when he moaned.

Jess shuddered and smacked herself in the head. "God, you're pathetic," she muttered and stared intently at the inventory list in front of her. Several moments passed as she stared at the same page and then slowly her eyes wandered back over

to the wall of monitors. She scanned them all and suddenly spotted Jason's tall, lanky form heading towards the employee door.

Jess glanced at the watch that dangled from her slender wrist and realized that it was 2AM which meant his shift was ending. Without thinking, she grabbed her radio and switched it on, telling him to come to her office before he left. As soon as the words left her mouth, she made a face and smacked herself in the head again, realizing that she really didn't have any good reason for calling him in. Despite that, she jumped up quickly and began fussing with her hair, sitting on top of her desk and crossing her legs so that her skirt exposed even more of her thigh.

As soon as Jason entered her office the butterflies that had plagued her stomach began flapping their wings enthusiastically. She tried to stop herself from messing with her hair again and smiled at him. "Hey."

Jason walked in and stopped several feet away from her, crossing his arms over his chest and staring at her with an unreadable expression on his face. Much to her disappointment his eyes did not drop to her exposed legs or even to the way the fabric of her shirt clung to her breasts. Instead he raised an eyebrow at her and did not smile. "What?"

She wasn't exactly arrogant but she had the goods and typically men tripped all over themselves trying to talk to her. The fact that Jason didn't seem impressed by her was frustrating, but at the same time it intrigued her even more. He didn't seem interested in looking at her but she couldn't stop her eyes from wandering over his body. The black cargo pants he wore had silver zippers and short chains across the pockets and although they were loose, they showcased his muscular thighs and in the camera she hadn't been able to take her eyes off of his perfect ass. That combined with the way his black wife beater showed off his well-defined, tattooed arms was enough to make her want to rip his clothes off right there. Jess dragged her gaze away from his body and focused on his face, reddening slightly when she saw the slightly impatient look.

"You're doing a great job so far," she said lamely.

"Okay."

Jess fidgeted and shifted on the desk, feeling flustered as he stared at her intently. He seemed to know she was bullshitting and it embarrassed her although it didn't prompt her to dismiss him either. "You know there are a few other people whose shifts are ending now too—usually they stay after and drink together or go out to another bar. I go too sometimes, it's a nice way to get to know everyone. You should come."

"No thank you."

Jess chewed on the inside of her cheek and looked up at him again, feeling heat spread through her as he began absently sucking on his lip ring. "Ah—" She cleared her throat and ran a hand through her hair. "You know when I called your last employer; one of your co-workers answered and was very excited to hear your name. She made it sound like you got to be good friends with her and the others. You should try to give the people a chance here—I know it sucks being new but we can be just as much of a family as your last job."

Jason shrugged and said nothing, seeming content to toy with the hoop of metal that wrapped around his lower lip and stare at her as if she was a moron.

She reddened even more but didn't let it deter her. "I'm serious."

He gazed at her with those intense eyes and lifted one of his shoulders in another shrug before drawling, "I'll think about it."

The butterflies went crazy again and she nodded, not trusting her voice just yet. She slid off the desk and walked towards him, heart pounding when he didn't move away and she smiled up at him. "We just want to get to know you. I..." She raised her hand and hesitantly ran one of her fingers along the stubble on his strong jaw. "Want to get to know you."

Jason stared down at her from under his constantly sleepy looking eyelids and grabbed her hand. Although it was firm, it was not painful, and just the fact that he was

touching her made up for the fact that he was pushing her away. "I said I'll think about it."

"I hope you do."

He watched her for another long moment before nodding and turning around, leaving the office without another word. Jess closed her eyes briefly and pressed a hand to her face, mildly mortified by her own behavior but not enough to even consider stopping it. She walked back to her desk and slumped down in her chair, allowing her eyes to track Jason's movements as he left the club.

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Boyd was seriously considering sending Reed hate mail regarding his haircut.

He was used to one length of hair that made it to his shoulders; he could easily pull it all back into a ponytail when it bothered him and otherwise it made a nice curtain to hide behind. But this stupid hairstyle was cut at too many angles to properly hide anything or even be pulled back. And every time he pushed it behind his ears it just fell forward again. So, with his hands full of blood that seeped from the beef and cascabel sauce, Boyd could do nothing to keep the hair from aggravating him other than to constantly rub his temple along his shoulder awkwardly and shake his head rather like a displeased horse.

The island in the kitchen was a mess and Boyd was a little annoyed. He had never really made any food before; even during the time he was alone in his family's house, he'd made things like sandwiches that required little preparation, used the microwave, or just ate crackers or bread. Boyd only barely knew the difference between a stove and an oven, and wasn't even entirely positive he had the correct definitions for each. He still didn't know the difference between a pot and pan, but he thought there must be one because it was always said that way together, 'pots and pans,' and it wouldn't be such a common phrase if it wasn't, right? It's not like people said 'books and tomes' or 'tennis shoes and sneakers.' Luckily, he found a recipe in one of the

cookbooks that required no pots or pans, but it did need an oven and it took him a long time to figure out what that meant.

At first he thought he would need to light the things on top of the contraption, but the more he read the directions, the more he thought maybe the beef was supposed to be encased in heat rather than just heated on the bottom. Besides that, there was only one dial that had numbers in the hundreds, such as was required with the 'Preheat to 300° F' and when Boyd turned the dial, it was the part that looked like a box behind glass that seemed to turn on and not the spiral black things on top.

Although he had used the oven/stove in his house before in order to heat tea, he'd never paid much heed to terminology or even how to properly use any of it. The only reason he'd even known to heat tea on there was because he'd vaguely remembered his mother doing the same when he was little. It didn't take long after his father's death for his mother to basically abandon him to the house, so Boyd had to learn how to do things. Lou, who'd always had a maid to do that sort of thing, didn't know how to operate any kitchen machinery either. So, the first time Boyd had felt adventurous enough to heat water somewhere other than the microwave, he'd gone vaguely by memories of his mother's actions. As a result, he'd often burned the water, steeped the tea too long, and in general made a mess of things. When he'd told Sin in his apartment that he was not good in the kitchen, he hadn't been joking. He really had very little clue how to work anything. And, being the sort of person who was used to knowing exactly what was happening and when, it was a little frustrating.

Standing back and staring blankly at the glass, he realized he had no idea what it meant to preheat. Obviously he heated it prior to something, but to what? Placing the food inside presumably. But if that was the case, how in the world did he know when it reached the appropriate temperature? Was it important that it was exactly on that degree? If he left it heating long enough, would it heat over 300° or did it have some sort of failsafe that cut off the heat producing agent at the correct time to keep it only at that temperature? Frowning distractedly to himself, Boyd washed his hands and flipped through all the cookbooks he could find. Unfortunately, most of them were simple

collections of recipes and didn't tell him anything useful at all regarding the oven/stove equipment. A few of them were also bilingual, in a language he couldn't read.

After awhile of trying to decide what to do, Boyd settled on just preparing the food the way it said and assuming that if he left it for half an hour it would be warm enough. Turning back to the recipe for 'easy' chile con carne, he got rather frustrated when he realized it didn't tell him what the hell he was supposed to put the beef in. Would it *kill* these people to put better directions in these things? Recipes were totally unlike mission parameters. If this were a mission, he would know exactly what he was supposed to be doing, where, when, what time frame he had, even the location to the exact longitude and latitude.

Instead, the sadistic writers delighted in such vague phrases as 'add beef and brown well on all sides' and 'remove all but one teaspoon of fat.' What the hell was that? First of all, browning well on all sides didn't tell him how long that took. Did he just stare into the glass until he saw it was brown? How did he know? He assumed he would have to turn it around or something and that the point of browning would occur on the edge against the metal, but if it was surrounded in heat, did it actually brown on all sides at once? And then the teaspoon comment. What did he do, remove everything into a bowl and then stick one teaspoon of fat back in? How did he remove fat anyway? What did it even look like? And what was a teaspoon? Just a normal spoon?

But what he was perhaps most indignant about was the phrase, 'Heat oil in an ovenproof Dutch Oven over medium high heat.' An ovenproof Dutch Oven? How could it be ovenproof if it was an oven? That was like saying he was a foolproof fool, or a nonhuman human. And 'medium high heat' seemed to imply the other dial which he knew turned on the spirals, but he had just thought he'd realized that an oven was the glass box and the stove was the top, but then hadn't he also heard 'stovetop oven' so did that mean that the stove was on top of the oven and that not all ovens had stoves? God. What was with these kitchen contraptions? They were so contradictory and fuck that stupid Dutch Oven, Boyd would just put the oil in a pot. Which, by the way, it would

have been nice of them to tell him what exactly he was doing with this oil other than heating on medium high.

In the end, it was good that Boyd started his attempt to cook quite early. It took him hours to get everything prepared and even then he had to throw some pieces of food out as he accidentally did something wrong that ruined it. He went through several cycles of being indignant enough that he almost left the apartment to find a library to look for a book that would explain something properly instead of this vague inside-terminology about Dutch Ovens and bringing to a fucking simmer. What constituted a simmer, how did he know how to bring it to one, why would he want something simmering anyway?

Over time, in frustration, Boyd had started moving things around that didn't need to be touched. When he didn't know what something was, he looked all around the kitchen for something to tell him, maybe user manuals because honestly, why wouldn't they have one somewhere? But there wasn't a manual for the oven or the stove and all he succeeded in doing was accidentally knocking over a bag of flour and getting it all over his shirt and face. He washed his hands and got it off his face mostly, but his hair was sprinkled with bits of white and it kept getting into his eyes when he tried to finish what he was doing. Although he cleaned the flour from the floor there were still some clouds that were kicked up when he walked around and Boyd gave up trying to keep the situation under control.

The beef already looked brown to him so he had a hard time figuring out what shade of brown they meant when they said that, and the glass in the box was not the most conducive way to check. The oil also popped all over and he was irritated that he didn't have a long sleeved shirt on when one bit fell on his arm and burned. Even after he washed it off the skin puffed up a bit and he glared at it sullenly, as if to silently say that was the physical manifestation of why cooking sucked. Sin had damn well better appreciate what Boyd was trying to do because if he didn't, they would just have to find places to eat out, which would unnecessarily deplete their account too quickly. Boyd was not cut out for being a housewife, or a slave, or anything they had joked about. He

could infiltrate a rebel base and take out the leader no problem, but give him a slab of beef and point him to the kitchen and he had no idea what the hell he was doing. He was only doing this because for some God-forsaken reason he'd been motivated into trying to do something different and he knew neither of them had been eating particularly healthily since neither of them ever made anything. They'd been eating the food that could be eaten raw or with minimal preparation and somewhere along the line Boyd thought it may just be a nice gesture in general to try to make food for them both in time for Sin to get off work. A thought that, especially when the flour exploded around his face, had been becoming less motivating by the minute.

Even so, some of his indignation faded over time and he started to get into trying to work with his hands, creating something from separate ingredients. He was curious to see if it would actually work out, and if not, he knew he was stubborn enough that he would try several other recipes until he found something he could perfect. He could not let a simple kitchen beat him; that would just be embarrassing. By the time he heard the door open behind him, the beef looked like it was probably on the way to finish simmering or baking or whatever the hell it was doing and he had the plates ready with the tortilla circles. Shaking his head to get his hair out of his eyes, he kept his messy hands carefully away from his shirt and turned to look at the door with a slightly expectant expression.

When Sin walked in he didn't look at Boyd at first and the expression on his face could easily have been described as pensively disgruntled. The corners of his mouth were slightly turned down and his eyebrows were drawn together as he shoved the door closed behind him. However, as soon as he looked up at the spectacle of Boyd standing in the kitchen covered in flour and sauce, his mouth curled up into a helpless smile and a startled laugh escaped him. He seemed surprised by the sound and blinked a couple times but he didn't seem capable of stopping it.

Boyd stared; he had never heard Sin laugh before and he was mesmerized by it. The moment he realized it was because of him, he smiled self-consciously and tilted his head down, watching Sin through red hair that did not quite cover his expression.

"What?" he asked, his smile stretching to a grin at how amused Sin was. "I don't look that ridiculous, do I?"

Sin locked the door, not taking his eyes off Boyd or bothering to hide the large grin that spread across his face. He dropped his keys on the small coffee table, another one of Boyd's surprise additions to the apartment that had been accompanied by a secondhand loveseat, and walked over to the island, leaning on the countertop with his elbows.

"Ridiculous wasn't the word that came to mind," Sin drawled, seeming to be in a much better mood than he'd been in a few moments ago.

Warmth flooded through Boyd at Sin's expression and all the annoyances he went through to make dinner suddenly seemed worth it. He would have preferred it if Sin weren't wearing the brown contacts; he would have loved to see that spark in his natural pale green eyes. They had been closer since the night they'd fallen asleep together, but it was mostly shown in the way Sin was a little more likely to smile around Boyd, or how comfortable they were around each other. Even though this was the first time Boyd cooked, even though they were on better terms, this reaction was far better than he had expected.

"Oh really?" Boyd asked with a wide, amused grin. He walked over to the island and leaned his hip against the other side, his hands still held carefully away from everything they could get dirty. He had yet to get the leftover cascabel sauce off them but with Sin there smiling at him it seemed less important to do so immediately. "What was the word?"

Sin leaned forward a bit and raised an eyebrow at Boyd, reaching out and running a finger along his forehead, managing to collect a large amount of flour. "I'm afraid I can't share that information with you. It's confidential. But it wasn't bad."

Boyd was mildly distracted by Sin touching him and leaned into it a little, but when he saw the white covering Sin's finger he couldn't help an amused, self-deprecating smile. "It was probably 'messy,'" he said, bemused. "Look at my hands!

They're so covered in cascabel sauce I haven't even been able to keep my hair from my face." He held his hands out to Sin to show him.

Sin's gaze dropped to Boyd's hands and he arched an eyebrow. "Cascabel? What's in it?" Without waiting for an answer, he leaned forward and enveloped one of Boyd's sauce covered fingers with his mouth, absently closing his eyes as he did so.

Boyd's eyes widened and he was so surprised that he didn't even think to hide his reaction. Dropping his other hand to the counter and leaning all his weight on it was mainly what kept him steady with his knees getting a little shaky. His mouth fell partially open and with a darkened, half-lidded stare he could not seem to look away from his finger disappearing into Sin's mouth. It was warm and wet and with Sin sucking the sauce off so thoroughly, every other thought in Boyd's mind disappeared. He didn't even realize that he exhaled with a hint of voice making it into his breath, or that he had not answered Sin's question. All he could feel was Sin's tongue against his skin, the heat of his mouth, even the slight press of the lip ring against his finger. Heat pooled in his belly as he felt himself begin to harden.

Although he'd done it with the sole intention of tasting the sauce, Sin didn't seem in any hurry to release Boyd's finger.

Sin licked his lips absently and gripped the counter. "Tastes good."

"Ahh," Boyd said, a helpless half-breath of a sound. He held himself up by a slightly weak hand on the counter, his gaze completely caught by Sin's lips even though his finger was free and hovering in front of him rather stupidly.

Boyd felt flushed, completely arrested by an overload of sensations and reactions he was not expecting from his partner. Sin's saliva cooled on his finger in a manner that took entirely too much of his attention, making it difficult for him to think past anything his body was telling him. The entire situation left him off-balance and uncertain though it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Dropping his gaze and free hand to the island, he tried to steady his breath, the rapid beat of his heart, and his thoughts.

Sin didn't speak for a long moment, opting instead to stare at his partner with slightly parted lips and narrowed eyes. He licked his mouth again and finally dragged his eyes away, raking a hand through his unruly black and white spikes.

"So, what are you making?"

"What..?" Boyd asked in a slightly dazed voice, not looking up though his eyebrows furrowed down. "I don't... kn..." He stared at the counter and shook his head to clear it. "Oh. Ah." Blinking, he finally glanced up at Sin then turned his attention to the oven. "Chile con carne?"

"Ah." Sin walked around the island, trying to ignore the thoughts swirling in his head, and instead began poking at the ingredients and peering into the oven. "Is it almost done?"

"I don't... know..." Boyd stared after Sin, highly distracted by the way his tank top showed off his arms and clung to him as he moved, and especially the shape of his ass when he bent over to peer into the oven. "I think... it said another twenty minutes."

Boyd looked back to the counter, trying to keep his lower body tilted away from Sin's view, and said suddenly, "I don't need to sit here watching it. I'm going to shower or I'll never get this mess off me. If it seems done before I'm out you can just eat." Without looking at Sin again he headed straight for the bathroom.

Sin watched Boyd disappear, eyes moving over his retreating form and the way he looked in the slightly ragged jeans he wore. When the door closed behind him, Sin made a face at his own behavior and walked across the studio to one of the couches. He yanked off his sweaty shirt and dropped it on the floor, sprawling down into the overstuffed couch as he kicked off his boots.

He didn't know if it was the heat, the distance from the Agency or the fact that he was temporarily pretending to be someone else, but for the past few weeks his thoughts had been completely consumed by sex. After twenty-eight years of thinking he was asexual, he suddenly couldn't think about anything else. Ever since the night they'd

slept in the same bed and the following morning when he'd woken up with the worst case of morning wood he'd had in awhile, every time he looked at Boyd he'd suddenly be consumed by filthy thoughts and explicit mental images. He'd probably jerked off more times in the past two weeks than he had in his entire life.

Despite that, he never considered telling Boyd or acting out the things he pictured himself doing. He didn't want to jeopardize the friendship they'd worked hard to finally stabilize, especially not when he remembered how disastrous his last attempt had been. Whenever he wanted to cool himself down or get rid of a stubborn erection, all he had to do was remind himself that Boyd had been afraid that he would rape him that night in France.

If he hadn't been confused enough about that though, now he had other thoughts on his mind. Working at Lunar was probably the most obnoxious assignment he'd endured in awhile which was emphasized by the sheer amount of people who took it upon themselves to touch him casually. He could deal with the violent aspect, incapacitating drunk people was easy as long as he reminded himself not to accidentally kill them, but it was the other part that disturbed him.

He allowed Boyd to touch him because he trusted Boyd, he liked Boyd; he didn't take kindly to strangers rubbing against him or caressing him. He didn't like the way that gaggle of young girls followed him around and took turns trying to grab his ass. He didn't like the way the female bartender had boldly slid her hand down his chest, towards his crotch, but what he really didn't like was Jess.

And the fact that he didn't like her was because she made him curious. Anyone else who tried to touch him quickly backed off when they saw the expression on his face, but she was determined. The way she looked at him and spoke to him made it clear that she was attracted to him even if he couldn't possibly fathom why. After years of being treated like a leper, he couldn't imagine anyone being attracted to him, even if he supposed he wasn't physically repulsive. But Jess seemed incredibly taken with him and the more she did it, the more curious he became.

He'd never been interested in anything sexually before so it was only natural for him to wonder if these feelings he had were only for Boyd, who was unattainable, or if they could transfer to someone else who actually had interest in him. He didn't find himself to be attracted to Jess, he didn't really enjoy being in her presence, but the more frustrated he became the more he considered the idea that maybe it was possible that he would enjoy something sexual with her. It was strange that he was considering such a thing, especially considering the fact that for years he'd considered sex to be a weakness, an act that made a person entirely vulnerable to someone who could very well be an enemy. But now that he was pretending to be Jason, he felt almost liberated in a way that he'd never been before. He had the freedom to do things he'd never been able to do before. He wasn't under constant scrutiny of people who expected the worst from him. For these few months, he didn't have to be the monster from the fourth. He could be a man who could satisfy these new, unrelenting urges, even if the person he really wanted to satisfy them with was completely untouchable.

He was absently unbuckling his belt fifteen minutes later when Boyd came out of the bathroom. He looked up and immediately looked away when Boyd appeared damp, slightly flushed from the heat of the shower and wearing nothing more than a robe and the tracker that was wrapped around one ankle.

"Make me food," Sin said blandly, mostly because he had nothing better to say.

Pulling a lock of red hair behind his ear, Boyd headed toward the oven rather than the beds. He crouched down so he could see inside the glass, making sure the robe covered all the essentials in the process. One side slipped a little on the top, revealing a glance of his collarbone and just a hint of the right side of his chest before he absently pulled the robe closed.

"I can't tell," he said uncertainly, peering at the food with a slight frown. "I think it will be ready in a few minutes." He ran his hand through his hair to get it off his face and because it was wet it was actually marginally successful. He stood, absently cinched the robe a little tighter when it started to slip at his collarbone again, and crossed his arms loosely at his stomach as he tilted his head. "Let me get dressed and then I will check."

Sin eyes tracked the progress of the robe as it slid down repeatedly and he stood up, black pants sliding down his hips even more than usual since they were unbuttoned. He walked over to the kitchen again and smirked at Boyd.

"I didn't really think you would cook," he commented. "So does this mean you finally agree to be my slave?"

Boyd's gaze dipped down to Sin's pants, where a hint of hair could be seen. He snapped his attention back up to Sin's eyes and refused to look away again, because two showers in a row would be entirely too suspicious. "Mm. I suppose I am considering something along those lines. But I'm holding out until you prove to me it's worth it."

Sin made a face at him. "You should feel lucky I would bother to consider you worthy of being my slave," he deadpanned. "Some people would jump at the chance."

"Or perhaps," Boyd said, stepping a little closer, "you should feel lucky I am even considering being your slave. There are some who would fall over themselves to have me at their beck and call."

Sin leaned against the counter and stared at Boyd as he crossed his arms over his chest and barely concealed the leer on his face. "Well wh--" Before he could finish his sentence, something began beeping wildly. Sin blinked and shook his head slightly, looking over at the stove. "I guess it's done."

Distracted from wondering about the expression he briefly saw on Sin's face, Boyd looked over at the oven. "Damn."

His attention was fully absorbed by preparing the food, but it was clear he was awkward in the kitchen. He couldn't remember at first how to turn off the timer and then when he opened the oven he almost forgot that he needed something to pad his hands because everything would be hot. He opened two drawers before he found a towel thick enough to wrap around his hand and pull the beef out. It looked decent but smelled better, but Boyd almost slopped it all onto the ground when he stood too quickly. Even

after he set the dish on the stove top he didn't think to turn the oven off for almost a minute and he couldn't find a spoon to put the food onto the plates so he ended up using a spatula.

The end result was a rather messy-looking chile con carne and cheese burrito for each of them, with some leftover meat in case they wanted to make more. He frowned to himself and checked the cookbook a few times, a paranoid, completely unconscious gesture, and tried to pour the sauce on top so it looked exactly as it did in the picture. When it didn't look at all the same he was irritated but just decided next time he would do better.

Shaking his slowly drying hair out of his eyes, Boyd then wiped a bit of sauce off his cheek with the back of one hand and turned to Sin with a slightly frazzled expression. "Well. Honestly, I expect it to taste terrible. These recipes are completely incoherent and they don't know how to give proper directions for anything." He sounded a hint indignant but otherwise seemed to be in a good mood. "But I'm going to get dressed first." He held the plate out for Sin to take.

Sin grabbed it and inhaled, bypassing the dining table and instead wandering over to the loveseat. He folded his legs under him lotus-style and started to eat but then paused and decided to instead wait for Boyd.

Although Boyd initially was just going to dress behind the screen, when Sin sat on the loveseat he was in full view of the beds. So, after a distracted glance Sin's way, Boyd swiped his duffel bag off the floor and disappeared into the bathroom just long enough to change. He reemerged with scruffy red hair that was half-dry and a typical pair of low-rise pants and a shirt. He didn't bother putting on socks or shoes; instead, he tossed his duffel bag in the general vicinity of his bed and padded barefoot over to the kitchen. Pulling his bangs out of his eyes as he leaned over, he smelled the burrito rather dubiously, as if he had not been the one to make it. Glancing distractedly at Sin again, he gave up and just brought his food over to the couch, setting the plate on the coffee table and leaning forward to start eating.

Sin took a large bite of food and chewed slowly for a moment, staring at his plate suspiciously before he swallowed. He paused for a brief moment and then practically inhaled everything on the plate, not even making an attempt to practice anything resembling table manners. "Is there more?" He asked around a mouthful of burrito.

"Yes," Boyd said in faint amusement, eating his burrito far slower, though it ended up being just about as messy simply due to the nature of the food. He tilted his head toward the counter. "There is enough for a few more and the tortilla shells are next to the stove."

Sin unfolded his legs and got up, ignoring the way his pants were dangerously close to completely falling off, and went over to the island. "How do you put all this shit together? Just throw it in the shell?" He didn't wait for an answer before he began throwing ingredients on his plate without even bothering to try making it right.

"Oh, look at that, he learns so quickly," Boyd said teasingly between bites. He brought one leg onto the couch tilted at an angle and rested his arm on it, watching Sin with amusement. "I'm surprised this tastes decent. I feel nigh incompetent in the kitchen."

Sin shrugged and brought his loaded plate back while making vain attempts at pulling his pants up with his free hand. "You aren't incompetent at anything apparently," he replied and plopped down again, eating with his hands rather than silverware.

Boyd looked at him sidelong at the comment, feeling like he was just given a very good compliment, even if he wasn't quite sure why. Since only within the last few weeks he had been convinced Sin thought he was a backstabbing, worthless idiot, it was a surprising but nice thing to hear that he felt him competent. Returning his attention to the last bits of his burrito, he pushed some of the beef around idly before looking up through his bangs.

"How was your job?" he asked lightly.

"It's bullshit," Sin replied as he began eating his new plate of food at an alarming rate. "Apparently intoxicated civvies think they can do what they want with their hands. I don't understand what these people want from me."

Eyes narrowing just slightly, Boyd studied Sin over his food. "What do they do?"

Sin shrugged and glanced at Boyd. "They are very... forward. This group of teenage girls constantly follow me around and attempt to engage me in conversation or touch me. Some of my co-workers have put their arm around me or attempted to touch me in some way, and Jessica, the woman who owns the club, seems to be interested in me."

Boyd blinked slowly and tried to ignore the spike of displeasure he felt at the thought of anyone else being close to or interested in Sin. "Ah," he said neutrally after a moment, tilting his head down to the plate but watching Sin in his peripheral vision. "What does she look like? Jessica."

Sin gestured vaguely. "Like a woman. I don't know." He pictured Jessica for a moment and chewed thoughtfully. "Quite tall, slender, long legs, very large breasts, long dark hair and large blue eyes. I suppose she is technically an attractive woman."

"Sounds so," Boyd agreed calmly, watching his plate as he finished his food.

"I don't know how to appropriately respond to things these people do. I do not know what Jason Alvarez would do-- what a normal man would do. I don't have any experience being constantly surrounded by civilians, especially civilians who are apparently obsessed with flirtations and sex." Sin shook his head and licked sauce from his fingers, sitting back and balancing the now empty plate on his knee.

"Have you ever been with a woman?" Sin asked, voice casual.

Boyd felt uncomfortable with the question. Here was the person he found himself increasingly attracted to, talking about an apparently beautiful woman, and now bringing up sex with her and others. He drew in a breath and pushed his plate further onto the table so it wouldn't fall.

"Ah," he said after a moment, watching the floor before he finally was able to drag his gaze up to Sin's. He tried to keep his tone casual but he didn't know if he succeeded. "No, I don't suppose I have."

Sin frowned slightly. "Well you have more experience with civilians than I do. If you were in my place, how would you act? For example, they constantly ask me to spend time with them socially and I suspect that my employer knows that the person I am supposed to be would be interested in such a thing." He looked frustrated and began to toy with his lip ring absently. "This is why I have never been good at these assignments. I do not understand how someone who has no experience with civilians is expected to pretend to be one of them."

"You will only learn by being around them, though," Boyd pointed out, and he found it a little easier to ignore Sin playing with his lip ring now that he had thoughts about Sin and Jessica in his mind. He felt strangely stupid saying he had never been with a woman; that was what men were supposed to do, not sleep with other men. Sin had never had the chance to be normal, but maybe now he would realize with all his options, there really was no reason to notice someone as boring as Boyd.

He couldn't let his biases ruin Sin's only chance for normalcy. Drawing in a deep breath, Boyd leaned back in the couch and crossed his arms lightly at his stomach. "I would probably spend time with them," he answered, trying to think about what he would honestly do in that situation. "If you continue to deny them you will stand out more. However, I would only go once in awhile so that I would not give myself too many chances to accidentally say something I should not, or act in a manner they do not expect. In your case, I would suggest accepting next time, but not every time. Someone like Jason Alvarez probably accepted more often than not, but they do not know that necessarily, and if you feel too awkward or uncomfortable in the situation, it will stand out and seem even stranger than if you had said no. It would be better to ease into it and give yourself a chance to become accustomed before you push yourself too hard."

Sin made a face and put his plate on the table, stretching out his legs and folding his arms behind his head. "I don't particularly want to do that, but I suppose that I can. It

seems that being so detached garners me a lot of attention. People are not nearly so preoccupied with people who do the things they expect."

A faint smile pulled at one edge of Boyd's lips. "That would be my mindset whenever I plan to infiltrate," he agreed dryly.

"See?" Sin raised his eyebrows at Boyd. "I can learn."

"I never said you couldn't," Boyd said, mildly amused even if he meant what he said.

Sin slouched down farther into the sofa and shrugged languidly, putting his feet up on the coffee table as he scratched his stomach absently. An almost petulant scowl tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Well I don't know if this ability to learn will extend to this socializing thing. I suspect that I would be antisocial even if I actually were a normal person. I just have no desire to spend time with large groups of drunken civilians. I'd much rather stay here in the apartment with you," he complained.

Boyd looked over with a sidelong smile but didn't respond directly. It was already past three in the morning by the time the kitchen was cleaned up but the time was spent with casual, alternating conversation. Despite the stuffiness of the room and the almost unbearable heat, the environment was relaxing and not for the first time since the start of the mission it was just like they were two normal guys hanging out and not agents, assassins.

## Chapter 30

Monterrey was filled with an amazing amount of people, sights, and sounds. Because he had been focused on getting the studio in a livable condition and filling the role of a newly settled foreigner by idly wandering the streets, Boyd had not yet spent a decent amount of time actually working on what he was supposed to be doing. Kadin Reed had been an artist before he became part of Sector 53 and he spent a lot of his time designing things like weapons and marking out battle plans on paper. Perhaps not surprisingly considering the fact he was a rebel, he was also not a stranger to mildly to alarmingly illegal activity. Boyd was never a particularly wonderful artist, but he could draw well enough for it to be obvious what he was sketching and some people liked his style. He also knew how to let his emotions bleed into charcoal; it was his favorite media, letting him stain parch white paper the deepest black that faded in irregular flecks to grey. And as for the illegal activity, he would use that angle if he needed to in the future.

He knew he would be walking around all day in the extreme heat so he ended up actually wearing a tank top. He didn't feel quite as exposed or vulnerable as he expected, but that was only because it had a high neckline and he was able to wear the large black cuffs around his wrists. He wore a beret partially to protect his head from the heat, but mostly because he was sick of his hair falling into his eyes so he tried to shove his bangs beneath the brim to hold them back. It was marginally successful, but strands kept slipping out. He ended up taking what he could get and ignoring it as best he could.

His first stop of the day was the bank; he had equal access to Jason's account and had been taking out just over the amount of money necessary each time he made a stop. That excess cash was hidden in secure places as the weeks passed, in areas that he had memorized but knew no one else would look. The Monterrey spring may have been making the tension slowly melt out of his shoulders but he was still aware enough of the future to plan for it. Even a best-case scenario after the convention included Sin and he being unable to access Jason's account for fear of it being watched and for that period that he expected to be a few weeks, they may not even have contact with each

other. They would need to lie low, but it wasn't exactly easy to do so without any money. Yet he also knew that if either of them suddenly withdrew a large amount of money just before the convention, it would imply that they knew something bigger was happening, that they were planning for something more than just visiting a convention. And wouldn't that be the perfect way to compromise the mission or cast suspicion on themselves in the last few days after months of preparation? It was better to siphon off extra, small, amounts from the beginning; that would not draw any extra attention and there would always be a little extra somewhere in case Sin somehow managed to lock them out of the account again.

At the same time, he didn't want the money tucked around the apartment in case it was ever searched thoroughly; all it would take was even a single greedy but thorough burglar who had nothing to do with rebel groups or the American government, and all that preparation would be lost. So he utilized a number of places that varied in location enough that he was confident no amount of coincidence would ever allow for all the money to disappear. And if that ever did happen then it would be a good indication that something was very wrong and their covers could be compromised. At which point, withdrawing a lot of money at once could be a more acceptable, and less telltale, last resort.

Depositing the money in his third designated safe place took him relatively little time and he was able to concentrate on the rest of the day. A local art store provided him with all the supplies he needed, including a carrying bag. He spent the day wandering around the city, fascinated by the diversity of the people he saw and the number of languages he heard. Although almost all the signs were still in Spanish, there were sections of Monterrey that had signs in other languages as well. English, Mandarin, Russian, Hindi, Fijian... Sometimes he stopped, letting the rush of people pass him by like a river past a stone, and he just stared at a sign until he could decipher what it may mean. He carried his sketchbook by his stomach with loosely crossed arms and just closed his eyes, breathed, let the heat of the city seep deep into his skin and warm his bones.

Boyd did not think he had been this relaxed in... years, certainly, but possibly ever. There was no one there to judge him, no silence that overwhelmed his mind and brought him back to times he wished so desperately to forget. Even when he used to spend time with Lou he had not been relaxed as much as he was simply having fun. For the first time in a long time, Boyd felt like it was alright to just be himself and the anonymity in such a large city felt amazing after months of people watching his every move. Here, he was not his mother's son, here, he was not the monster's partner, here, he was not even Boyd Beaulieu. He was Kadin Reed, just another young man wandering the city in skinny jeans and floppy sandals, and no one looked at him twice. He was smiling to himself without particularly noticing it and the expression did not leave for most of the day.

Needing to become acquainted with the city, Boyd bought another map that was updated as much as possible to the reconstruction and he analyzed where they would need Intel first. Then he chose to visit areas that were not important at all. It would have been strange if, being a total civilian, he ran around sketching particularly well-fortified areas within a few weeks of arriving in the city. Instead, he visited parks, walkways, tourist stops and ended up in Gran Plaza where he spent an hour sketching a statue of Neptune and his court at play in a pool of water.

Time passed and after awhile he decided to walk around more. He passed Calle Pancho Villa, which brought him to what had once been a warehouse district. Several of the buildings had been renovated to include new businesses; there was a florist, a bookshop, a few restaurants, and much more. He held his map in front of him and walked like a tourist completely content to wander and he kept up the act even when one of the restaurants he passed caught his attention. It was named Julieta's and looked very similar to the other restaurants nearby, but something about it was a little off. There didn't seem to be enough customers for that time of day, which could have just been an unfortunate circumstance for the business, but somehow didn't seem likely to him. He stopped a few buildings down across the street from the restaurant, then turned and looked down at his map then up and down the street carefully, as if trying to check his position.

In his glance past Julieta's he realized that part of it seemed that several of the customers there seemed a little too casual; as if they were making an attempt to blend in and would be doing a great job if he weren't used to looking for that sort of carefully planned behavior. He looked down at his map with a frown and pivoted, continuing on his way with distracted glances at the street signs he passed. He didn't look back at Julieta's and was positive that even someone looking for suspicious behavior would not have thought his brief presence to be noteworthy. He had been just one of at least a dozen tourists or new residents on the street doing exactly the same thing at the same time. He planned to leave the restaurant alone for a few days then maybe stop by casually again, possibly actually go in to eat, so he could get a better idea of what was happening. But in the meantime he had other things to do. He continued through the city at a slow pace, stopping here and there to sketch something that caught his attention and otherwise just enjoying the relaxing freedom of the day.

As the sun slowly faded behind the clouds, the heat remained. Lights flickered into life around him slowly, like fireflies waking from slumber. Dusk set in, that period of time when it was neither light nor dark, when the clouds were tinged quiet shades of red and the air seemed to hum enigmatically.

Boyd watched the crowds shift slowly, from tourists and businesspeople to groups of friends wandering around and couples going out to eat. He felt a touch of nostalgia at that without really knowing why and slipped his sketchbook into his messenger bag to slowly make his way home. He had barely walked two blocks before he recognized the name of the street he was passing. It took him a moment of wandering up and down it before he realized it was the street Sin's job was located on. He remembered the address from when Sin had told him before, although he'd not yet visited.

He had to walk a few blocks down before he saw Lunar already slowly pulling people in for the pre-party drinks. Boyd amused himself with watching the people who were gathering into a line out front. Boyd had learned since Sin started the job that it was a very exclusive club. He could certainly tell that it seemed to be the case; the line

was growing larger by the minute but most of them were being turned away. A man stood at the door with an unimpressed expression and a list he checked each person's name and ID against.

The line itself was interestingly diverse and Boyd watched each person idly as he passed. There were plenty of women wearing clothing that would be better classified as handkerchiefs and lingerie, men who wore everything from tight pants that they could hardly move in to clothing that was as full of metal and chains as the local hardware store. Several people appeared to be going for the mysterious look, including a tall man in a large hat and sunglasses that concealed almost his entire face, another man who wore a trench coat with the collar pushed up so his lower face was hidden, and a woman who wore a scarf wound all the way over her hair, looping down to her mouth and below so only her eyes showed. Something about the way she looked made Boyd believe she was not wearing the scarf that way for religious reasons. And between those extremes there was everyone else, including people wearing rather conservative clothing and several others who seemed to be business men and women who were stopping by Lunar to wind down after a busy day. Several of the people looked back at him when they saw him studying them and a few idly tracked his movement as he wandered past, including a gaggle of girls, a man in particularly tight pants, the man in the sunglasses and a woman in a low-cut red dress.

Boyd turned his attention from the line to the door and was just wondering if he would even be able to send a message in for someone to get Sin when he saw him in the corner at the front of the building, staring with half-lidded eyes into space while he smoked. Boyd could not help a twitch of a smile at that and he sauntered closer, keeping all his mannerisms exactly like Kadin Reed's. Closer, he could see that Sin wore a sleeveless black shirt and a pair of black pants that appeared to be made of genuine leather and actually hung at a decent level on his hips. With the silver of his lip ring and earrings glinting in the lights flashing around him and his expression distant and pensive, Sin looked amazing. Boyd had to force himself to keep walking and not stop to gawk. Sometimes he could not believe how attractive Sin was; not only in a manner that made Boyd's blood run hot, but also just in an almost tragically

mesmerizing way. He was like the model of a painting at that moment and Boyd felt his stomach tighten just a little as he realized he honestly thought he was beautiful.

Boyd strolled right up to Sin and grinned at him lopsidedly just as Kadin would. "Hey."

Sin stared at Boyd in surprise, the cigarette dangling between his lips and eyes slightly wide. "What are you doing here?" His mouth twitched into a smile around his cigarette and his eyes automatically slid up and down Boyd.

Shrugging languidly, Boyd slouched against the wall by him and stretched his arms in front of him until they popped. "I was wandering around and realized I was close. Thought I'd stop by." His dark blue gaze surveyed the area idly. "So this is Lunar, huh?"

Sin nodded, taking a long drag from his cigarette as he stared at Boyd intently. Despite the fact that the sun's rays didn't entirely reach the Earth, Boyd had still managed to get a slightly golden tan during the course of the day. Sin couldn't take his eyes off his partner's exposed skin; it was probably the most of Boyd's body that he'd ever seen before and he tracked every motion, enjoying the sight of those lean muscles flexing when Boyd stretched. It was incredibly distracting to see for the first time and Sin continued to stare, eyes momentarily flashing to a bit of black markings that he spotted on the back of one of Boyd's shoulders. He didn't know what it was and hadn't been aware that Kadin Reed had a tattoo but he decided he'd ask Boyd about it later.

"Yeah. It sucks."

Looking over at Sin, Boyd smirked. "What d'you do, anyway? Hang out front staring people down?" It was a little strange talking to Sin in the manner Reed did, since even on previous missions they tended to be themselves around each other, but Boyd was not going to mess this up since they would be there for months. And he certainly was not about to slip character so early in the mission.

Sin exhaled slowly, causing smoke to drift into Boyd's face, to which Boyd made a slight face. "I'm taking a smoke break." He pushed away from the wall and flicked his cigarette, eyes focused on Boyd as he smirked. "I can bring you in if you promise to be a good boy."

It was probably strange seeing Jason Alvarez interact with anyone and likely many of those people in the line had been to Lunar enough times to realize this was the case, which explained why he could feel people watching them. But Boyd didn't care. He was here as his roommate and he needed to establish some sense of relationship with him early on in the eyes of the club just so if he ever stopped by again they would recognize him. Besides, he couldn't deny that some part of him felt a little smug that he could walk past everyone, stop by the hottest guy there, and talk to him without being turned away.

Boyd shoved himself away from the wall and smirked in return. "Hey, c'mon," he drawled. "I'm always on my best behavior." He jerked his chin toward the door. "So hurry up, give me some show 'n' tell."

Sin grabbed Boyd's arm and yanked it abruptly, temporarily causing a startled Boyd to bump into his chest and their faces to be inches apart. He locked gazes with him for a moment before stepping away and tugging Boyd along behind him. He ignored the gazes of everyone standing in line, especially from the group of girls who constantly tried to get his attention, and walked up to Johnny, the doorman.

"Who's the kid?" Johnny asked, peering at Boyd with an arched eyebrow. "Finally decided you wanted some candy?"

Sin made a face at Johnny. "Put Kadin R. on the black list."

"Will do, Jase," Johnny replied, looking amused and more than a little impressed. It seemed like he wanted to give 'Jase' a high-five.

As they entered the club, Boyd felt a mixture of confusion, attraction, and amusement. Being so close to Sin was startling, his hand on his bare arm, his face so

close. He was glad he hadn't had the chance to think about it too much before he was referred to as 'candy.' And hearing Sin's voice murmuring the name 'Kadin'...

He could not help a grin as he looked over at Sin. "What kinda candy am I, 'Jase'?" he asked teasingly.

"I don't know yet," Sin replied, not releasing Boyd's arm as he led him deep into the main floor and towards the spiral staircase. His booted feet pounded up the metal stairs as he automatically avoided the small crowds of people. It was still early by the club's standards so it wasn't very full yet. It was the time when he usually didn't have to pay much attention; the rowdy drunks typically didn't come out until after ten.

He took Boyd to the second floor and over to the gallery; a small area to the side of the staircase which had a couple couches and the most amount of privacy. "I don't have to really be on point for a couple of hours," He said quietly, leaning against the railing.

Skin still tingling from Sin's touch, Boyd casually walked closer. He pulled the messenger bag off and dropped it nearby so it wasn't as awkward, then leaned his back against the railing next to him.

"So you're saying I have you all to myself?"

"You do," Sin replied in the same low voice. His eyes did not leave Boyd's face, even as he absently toyed with the radio that hung from one of his pockets. It caused his pants to dip down a bit on that side and expose the chunky, black sideways cross that was tattooed to that hip. "So... Kadin. Do you like the club?"

Boyd's gaze drifted down to his hip and he studied the cross before looking back up to study Sin's face. The atmosphere of the club was getting to him; muffled music that he couldn't hear the lyrics to but could still feel the beat resounding in his chest, the darkness accented by flashes of light, the susurrations of many voices indistinctly heard at once. In his black clothes Sin was half lost in shadows but there was plenty of light to see his expression, the dark glint of his eyes, the flash of his lip ring as he spoke. Boyd

felt drawn to him, unable to look away; with the barest of smirks, he pushed away from the railing and stood right in front of Sin, tugging him down by his shoulder just enough to whisper into his ear, "I like hearing you say that name more."

Sin's heartbeat began to quicken at the feel of Boyd's breath on his face and he sagged against the railing, pulling away just enough so that their faces were directly in front of each other. He knew that Boyd was just being in character, playing his role, but it was driving him crazy. He licked his lips nervously, concentrating on keeping his arms at his side and fighting the urge to put them on Boyd.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

Absently playing with the collar of Sin's sleeveless shirt, Boyd's eyes sparked a bit as he murmured too low for anyone but Sin to hear, "It's my middle name."

Sin's eyebrows shot up and he gripped the railing. "Are you serious?"

Boyd did not look away from Sin's eyes. "Yes," he said softly, drawing the word out slowly. "I nearly laughed before." He tilted his head just slightly, trying to get across without saying it aloud that he was referring to when they first got their assignments. He let his thumb brush the back of Sin's neck as he continued, watching Sin's lips, "There's a short story behind it but I won't get into it here."

Sin's lips parted slightly but no sound came out. He let go of the railing, placing a hand on one of Boyd's narrow hips. His fingers tightened slightly and he closed his eyes briefly, as he asked, "Does Kadin like men?"

The question made Boyd pull back just slightly. In truth, while he knew Kadin was bisexual he didn't know how much he was breaking character. He shouldn't be acting like this; Kadin was flirtatious from what he saw, but would he be in Sin's face in public? Would he be whispering in his ear? He just couldn't help it; seeing Sin in that outfit, watching him in a room full of people who weren't turning to stare in fear or disgust...

Opening his mouth to respond, Boyd didn't get to speak before loud static erupted from the radio at Sin's hip. They both looked down at it immediately as a

woman's voice crackled, "Jason, what the fuck! There's a brawl on three, get over there!"

Boyd stepped back from him completely, looking to the side and feeling a little guilty for possibly jeopardizing Sin's cover. "You should probably get that," he said with a slight, unreadable smile.

Sin growled softly and snatched up the radio. "On it," he snapped, annoyance obvious in his voice.

He pushed himself away from the railing and stood up straight, staring down at Boyd. His face was unreadable for the moment despite the way his eyes seemed to burn in the dim light. "We'll talk later," he mumbled and stepped around Boyd, brushing against him as he headed to the staircase.

Watching Sin until he disappeared up the staircase, Boyd leaned against the railing and pensively turned his attention to the people he could see milling around the room below. He didn't quite know what he was doing, or even if he was glad or disappointed that they were interrupted. He stayed there for a few minutes before he pushed away from the rail, grabbed his bag off the ground, and strolled out of the club. Johnny gave him a knowing smirk as he walked past and Boyd just looked at him silently with an enigmatic smile pulling at one edge of his lips.

For the entire walk back to the studio, Boyd went over those few minutes in the club; every time Sin's eyes passed over him, the feel of his hand on his bare arm, on his hip, the heat of his body so near him. But then he thought about Sin's whisper, "*Does Kadin like men?*", and Boyd... just could not believe himself.

What the hell was his problem? He kept thinking he needed to give Sin a chance to be normal, he wanted him to be accepted by society, he wanted him to just be happy. But he showed up at his work and anyone who was watching very well could have thought Jason was gay. If that proved to be a problem in Sin's future interactions, it would be entirely Boyd's fault.

The worst part was that he completely had not intended that. He honestly meant to just go say hi, maybe walk around with him for a bit, act like a normal friend or just a roommate. But Sin touching his arm, Sin pulling him with and just being near him, by him, was enough to make the logic slip from Boyd's mind completely. He lost track of things like the mission, their cover, even the fact that Sin may not be interested. He became so self-involved, so obsessed with the idea of being around Sin, so taken by what he made him feel and the way his body responded, that he ended up being an idiot. The fact that he was acting like this showed how much constantly being alone with Sin and away from negative influence was affecting him. It showed what Sin could do to him.

Shaking his head to rid his mind of the thoughts as best he could, Boyd shoved their door open (they really needed to fix that) and dropped the bag onto the little coffee table nearby. Once the door was locked and he was able to pull out his drawing pad and a charcoal pencil, Boyd collapsed onto the couch and pensively drew for hours.

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The rest of the night seemed to take an eternity to pass and Sin found himself being unnecessarily rough with the drunken patrons just because he desperately needed to take some of his frustration out on something. Cravings that had been stifled and snuffed out for years were boiling over inside of him and Boyd's strange behavior around him wasn't helping at all. It had to be his cover, it had to be him playing the part of Kadin Reed, it was the only thing that would explain it. It was the only thing that would make sense to him. Why else would Boyd touch him that way? Why else would he talk to him like that?

It was like Boyd didn't even realize that he was teasing him, it was like he was doing it without even knowing it; and despite the fact that Sin thoroughly enjoyed the brief touches, it frustrated him beyond belief and that frustration made him hostile, aggressive. He was thankful when his shift finally ended, thankful that he was no longer in danger of losing his temper completely and breaking someone's neck.

"Jase! Drinking tonight?"

Sin looked up at Estella and started to bark out an annoyed 'no' before he remembered Boyd's advice. He wasn't here to agonize over his pathetically adolescent hormones— he was here on assignment.

"I guess," he replied moodily and wandered over to where they were sitting in the break room.

"Yeah!" Estella cheered and poured him a shot of something golden. "Drink up, party boy!"

Sin sat down next to Johnny, who was apparently on break, and a couple other people. He didn't particularly want to talk to them, didn't want to be around them, but he ignored that and lingered there for over an hour. He answered their questions when they asked and tried to paste a neutral expression on his face so that he appeared somewhat welcoming. He didn't know if it worked, frankly didn't give a shit, and knocked back a few shots without even thinking about it.

By the time Johnny was going back to work and Estella was gathering her stuff to leave, Sin was regretting his decision to drink so much when he hadn't eaten all day. He reminded himself of the idiotic way he'd acted the first and last time he'd had anything to drink. "I'm going," He muttered and got to his feet, ignoring the way the world tilted strangely when he stood.

"Going to go have fun with that sweet little piece?" Johnny teased.

"Shut the fuck up," Sin muttered and headed for the door, ignoring Johnny's amused laugh.

He was confused enough about Boyd, he didn't need some random nobody making bullshit comments about it too. He took his radio off and started to drop it off with the others when it suddenly blared to life and Jess' voice demanded that he come to her office. Sin glared at the contraption and switched it off, feeling incredibly annoyed as he left the break room and walked down the hallway towards her office. He didn't

know what she wanted from him and if it wasn't for the fact that he'd possibly jeopardize his job, he probably would have ignored her and went on his way. Since that wasn't the case, he stalked into her office with a thoroughly annoyed expression on his face.

She was sitting in the middle of her desk as usual, posing just enough to show maximum leg and cleavage but the expression on her face was strange. Although her wide blue eyes wandered up and down his body in the usual way they did, there was something about her posture that made her seem angry, defensive. Her slender arms were crossed over her chest, lips pursed slightly into a frown.

"Finally decided to stay and hang out?"

"Yeah, so?" Sin asked, voice anything but friendly. He didn't move closer to her and didn't say anything more. He narrowed his eyes slightly, wishing she'd get on with whatever the hell her point in calling him in here was even though he knew she probably didn't even have a real reason.

"So—" She hopped off the desk and crossed the distance between them. "So I was hoping you'd actually accept during a time when I would be involved." Her eyes narrowed slightly and it seemed as if she was almost accusing him of something but he had no idea what that was.

"Sorry," he said flatly, eyes burning into her impatiently, making it obvious that he was anything but genuine.

She looked away and took a long time to speak, as if she were fighting with herself on what she wanted to say.

"Jason..." She trailed off and shook her head as she watched him, expression growing in hurt and frustration. "Don't you realize— Don't you care how much it bothers me when you act like such a fucking ass?" She glared angrily, although it was unclear as to who exactly she was angry with at that moment: him for being so callous to her, or herself for actually caring.

"Why should I care about that?" he retorted, not changing his tone or expression. He knew he was probably being stupid—he was probably going to get himself fired—but the alcohol was making his tongue loose once again and he couldn't control it. And at that moment he was too annoyed, sexually frustrated and impatient to deal with her annoying and emotional rants.

Jess stared at him incredulously, the anger in her expression only heightened by the hurt.

"Because I like you, you fucking asshole!" she blurted, raising her hand suddenly to slap him in the face. Before it could connect with his cheek, he grabbed her arm violently, his furious, impatient glare merciless as his fingers dug into her skin.

She tried to yank her hand away but his grip was like a vice that she couldn't escape. She tried pulling harder but with her momentum and the fact that he didn't budge at all, she ended up rebounding against him. Her wide blue eyes stared into his angry brown ones with a sort of sick desperation and before he could back away, she was leaning forward and pressing her mouth against his.

Sin's eyes widened briefly and his automatic response was to shove her away from him, to get her out of his personal space, but something in him wouldn't let him do it. The part of him that was drunk, horny and out of control from weeks of frustration prompted him to stand completely still as her soft, red lips moved against his mouth. He could feel her heart pounding against his chest and when her trembling hands tangled in his hair and her tongue slid between his lips, something in him snapped and he began to respond to her heated kisses.

She moaned against his mouth loudly and clung to him, pinning her body against his as his strong hands slid down and wrapped around her. He kissed her frantically, not really knowing what he was doing and not really giving a damn as his body automatically responded to the way she writhed against him. He picked her up effortlessly and moved forward, dropping her roughly onto the desk as his hands slid up her back and clutched her with more force than was necessary. He ripped his mouth

away from hers and kissed down her jaw, breathing hard as he lost himself in the moment.

"God yes," she whispered and tilted her head back, panting when his mouth fastened on her neck. She slid her legs open and wrapped them around his waist, pinning him against her.

Sin's mind was racing and he found that he couldn't really think straight, couldn't really process what was happening even as he slid his hands up her thighs and yanked her skirt up, hiking it around her waist and exposing a small, black g-string. He heard Jess' moans distantly, as if she wasn't right there in front of him, and covered her mouth with his once again when she began to beg him to fuck her. Her hands began to fumble with his belt, trying to get it open with shaking, excited hands as she panted against his mouth.

Somewhere in his drunken haze, he absently remembered the things his mother had told him long ago about what women liked and pulled the front of her shirt down with his free hand, closing it around one of her large breasts, rubbing his thumb against one of her hard nipples. She arched into his touch, hands trembling even more as she tugged his pants open and hurriedly tried to shove them down.

Abruptly, the mental image of him pinning Boyd against the wall of a hotel room in France popped into his head. The memory of Boyd's tongue in his mouth, his slender body crushed against Sin's chest, Boyd's rock hard erection pressing against his crotch— it caused something in him to twist and suddenly Jess' kisses lost their heat.

His hand dropped from her breast and he stilled against her, even as she insistently ground against his crotch. He tried to get back into it— to tell himself that she wanted him and that he could finally do the things he'd been obsessed with for weeks— but he couldn't. He didn't want to do them with her, and the memory of Boyd's passionate kisses had been like a bucket of cold water on his erection. How could he touch Jess' breasts when all he could think about was Boyd's dick?

"What's wrong?" Jess panted, staring at him with wide, confused eyes.

Sin pulled back, hands sliding off of her thighs slowly as he blinked and regained his bearings. His face returned to the blank, unreadable expression that he always used on her and her face crumpled miserably when she saw it.

"Don't fucking do this to me," she pleaded. "You— you were into it."

Sin began buckling his belt, backing away from her slowly until he was at the original distance. "Sorry," he muttered, feeling confused, off balance and mortified. "Sorry, Jessica."

He was surprised that he actually meant it; he knew what it felt like to have somebody you wanted lead you on and then push you away.

She stared at him incredulously and slid off the desk, turning away briefly as she fixed her clothes. She was silent for a long moment as she caught her breath. "You and that boy are together," she said flatly.

Sin blinked in surprise, staring at her back. "What?"

She turned around, crossing her arms over her chest and not looking as angry as she had a moment ago. Her expression was strange and seemed to be full of too many different emotions to choose from. "That red head with the beret— I saw the two of you on camera. You— you were so... it was so obvious that you wanted each other. But..." She trailed off and shook her head. "But I just wanted to be sure before I gave up."

Sin stared at her blankly. "Wanted to be sure of what?" He asked cluelessly.

"That you're gay," she snapped at him, temper flaring. "You could have told me before you—"

She stopped abruptly and stared at him for a long moment before she shook her head with a groan. "Oh great, did I make you feel that pressured? Now it's going to be some sexual harassment thing?"

Sin opened his mouth to tell her she was wrong but closed it quickly. Why bother trying to be honest when she was providing him with a convenient lie?

"It's... okay." He studied the carpet for a moment and tried to figure out if he was supposed to say something else.

Jess stared at him, her wide mouth turned down into a scowl. She began fixing her clothing stiffly, eyes slanting away. "Well, I didn't want it to seem that way. I wasn't going to like, try to hold anything over your head. You're good at your job, no one can deny that."

Sin stared at the carpet, completely mystified. What was wrong with this woman? "I never said anything like that. I don't really know what you're talking about."

She sighed loudly and finally went around the other side of the desk, sitting down. "Just never mind, Jase. I'm just an idiot. I don't even know what I'm talking about. Just... go. I need to stop being mortified and it's hard with you standing there."

Sin scratched the back of his head and squinted at her. "Uh. Okay."

He backed towards the door and turned around. She bid him a final, depressed sounding goodbye and he escaped into the hallway safely. He walked quickly down the hallway and out of the employee area, disappearing out of the club before anyone had a chance to ask him any questions.

When he stepped outside there was a surprisingly pleasant breeze and it helped to clear his mind somewhat of the drunken haze that his mind was still slightly shrouded in. He raked a hand through his hair and headed towards the studio, trying to figure out what the hell had just happened and failing miserably. He'd had the perfect opportunity— he'd had someone who wanted him, who was willing, who had no idea what his past was and who did not fear him or think he would rape her, and he'd denied her. What the hell was his problem? Was he actually gay?

The question nagged him the entire walk home.

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When Sin got to the obnoxious, broken door he pushed it open impatiently and entered the apartment with an annoyed scowl plastered on his face. He kicked the door shut behind him and stared down at Boyd who was stretched out on the sofa, drawing and looking incredibly peaceful.

"Hi."

Boyd blinked slowly and yawned, bringing a languid hand up to cover his mouth as he did so. "Hey," he said, sounding a little sleepy and questioning. Noting how annoyed Sin looked, he tilted his head and closed his sketchbook. "What's wrong?"

"I'm an idiot," Sin replied stonily and locked the door before he began ripping his clothes off angrily. "And I drank too much."

Boyd's eyebrows shot up, not able to help feeling surprised.

"Why, what happened?"

"Stupidity happened," Sin growled as he kicked off his boots and tossed his shirt onto the floor. "I knew that woman would get to me at some point."

There was a pause and then Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as understanding dawned on him. "You... Wait, what? You and... Jessica...?"

"Me and Jessica," Sin repeated, sounding disgusted. He wandered into the bathroom without saying anything else and came out a moment later without the contacts in. His green eyes were flashing angrily and he yanked a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, lighting one and taking a long drag.

"It doesn't matter. I fucked it up anyway."

Boyd was practically reeling from Sin's admission and he tried to ignore how the idea of Sin with this Jessica woman made him feel jealous, upset, and stupid. Just a few hours ago he had been hanging on Sin and Sin did nothing with him. Instead, he went

to this woman. Was Boyd that unimpressive, or was Sin just mad that his male partner was all over him when he possibly wasn't even gay? He was definitely glaring at Boyd, but it just seemed to be because he was angry in general.

"I don't.. understand..."

Sin shook his head and exhaled slowly, staring down at Boyd through partially closed eyelids. "She wanted me. She was touching me, kissing me, begging me to fuck her--" The words came out almost mockingly, but it seemed that he was mocking himself. "And for a minute I wanted to, I wanted to rip her clothes off and fuck her on her desk," He continued, once again allowing the alcohol to take control of his mouth. "But I didn't."

Watching him with wide eyes, Boyd tried to ignore the fact that he didn't like the idea of Sin wanting someone that much when the someone wasn't him. Could he blame him? Sin had come after him before and Boyd had shoved him away. He knew Sin didn't mind his presence, he knew they were getting along so well; but that didn't mean Sin wanted him. It didn't mean that Sin would ever choose Boyd again now that he had options.

"Why?" Boyd asked hesitantly after a surprised pause.

Sin's shoulders sagged and he shook his head, raking a hand through his hair in frustration. "I just... I don't know. I just didn't want to anymore."

Sin looked at Boyd for a moment and then padded over to the kitchen on his bare feet, yanking open the fridge and pulling out a bottle of water. "Just forget it. It's stupid. You're probably tired anyway... Just go to sleep."

"I'm not..." Boyd began, but watching Sin only made him think too much, no matter what he was doing. Boyd was such an idiot. Why the hell was he like this, why did he always have to complicate matters? Why would Sin stop when there was a beautiful woman willing, when he had even admitted that he wanted her? Maybe... If it was a replay of that first time, maybe Sin was paranoid that he would hurt her. Maybe

he wanted to go slower with her... Maybe he'd learned his lesson with Boyd. Maybe Boyd had just been a mistake and now he would become the experiment that helped Sin know what to do better with others.

That thought actually bothered him enough that he could not finish his sentence and he looked down at his lap, automatically reverting to the neutral expression he'd spent years creating. After a moment, Boyd nodded and dropped his sketchbook onto the table.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," he said calmly, walking over to his bed where he grabbed pajamas from his duffel bag and disappeared into the bathroom to change. He ended up choosing a long-sleeved shirt and pajama pants, even though he knew he would be incredibly hot. With all the other confusing thoughts in his mind, now he felt bothered by the idea that he'd been walking around with his arms showing all day, even if it shouldn't be a big deal. But his whole upper body was something that could make him feel vulnerable faster than anything else when it was shown.

When he came back into the main room, he didn't feel like putting his clothes away so he just tossed them out of the way of his bed, where they fell near the couch. He whispered only a soft,

"Good night," before he pulled the sheets up, and, curling on his side facing the main room, closed his eyes.

He was too edgy to sleep properly though and more than once he found himself watching through his eyelashes as Sin paced the living room in his boxers, chain smoking. He sat down a few times, looking frustrated and confused, and kept looking over at Boyd, who made sure to look like he was sleeping.

Sin put out his last cigarette and covered his face with his hands briefly, sighing softly. He sat that way for a moment, hunching forward on the couch until he sat up again and sent another distracted look at Boyd. But just as soon as his eyes rested on his partner, Sin looked away again, eyebrows drawing together in that same confused look.

He stood up and began to pace again, cracking his knuckles and sucking on his lip ring in agitation. It went on that way for several moments before his pale green eyes fell on the pile of Boyd's clothing he had carelessly tossed aside. Sin stopped pacing and gazed down at them for a moment before he slowly walked over and picked up Boyd's tank top. He looked at it for a moment and at first it seemed that he would toss it back down but instead he sat down on the couch again and rubbed his thumb absently against the fabric. He looked indecisive, baffled, and then after shooting another glance in Boyd's direction, he brought the shirt up to his face and inhaled, closing his eyes.

Sin stayed that way for a long moment and a loud, ragged sigh escaped his mouth. One of his hands found its way up to his lap and began rubbing his crotch absently as he kept his face buried in the shirt.

Boyd's eyes almost widened but he stopped himself. He couldn't quite believe that he was seeing what he thought he was. He forced himself to remain perfectly normal, with consistent breathing as if asleep, but his gaze was riveted from beneath his eyelashes.

A soft sound escaped Sin's mouth and he slumped down on the sofa, letting his long legs spread apart as he rubbed himself a little faster. He pulled the cloth away from his face and allowed his head to roll in Boyd's direction. Heavy lidded green eyes were staring at Boyd intently as Sin pulled his erection out of the slit in his boxers. The moonlight that streamed through the windows illuminated him perfectly and Sin was obviously extremely turned on. His hand began moving up and down quickly, full lips parting as he stared at Boyd.

He slumped down lower on the couch, one hand still clutching Boyd's shirt as his fist began to pump his cock faster. His eyes rolled back in his head and he began to pant, jerking off frantically, not caring that he was in plain sight of what he thought was his sleeping partner.

Sin breathed noisily as he touched himself, chest rising and falling erratically as his hand slid up and down his erection. It seemed to go on like that for several moments

and then his breathing increased and he began arching up, thrusting his hips against his hand, low moans escaping his mouth as he lost himself in some fantasy.

He continued to clutch the shirt even as the soft sounds rose slightly in pitch, the muscles in his body flexing and straining. He was getting louder and breathing harder, when suddenly a strangled cry escaped his lips and he came hard, streams of semen shooting up all over his chest. He muttered Boyd's name softly as he sagged against the sofa in apparent exhaustion.

It took absolutely every bit of control Boyd had to continue to breathe evenly and not react at all. He stared through his eyelashes at Sin, stunned and aroused. There was absolutely no mistaking what had just happened and his mind reeled. He couldn't believe that Sin actually just masturbated in front of him, clutching his tank top and murmuring his name. The very same doubts he'd had within the same day were now debunked. Boyd couldn't believe that Sin chose him over a beautiful woman. He chose to stop when he was with someone who was begging for it, and instead he came back to Boyd, who had certainly been flirting with him but who had yet to say anything as blunt as, "Fuck me, Sin, I need you now." This changed everything. Boyd had been leery of inadvertently scaring Sin away or limiting his choices by showing interest in him.

But after this... He should have felt bad for seeing Sin jerk off when he thought no one saw, but he figured it was Sin's fault. He shouldn't have been right in view of Boyd, even if he thought he was asleep, and he certainly shouldn't look so fucking hot while he did it. The main problem was now Boyd was painfully hard and he had no way of dealing with it without letting Sin know he was awake. The only saving grace he had right then was that he'd happened to lie down in the best way to hide an erection.

Sin shifted on the couch, looking exhausted but content. He grabbed Boyd's tank top and absently cleaned himself up with it before he froze and stared at the shirt. His expression clearly said, 'Fuck. I'm an idiot.' He stood, threw the dirty tank top in the laundry hamper Boyd had recently bought, and wandered by Boyd's bed, glancing at him along the way.

Boyd continued to act as if he were asleep and perfectly unaware of anything that had just transpired. It was that much more difficult when he could smell the musk and damp sweat from Sin's body as he passed by to get to his bed. The slight creaking of the bed springs as Sin dropped down to sleep was creating far too vivid of images in Boyd's mind that had nothing to do with sleeping and a lot more to do with Sin, naked and making those sounds again only this time against Boyd's skin.

Thankfully, his back was to Sin's bed so he could squeeze his eyes shut finally even if he didn't dare disrupt his steady breathing. He waited a long time until he was certain that Sin had actually fallen into an exhausted sleep, his body spent from the alcohol and orgasm.

Gritting his teeth, Boyd stood and made his way to the bathroom. He dropped his head back against the wall and masturbated to the memory of Sin touching himself.

His mouth fell open even as he forced himself to make no noise louder than a ragged exhale of breath. His hand was quick and rough against his erection, but he closed his eyes and imagined it was Sin's hand. He thought of his light green eyes staring at him so intently. Imagined that sexy little smirk and the timbre of his voice when he said his name. Sin's strangled cry echoed in his mind and Boyd thought almost obsessively about the shape of his body, the feel of those hard muscles beneath his hands and what it would be like to touch him all over without having to pretend it was casual.

Sin's cock was large enough on its own but it only seemed emphasized by the memory of his erection cast in contours of moonlight and shadow. What would his cock feel like rubbing against Boyd, bare bodies sliding with sweat, Sin's voice low and a puff of hot breath as he whispered in his ear, "I want to fuck you—" Boyd had to actually bite his shirt to keep silent at that thought and he came so hard that he couldn't think clearly. There was a long, pleasure-filled moment when Sin could have burst into the room and Boyd would have been too caught up in his orgasm to notice or care. But he remained as alone as he had been and there was no sound from the other side of the door indicating that Sin knew he was awake.

He sagged against the bathroom floor, feeling exhausted. It didn't help that he stayed up far later than he should have, or that the last half of the day was a bit of an emotional roller coaster.

The irony did not escape him that they'd masturbated thinking of each other, despite being in the same apartment. They could just fuck for God's sake and use each other's bodies rather than their own hands.

It took him awhile to summon the energy to clean up and then he realized to a bit of dark irony that he dirtied his shirt as well, just as Sin had earlier. Apparently it was the night of getting semen all over Boyd's clothing. Luckily, he had an identical shirt in the bathroom to change into so hopefully Sin would not notice.

Silently padding back into the room, Boyd walked around the Japanese folding screens and tossed his shirt into the laundry carelessly. He paused at the edge of Sin's bed, watching him for a long time before he finally crawled into his own bed.

He remained watching Sin from beneath his eyelashes, listening to his steady breathing and watching the rise and fall of his chest. He studied the way his lips were parted and his eyes moved every now and then as if he was having a particularly vivid dream. The room was stifling even with the air conditioner running, making it difficult for Boyd to feel comfortable enough to relax for sleep.

But exhaustion pulled at him and, slowly, watching Sin until his gaze blurred into undefined shadows, he fell asleep.

## Chapter 31

A loud whining sound jolted Boyd awake so suddenly that he jerked, eyes snapping open. He stared wildly, heartbeat a crescendo in his chest, and it took him a second to even think to look for the source. Sin was standing at the entrance to their studio, clad only in low-slung jeans as he bent over with a drill. A middle-aged man Boyd had never seen before stood next to their couch, watching Sin work. He gestured and said something rapidly in Spanish and Sin didn't even look over before he replied in the same language.

Boyd couldn't tell if they were arguing or chatting, but Sin didn't seem to be on high alert so he just sagged back against the bed and threw a pillow over his head, squeezing his eyes shut. He had the vague beginnings of a headache from lack of sleep and the whirring of the drill was not helping matters at all. This was a prime example of why it was an issue living with someone with such different sleeping patterns.

Not that he could really blame Sin for practically being an insomniac; it had been trained into him as a child, it was really his father's fault. The thought still bothered Boyd and it made him want to counteract it just to prove that Sin didn't have to be on guard at all times. At least he seemed to have been getting slightly better; Boyd was fairly certain he slept more in Monterrey than he had back at the Agency.

He lay still for a few minutes, attempting to doze off or ignore the drill, but it was too late; Sin had effectively woken him for the day. He sighed and listened distantly to Sin murmuring in Spanish, letting the words that meant nothing to him pass him by. It was easier to listen to the rise and fall of Sin's words, voice, even his mood, when Boyd didn't know what he was saying.

His eyes slid closed and he found himself thinking about the night before. There was no way Boyd could misinterpret what he'd seen and heard. There was no way to ignore that Sin wanted him, and no way to ignore that he wanted Sin as well.

He pushed himself up on one elbow and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Neither of them seemed to notice that he was awake, but it was more likely that Sin was

just ignoring the fact that he'd gotten up. He padded over on bare feet, ruffling his messy hair back as he yawned.

The man nearly jumped when Boyd stopped at his side and he looked over while stopping himself in mid-sentence.

"*Hola*," Boyd said with a lopsided, sleepy smile; he held his hand out and the man shook it, looking startled. Boyd kept his eyes half-closed so his eye color could only vaguely be seen through his eyelashes; he'd almost forgotten that he didn't have the contacts in and tried to remember the few Spanish phrases he'd learned so far.

"*Me llamo Kadin*. Ah... Sorry, that's almost all I know in Spanish. Except '*No hablo Español*.'"

"*Hola*," the man said back, looking at Sin quickly as if to question Boyd's presence. "I am Enrique. I watch this building."

Enrique said something else to Sin in Spanish and Sin finally looked over his shoulder, giving the man a slightly impatient glance. He drawled something that sounded annoyed and waved a hand in the direction of the hallway as if telling the man that he had things under control.

Enrique shrugged, not seeming very concerned and pointed at the air conditioner, saying something else in his native language before nodding at Boyd and heading out of the room. Sin ignored him and didn't bother attempting to translate any of the conversation for Boyd.

Sin's accent sounded different than Enrique's, but Boyd liked Sin's more. While the caretaker trilled out his words quickly and almost incomprehensibly to a non-fluent Spanish speaker, Sin drawled the language out almost lazily. His voice was low, deep and every syllable rolled off his tongue in a manner that rather seductive, even if he was likely unaware of it.

Boyd waited until Enrique's footsteps faded down the hallway before he walked over to Sin's side, closer than was necessary. He leaned over so that he could see

more clearly what Sin was doing and was pleased to see that he was installing very sturdy-looking locks; a one-sided deadbolt, two additional double cylinder bolts, new steel butt hinges and a security strike plate with case-hardened screws.

"What did Enrique say?" he asked quietly, lips brushing against Sin's ear.

Sin's hands froze for a moment and he turned his head slightly, looking at Boyd briefly before turning back to his work. There was a long hesitation as if he'd forgotten what he was supposed to be doing. The corners of his mouth turned down in a displeased frown.

"He said he'd forgotten I had a roommate and that our air conditioner won't work for shit during the summer months."

Boyd leaned a little closer. "Oh." He tilted his head enough for his breath to warm Sin's skin and he watched Sin with eyes that looked almost golden in the morning light. "Will he be bringing us a new one?"

"No." The tension in Sin's shoulders was obvious, his muscles taut as he awkwardly began to drill the lock into the door again. He kept shifting and pausing, obviously distracted.

Inwardly, Boyd smirked, but he made sure his expression remained neutral. "Really?"

He shifted nearer to Sin in the pretense of being heard over the drill. His t-shirt brushed against Sin's strong back and he could practically feel the energy and heat radiating from his body through the fabric. His eyes wandered over the tattoo on Sin's shoulder, the beads of sweat that slid down his back and disappeared into his low hanging jeans. "Why not?"

"Because it's no--fucking damn it," Sin swore and stopped drilling abruptly, realizing he'd been working in the wrong spot. He turned around entirely and glared at Boyd.

"You made me fuck it up," he snapped and slammed the drill down on the floor. He dug into his pocket to look for cigarettes only to find that he'd finished his pack already. His full lips pursed tightly, dark eyebrows snapping together in annoyance as he flung the empty pack on the floor with an irritated grunt.

"What did I do?" Boyd asked, feigning a confused look. He moved next to Sin and bent over, brushing against Sin's bare arms and torso as he went to grab the drill. His shirt was sticking to him by now and it was unbearably hot in the room, mostly because any cool air the AC had managed to generate had gone right out the open door. "I'll do it."

Sin yanked the drill out of his hand and made a face. "You can't even identify a pot-- why do you think you'd do any good with a drill?" Despite the comment, Sin's eyes didn't seem particularly mocking and a smirk managed to find its way onto his otherwise stony face. It seemed that he was trying to force himself to be mean to Boyd and was failing. "Go do something constructive."

Standing fully, Boyd raised an eyebrow. He reached out and put his hand over Sin's on the drill in the pretense of pulling him closer. "Why don't you teach me, then?" he suggested mildly, ignoring Sin's last comment. "There's only one way to learn and that's hands on."

Sin blinked once, twice, and then his mouth fell open although no sound came out. His eyebrows drew together slightly and he stared at Boyd in what seemed to be relative confusion. He closed his mouth and opened it again although he didn't seem to know what to say. He ended up clearing his throat and dragging his eyes away from Boyd.

"Go get me some cigarettes," he muttered finally, for lack of anything better to say.

Boyd watched him for a long moment, looking as if he was about to argue, but in the end he decided he had all day. He just inclined his head in a nod. "Alright. I need to pick up some things anyway."

He strolled past Sin and brought his duffel bag with him into the bathroom. A few minutes passed before he reemerged in a dark green t-shirt with a picture of a pinwheel on it and white letters beneath that said simply, 'Blow me.' A pair of worn denim shorts hung low on his hips. Wide black leather bands hid his wrists and a pair of sunglasses on top of his head held his hair away from his now dark blue eyes in a messy tangle.

Sin was no longer making any attempts to mess with the door. His eyes followed Boyd the entire time after he appeared from the bathroom and he was doing a very poor job of concealing that fact. He wiped his arm across his sweaty forehead, absently sucking on his lip ring as Boyd noticed Sin watch him lean over to dig through his duffel bag for something. Through the fall of his red hair, Boyd could see Sin's eyes going up and down his legs.

Not showing that he noticed Sin's stare, Boyd wandered over to his side once again. "Need anything else?" he asked idly, bare arm sliding against Sin's as he stood within the other man's personal space.

Sin watched Boyd from under his bangs and shook his head silently.

Boyd stared into Sin's eyes for a long moment without saying anything. The time stretched around them, slowed by Monterrey's heat and the moment, until he smiled.

"Good luck, then," he said lightly, pulling away just enough to place his hand on Sin's shoulder, squeezing slightly. "I expect the door to be finished when I return." His fingers tightened, his thumb rubbing briefly near Sin's collarbone, and it was with a lingering touch that he disappeared out the door.

===The task took Boyd nearly an hour. The heat was intensifying by the day and many people seemed to be wearing fewer items of clothing than even earlier in the week. Boyd had not shown so much skin in public for years; he rarely wore anything but pants and a long-sleeved shirt even in the confines of his house. While in some regards it felt a little odd, for the most part he was thankful for whatever relief he could get from the heat.

Letting the bag from the store thump against his legs, Boyd took the stairs two at a time to the third floor. While out, he'd decided to pick up a few extra items that he thought they may need soon. When he turned down the hallway he saw that the door was shut firmly and seemed to hang in the frame better. He was prepared to shove against it but the door swung open perfectly, cleanly and silently.

Impressed, he looked the door up and down then pushed it lightly and watched it swing shut on its own. He turned around and saw Sin sprawling on the couch reading the Neil Gaiman compilation he'd bought months ago, and noted that the rest of his books sat in a messy pile next to the sofa. Walking over to Sin's side, Boyd dropped the bag on the table and looked down at him. He was entertained to note how studiously Sin was ignoring him. He was certain that Sin was actually watching him from the corner of his eyes but was trying in vain to pretend that he wasn't.

Crouching down, Boyd put one finger on the top of the book and tugged it down just enough to grin at Sin over the edge. "I'm impressed by the door," he told him. "Having it shut so easily makes up for you waking me so early today. "

Sin glanced at him and then let his gaze drop down to the pages of his book. "What else did you get?"

"Just some things I needed." Boyd reached into the plastic bag and pulled out a cigarette pack. He shifted up and sat on the side of the couch, reaching over the book to press the pack against Sin's chest, his hand lingering there. "This is the brand you like, right?"

"Yes," Sin replied, sitting up straighter as he opened the pack.

"Good." Boyd pushed himself a little further onto the couch, causing the side of his hip to press against Sin's. He watched Sin's fingers, and then his gaze slid up Sin's chest to center on his green eyes. "Are you enjoying your day off so far?"

Sin shrugged, glancing up at Boyd. "I guess. Why?"

"Just wondering," Boyd said with a shrug. He leaned a little further against Sin's side in the guise of trying to get more comfortable. He let his eyes wander along Sin's chest and arms. After a moment he reached out to run his fingers along the barbed wire tattoo on Sin's upper arm, just visible beneath his shirt. His eyes flicked back up to Sin's face. "Will you keep anything from your cover after this is over?"

"Smoking may be difficult to quit," Sin replied slowly, eyes narrowing at Boyd. Once again he asked in a suspicious voice, "Why?"

At first Boyd simply shrugged, his gaze sliding down to taking in Sin's body. He shifted and raised his hand to Sin's face. His fingers brushed against Sin's chin and his thumb reached out, running along the lip ring and catching against Sin's lips. His gaze intensified as his thumb briefly ran along the parting of Sin's lips. He wanted to slide his fingers inside those full lips and taste every centimeter of that mouth.

He didn't hide the desire he felt when he looked back up and met Sin's eyes. "Because I want this to stay," he murmured, his thumb pressing lightly against that simple silver ring.

Sin's Adam's apple moved in his throat as he swallowed. His lips parted further as he asked again, and in a lower voice, "Why's that?"

"When you wear it, I wonder what it tastes like," Boyd replied, his voice a husky rumble. He dipped his thumb between Sin's lips. "I wonder how it feels."

Dark eyebrows drew together over Sin's vivid green eyes and he actually sat back slightly, out of Boyd's reach. It seemed like he would say something but a breath passed, and he just stared silently.

Boyd's gaze tracked Sin's face, drifting down to his lips and then moving back up to his eyes. He watched him a moment and then decided to give Sin a little space before he made his next attempt. He let his fingers brush against Sin's arm and hand when he pulled away and pushed himself up off the couch. He walked over to the kitchen.

Although Boyd wasn't facing Sin anymore, he could feel that intense gaze burning into his back as he stood in front of the fridge. He didn't say anything when he heard the books drop to the floor and didn't turn even as he felt Sin's presence silently coming closer to him. He didn't do anything until Sin was standing right behind him, body slightly pressed against him as one of Sin's hands rested against the closed freezer door.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Sin demanded softly, speaking directly into Boyd's ear.

A tingle went all the way down Boyd's spine and his stomach warmed. He tilted his head just enough for his hair to brush Sin's lips. "Doing what?" he murmured.

Sin's arm slid around Boyd's waist and his hand clasped his opposite hip, pressing their bodies firmly together. "Showing off for me."

Boyd could feel Sin's erection pressing into his lower back, his breath warm and quick against his hair. He couldn't answer for a moment; Sin felt too good against him. The possessive arm crossing him should have bothered him because it was touching his stomach but it didn't, not the way he would have expected. From the angle Sin held him there was no way he could hide that he was getting hard as well, so he didn't even bother trying.

Turning his head more, he placed his hand on top of Sin's at his hip and tightened his fingers. "Tell me what I'm doing to you," he said softly.

"You know what you're doing to me," Sin snapped, voice a low growl. His breath hissed out and he clutched Boyd, fingers digging in hard enough to bruise. "Why are you playing games with me? Is it funny for you?"

"No, it's not funny." Boyd felt just a little guilty if Sin thought that. He turned his head enough to see Sin's eyes, his fingers tightening against his hand. "I like to see your emotions," he said honestly. "I can't help wanting more of that."

Sin slammed the fridge door shut and spun Boyd around, pushing him against it. He looked frustrated and confused, eyebrows drawn together as his eyes flashed. The raw emotion in his expression gave him a slightly wild look and he closed his eyes briefly as if trying to calm down. "You just don't get it."

Boyd watched him, unperturbed by the changed positions. "What don't I get?" he asked, actually wanting to know. "Stop trying to pull it all back in, just tell me."

Sin stared down at Boyd for barely a second before yanking him forward and crushing their lips together desperately. Boyd let out a half-moan and returned the kiss just as intensely. The world zeroed in on the feel of their lips moving feverishly against each other and Boyd pulled Sin closer, pressing their bodies together tightly as Sin pinned him against the fridge and tangled long fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

The kiss was sloppy and desperate. His free hand slid down Boyd's back before cupping his ass and squeezing it hard, using his grip to crush their lower bodies together even tighter. Boyd's eyes slid shut as he groaned into Sin's mouth. One of Boyd's hands slid down to Sin's lower back as the other gripped a shoulder almost painfully, both of their hearts beating out of control as hypersensitive skin brushed together with every movement that was made.

For that moment the heat, the mission, the miscommunication and confusion--none of it mattered. The only thing that did matter was the way their clothed erections ground against each other. The only thing that mattered was how it felt to run his tongue against Sin's lips, silently begging for entrance.

Full lips parted and Boyd's tongue slipped inside, massaging Sin's in a manner that made Sin's grip on him tighten violently. His hands skittered up and down Boyd's back frantically, as if wanting to touch everywhere at once but not knowing what to do. Their tongues clashed, low moans and throaty whispers of breath escaping lips that refused to part for more than a brief second as their hips began to grind together

wantonly. A low swear, a soft grunt and their lower bodies began slamming against each other as they continued to kiss with frantic passion.

Unnaturally brown eyes snapped open and Sin froze. He yanked away from Boyd, stumbling backwards slightly even as he stared down with eyes wild with untamed passion and lips that were wet and swollen from Boyd's kisses.

"Fuck," he uttered, dropping his hands as though they'd been burned even as Boyd reached for him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-- You don't..." He trailed off and swallowed hard, watching with wide eyes as Boyd grabbed his hand and pulled it toward the obvious erection between his legs.

"Fuck that," Boyd growled, pressing Sin's hand against his body firmly, proof that he wanted it just as badly as Sin did.

He let out a low, shuddering breath and dropped his head back against the freezer door, his eyes sliding shut and wet lips dropping open. The slight pressure on his cock was a delicious tease that could be so much better if Sin just gave them the chance. He didn't know what the hell he was going to do if it turned out Sin only liked the idea of sex with him but couldn't handle the actual physical part of it. He needed Sin, needed to touch him, needed to be touched by him. Sin was like a black hole that was sucking Boyd in and he couldn't-- wouldn't stop it.

"Don't leave me like this, Sin," he panted, opening his eyes to watch Sin's startled expression through his eyelashes. "Let me be with you. Please."

His grip on Sin's hand tightened and Sin allowed his fingers to graze against the bulge slowly, hesitantly, even as he shook his head in denial and swallowed hard, Adam's apple bobbing convulsively. His expression was a picture of shock, confusion, even suspicion as he tried to pull his hand away and began to back off. He stared at Boyd with narrowed eyes as Boyd shook his head and refused to release Sin's hand even if he let it move away from his body.

"I thought you wanted it before and-- and then you didn't and it got all fucked up."

"I told you I panicked. You didn't stop when I said no and I didn't know what to do." Boyd pushed himself away from the fridge and stood right in front of Sin, searching his eyes almost desperately while his fingers tightened on Sin's hand. "I want to now, though."

Dragging his eyes away from Sin's surprised gaze, Boyd let go of Sin's hand to almost hesitantly touch Sin's chest. The pressure from his fingers was light, distracting as his hands slid down to rest at Sin's side, just below the ribs. Sin said nothing and didn't touch him again but Boyd didn't let go. He looked up at the darkening brown of Sin's contacts and brought their bodies together again. Sin's mouth opened slightly but he didn't stop him, didn't speak, so Boyd leaned in and licked slowly near Sin's nipple, enjoying the taste before he turned it into a kiss with light suction.

He could feel Sin shudder against him even as he pulled back just enough to whisper hotly against feverish skin, "Let me touch you." Another open-mouthed kiss in the center of Sin's muscular chest and a whispered, "Can I?", before he pulled back just enough to see Sin's eyes. "Please?"

There was no response but the look in Sin's eyes could only be described as needy and hungry. His mouth was hanging open slightly, breath coming hard and fast as he stared down at his partner as if he wanted to devour him. But he didn't say anything; he neither gave his consent nor told Boyd to stop.

Still, there was tension in his broad shoulders and he seemed paranoid, confused. He backed up again, eyes wide and slightly unfocused, erection obvious even in his baggy jeans as Boyd followed the movement and refused to let him get too far. Boyd waited a breath, hands still on Sin, eyes still locked. When Sin didn't push him away or move, he took that as momentary consent, resuming the slow, open-mouthed kisses down Sin's chest. He knelt slowly as his hands slid down Sin's sides and rested at the top of his jeans.

"Tell me no if I should stop," Boyd murmured against the flat, toned stomach. Sin didn't respond, only stared down at him through long black eyelashes. Boyd's fingers

brushed Sin's skin lightly as they moved toward the button of his pants where he paused and looked up again with smoldering eyes. "If you don't, I'll think you mean yes." He slowly popped the button open on Sin's jeans, waiting for a sign.

Still Sin did not respond. He continued to gaze down at him silently, leaning back against the counter as he gripped it tightly. His full lips were parted, breath coming in low, shallow pants, causing his chest to heave from the effort. His tongue swept out quickly, moistening lips that were suddenly too dry. His fingers curled around the counter even tighter, causing a slight cracking sound to emanate from the cheap wood as Boyd smiled up at him before dropping unnaturally blue eyes to his slender hands poised at the waist of Sin's jeans.

He didn't rush the moment; he was reveling in the fact that he was touching Sin and that he wasn't being pushed away. His lips curled up as he began unzipping the ragged jeans and Sin's eyes shuttered closed briefly, breath hitching as fingers ghosted beneath the fabric and slid across his hips, pushing his jeans down below his ass.

The faded, threadbare jeans slid down slowly, exposing strong thighs and grey boxer-briefs that barely concealed a large erection straining against the cotton rebelliously. Boyd paused again, staring at the image before him with an almost ravenous look on his face as he let his hands rest on Sin's hips, thumbs idly sliding beneath the waistband of the briefs and rubbing slow circles against Sin's skin. He pulled back just enough to look up at Sin fully and locked gazes with the silent man again.

"One last time," he breathed in a voice that was low and hoarse. "Tell me if you don't want this."

Sin's grip on the counter was so hard that his knuckles whitened as he gazed down at Boyd. He started to speak but only a slightly hoarse sound came out. He closed his eyes again briefly, erection throbbing as Boyd's fingers continued to tease his skin. He finally shook his head and opened eyes that were dark with lust.

"Don't stop."

"I won't," Boyd promised, turning his full attention to what he was doing now that he had Sin's consent. His heart was a resounding thunder in his chest and his skin felt hot to the touch.

Boyd pushed the hem down on the sides, watching as Sin's pubic hair was revealed before his erection sprang free. He kept pushing until the underwear circled Sin's upper thighs.

He'd always known that Sin was large but now that his cock was right before his eyes, he was unable to look away as his stomach clenched in anticipation. He wanted to taste Sin more than anything, wanted to lick up and down that swollen cock and trace the protruding veins with his tongue. His hands slid along Sin's skin; he was smooth over the hard muscles and just the touch of him, just the *sight* of him, was making Boyd so hard he wondered if he'd even make it through this. All the fantasies that had been building up over time had given him plenty of material he could finally act on.

Leaning forward, Boyd inhaled Sin's musky scent and ran his tongue along the length of his erection, teasing the tip and flicking at the drop of salty pre-come that trickled out. Sin's eyes rolled back in his head and he shuddered, stomach quaking as Boyd's fingers dug into his hips. When Boyd finally wrapped his lips around the swollen, purple head, it took him a moment to adjust.

Sin's fingers curled and jerked up to dig into Boyd's soft red hair, tangling in the strands desperately. Sin groaned loudly. Boyd's lips curled into a pleased smirk as he slid his mouth down Sin's large, pulsing cock and slowly dragged back up. Eyes falling half-shut, he pushed forward again, his mouth wet and hot; a slow torture for Sin's frazzled nerves.

Hoarse obscenities fell from Sin's mouth, "Oh fuck... Oh fucking Christ."

Sin's mouth dropped open as he began to moan unabashedly, making it impossible for Boyd to stay at the same slow pace as he listened to the sounds. His fingers itched to wrap around his own aching erection but he couldn't bring himself to

take his hands off of Sin. He was like a drug for Boyd; he wanted more of him. Wanted to see, experience, taste and feel every bit of him.

Fingers tightened hard against Sin's hips and as Boyd bobbed his head and slid his mouth up and down faster, he kept his gaze riveted up to Sin's face. He felt the knot in his stomach clench, felt come begin to ooze from the tip of his own arousal while he watched Sin's expressions change as he appeared to lose more control of himself. Breathless pants mingled with throaty groans and when Sin began jerking his hips forward, thrusting as his fingers dug into Boyd's hair tighter,

Sin began moaning in Mandarin. His eyes squeezed shut and he braced himself against the counter, fucking Boyd's mouth faster and instinctively going with Boyd's movements. Boyd couldn't help a muffled moan as he allowed his mouth to be fucked with abandon. The weight of Sin's cock sliding in and out of his mouth was enough to make his stomach ache with pleasure, his blood running hot and fast. At that moment, more than anything else, he just wanted Sin to feel good. He wanted him to feel so amazing that he made more of those noises, that he couldn't think about anything but pleasure.

One hand slid down Sin's side, trailing along the nasty scar from the aborted attempt at castration, and he began rubbing his fingers along Sin's balls. He cupped them in his hand, massaging them gently and was only encouraged by the way Sin arched against him. Through the mumbled, excited moans, Boyd's name fell from his lips. He dropped his head back, panting open mouthed as he began to thrust his hips wantonly. Every muscle in his body seemed to be tensing up and clenching. His moans grew louder, more frequent, and soft swears escaped his mouth as he thrust more quickly.

"Fuck," he hissed, fingers guiding Boyd's head as he fucked his mouth faster. "I... I'm-- Oh God--"

The timbre of Sin's voice went straight to the heat burning in Boyd's stomach. He hardly had time to think about it before Sin came explosively in his mouth. Boyd

swallowed immediately and closed his eyes, concentrating on the feel and taste, on not missing anything while his fingers absently continued to play with Sin's balls. Sin pressed against him, seeming lost to his orgasm even as his hands tightened on Boyd. When Boyd finally pulled away it was with a lingering slide of his mouth, and he only stopped touching Sin when Sin sagged to the floor.

Drawing back, Boyd braced one hand on the floor to keep himself upright. He panted heavily as he found his attention split between his own untouched arousal and not looking away from Sin, who slumped against the counter's side, looking dazed.

His eyes focused on Boyd and his expression was... strange. There were so many emotions in them that it was hard to pick out just one but the result was raw, powerful and incredibly beautiful. Boyd couldn't take his eyes off Sin, although his mind was buzzing with his own unresolved lust. His lips parted and his skin was flushed. His hair was disheveled from where Sin's hand had gripped him.

Sin's breathing began to even out and he sat up straight, dragging Boyd closer to him, eyes focused on Boyd's wet lips. He leaned forward and kissed Boyd again. This time his kiss was not hesitant; it was passionate and his tongue explored Boyd's mouth thoroughly, causing Boyd's eyes to slide closed and a low muffled moan to escape him. The taste and feel of Sin made Boyd's already hard erection pulse.

He was nearly overwhelmed by the passion he could feel in Sin at that moment and responded with a hungry sort of desperation, wanting to feel and taste as much of him as he could. One hand reached up, tangled in Sin's unruly hair and held him closer so that he could deepen the kiss. The feel of the lip ring pressing to his lips in the manner he had been imagining since he'd first seen his disguise made him groan. Half-moans and caught breath from each of them disappeared into the other's mouth while his other hand clumsily unfastened his shorts just enough to free himself from his briefs.

With his fingers closing around his own erection, Boyd could feel his own heartbeat and breath quicken. The kiss turned sloppy, wet, as he panted and groaned into Sin's mouth, pulling closer with one hand as he ran his other quickly over his painful

arousal. Sin crouched before him, pants tangled around his thighs as he cupped the back of Boyd's head and worshiped his mouth in a way that made it obvious that it would not take long for Boyd to come. Boyd stood no chance against the fresh memory of Sin's moans and expression as he fucked his mouth, or the way his tongue was searing into him now as if Sin was trying to absorb his very soul. He was overwhelmed by Sin, and he couldn't imagine anything better at that moment.

Their lips ripped apart finally, both of them gasping for air as Boyd moaned desperately, fist flying over his erection. Boyd was barely able to notice that Sin watched with a fascinated look, eyes dropping to Boyd's cock before rising to take in the lost, ecstatic expression on Boyd's face.

Sin wet his lips again, breath coming fast and he leaned forward for another hungry kiss as heat rushed through Boyd's veins and centered in his stomach. An especially desperate sound was muffled by the all-encompassing warmth of Sin's mouth, and Boyd moaned so loudly it was nearly a helpless shout when he came. The kiss did not end even as Boyd's orgasm wiped his mind clear of thought. If anything, he deepened the kiss with a wild sort of hunger.

Their moans and harsh breathing were the only sound in the room until Boyd pulled away from the kiss finally, his forehead dropping against Sin's shoulder as he let Sin take most of his weight. He was breathing heavily, eyes closed and breath hot, body feeling completely sated. There were no words that came to mind so he just slid his hand from the nape of Sin's neck and rested it there, let his other arm loosely encircle Sin until he was half leaning on him.

They sat there silently for several long moments, the only sound in the room their loud, uneven breathing. Sin's face was slightly downcast, hair hiding most of his expression although his gaze was locked on Boyd. After awhile his eyes closed briefly as he swallowed hard and exhaled slowly as though he were trying to regain his bearings or at least some semblance of mental order as he absently pulled up his jeans. After awhile he reached out almost hesitantly and pushed the hair out of Boyd's face,

the touch making Boyd's eyes slide open lazily. Sin's gaze was intense and searching as he tilted Boyd's chin up so that he could look directly into his eyes.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, voice quiet and still slightly hoarse.

Boyd watched him quietly, not able to answer at first. Even if he knew Sin was attracted to him, even if he hadn't said no, some part of him was still a little afraid that he would do something wrong, that he would mess this up and they would be cold toward each other again. But he was tired of half-truths. He took a moment to shift just enough to pull his clothes back on, partially because it was uncomfortable and being half-naked would not make this conversation any easier, and partially to give himself time to get his thoughts together.

"I've wanted to for awhile," he said finally.

Sin stared at him, surprise evident on his face even as he narrowed his eyes slightly in something that looked vaguely like skepticism. "Why? Since when?"

Boyd shook his head once. "I'm not certain. Months, probably." Without really thinking about it, he absently ran one hand down Sin's thigh.

"How many months? When?" Sin's eyes followed the movements of Boyd's hand and his face remained unreadable. Something about him stayed slightly guarded.

Noting Sin's gaze, Boyd realized he couldn't read Sin's expression. Even if he couldn't tell what he was thinking, Sin's muscles were tense beneath his touch, making him feel that for the moment it was unwanted. His fingers stilled and, self-conscious, he pulled his hand away to push hair out of his eyes with a sigh.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "I wanted to in France. I suppose it all came together again after I broke you out." He paused, watching Sin closely. "Why? How long for you?"

"I don't know," Sin said vaguely, rubbing the back of his neck and looking apprehensive. There was a long stretch of silence as Sin regarded him, seeming to

think the question over seriously. He chewed on his lip ring and stared at Boyd, eyes slightly narrowed.

"Since November," he said finally.

Boyd had just come to the conclusion that Sin wasn't going to reply but when he did, the answer was so startling that Boyd stared at him in surprise. "Since -- Really?"

November was... early. They'd barely known each other at that time.

"Then..." Boyd said, trying to understand but mostly just feeling bewildered. He remembered how emotionless he'd been at the time. "Why? I didn't do anything to warrant you wanting me."

"You didn't have to do anything," Sin replied with a one-shouldered shrug, dropping his eyes again and going back to studying the concrete floor. "I don't know why it started or how. All I know is..."

He trailed off for a moment, looking mildly self-conscious as he raised a hand and began rubbing his jaw idly. "I was intrigued by you from the moment I saw your interview. I couldn't figure out why and it gradually led to my behavior changing towards you. At first... I realized I did not want you to die."

He raised an eyebrow as he continued. "And then... I realized I wanted to protect you. And then I became very possessive of you, or perhaps, the idea of you. I am still not precisely sure what any of that means."

Boyd tracked Sin's face for a moment and studied his eyes. There had been times he'd been worried Sin hated him. He knew by now that wasn't the case anymore but hearing it all laid out only helped reinforce it. He'd spent years feeling unwanted so being wanted and knowing that Sin was protective, even possessive, of him warmed him on some level.

Still... 'the idea' of him? Boyd's gaze unconsciously slid away in thought. He wondered what that meant. Liking the idea of him, feeling possessive of it, did that

mean he'd never felt protective of Boyd himself? All along, had he just wanted to keep around one of the few people who treated him differently? Was it only Boyd's actions that attracted Sin and not actually Boyd? The thought was mildly disturbing but Boyd didn't care to dwell on it. Instead, Boyd thought about where they'd come from, and what had just happened. After months of being hesitant to touch Sin at all, he'd just kissed down his chest and wrapped his lips around his cock. He couldn't even comprehend what sort of step this would mean in their interaction; but, mingling with disbelief, he definitely hoped that it would happen again.

"Oh," he said finally, at a loss for words.

Sin stared at Boyd intently from under his bangs, continuing to chew on his lip ring as he studied the other man. After awhile he raised his hand and brushed it tentatively against Boyd's cheek. There was something almost awkward about Sin's movements, as though he wasn't really sure how to act or what to say. Boyd touched Sin's hand with a slight lifting of the edges of his lips. After a moment Sin's hand dropped away and he stood up.

"So are you ever going to make me breakfast?" The topic change was sudden and it clearly signaled the fact that Sin no longer wanted to discuss their mutual attraction or anything relating to it for one reason or another.

Boyd stood as well and headed to the other counter. He couldn't help noticing that Sin was acting strangely, which made it difficult for Boyd to know if he was regretting it or just too surprised himself to really know how to react. It made Boyd rather unsure of himself; he'd known since the night before that Sin was at least interested in him sexually but he had no idea what he thought now that they'd actually come together in that way.

He decided the best thing to do was just to act normal; after all, he'd definitely been the one to initiate this so if he seemed awkward as well it would probably be confusing.

"I don't know if you want me to. I'm really not skilled in the kitchen, but I'll try. What do you want? No guarantees, of course, that I'll even know how to make it."

Sin stood behind the counter, looking almost distant as he stared into space. He looked at Boyd distractedly and ran his fingers through his hair, shrugging. "Oh, I don't know." Boyd watched him sidelong then turned with an amiable shrug of one shoulder and busied himself with trying to make some omelets. He was fairly certain that just involved eggs and... heating them. And probably putting stuff inside.

Sin's words from earlier drifted through his mind as he tried to figure out what pan or pot he wanted for this. Looking over his shoulder, he raised an eyebrow. "You know," he drawled in an attempt to lighten the mood a little, "If you know so much about pots and pans, maybe you should cook instead."

Sin looked at him blankly, as if the comment hadn't properly registered; the moment stretched for a long time and turned into an awkward silence.

Boyd turned around fully and he gave Sin a strange look. Acting nonchalant wasn't going to work if Sin was determined to act oddly towards him from now on. He was already paranoid about Sin's silence but now he almost felt irritated by it since he was making a conscious effort to behave normally and his partner apparently had no intentions of returning the favor. "...Are you always this charming after a morning blow-job or am I just lucky?"

Sin blinked at him, eyebrows rising. "I don't know. That was my first blow-job."

Boyd blinked. "Really," and it was more a statement than a question. He watched him skeptically. "What did you do with the other people you've been with?"

Sin's eyebrows drew together and he gave Boyd a mildly confused look. "What other times? What are you talking about?"

That just bewildered Boyd. "Your other..." He stared at Sin. "The other people you've slept with."

He gave Boyd a strange look. "What? I've never had sex with anyone before."

A long moment of silence met the statement. Boyd blinked and drew his eyebrows down. "What...? But..."

Thinking about it now, Sin had never specifically said he'd slept with anyone. When he'd said that he was tired of men and women, he must have meant them in general. With the way Sin had so readily suggested Boyd have sex with the waitress and the attraction that had been growing between both of them, Boyd had just assumed Sin had been with other people.

Sin's mouth turned down and he glared at Boyd. "What?" he demanded, sounding defensive.

"Nothing," Boyd said immediately. "It's just surprising." He gestured at Sin vaguely. "You're just so sexy and you seem to know what you're doing. And some of the comments you made in the past-- I just assumed..."

Sin relaxed, appearing mildly mollified by the explanation. He hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his jeans and shrugged. "I always thought I was kind of asexual. I was never attracted to anyone, and I never really thought about myself in the terms of being in sexual relationships. I barely spoke to anyone, so the idea of doing that never really occurred to me."

"Ah." Boyd paused, watching Sin thoughtfully. "So you were never even tempted to indulge with anyone ever? Even something quick like the way you suggested I do with that waitress?"

"No." Sin shrugged. "I just never saw myself as a sexual being. I only ever fought. And nobody ever showed interest in me in that way unless they were psychotic in some fashion."

Boyd's eyebrows lifted. "Are you calling me psychotic?"

Sin smirked. "You might be. Or masochistic."

"Masochistic?" Boyd echoed in a drawl, his lips lifting into a wry smile. "You think so?"

"You must be if you want to screw around with a half deranged assassin," he replied with a raised brow.

A smirk drew across Boyd's face and he stepped closer. "It must be so, then. Especially since all I can think about is how I want to screw around with that assassin again."

Sin's eyebrows raised. "Then I think I'm glad you're a masochist."

"Good," Boyd said with a slight, pleased smirk. He stepped closer and rested his hands on Sin's hips. "So, what are you going to do with that information?"

Strong hands reached out and gripped Boyd's upper arms, pulling him forward until their bodies were pressed together. "I'm not sure," Sin admitted slowly. "But... after months of wondering what it would be like to put my hands on you and my mouth on you, I think... I just want to touch you."

The words came out almost faintly and Boyd's mouth went dry, heart skipping a beat as Sin released one of his arms and raised a hand to his face. Callused fingers traced the shape of his lips and parted them as Sin stared at his mouth with the same intense fervor that he'd had earlier. But this time Sin didn't pull away or hide it.

When Sin spoke, his voice was low and had the hypnotic, seductive quality that Boyd had always imagined it would have in a situation like this.

"I think I just want to taste you."

"So do it," Boyd replied, the timbre of his voice rough with desire. "I want it too."

There was a brief pause, Sin's eyes seeming to intensify even further as their attention narrowed in solely on each other. Their lips met again, tongues twining together hungrily. Long fingers and strong hands moved over each other as if they were

trying to memorize every contour, every muscle, every hard line. The kiss was almost violent in its need and lasted long enough that it left them both panting as they finally pulled apart. Boyd left a lingering slide of his tongue against the ring wrapped around Sin's full, lower lip.

Sin groaned. He rolled his hips boldly and for the first time the hesitation was completely absent from his motions. "You're making it hard for me to take my hands off you," he rasped when Boyd released his lip.

Boyd tilted his head back, eyes still fastened on Sin's lips as his own mouth hung slightly open. "Then don't," he said quietly, fingers digging into Sin and eyes shuttering as he felt Sin's erection press against his own.

"Are you sure?" Sin asked, voice low and thick with lust. "Because I won't." He clutched Boyd's ass with one hand, pounding his hips against Boyd's roughly, causing Boyd to hiss an expletive as his eyes shut and his fingers dug into Sin's skin.

"I've been jerking off thinking about touching you for months," Sin growled, lips hot against Boyd's as his other hand slid up and under Boyd's shirt, teasing the soft, smooth skin at his back. His fingers stilled and drew away almost immediately.

Boyd's skin tingled where Sin's fingers had briefly touched his back and even though some part of him recoiled at the idea of being touched anywhere beneath his shirt, Sin had stopped without being told to. That alone meant more to him than he could explain. Added to that, the spike of desire he felt at Sin's confession burned away the discomfort he may otherwise have felt.

When he pulled away from the kiss, he watched Sin with heated, half-lidded eyes. "If my shirt stays on," he muttered, his voice thick with arousal, "and you only touch my back, it's okay."

Sin nodded, eyes slightly unfocused and fogged over with passion as he drew Boyd in for another lingering kiss. A low growl escaped his lips and he pulled back for

air after several long moments, gazing at Boyd from under heavy-lidded eyes. "What now?"

"I don't kn..." Boyd started to say, too dazed by the entire situation to process questions quickly enough. He breathed heavily and for a moment could hardly comprehend that Sin wanted to do more.

As Sin caught his breath, Boyd trailed his mouth across his strong jaw; let the pounding of his heart be the tempo to which he kissed along Sin's ear and sucked on his earlobe. He let the taste of Sin's skin mix with the metallic flavor of Sin's earrings. Sin's eyes rolled backwards, a low sound escaping his mouth as his grip on Boyd tightened.

"Anything," Boyd murmured against his ear. "I can suck you off again," a kiss against the corner of his jaw, "or I can jerk you off... Or if there's anything else you want..." There were, of course, any number of options, but most of them he didn't want to push at the moment.

"I don't know," Sin mumbled as he reached down to adjust the way his erection was pressing uncomfortably against his jeans, panting as Boyd's mouth continued to tease his obviously sensitive ear. "You don't have to do anything."

Noting the reaction, Boyd smirked almost wickedly to himself and began sucking on Sin's earlobe slowly and thoroughly. "Maybe I want to," he said softly, pulling away just enough to speak but keeping his lips against Sin's skin. He slid his fingers into Sin's hair to pull him closer. "I like touching you." His breath was hot against Sin's ear. "I've been jerking off thinking about you for months too. The feel of your skin," his fingers dipped down briefly to tingle along the back of Sin's neck before he tangled them in his hair again, "your incredibly hot body, your eyes... Everything."

Sin's breath hitched and he actually fell backwards against the counter, a strange, strangled sound escaping his throat. His chest was heaving as he stared at Boyd, mouth hanging open and lips wet, mildly swollen. It was strange to see him like that; to see someone who was usually so controlled and serious turn into someone who

seemed completely consumed by desire. Somehow he almost seemed powerless against Boyd; like he didn't know what to do and he was leaving it all up to Boyd. Seeing him like that made Boyd so hard it was nearly uncomfortable.

"Really?" Sin muttered.

"Yes." Boyd pulled Sin forward by the back of the neck as he stared at him with an expression overcome with desire. "You're so--" He broke off for another needy kiss, his tongue practically ravishing Sin's mouth, and for another stretch of time they were lost to each other.

Boyd was the first to pull away with a murmured, "Come here," as he moved backwards towards the couch, dragging Sin along with him. They stumbled slightly, unwilling to part long enough to walk properly, bodies tight against each other.

Sin stared at him with sleepy-looking bedroom eyes and lapped at Boyd's mouth like a cat as he gripped Boyd's tight ass hard enough to most likely leave bruises. Sin grunted, and growled, "My dick is so fucking hard right now."

Boyd almost fell over the table at that and had to grab Sin's arms to regain his stability. They practically collapsed onto the sofa, groping and kissing each other with abandon. They sprawled facing each other, both of Boyd's long, lightly tanned legs spread on either side of Sin's as their lips moved together feverishly, hands roaming everywhere. For a long time the only sounds in the room were soft panting, moans and their wet, sloppy kisses.

Sin slid his hand under one of the legs of Boyd's shorts, long fingers teasing upwards against where Boyd's hard cock strained against his briefs.

"Ahh fuck," Boyd groaned, arching his back at that and resting his forehead against Sin's, panting harshly against his mouth. A low, lingering shudder of a breath escaped him, but for a moment he could not speak. Sin caused a fire within him that made him insane with passion.

It was already dizzying feeling Sin's lips and hands on him, but those strong fingers, which could easily rip a person apart, were a gentle torture against his tingling skin. He let out a helpless moan, incredibly turned on by the contrast of what Sin was capable of and what he was doing, and he didn't even stop to wonder if it was strange that the idea aroused him so much. He couldn't help it. The fact that someone who could be so fucking intimidating and violent, who could inspire complete terror in a grown man with a single, stormy glare, was touching him with the sliding, gentle brush of fingers up his thigh and under his clothing... It was almost too much.

Sin's fingers traced the length of Boyd's cock through the fabric in slow, teasing gestures, his tongue sliding against Boyd's as he let his fingers go slowly beneath Boyd's briefs. He splayed his hand out and let his fingers spread on either side of Boyd's erection although he didn't touch it, instead lightly toying with his pubic hair.

Boyd made a half-whimpering noise and jerked his hips to try to rub Sin's hand closer to his erection but it didn't work and a strangled, desperate moan was muffled by Sin's lips. He squeezed his eyes shut and his heart skipped and sped. He almost couldn't breathe properly; his mind was so overloaded by what Sin was doing. Boyd didn't want to break the kiss; it was wet and hot and he wanted to taste every centimeter of Sin and then start all over by exploring his mouth again. Sin's kisses were so addictive.

Sin pulled away slightly and trailed wet, open mouthed kisses along Boyd's jaw and down to his neck as he finally wrapped his strong fingers around Boyd's erection. As his mouth fastened on the side of Boyd's neck and sucked, he slowly began to pump his cock, fingers tightening around it. Boyd threw his head back and let out a long, shuddering moan. The feeling of that callused hand sliding up and down him was mind blowing and suddenly he was overwhelmed by the fact that this was Sin, this was *Sin*, Sin was touching him and kissing him and—

His eyes snapped open and he looked down almost wildly. Sin was watching him with lust-filled eyes and Boyd's entire body trembled. "Oh God..." he groaned huskily, absolutely incapable of looking away.

He arched into Sin's touch, his legs falling open to give better access, and he stared at Sin with half-lidded eyes burning with desire as he started pumping his hips. His lips were swollen and red, his mouth open as he panted and moaned unabashedly. Sin's presence was completely sucking him in and he had no defenses against it; it didn't even occur to him to try to hide how much Sin was turning him on, how much he wanted him and how little he could resist him. Half-formed words became moans and whimpers and every expression, every thought was there for Sin to see and hear.

Sin took his fingers away abruptly, ripping his hand out from under Boyd's shorts. "Take them off," he ordered in a low, throaty whisper.

Boyd's breath hitched and, not looking away from Sin, he didn't even question the order. His fingers fumbled shakily with the button and zipper but he managed to lift his hips and push his shorts down, all without saying a word.

Sin licked his lips, eyes darkening. "Underwear too."

"Fuck," Boyd hissed impatiently, eyes narrowed toward Sin as if he wanted to glare but was too clouded by lust to bother. He didn't question that either, though. He just hooked his thumbs beneath the waistband at his hips and pushed them down unceremoniously. Sin's gaze dropped and focused on Boyd's erection; he panted softly as his eyes feasted on his partner's body. He wrapped his hand around Boyd again and began sliding it up and down his cock, rubbing the pad of his thumb against the head slowly. His own erection strained in his jeans and he rubbed it idly with his free hand.

"Do you like when I touch you?" he asked Boyd softly, eyes burning intensely from under his messy hair.

Boyd arched his back like a pleased cat and watched Sin with eyes nearly turned black from dilation. His mouth fell open and his gaze drifted to where Sin was touching himself. The sight aroused him further, causing his stomach to clench as he grunted softly. He still couldn't quite believe this was happening; it felt like it had to be a particularly vivid wet dream.

"Jesus fuck, yes," Boyd groaned, jerking his hips up insistently.

He rocked his hips against Sin, his hands curling and his fingers digging into the cushions. He opened his legs as far as he could and braced his feet against the couch for leverage.

Sin responded to him immediately and began pumping Boyd's erection harder, faster, even as he impatiently unzipped his own jeans with his free hand. His breath was coming fast enough to rival Boyd's and when he lifted his hips and shimmied out of his jeans and underwear, he grabbed one of Boyd's hands and guided it to his erection. It was rock hard and swollen, clear liquid oozing from the tip as he wrapped Boyd's fingers around it. Sin's eyes rolled back in his head as Boyd slid his hand along the length.

Sin's hand began moving faster, sliding up and down Boyd's cock as he fucked Boyd's hand. He leaned forward to run his tongue along Boyd's neck as he licked down and sucked lightly on his Adam's apple, causing Boyd to groan and arch into the touch. The slick heat of Sin's tongue and breath against his skin made a shudder run through him.

A loud, husky moan escaped Sin's mouth and he began slamming his hips up against Boyd violently, moving his own hand faster as he panted against Boyd's lips. He muttered in a language Boyd didn't understand; urgent words that Boyd could still tell were saying how good this felt and how close he was to coming.

He pumped his hips against Sin's hand wildly, lost to the feel of callused fingers on his skin, lips pressed against his mouth hungrily, that sexy voice murmuring in another language, Sin's erection in his hand as he jerked his hand even faster... Boyd's eyes rolled back as he felt the moment build within him powerfully. He could think of nothing but the intensity of the feelings coursing through him. The way this all felt, the sweaty, sliding heat of his skin and the hungry, muffled pants caught between their lips.

"S-Sin--" was all he managed to breathe desperately.

His eyes slid open and he stared at Sin as his orgasm hit him so hard that he lost all ability to think coherently. His back arched, fingers and toes curling and he could only drop his mouth open wide and moan in a strangled half-cry, letting the intensity scour through him and wipe out every thought but Sin. His orgasm was messy and overwhelming, and his eyes feasted on every bit of skin, every perfectly sculptured feature he could see of his partner.

Sin's eyebrows drew together as he panted harshly, loud sounds dripping from his lips as Boyd's hand began to jerk his cock faster, rougher. They stayed that way for a few moments before Sin clenched his teeth together and came violently. An incredibly long, loud moan fell from Sin's lips. His eyes squeezed shut as his fingers tightened briefly against Boyd's skin. When it was finally over, he fell backwards against the sofa, panting loudly.

They stayed that way for a long time, both of their bodies slick with sweat in the room that was heavy with heat and the heady smell of sex. Finally Boyd shifted uncomfortably and made a vain effort at pulling his shorts back up so that they wouldn't dig awkwardly into his thighs anymore. He kept his eyes closed as he moved lazily, limbs languid and sated from what had just happened. When he accidentally collapsed against Sin's naked body he didn't get up even though it was far too hot for them to be so close together. He didn't make any effort to move and Sin didn't push him away so he let exhaustion overtake him. ===

When Sin opened his eyes, the shadows were considerably longer and the room was hotter. The only sounds in the room were Boyd's soft breathing and the pitiful humming of the air conditioner in the window. Sunlight streamed through the windows, casting a golden light on the floor which mesmerized Sin for a moment. The sun shone through so rarely that it always captured his attention.

For awhile his eyes simply followed the dust particles that danced in the beams of light. Despite the heat in the room, Sin had no desire to move. He felt lazy, sluggish and extremely content. But after awhile the uncomfortable feeling of dried semen and

sticky sweat became too annoying and he made a face, shifting slightly as his gaze dropped down to Boyd.

He'd never really taken much time to watch Boyd sleep but now that they were at such a close proximity, he decided that his partner looked almost innocent in his sleep. His lips were slightly parted and face extremely peaceful, relaxed. Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and as he felt Boyd's heart beating against his chest, he wondered if this was actually happening or if it was one of the vivid dreams he'd been having in the past few months. His eyebrows drew together and he frowned at the idea but after a moment the paranoia passed and he rolled his eyes at his own stupidity.

He shifted again and frowned at Boyd when he didn't so much as stir. "Hey. Move."

The movement half woke Boyd and he blinked sleepily before shooting Sin a rather confused glare, red hair hanging around his face in disarray. "What?"

"I said get your bony ass off of me. I need a shower." Sin sat up fully and shoved Boyd unceremoniously backwards on the couch. He stood up to stretch, completely uncaring that he was entirely naked. He stepped out of the jeans which were still tangled around his ankles and scratched at the dried semen on his stomach. It flaked off and floated into the air.

Boyd made a sleepy, indignant face at him but didn't bother to get up again. He just settled against the couch and mumbled almost sullenly, "Who's the bony one."

Sin snorted and headed towards the bathroom. "Go back to sleep."

Boyd muttered something that was incoherent as it mixed with a yawn and Sin smirked, closing the bathroom door behind him. He turned on the shower and stared at himself in the mirror for a moment as he waited for the water to get slightly warmer. He studied his features, the face that looked so identical to his father's, and frowned slightly to himself. He didn't know what anyone saw in him but then again considering the fact

that women had flocked to his father, he supposed it wasn't so shocking that some people might find him to be attractive as well.

The water was a little cooler than lukewarm and it felt good against his sweaty skin. He closed his eyes and absently wished that Boyd wasn't so body shy so that they could stand under the water together.

He ran his fingers through his hair and he tilted his face up, imagining what Boyd would look like completely naked. He couldn't figure out why Boyd didn't want to take off his shirt; he imagined that his chest was just as attractive as the rest of him. While his body wasn't as cut or muscular as Sin's, months of training and going on missions had given him a sleek, athletically toned body that was incredibly pleasing to look upon. Sin tried to imagine what could be so bad that Boyd felt the need to hide it so obsessively. The thought reminded him of that hint of black ink that he'd briefly seen beneath the back of Boyd's tank top.

Sin opened his eyes and washed up quickly, determined to bring it up before he forgot again. He finished his shower and wandered out of the bathroom in nothing more than a small towel which was wrapped around his waist.

Boyd looked up, seeming to have woken entirely sometime during Sin's shower. He pushed himself up on one elbow, surveying him with a pleased smile. "That's a nice sight to wake up to."

Sin smirked and ran a hand through his wet hair, slicking it back. "Too bad you didn't feel that way when I used to parade around naked in front of you on assignments."

Boyd dropped his head down onto his arms, grinning with a chuckle. "No," he drawled. "That would have been bad. I would never have been able to concentrate on anything. Running through the base I'd think only about you."

Sin gazed down at Boyd for a moment and tilted his head. "So does that mean we shouldn't be partners anymore? Or does that mean we can't do this anymore?"

"It just means I need to see you like this all the time so I can become accustomed to it," he replied innocently.

Sin actually laughed at that and leaned against the wall.

Boyd smiled in return and watched Sin for a moment. There was something that almost seemed content in the way he studied him. "I'm going to shower," he said after a moment.

Sin grunted, still looking faintly amused. "And then you can finally make me some breakfast."

Boyd got to his feet finally and raised an eyebrow at Sin. "How about you make me some instead?"

Sin made a face but before he could respond, Boyd grabbed some clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. Sin ultimately decided that he may as well make breakfast since he was hungry and didn't want to wait. He could hear the hiss of the water in the shower, muffled by the closed door. Sin made scrambled eggs and had them put onto two plates by the time Boyd was done.

When Boyd reappeared, he was in skinny jeans and a checkered shirt, the leather bands secured around his wrists as usual. His hair was still damp from the shower and fell into his eyes, which were unnaturally blue from the contacts he'd put in. He stopped, looking surprised by the food.

"Wow." Boyd started toward Sin, his bare feet padding silently across the room. "Maybe you should be the domestic one instead."

Sin gave him a reproachful look and picked up his own plate, heading over to the couch and bypassing the kitchen table as usual. "I don't think so."

"Oh?" Boyd drawled with a light smirk, bringing his plate with him as he trailed after Sin. "And why not?"

"I have to work at that ridiculous establishment so you have to do menial labor and be domestic. That is the way this situation works." Sin sat on the sofa and shoveled eggs into his mouth. He immediately made a face and declared that they were bland.

Boyd shook his head, seeming amused by Sin's reaction. He pulled the coffee table closer and set his plate down. After he took a bite of eggs he gave Sin a strange look. "No, they taste great. I think you're just trying to get out of cooking again by pretending to be terrible at it."

"I am terrible at it," Sin replied and began to eat his food at an alarming rate. They were silent as they finished eating but then Sin remembered what he'd wanted to ask Boyd. He reached out, running his finger over the base of Boyd's neck. "What's that tattoo?"

Boyd jumped at the touch, looking over at Sin with a startled, blank stare. He seemed confused by the question until recognition suddenly hit him with an alarmed widening of his eyes. His skin paled and he suddenly twisted his head to look over his shoulder. "That's showing?" he asked, sounding unnerved by the idea. "I didn't even think--" He stopped talking abruptly.

"You didn't answer my question," Sin said bluntly, eyes narrowing slightly at Boyd's reaction.

Boyd stared at him, his arms crossing his stomach. There was a guardedness to his expression that Sin wasn't accustomed to seeing. "It's nothing." He paused. "Just words. Nothing special."

Sin stared at him for a moment before shaking his head, mouth turning down with irritation. "Fine."

Boyd frowned and glanced at Sin before looking away again. His fingers curled and his eyebrows lowered almost broodingly. He wouldn't meet Sin's eye and tension built between them before Boyd finally said, "*Mea Maxima Culpa*." He paused. "And *Corpus Vile*. ...That's what they say."

Sin gave him a strange look. "And that is Latin for what?"

Boyd grew still, his expression turning into the neutral mask that Sin remembered from long ago. He didn't reply at first; he just watched Sin almost warily.

The silence grew until Sin felt irritated by Boyd's reluctance to ever tell him anything of value. "Just forget it," he snapped.

Boyd's eyebrows twitched and he looked away with a slight pained cast to the turning down of his lips. His eyes narrowed pensively and there was tension in his shoulders. After a moment he grimaced.

"Through my greatest fault,' and 'worthless body,'" he said without looking over.

Sin stared at him blankly. "Why would you get something like that?"

"I was upset," Boyd replied, still not looking at him.

That earned him another blank stare but this time the expression morphed into one of annoyance. Sin shook his head. "Whatever, Boyd. Forget I asked."

Boyd's expression twisted and he looked down. One hand rested on the wristband of his other wrist and his expression tightened. "It's not that I don't... It's just--" He stopped himself, apparently incapable of finishing a sentence. A frown marred his face. "It's just... difficult."

"Just forget it," Sin said flatly. "I've lost interest in knowing."

Boyd looked over at Sin, seeming at once hesitant and wary. "I mean it's hard to explain, okay?"

Sin made a face and stood up, grabbing a shirt and throwing it on. "Yeah, everything is with you."

He didn't want to be angry with Boyd, didn't want to go through this again, but he couldn't help it. Despite everything he'd been through, despite the fact that he was going

against all the things that were ingrained in him, he constantly opened up to Boyd but Boyd had yet to do the same.

"I'm going to go work out. Go running."

Boyd watched him and then ran a hand back through his hair. He looked away with a nod, his lips pulling down pensively. "Alright."

Sin stood for a moment and looked at Boyd before shaking his head and turning away.

## Chapter 32

Monterrey was slowly becoming less of a mystery to Boyd as he spent most of his days wandering the streets with the sketch pad, getting a feel for the public transportation to better understand what systems would make learning the city most efficient. He learned that the taxi cabs were by far the best way to tour the city, but there were certain areas that the bus-lines or train were better for. He also learned that it was incredibly easy to find every type of transportation available in many areas of the city but there were a few places where it was nearly impossible.

The availability of public transportation seemed to correlate to the wealthiness of the neighborhoods he found himself in. It helped him get an overview of Monterrey and which areas he should study the most as the months passed. More than once he found himself mentally marking a block or building to return to at a later date for further study as a possible future hiding place.

At one point in one of the trendier parts of the city, he thought he felt someone tailing him. He gave no visible indication of noticing but he could feel it in the way his senses were on alert. Rather than looking around obviously, he just meandered, casually checking reflections or stopping at shops and watching in his peripheral vision for anyone out of the ordinary.

If someone was truly watching him they were doing a very good job of staying hidden because Boyd never once saw anyone acting suspicious. And, unfortunately, Monterrey was such a diverse city that he couldn't even look for someone who seemed out of place.

After awhile he decided he had either been mistaken or the moment had passed so he gave up searching for the origin of the feeling and instead focused on his task. While he always made a point to act like Kadin, he was especially careful that day; every speech pattern, seemingly unconscious gesture, and expression was to the best of his ability a perfect mimicry of the man he was impersonating.

He hadn't returned to Julieta's; it seemed too early to him and the last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to himself. Instead, he excused his apparent interest in the city at large as a longer-ranged shopping trip. Even with the sturdier door, there were still some issues with the security of their studio. He didn't see the need to fortify the entrances any further but he did think the inside could use some help and it gave him a good cover for extensively traveling the city.

The main issue was Sin's weapons; they were really the only thing of import they had in the studio and they were not properly protected. He decided to go with a wardrobe with a fake back that would give them access without being an obvious hiding place.

Due to his varying schedule, Boyd didn't see Sin as often as he had before. With Sin working night shifts and Boyd traveling around primarily during the day, there were a few times when Sin returned home to find Boyd already asleep or just on his way. Most of the time, Boyd was still awake when Sin returned or Sin woke up early enough to see Boyd during the day; whether it was before he left or when he returned for breaks.

Now that their mutual attraction had finally been acted upon, it wasn't uncommon for them to touch each other. There hadn't been much progression sexually, but that didn't take away any of the heat from their fevered kisses or quick, frantic handjobs before one of the two left the studio to go about their day. Other than the introduction of mutual masturbation and oral sex, nothing else had changed about their relationship except for the fact that Sin had become far more stoic than he'd previously been.

He was far from cold and was as sarcastic as ever but now it seemed almost like he'd reverted to the attitude he'd had when they first became partners. It was a subtle difference that probably wouldn't even be recognized by anyone else but over the days Boyd had noticed that their conversations had focused on the assignment, work, or superficial banter that seemed almost forced or stilted. No personal information was exchanged, no questions were asked. In fact, Sin seemed to be refraining from even sharing his thoughts or opinions on trivial incidents at work. Instead, he'd taken to relating them in an almost impersonal way.

Despite the fact that Boyd was more than pleased by the fact that they had gotten closer sexually, he was disappointed by the distance between them. There was no doubt in Boyd's mind that it was directly related to his awkward reaction when Sin had asked about his tattoos.

Many of the hours Boyd spent walking around the city eventually became a time for him to think more clearly about recent revelations. He'd felt guilty for not answering Sin's questions that day when Sin had answered so many of his own. Yet talking about any of that was a difficult thing for Boyd to consider; he was an introvert by nature and that had only been emphasized as he grew, as events in his life had changed him irrevocably.

If it had just been a question of tattoos, he could have answered. But it wasn't. It was all tied together, the dark mass of emotions that loomed in his memory. For anyone else the very idea of even trying to talk about it would have been terrifying. But this was Sin.

It took him a day to determine that he couldn't avoid this, and another to convince himself that he had to get over his aversion to talking about this. Of all people, Sin deserved the full answer that Boyd had never been able to even think about for anyone else.

Still, even after he'd determined that, every time he tried to bring the subject up he somehow always changed his mind at the last second or just couldn't seem to get the words out correctly. It was starting to irritate him but that only added to his determination. He couldn't -- shouldn't -- let fear of the past determine the course of his future. It was a lesson he needed to learn in general but he would start by applying now.

By the time Sin returned from work, Boyd was standing in the kitchen reheating some food he'd bought a few hours earlier when returning from the city. It had worked out nicely; he'd needed to check out a few places after dark and at that point he decided he may as well eat late with Sin. He turned at the noise of the door opening and smiled slightly.

"Hey," he greeted. "Are you hungry?"

Sin locked the door and flipped the dead bolt before turning in Boyd's direction with a grunt that passed as an answer. He looked tired and a little annoyed although he didn't complain about either. He walked over to the kitchen. "What did you make now?" He stared down at the pot of reheating noodles.

"I didn't make it, but it's chicken alfredo."

"Oh." Sin grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and turned towards the main room to start stripping off his work clothes.

Boyd watched him sidelong before speaking again. "Were there any exciting brawls at work today?"

"I broke some college kid's nose," Sin said mildly. "Slow night. But somehow that annoying group of women who follow me has grown larger."

"Really." Boyd deemed that the chicken alfredo would be warm enough in a few minutes. He set a small hand-held timer he bought for the kitchen and turned around, leaning against the counter with his hands resting on the edge. "What's it up to now, twenty?"

Sin shrugged and pulled his shirt over his head, tossing it on the couch. "Seventeen. Johnny's suggestion was that I fuck one and be done with it."

"Hmm." Watching Sin's bare torso, Boyd shook his head slightly. "I don't think that would work. It would only make them want you more."

"I wasn't planning to try it, anyway," Sin replied with a shrug.

Boyd watched him, his gaze automatically moving across Sin's body. The old scars were a familiar pattern against Sin's skin; he'd certainly seen him without his shirt often enough to know where each of them was and what they looked like.

They told stories, some of which he hadn't heard, and several of which he wanted to know. The one that looked as though it had been most painful, and certainly most life-threatening, was a thick scar that angled partially across his throat before it jerked down toward his collarbone.

Before Monterrey, the collar had always been there, partially obscuring the scar. Seeing it out in the open made him think about how things had changed in Monterrey; how Sin had seemed, for awhile, to be opening up even more. It made him think about how much he'd liked learning more about Sin and how annoying it would have been if every time Boyd had asked anything personal, Sin would have just avoided the question entirely or not fully answered.

This was the best chance he would have to get to know Sin more and, honestly, it worked vice versa.

The buzzer went off behind Boyd and he turned toward it automatically to shut it off. He filled a plate for him and Sin each and then moved over to the couch, pushing one of the plates in front of his partner. They were quiet for a bit but it wasn't particularly uncomfortable.

Boyd stared at his food thoughtfully as he ate, realizing that at that point he could just fall silent. He could take the easy way out. He could feel like at least he accomplished some small part of his goal and be done with it until another time. But that would be stupid; he hadn't really said anything important yet and Sin still deserved to know at least an equal amount about Boyd that Boyd now knew about Sin.

He looked over at Sin, studying him. "I'm not very good at this," he said honestly. After the few moments of silence, the words seemed a little abrupt. "I don't know what to say to you. Even so... I want to tell you whatever you want to know about."

Sin studied his food intently as he twirled his fork around, expression not giving anything away. "What makes you think I want to know anything?"

"I think it's impossible to spend this much time in someone's presence and not be curious. And you wouldn't have asked me any questions earlier if you hadn't wondered." Boyd paused, considering him; this would probably make him sound like a stalker but at the moment he didn't care about protecting his own feelings. "But it's the same for me; I was curious about you long before I felt I could actually ask you questions. So... I did some research on you. I saw some videos and, for awhile, I watched you."

Sin stopped chewing and stared at Boyd for a long, tense moment. His face was completely still and guarded, body stiffening as his eyes narrowed. "Watched me," he repeated in a flat voice.

"Yes. Those cameras in your apartment had a live feed that I was able to connect to." He hesitated, hoping this wasn't going to ruin whatever amount of trust he'd been able to build with Sin. "I felt bad watching you without your knowledge but I couldn't help it. Still, the fact that you had no privacy bothered me. It's why I destroyed them."

Sin slowly began chewing again and swallowed his food, dropping his gaze to his plate thoughtfully. "Why did you watch?" he asked finally. There were no traces of resentment and anger in his voice if anything, he seemed mildly surprised and curious.

Boyd looked down at the alfredo, his eyebrows drawing together as he remembered that time. "I was captivated by you." He idly pushed some noodles along the edge of the plate with his fork and then looked up to meet Sin's eyes. "I ran across it by accident. But I saw a side of you I didn't see elsewhere at first, and all these questions grew in my mind. After a while, I began to feel," he paused as his eyebrows lowered further in thought. "Connected. I think I saw a bit of myself in you but more than anything, it just... made me feel like I wasn't alone."

There was a long moment of silence as Sin watched him. After a stretch he pushed his empty plate aside. "You saw some of yourself in me?" he asked somewhat skeptically, eyebrows drawing together. "How?"

Boyd let out a low breath. "I don't know, exactly. Just..." He gestured vaguely, his eyebrows drawing down. "You were so alone. No one knew you or even cared to try."

Sometimes you stayed still for hours, not really doing anything, and I couldn't tell if you were thinking deeply or if you'd simply stopped caring to move. And what I saw when we were together wasn't always what I saw on the feed. It made me start to think about what was a mask you put on to keep others from hurting you and what was indicative of who you are."

Sin frowned slightly, making a contemplative sound as he studied his partner. He seemed to take this all in before asking, "What other videos did you see?"

"Mostly the ones related to your incarceration," Boyd said with a shrug. "There was a surveillance video of the reason you were arrested, when you protected that girl. And of your interrogation by the two detectives. I also saw the session with Lydia Connors."

Sin had just started to reach for his water when he froze. He didn't look away from Boyd and for an instant his eyes narrowed, brows drawing down as his mouth tightened in a thin line. A muscle in his jaw ticked and he stared at him for a long moment before he finally grabbed his bottle. "You saw that." It was more of a statement of fact than a question.

"Yes."

"And you still..." Sin shook his head, trailing off as he drank a long gulp of water. "Never mind."

"What?" Boyd asked, watching him closely.

Sin shrugged and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Those two incidents are what led to mostly everyone believing that I am a psychopathic murderer. And you've seen them and yet--" He stopped again. "When did you see them?"

Boyd thought about that aloud. "It was after the mission when I was captured... So that must have been around October?"

Sin stared at him incredulously and shook his head. "You saw them that early on and you still treated me like... how you treated me. You still believed that everyone else's opinion of me was wrong." He was silent for another moment before finally clearing his throat and raising an inquisitive eyebrow. "And what did you think, then?"

"I was mostly watching them trying to ascertain what made you have an episode," Boyd replied with a faint contemplative frown as he thought back. "As far as I could tell, you reacted to threat levels. I couldn't entirely decide what to make of it all except that you seemed to have had a reason for your reactions each time, even if I didn't know exactly what that reason always was. One thing that was clear to me was that you're consistently mistreated at the Agency."

There was a shrug at that and Sin seemed to brush it off like he usually did. "They'd have probably terminated me years ago if they had a proper replacement. Kassian isn't as good as me at what we do."

Boyd thought about that as he pulled his plate closer to finish his food. His gaze flicked over to Sin curiously. "You've mentioned him before but I don't know much about him. Why is he such a poor replacement? Isn't he also rank 10?"

Sin shrugged. "I'm basically one of a kind. I can be ruthless, I can complete difficult assignments alone that other men need an entire team to finish and most importantly, I don't question the politics of the Agency, or at least I don't as far as they know. Kassian is a good agent but nowhere near on par with me considering I've been trained to do this since I was a child, which I think really eats at him. He also resents me because of my spot in the unit. And because they use me as a model during rank 10 training. Anyway, I suppose he was adequate for a time, but Connors doesn't trust him to do high clearance assassinations."

"Why not?" Boyd asked curiously.

"He has a moral code," was the bland explanation. "And they let him get away with not doing more unsavory missions because he is an excellent agent in every other

capacity. But that's the deciding factor between he and I. There have been times when I had missions I didn't agree with, but I still do them."

Boyd watched him, thinking about that. "Have you ever wanted to question your assignments? Just tell them no?"

Sin didn't answer for a moment and continued to eat his second plate of food quietly. "Yes. Twice. The last time was on my most recent solo assignment. It was one of the reasons why I was so angry when we saw each other again."

Boyd set his empty plate aside and leaned back on the couch. "Really," he said, eyebrows drawing down as he rested one arm across the back of the couch. "Why, what happened?"

Sin didn't answer for a moment but he turned his face slightly, a flash of displeasure briefly visible. "Have you ever heard of Anderson McCall?" Looking at Sin sharply, Boyd just stared for a moment. "Yes," he said slowly. "Probably the best philanthropist of our time. Whose scandal just before suicide seemed a little strange to me." Boyd didn't want this to be leading in the direction it pretty much had to be.

"The scandal was manufactured by the Agency; the line of shady businessmen that McCall supposedly had murdered were killed by me and his suicide was not a suicide at all. I poisoned him." Sin's flat, voice made Boyd look at him closer, searching his expression. When their eyes met, he could see that Sin was still angry over whatever the assignment had entailed.

Even Boyd, who hadn't paid much attention to the world around him for years, had still known about Anderson McCall. He was one of the few decent people left after the wars, devoting his time to the poor. The sort of person who, in only slightly changed circumstances, could have been there to help Lou or even Boyd in the aftermath of the war.

Although he couldn't deny that he was disgusted with the fact that McCall's legacy had been so thoroughly decimated by the Agency, he couldn't be surprised. The

Agency was ruthless when it came to dealing with threats, and if McCall gave money to Janus that made him one in their eyes regardless of what he was doing with his time. It angered him but there was nothing that could be done about it. The only thing that made it worse was knowing that Sin had to be the one to follow through such orders.

Boyd shook his head. "I wish I could be surprised by that but..." His eyebrows lowered, hooding his gaze. He looked over at Sin and his lips turned down. "I'm sorry it happened at all, but especially that you had to be the one to do it."

"It's done. No use crying over it now, especially not when I'm the one who essentially pulled the trigger." Sin shook his head and rolled his shoulders as if working out the stress that had come with the topic. "But that's the defining reason why I have a higher clearance than him in some ways. I didn't want the assignment, but they knew I would do it. That's why Connors wants to model agents after me, and that's why Carhart wanted me in his unit. He knew he could depend on me not to question orders."

"You know," Boyd began, remembering the way Carhart had always been about Sin, even back to when he first met the general. "I'm sure he has you in the unit because you're a uniquely skilled agent. But I wonder if that's the only reason."

Sin made a sour face. "What's that mean?"

Boyd sat back on the couch, placing one hand over the back so he could angle himself to see Sin better. "I noticed ever since I first joined the Agency that he always seemed to act a little different when it came to you." He paused, studying Sin. "I think he honestly cares about you."

"Oh please."

Boyd eyed him. "I've been meaning to ask about that... You do realize he's your greatest proponent? He seems determined to give you every chance he can and often waits until the last second to give any sort of punishment. I honestly think it's because he's hoping someone will give him a reason not to. Yet you never seem very pleased with him..."

"Because I'm not," Sin replied flatly and took another drag.

"Why not?" Boyd asked, mildly perplexed. "I would have thought you would welcome someone in some form of power on your side since no one else seems to be except Ryan."

Sin didn't answer for a moment and he took another long drag, watching Boyd through the smoke that drifted in the air between them. "He's obsessed with my father. He constantly tries to get me to talk about him, to figure out what happened before he died, and he took it upon himself to try to be my parental figure when I came to the Agency. I did not and do not need him to play that role for me. I do not need him interrogating me about my father or his death. I just don't... want to deal with him. He aggravates me."

"Ah." Boyd watched him and shook his head. "I think he just misses Emilio; it sounds as though they were good friends. Wouldn't you be curious and sad if someone you cared about for years suddenly disappeared? Or want to protect the single person alive in any way connected to him?"

"I'm aware of the extent of their friendship." Sin made a face. "But that in no way involves me. Ever since I showed up at the Agency he's hounded me for information about my father and no matter how badly I react to his questions and implications, he doesn't stop."

Boyd could see how that would be frustrating. He inclined his head as a silent acknowledgment of the fact, but Sin's comments about Emilio and Connors jarred his memory that he'd always been meaning to ask about. He paused and tilted his head, studying Sin. "It seems as though Emilio had quite the effect on many people."

The comment earned him a low scoff. "That was an understatement. I disappointed scores when I came back instead of him."

"Why did you even come in for that summons when you were fourteen?" Boyd asked, shaking his head. "Do you ever wonder... If you'd just stayed away you wouldn't have had to deal with any of the things you've had to at the Agency."

There was a beat of silence and Sin's expression briefly changed. There was a flash of something dark in his expression, and he stared into space for a moment before shaking his head. "It would have been worse for me if I was left alone," he finally replied.

Boyd paused for a moment, watching his partner carefully. He could almost see Sin's pulse beating wildly in his neck and when he caught a glimpse of Sin's eyes, there was chaos within that he could tell Sin was struggling to contain.

Despite what Boyd had intended, he was once again grilling Sin for more information about himself without giving anything back. To make it worse, he found himself asking about very personal matters, or bringing up topics that must be difficult or painful for Sin to discuss. Here he was, pushing his own points to Sin without considering his feelings. If Sin was so frustrated with Carhart for constantly bringing up things he didn't want to talk about, wouldn't he feel the same way with Boyd doing the same?

"Hey," Boyd said softly. He leaned forward and hesitantly placed a hand on Sin's thigh. "I'm sorry. I get so indignant on your behalf that sometimes I don't think about what I'm saying."

The silence that stretched was so long that at first it didn't seem like Sin would answer. He stared down at the glowing cherry of his cigarette where it burned on the floor and he absently stamped it out with his foot.

After several long moments of silence, he turned to Boyd and without warning, dragged him across the sofa and against him. He ended up straddling Sin, his knees bent and hands automatically pressing against the back of the couch on either side of Sin's shoulders. It was so sudden that for a moment Boyd's eyebrows shifted upward questioningly.

Sin reached up, his hand moving to the back of Boyd's neck and tangling in the ends of his hair before he pulled him down into an urgent kiss. Boyd's lips parted automatically and soon their tongues were clashing. The taste of Sin and the feel of his hard body against Boyd's was like a drug he couldn't resist. Boyd let out a low sound deep in the back of his throat as Sin's fingers dug into his neck and pulled him closer. Their hips pressed against each other and Boyd could already feel Sin's cock, half hard and grinding up against him. It made Boyd groan and start rolling his hips down against Sin's.

They stayed that way for a bit, grinding and moaning and kissing increasingly passionately. Their mouths worked against each other and Boyd was becoming overrun by the feel and taste of Sin. He could feel himself growing harder, their movements faster and less controlled. They were getting lost in the feel of each other-- everything zeroing in on their hardening erections jerking against each other and the heat and taste of their mouths joining. Their hands dragged all over each other, pushing up into hair or running down a back; gripping a shoulder or pulling them closer from the back of a neck.

The little bit of clothing between them soon became too much. Boyd could barely take his hands off Sin long enough to reach down and fumblingly start to unbutton Sin's pants. Their lips didn't part even then, their jaws working and moans muffled between them as they couldn't stop kissing each other hungrily. Sin's fingers curled against Boyd's neck while his other hand clutched and dragged along his back, bunching up the material of his shirt until Sin's hand dipped down beneath his pants and underwear and gripped one bare ass cheek.

Boyd's erection throbbed and he couldn't get Sin's pants and underwear off fast enough. He shoved them down, pausing only to brace one hand against the back of the couch when Sin lifted his hips, letting Boyd shove the clothing down his thighs and out of their way. Sin's fingers dug into his ass, his thumb shifting and moving between the crack, and Boyd groaned so desperately that he could barely breathe. His heart was

pounding and there didn't seem to be enough air in the room; what little he had was shared between he and Sin as they continued to devour each other's mouth.

With Sin's hard cock freed, Boyd's fingers automatically curled around it and pressed, giving an experimental tug that had Sin finally pulling away from the kiss to throw his head back with a resounding groan that rumbled both their chests. Boyd panted heavily, his hands falling away so he could tear his pants open as fast as he possibly could. Sin was pushing his underwear down almost immediately, his hands greedily running over every bit of bare skin that started to show beneath Boyd's shirt.

Boyd's cock was almost achingly hard, so much so that even the open air felt torturous. He rolled his hips forward, nearly shouting when their bare cocks pressed against each other, and without permission from his mind his hips automatically started slamming down against Sin's in a desperate rut. Sin's hands dug into the bare globes of Boyd's ass and their mouths met each other again in a passionate dance of tongue and lips and halting, groaning breath.

But the position wasn't comfortable and with his pants and underwear still around his upper thighs, Boyd couldn't spread his legs wide enough. His back had to be twisted at an odd angle for them to grind. Boyd tore his mouth away, one hand digging into the couch behind Sin. His head dropped down and Sin took the opportunity to sloppily kiss along his cheek; his jaw; the very edge of his mouth and start heading down his throat.

Boyd moaned, incredibly turned on by those full lips against his hot skin and that lip ring a cool line breaking up the heat. He could feel his cock straining between his legs and he pulled back suddenly, standing up so he could look down at Sin as he struggled to kick his pants and underwear off. Sin's gaze was hungry, running along Boyd's body almost possessively and centering on his arousal, where the faint sheen of pre-come wet the tip. While Boyd kicked off his underwear and pants as fast as he could, Sin did the same on the couch. Boyd couldn't tear his eyes away from Sin; those red, bruised lips and flushed skin; the way his eyes burned as they dragged along Boyd's body; that impressive cock hard and yearning between his legs-- straining for Boyd to take care of it--

With an animalistic groan, Boyd dropped to his knees between Sin's spread legs. He relaxed his jaw and swallowed Sin's cock to the core, causing Sin to jerk and arch, his groan wrenching out from the depths of him while Boyd felt overwhelmed with need. Feeling Sin's hot cock pulsing between his lips, a heavy weight against his tongue, pressing against the back of his throat and Sin's thighs flexing and jerking beneath him-- It was intoxicating, arousing, and only served to make Boyd's cock grow harder.

He started sliding his mouth up and down, making it a wet blow job with his saliva gathering and starting to run down the sides of Sin's cock. Sin was swearing, nearly shouting in pleasure, his fingers digging into the back of Boyd's head and holding him as his hips started jerking up frantically. Sin was moving quickly, his cock hard and hot in Boyd's mouth and filling him with the taste of Sin-- Boyd was groaning, twisting his head and running his mouth up and down that length and pressing his tongue against him-- And for all that it was making Boyd want to come right there suddenly it wasn't enough. He had to feel Sin. He needed more of him.

Boyd tore his mouth away, panting heavily with his lips shining wetly and eyes burning hotly when they turned up to meet Sin's eyes. Sin was looking down at him, mouth open and eyebrows drawn together; a painfully aroused expression that only seemed heightened by the sudden air against his wet cock.

"Oh Jesus," Boyd moaned, crawling up onto the couch and straddling Sin once more. "I need you-- I need you so bad--"

He braced one hand on the couch behind Sin and reached down with his other, holding Sin's erection up as he started to lower himself. Sin's eyes met his and all Boyd saw was urgency and a need that he didn't even fully know how to fulfill.

When the head of Sin's cock pressed against Boyd's entrance, Boyd was so aroused that it met with less resistance as he'd worried may have happened after years of celibacy. He guided Sin's cock through the tight ring of his muscles and soon they were both throwing their heads back and groaning loudly when Sin was fully seated inside him.

Boyd's fingers dug painfully into Sin's shoulders; his eyes and mouth wide open as he panted and Jesus fuck that felt so good-- Sin had him stretched wide and it was nearly enough to make him come from the pressure alone of him inside, hot and ready and filling him up. Sin's hands gripped Boyd's sides like vices and it didn't take long at all for Boyd's body to adjust. His thighs clenched as he pulled himself up and then dropped back down, and Sin's voice was hoarse with intensity and need as he started swearing in Mandarin.

Between one moment and the next, their tableau went from slowing and stilled to impassioned and fervent again. Boyd started riding Sin, his body rising and falling hard and fast as he alternated between bracing his hands against the couch and digging into Sin's shoulders, scrabbling along that skin and wanting nothing more than for Sin to fill him harder, faster, deeper. He threw his head back, his neck stretching wide and mouth unable to close from gulping in desperate, panting air and releasing husky moans.

They were groaning and swearing and soon Sin's hands gripped Boyd and his hips were rising to meet Boyd's-- a frantic give and take with the slapping of skin and the hot Monterrey air only aiding to the burning of desire within their bodies.

Boyd didn't think it could get any better but then suddenly Sin was surging up, supporting Boyd easily and flipping them sideways onto the couch while he was still inside. Boyd's back arched, his head digging into the cushions of the couch and his hands scrabbling for a place to hold. One of Sin's feet braced against the floor and his other leg knelt on the couch. He grabbed Boyd's hips and plowed into him. And then Sin was pounding into him with abandon and Boyd couldn't hold in his impassioned screams.

Sin's hips moved so hard and fast that all Boyd could feel was the vibration and pressure of Sin's cock, like a jackhammer drilling into him and stretching him so wide he would never feel full again unless Sin was in him just like this-- their sweaty bodies moving against each other and hips rolling ardently. Boyd was sliding across the couch until he could get his hand above his head, braced against the arm of the couch while

his entire body rolled and stretched and twisted with the movement of Sin driving into him.

Boyd couldn't seem to find purchase for his feet and then Sin reached down, gripping his thighs and yanking them open and up further-- finding a better angle to slam into him. Boyd's eyes were wide and his entire body shook with need. The rise of orgasm curled in his stomach and spread like wildfire through his veins.

"Oh-- Ohh-- Oh Jesus-- Ohhh fuck--" Boyd was groaning, a supplication that rose in pitch until it was half gasping breaths of words. He was teetering on the very precipice of control when Sin shifted his grip and speared into Boyd at a different angle. White hot pleasure scoured through Boyd ruthlessly, digging deep into his bones and streaming through his blood. His eyes widened, his bruised lips parting in a throaty, lasting scream-- and suddenly he was riding an orgasm that was so intense that he couldn't even see anything, could barely even breathe around the powerful waves wracking his body.

He lost himself for a moment, the world buzzing around him in white noise that made him never want to leave. When his surroundings came crashing back he distantly heard Sin making urgent sounds as his hard, pulsing cock pounded into Boyd in fast-forward staccato. Boyd looked down his body and saw those vivid green eyes burning into him, ravenous and devouring every shift of emotion and every broken-voiced scream. Sin's lips were parted and when Boyd came to enough to roll his hips up against Sin and squeeze his inner muscles tightly around Sin's cock, Sin's entire body jerked and caught.

Sin's hands clutched Boyd desperately. His eyes rolled back in his head and he shouted urgently as his hips jerked frantically against Boyd's. He came explosively, poised in the moment of ecstasy, his expression open and incredible as his orgasm moved through him. He still rocked his hips against Boyd, his cock staying hard as he came in rolling waves. The moment seemed to stretch as Boyd felt his own pleasure still moving through him in shock waves.

And then the room snapped back into place around Boyd. The distant whirring of the air conditioner and the heat of their sweat-slicked skin. They collapsed against each other. Boyd dropped his head back, panting for breath as Sin crushed him against the couch.

Sin's head was tilted down over Boyd's shoulder, his breath harsh and muffled against Boyd's ear and stirring strands of red hair. Boyd's hands rose to rest against Sin's back as their pounding heartbeats mingled. Their legs tangled together and the rise and fall of their breath was felt in the way their chests shifted against each other.

It felt so good that he didn't want to move and he didn't want Sin to either. He didn't want Sin to take away the intoxicating feel of his body heat trapping the smell of sex between them, and the warmth of their bodies pressed against each other.

"God," he moaned languorously. "That was incredible."

Sin leaned back slightly to look at Boyd, his full mouth lifted slightly as he raised his eyebrows. "I'm glad you are impressed."

Boyd grinned up at Sin, unable to stop himself from reaching up to push some bleached white hair off Sin's sweaty forehead. "I am." He paused and raised his eyebrows wryly. "But you're going to give me a complex soon. Do you have to be perfect at everything your first try?"

"Well, technically I did attempt this with you before and it was a disaster," Sin replied, lips turning up into a full smirk.

Boyd chuckled low in his throat and dropped his head back against the couch. "That's true..."

His hand remained almost subconsciously touching Sin's skin. His fingers shifted to slide down the side of Sin's face, his thumb brushing one of Sin's high cheekbones. He was struck by how incredible Sin looked; flushed from sex, with those bedroom eyes and his full lips pulled to the sides. Still, Sin's comment reminded Boyd of what he'd wanted to bring up in the first place, before all the distractions had happened. His smile

turned a bit more sober and he moved his hand around to the back of Sin's neck, pulling him down even as he leaned up to kiss him.

Their lips met much more languidly this time, moving against each other and soon parting as they tasted each other's mouths. Boyd's hand tightened against the back of Sin's neck and for a moment he thought about letting the topic slide. Sin may not even remember anymore what he'd asked before. Maybe he didn't care. Maybe it wasn't necessary to bring any of it up.

But in the end, he couldn't do that. Sin deserved an answer and, if he were honest with himself, after days of building himself up to it he wouldn't feel right if he didn't say anything.

So he shifted his hand down to Sin's shoulder, his fingers resting against those hard muscles he could feel shifting beneath Sin's skin. And not long after initiating the kiss, Boyd pulled away and rested his forehead against Sin's. Their panting breath intermingled and this time when Boyd's hand tightened against Sin, it was with resolve. He pulled back so he could see Sin's green eyes. His own brown eyes turned more distracted but serious and his eyebrows drew together, although his thumb rubbed absently along the skin near Sin's collarbone.

"Sin, can we talk?"

Green eyes narrowed slightly and Sin backed off slightly. "About?" he asked, his tone suspicious.

Boyd studied Sin and then sighed, his hand shifting until he could gently but firmly push against Sin's shoulder. Sin let him and soon they were both able to sit up. Boyd swung his legs over the side of the couch, looking for where he'd thrown his pants and underwear, and wished not for the first time that he hadn't had to cut his stupid hair so he had nothing to hide behind to collect his thoughts.

"Something you asked me about the other day." He saw his clothes nearby and leaned forward, dragging them over. He glanced almost cautiously at Sin, checking his

expression to test the waters on this topic and whether Sin didn't want to know more after all. "My tattoos."

"Ah." There was a beat of silence as Sin studied him thoughtfully. "Decided to share, did you?"

"I did." Boyd paused as he pulled on his underwear and pants. "I decided a few days ago, actually, but have had difficulty finding a way to bring it up somehow."

"I see," Sin said at length, still appearing somewhat wary.

Boyd sat there a moment and then stood, turning away from Sin and walking into the kitchen. He opened the fridge, glass jars making clinking noises as they swayed in the shelves, and pulled out two bottles of water. He held one up and looked over at Sin, who had pulled on a pair of black briefs. "Water?"

"Stop stalling, Boyd."

Boyd sighed and pushed the door shut. He walked back into the living room, setting one of the water bottles on the coffee table near Sin and sitting down next to him. He twisted the cap off his own water bottle. "I'm sorry. I'm just not very good at this. I've never told anyone any of this before. Honestly, I never planned to." He looked over at Sin. "So, it's a little-- odd."

"How so?" Sin asked, one dark brow still slightly raised.

"Because it's about Lou," he said soberly. He paused to take a drink of water, the liquid cooling his throat, and then looked over at Sin. "I assume there must be something in my file and that's how you knew about..." He trailed off and waved a hand, as if it could encompass the necklace, Lou's murder, and everything else.

His expression tightened briefly, his eyebrows dragging down as he looked away. The plastic of the water bottle crinkled as he gripped it. He looked down, watching the water swell up and approach the open top as his fingers pushed in the sides. He released his grip.

"The thing is, Lou was everything to me. He'd been with me my whole life. He was the only one who always stuck up for me, the only one who remained by my side through everything... The only one who noticed when I was gone and the only one who cared if I was unhappy. He was--"

He stopped, finding it difficult to think about Lou without feeling an echo of the weight of his loss. It wasn't nearly as bad as it had been those few years ago but it was still there; that sadness, regret, and anger at the abrupt end of it all. He gestured again and then dropped his hand onto his thigh. "He was everything," he said again.

Sin had begun absently rubbing his chin as he observed Boyd. "Judging from his file, he seemed like a troublemaker."

"He was a bit," Boyd admitted. "His parents gave him a lot of freedom. I used to love going over there; it was so comfortable and welcoming. But because they were like that, he took advantage of it sometimes. He got in trouble for little things now and then." He looked over and met Sin's eyes. "He always stood up for me, though. No matter what. That's how we met-- some kids in school were bothering me and he came out of nowhere and made them back off."

"I was actually referring to the stealing, and other illegal activities he dabbled in after his parents died," Sin replied with a shrug. "Is that what got him into contact with Jared in the first place?"

Boyd's eyebrow canted up and for a moment he fought down a wave of wariness. Exactly how much information did the Agency have on his life anyway? He knew they would have it on him, and he shouldn't be surprised by the extent they looked into others in his life.

Yet at the same time, he felt protective of Lou. He didn't want anyone digging up any dirt on him; he wanted Lou to rest in peace and be remembered fondly. And the offhanded way Sin referred to Lou's parents' death-- as if he'd known them or Lou or how devastating that had been for both of them. Lou had been orphaned and Boyd may as well have been, with his father killed and his mother practically abandoning him.

Calling Lou a troublemaker for trying to find solace, even if in the wrong choices, made Boyd automatically want to defend his old friend.

He didn't like not knowing exactly how much Sin knew. It was a disturbing feeling for such a private person as himself. At the same time, he had to acknowledge that he had violated Sin's privacy plenty of times. Hadn't he been the one watching Sin on the hidden cameras in his apartment? Hadn't he seen videos of Sin's past that he may not have wanted him to see, like that session with Lydia?

He grimaced and sat back on the couch, his fingers flexing on the water bottle and jaw twitching. "I don't know."

He hesitated, for a moment wanting to just end this conversation and walk away. Being reminded of how much Sin seemed to know without his permission only made him feel less inclined to continue. And the casual way Sin threw out facts from Lou's past made him not want to share anything, as if Sin would casually mention elsewhere anything that Boyd told him here.

But he didn't think Sin would do that. And he knew walking away wouldn't solve anything. It would probably only make it worse between them for no reason other than his own territorial sense of privacy.

"Probably. He didn't include me on any of that. Sometimes he just came home with money and if I asked where it came from..." Boyd gestured vaguely and then dropped his hand, shaking his head to himself. He paused and then looked over at Sin. "I'd never met Jared and didn't really know about him but I knew some things. Places Lou wouldn't let me go and people he told me to avoid if they came near or called. He was very protective of me. He said it was because I was going someplace in life and he didn't want me distracted. I don't think he ever wanted me pulled into any of that but Jared--"

Boyd cut himself off, looking toward the balcony with hooded eyes and shrugging stiffly. "Jared was a sociopath who killed Lou for winning in a fistfight a week before. Can you believe that?" Boyd demanded. "A fucking *fistfight*. Lou punched him and-- and

in return, Jared--" Boyd cut himself off again, this time with a sharp gesture and a glare at the sliding glass doors.

"And he was going to kill you because you just happened to be there, I assume." Sin seemed to consider this all before he crossed his arms over his chest, sitting back. "What does this have to do with your tattoo?"

Boyd was silent, thinking about that as he took a drink of water, his expression pensive. After a moment he sighed and shifted against the couch, looking over at Sin. "I know I said it before, but Lou meant everything to me. We grew up together, lost our parents together-- he was my first friend and first lover. I didn't know how to live without him. Losing him..."

His eyes narrowed and he couldn't help tensing as he remembered back to that time. As it all seemed too fresh; too recent. He let out a short, sharp breath, unable to entirely stop the tension in his shoulders. He leaned forward and set the water bottle on the coffee table and stood up. He turned as if he was going to walk to the kitchen but then stopped himself; made himself turn around and face Sin again. He crossed his arms and shifted on his feet.

"Lou kept saying he wanted to live together. He'd been telling me that for years-- if he could just save up enough money, maybe then I'd want to leave my home. Maybe then we could get our own place. But I was just so--" Boyd stopped and gestured, his eyebrows lowering before he shook his head. "I don't know. The point is, the war hit practically when I was born. We grew up in the aftermath. We saw a lot of people die and for awhile we didn't know how long we would make it either. Lou used to joke that if he made it to sixteen, he'd live forever. So... I don't even remember how it came up but we got this stupid idea to get tattoos-- like putting something permanent on us would ensure we could never forget or leave the other and we'd both be okay."

He fell silent a moment, his jaw setting before he turned away and did walk to the kitchen this time, although all he ended up doing was turning and leaning against the counter. "We ended up looking up some Latin phrases and decided to both get tattoos.

He got Luctor et Emergo-- I struggle but I'll survive. And I," he touched his lower left stomach near his hip, "got Ad Vitam Paramus-- We are preparing for life." His lips twisted bitterly. "I'd started to believe him, you know? That everything would be okay. That we could grow old together, that he could make it out of anything and that he'd always come back for me. He'd always be there for me. I really believed we'd make it."

"So, why was this a big secret?" Sin asked, eyebrows drawing together slightly. "Just because it's about him?"

"Partially," Boyd said, and then sighed. He walked back over to the couch and sat down. "But partially because of what else happened. Seeing Lou killed right in front of me-- having to see it and hear it and feel it--" He grimaced and looked away, running a hand back through his hair and trying to ignore the memory of how that had been. "I couldn't sleep or eat or-- I was devastated. I didn't want to live without him. And I blamed myself for not stopping it or saving him after all the times he'd saved me. For not being strong enough..."

He trailed off briefly. "At first I thought I deserved to remember that forever, just like--" He stopped himself from saying, just like Jared said. He shook his head. "I went back to that tattoo parlor and got the ones on my back. But when I was there, all I could think about was Lou and I knew it wasn't enough. It never would be. It only made everything worse." He shook his head. "I got so angry and depressed. When I got home, I don't even remember how it happened but I saw that damn tattoo on my hip and it reminded me of everything I'd lost. I wanted it gone. So I grabbed a kitchen knife and just-- started stabbing."

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and he nodded, standing up and grabbing his own pants. He was silent for a brief time before saying at length, "I'd read about two suicide attempts in your file, although your mother attempted to lie about the first one so it was unclear."

Boyd shook his head, not even able to be surprised that such information was in his file, aside from the fact that his mother had allowed it. "She thought I was being

dramatic and that I'd get over it. And I don't think she wanted it on official record that her son was suicidal. But when she brought me home I was still so depressed that all I wanted was to die. So I went to the bathroom and slit my wrists. I wasn't thinking-- it didn't even occur to me that I should wait until she was gone. It was stupid, really. She found me and brought me to a different hospital. They wanted to keep me in the psych ward but she wouldn't allow it."

"I'm surprised they let her remove you."

"She probably used her connections."

Boyd paused and then shook his head. He was growing tired of rehashing all of this. Having to lay bare the story of the worst time of his life was painful and somewhat disturbing because it made him feel vulnerable-- and yet at the same time he felt compelled to finish. Not only because now that he'd started he just wanted to unload the totality of that chapter of his life, but also because part of him wanted Sin to know. Part of him wanted Sin to understand why some things had happened between them the way it had.

He looked away and ran a hand back through his hair, the movement a little stiff. "Anyway, I think she wanted to ensure I couldn't try to kill myself again but couldn't be around constantly to watch. The next thing I knew, I woke up tied to the bed. I think she drugged me so I wouldn't resist and then left me."

At that, Sin stopped with his arm half-extended to grab his shirt from the floor and looked at Boyd with surprise. "What do you mean she left you? For how long?"

"I don't know," Boyd admitted uncomfortably, not looking Sin straight in the face. "I was really--" He cut himself off, staring out the window with narrowed eyes for a moment before shifting his gaze back to Sin. "I was so messed up. I don't have clear memories of that time-- a lot of confusion and terror and screaming and things that may not even have been real. I didn't know what I wanted more; for someone to let me go or for someone to kill me."

Sin finished the motion and grabbed his shirt although he didn't put it on. "How long have you had merinthophobia?"

"I don't know," Boyd said again with a sigh. He moved the water bottle between his hands absently. "I don't recall ever loving being restrained but I don't remember having a huge issue with it either. I think it mostly stemmed from being forced down and held there while Jared--" His jaw twitched and he looked down at the bottle. "While they killed Lou in front of me. I've always needed some amount of control over my environment and they took that from me at the same time that they took away my life as I knew it. Everything afterward just made it worse."

Sin sat down beside him and there was silence for a moment. He looked over at Boyd, eyes flicking over him and resting briefly on his shirt before rising to his face again.

"I don't see why you didn't just tell me this earlier. It would have made things easier. You know things about my past."

Boyd was silent a moment and then sighed, sliding the water bottle onto the table and looking over at Sin. "It's difficult enough to talk about even now when we're on good terms. That whole experience nearly killed me and it took me years to become functional again. I spent a lot of time trying to pretend it never happened. I did want to talk to you after my birthday and after everything in France, but..."

He shook his head. "Seeing that necklace out of nowhere hit me really hard. I needed time to think at first and then everything had gone to hell again and the chance was gone. But it was important to me that you know so that's why I wanted to tell you now, before I could lose the opportunity again."

It seemed for a moment that Sin would say something else on the topic, but he just shook his head and ran a hand through his dyed spiky hair. "What does your mother say about it? What was her take on the entire situation?"

"She thinks it's a disgrace to my father's name and refers to it as my 'little drama,'" Boyd said, unable to keep the slight bitterness from his tone. He'd never felt alright with her belittling Lou's murder. "I think that was her main motivation behind taking me out of the hospital. She probably didn't want the stigma of having an officially suicidal son. People would talk."

"I'd love to say I'm surprised but I'm not." There was another silence where it seemed to Boyd that Sin was picking his words carefully. It was one of the things about him that had changed over time following the Harry incident.

"But not everyone thinks like her. I can't help thinking you thought I would judge you."

The comment made Boyd look up at Sin, studying him more seriously. Sin's full lips were turned down in a frown and that made Boyd wonder if Sin didn't like the idea. He reached over, resting his hand on Sin's thigh briefly. "It wasn't really that. At first I was just too afraid to open myself up to anyone at all. It had too many painful memories and I'd run the risk of the reaction being anything like my mother's. But by the time I did plan to tell you, none of that mattered anymore. I just wanted you to know and didn't even consider how you would react."

Sin raised an eyebrow at that. "Why? Because I was getting tired of your evasive bullshit?"

"Well, I suppose that was part of it-- I didn't want to lose your friendship over my inability to share anything of import with you." Boyd slid his hand away from Sin's thigh, watching his partner with an open expression. "But more than anything, it's because I trust you. You've told me about yourself and I wanted to do the same with you. I wanted to stop feeling like I had to hide anything around you."

Sin raised an eyebrow and studied Boyd for a long moment as if he were trying to gauge the sincerity of his words. After awhile he let his eyes drop and reached out again, running his hand lightly over the front of Boyd's shirt. "Do you trust me enough to let me see under your shirt?"

Boyd couldn't help tensing slightly at the question, at the idea of showing anyone, but he knew it was time to stop fearing something that he couldn't deny anymore had happened. In truth, he wanted to show Sin. He wanted to be liberated of even one of the pathological fears that he had gained those years ago. He wanted to be able to let go.

"Yes," he said seriously.

He kept Sin's gaze for a long moment and then reached down to grip the hem of his shirt. It felt strange to even consider doing this after years of avoiding even looking at anything himself. But that didn't stop him from scrunching the fabric in his fingers and, not giving himself a chance to think about it, pulling the shirt off over his head.

His stomach automatically tightened when fresh air hit his skin in the open for the first time in years. He wanted to look away but he also wanted to watch Sin, so his gaze kept catching and straying as he leaned back on his hands, his fingers pressing into the cushion.

Sin studied them calmly, his expression unreadable even as he traced the scars lightly with his hand. Beneath the web of scars, Boyd's skin was pale while his chest and stomach were as well toned as the rest of his body. Boyd could feel his skin tingling everywhere Sin touched.

Sin's eyes rose and he raised an eyebrow at Boyd as a half smirk found its way onto his face. "Does that mean we can take a shower together some time? Without wounds being involved."

The question caught Boyd off guard. He raised his eyebrows and his eyes centered on Sin's face. On those eyes that weren't judging him and on the feeling of those powerful hands moving gently against his skin.

He couldn't keep himself from smiling-- a relieved and startled reaction; almost heady from the release of the tension that had been building in him unknowingly. "Maybe," he said lightly. "If you ask nicely."

Sin leaned forward again, but this time he closed his hand around Boyd's arms and pulled him close. His lips twisted slightly to the side and his dark eyebrows rose. "This is me asking nicely."

Boyd felt his heartbeat increase and his gaze automatically dropped down to the glint off Sin's lip ring. "Is that so?" he asked a little softer. "Then I suppose this is me accepting."

"Good." When Sin's lips met his, it was with the same fiery intensity that had been there the first time they'd touched each other. When his tongue slid into Boyd's mouth, his hands shifted down Boyd's chest, running along his scars. This time, Boyd didn't cringe away from his touch.

## Chapter 33

Warm wind blew Boyd's hair into his face. His eyes were narrowed and focused entirely on the building across the alley. The warehouse was just one of many in that area; several had been renovated and reused for housing, stores, even a church a block away. The warehouses and buildings in this section of Monterrey were being used for such a motley collection of reasons that it did not bring suspicion to the fact that this particular building had lights on quite late into the night even though the restaurant it housed had closed hours ago.

After weeks of surveying the place at various hours of the day and night and either walking past completely nonchalantly and not even seeming to look at the building or sometimes sliding in and out of shadows silently and going straight up to the windows to peer inside, Boyd had finally decided that the activity here was not only unusual, but that it was very likely a smuggling group as they'd thought. But what were they smuggling? If it was weapons then these could be people who were linked directly to Janus. If that were the case, then all the information he could gather on them could be well-utilized once they returned to the Agency.

This city was going to be Janus' temporary home base in just a few months and with the amount of traffic Boyd had observed going in and out of this building, it was very possible these people would be major suppliers. Assuming some pockets of Janus would remain even after the convention center was blown up, then these would be the first people many of those groups would run to. If he could neutralize them or at the very least get some solid information on the smugglers then it would be easier to track and destroy them later if that turned out to be the case.

Boyd would not have necessarily thought they were related to Janus if it weren't for how good they were at what they did. Even though Boyd noticed the activity, he doubted it would have drawn many others' attention. The men who frequented the building often wore what appeared to be uniforms and they used the back entrance which led into a dark alley where trucks drove past all hours of the night with supplies for the various restaurants. One side of the warehouse was protected by a large fence

but on the other side the fence was broken and in its place they had just piled a lot of garbage and boxes.

The alleyway in the rear did not have good visibility into the windows; that could only be accomplished by surveying the area from the roofs on the surrounding buildings (which did not actually have a good view of anything but vague movement and crates) or by standing on the rickety, rusting fire escape clinging to the far back corner near the alley. But the fire escape creaked alarmingly when any weight was put on it and Boyd was certain that the door at the top was not secure. This meant that at any point someone could suddenly appear and given that the only alternatives for escape were the broken fire escape which did not reach the ground and a thirteen foot drop, it was not the best place to be caught unaware.

There were, however, three other options Boyd had checked out. He could go straight into the building itself during the day when the restaurant was open and try not to get caught snooping around or he get up to the warehouse's roof and watch through the small skylight. However, the problem with that idea was that the roof was completely flat and there was nothing to hide behind if someone appeared. Another alternative was to simply watch from the alley itself which gave him a great view of the activity at the back of the warehouse even if he couldn't actually see inside. He mostly followed this plan and observed the men loading the trucks; the men were usually carrying large crates and boxes and it often took them a while to get the property into the vehicles before they could close the doors. Boyd had been considering how best to get an inside look at the crates themselves; all he had so far been able to gather was that they, and the truck itself, were all stamped with a stylized version of '4FF'. He had no idea what the phrase meant but he assumed it had something to do with the actual name of their smuggling operation.

Eventually he decided that he had a few choices. He could wait for the off-chance that magically one day someone would drop a crate and the contents would spill out (which would be disastrous if they contained sensitive materials like bombs), he could crawl into one of the trucks when no one was looking then open and examine the

insides of the crates and somehow get off before they stopped or anyone noticed him, or he could hope one of the crates would be stacked near him and left unattended long enough for him to investigate.

Overall, it was not a particularly easy situation. Despite being grunts the men seemed to be fairly aware of their surroundings. No one had come close to noticing Boyd yet, but he wasn't about to let his guard down. And he couldn't just go sauntering in there with a stolen uniform like he usually would because they were all locals; even if somehow Boyd managed to not stick out, he still didn't know enough Spanish to pass off as being a native.

This had led to several nights of stakeout, which was good and bad. It gave him something to focus on other than getting to know the city better, but it also was a tiring, boring job, and he found himself wishing several times he didn't have to be doing this alone. While there had been a time in his career as an Agent that he would have preferred Sin not be there because he couldn't trust him not to blow their cover, now he would have liked to just have someone to talk to when they were watching from far enough away that no one would overhear a whispered conversation. Besides that, he wondered if Sin would be noticing anything he was missing, and it was possible that Sin could blend in well enough to walk right in with them. It was ironic to him that even with Sin's reluctance to go undercover there was still a situation in which he would probably be better at quietly infiltrating than Boyd.

He shifted just barely; enough to lessen the cramping in one leg while also taking him deeper into the shadows. The particular dead end half-alley he was currently holed up in usually provided the best view of the doors but sometimes trucks parked in different places and blocked large portions of his line of sight. He was lucky so far that night, not that it mattered. He was no closer to confirming what was inside those damn crates than he was the first day he'd discovered the place. After considering all the situations, he was pretty certain that if he didn't find anything by the following week he would just hop a ride on one of the trucks and hope it didn't get him killed.

However he wasn't precisely sure when he would make that move and so he spent the night observing quietly as usual, which led to yet another downside of this assignment. So much time spent staring at the same scene was almost like meditating; he was lulled into boredom with nothing to catch his attention and it let his mind wander. He was still extremely aware of the environment – he'd be an idiot not to be – but it was hard not to just think about things, allowing his mind to drift from one subject to another. Sometimes he thought about the layout of the city but since he spent the majority of his days doing that it wasn't a very interesting option. Other than that, drawing, and dealing with the heat, the only other thing that really occupied his time in Monterrey was his partner.

The wind blew his hair into his eyes again, interrupting his thoughts and though Boyd's mouth thinned in mild irritation, he didn't shift. He was trying to stay as perfectly still as he could just in case anyone was watching. No one had so much as glanced in his direction yet, nor had they on any of the nights he had watched, but he was not about to compromise himself through stupidity.

One of the men came out of the building with an especially large crate that he fumbled with. Boyd's gaze snapped to him immediately, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized the man's movements. The worker stumbled a little and the others seemed to be ignoring his calls for help. One edge of the box tipped down but before it could hit the ground, someone else appeared at his side and steadied it. The tension that had started to build in Boyd released slowly. Disappointed, he settled further into the shadows to wait.

Not even a second passed before a knife blade suddenly pressed against Boyd's throat and a low male voice whispered into his ear, "*Hola, chico.*"

Boyd's froze in surprise, his heartbeat leaping while his mind raced. How the hell - Despite letting his thoughts wander, he was positive he'd been paying enough attention that he was aware of everyone in his vicinity. The fact that someone was able to come up right behind him with a weapon was as astounding as it was disturbing. He stayed perfectly still and silent, not knowing what could potentially set the person off.

The sharp edge of the knife was steady at his throat and the man pressed against his back close enough that he could feel his muscles through his clothing. Lips moved against Boyd's ear as his attacker said something rapidly in Spanish, idly dragging the knife back and forth as he spoke.

Trying to ignore his thundering heart, Boyd said softly so as not to disturb the blade, "*No hablo español.*"

His gaze darted around quickly, searching for possible back-up the man may have but he didn't see any. When he'd chosen that spot, he'd already figured out where all potential exits and weapons or distractions were but nothing was close enough; first he'd have to get away from the knife.

There was a soft snort against his ear and Boyd could feel the blade digging harder into his skin. "I said what the fuck are you doing here, pretty little boy," the man drawled in his ear.

Boyd automatically memorized everything he could of the man, quickly assessing the situation. His voice was deep and smooth; he had an American accent with no dialect Boyd could detect but his Spanish accent was different than that of the natives. The man was not much taller than Boyd; his hands were strong and he held his blade skillfully, making it impossible for Boyd to move even slightly without cutting himself. When Boyd shifted his weight a little he could feel the man account for it in his stance. It was obvious that this wasn't an amateur he was dealing with, though that much could have been determined by the fact that he'd caught Boyd so completely unaware. This sort of behavior was more consistent with the leaders of the more successful rebel groups Boyd had come in contact with over the months.

This was not someone to mess around with; this was the sort of person who could kill him and walk away without a care. At the same time, Boyd was here as an undercover agent and even in this position, he couldn't abandon his cover. Even if being Kadin could possibly get him killed, if he suddenly acted like an agent then it could by extension put Sin's cover in danger, and that would endanger the success of the

mission entirely. Not to mention the fact that even if he had the freedom to act entirely as himself, it didn't necessarily mean he would be able to get away unharmed from a person who could stand immediately behind him with a knife to his throat without Boyd even knowing until he spoke.

So, after a moment he said offhandedly, "Sight-seeing."

"You've been casing this place for days *pendejito*," the voice said, a hint of amusement in it. His breath was warm as it puffed against Boyd's ear, stirring his hair. "Haven't you seen all the sights yet?"

Boyd didn't know what '*pendejito*' meant but he didn't think it was a compliment.

"Guess not," he said glibly. "Don't think I ever saw you."

The man made a noise against his ear and he wrapped an arm around Boyd's chest from behind, trapping his arms and pulling him closer to his chest. Boyd could feel the man's muscles shift as he stepped back, tugging him further down the alley. Boyd tried to look down as best he could from the angle his head was tipped at but he could see nothing identifying on the man's arm. He wore black gloves and long-sleeved black clothing; nothing stood out.

Boyd knew better than to go from crime scene A to murder scene B, that complying with the demands of attackers in a manner that brought him further into seclusion was as stupid as it was dangerous. But he also knew that even if he cried out that none of the men in the smuggling group would help him and that if anything, it would put in him an even worse position. He didn't know yet if the man was related to them, but regardless of that, he likely would not take kindly to Boyd drawing attention to them. At the moment he seemed content to just talk and by complying with him, Boyd gave himself more time for the man to let his guard down enough for him to escape. He stepped back with the man, both of them nearly silent even in that situation, the scuffing of shoes against the pavement just the quietest hush in the night, not even loud enough to echo in the alley.

"I know that," the man said. "Not here anyway. I got the feeling you noticed me when I was tailing you though."

Boyd kept his expression the amiable sort of blank look that Kadin seemed to display when he was attempting to be unreadable. That was interesting, though considering the situation he was currently in, it was completely unsurprising that this was also the man who'd been tailing him for weeks. If this was the same person, that meant he had a lot of free time to have followed Boyd at such odd times of the day as well as being here at night. Boyd's mind moved quickly; he couldn't remember being tailed before he'd noticed Julieta's, so that confirmed that the man was related to the activity at the warehouse. He could even be the leader of the group, which meant Boyd had either been so terrible at surveillance that the workers had tipped him off, which Boyd knew wasn't the case, or that the man had been watching for people who noticed them.

Whatever the case was, the group was definitely doing something shady and even though Boyd had already been fairly certain that they were weapon smugglers, it was now confirmed. He doubted so much effort would be put into overseeing smuggling of something more innocuous unless it was drugs, but he doubted they would package drugs in such a way. It all boiled down to the fact that the man was extremely talented at what he did and because of that he was extremely dangerous.

"How sweet, even with your night job you followed me around during the day. Do you like me that much?" Boyd felt the man's arm tighten to hold him more securely but he did not speak as he led him further into the dark.

The shadows fell around them more completely, the tall buildings cutting off the view of the sky, the ambient light that came from it and streetlights. Sounds were conversely muffled and more prominent; the men talking at the warehouse became a distant susurrations, the occasional loud laughter from the street in front of the building sounding far away, unattainable. Yet every time Boyd's sandals scraped the floor, each pebble kicked and as the fabric of their clothing rustled, it seemed impossibly loud. He

was entirely aware of the warm breath at his ear, the strength of the arm holding him tightly, the edge of the blade held steady and firmly to his throat even as they moved.

When they were near the dead end of the alley where the shadows seemed like a second night, the man turned him until he faced the side of the alley. Faster than Boyd could react to, he was shoved roughly until he was trapped between the wall and the man's chest, while a knee was used to keep his legs spread. The position gave him even less of a solid stance and he had no way of successfully getting away. The brick scraped against Boyd's cheek as he turned his head and the man kept the knife trained at his jugular. Between one released breath and the next inhale of the scent of stale brick and dirt, Boyd felt another arm snake around his lower body and suddenly the sharp tip of a second knife was pressing against his groin. Boyd froze completely as he felt his heartbeat thunder. The individual edges of the bricks pressed uncomfortably against him, the inconsistencies in the building material making some parts feel like little daggers stabbing into him. Blood and adrenaline rushed through Boyd's body but he had nothing to expend it on; he kept himself still and instead concentrated on getting a handle on the situation.

"Do something stupid and you become a eunuch," came the murmured threat. "And I doubt your lover would be thrilled with that."

Despite the man's taunts and the almost casual, amused tone he used, there was an undercurrent of danger in his voice. Boyd knew there was no question that the man could actually follow through with his threat. Being trapped was bad enough and having knives in play was not helping matters but his arms were free at least so he tried to think of it as only being temporarily detained, even if it seemed like the man could take him out before he got half a step away.

He concentrated on breathing evenly and trying to slow his automatically racing heart as he tried to analyze the comment. It made him wonder exactly how much the man knew. He very well could have just seen them when they were wandering the city at some point; their behavior at the restaurant or how they acted together at Lunar could have given anyone that idea about them. But if this person had been following him more

than the few times that Boyd had actually noticed then it was possible that he also knew where they lived, had maybe even looked through the studio while they were gone. He was certain there wasn't anything at their place that could blow their cover that wasn't properly hidden but once again, he wasn't sure if this man would be easily fooled.

"What do you want?" Boyd asked finally, dismissing all the sarcastic remarks that came to mind first.

Another burst of breath near his ear as if the man couldn't help but laugh at the situation. "*You* didn't catch *me* peeping into *your* house, *pendejito*," He drawled, gently prodding Boyd's testicles with the tip of the knife. "What do *you* want?"

Holding himself as still as possible to avoid the knives, Boyd knew Kadin well enough to say sarcastically, "World peace?"

"You have some *cojones*, *chico*," The man said and Boyd could actually hear the smirk in his tone. "But keep fucking around and you won't have any left." The knife pressed harder against Boyd's crotch as if to emphasize the point. "Are you alone?"

The man would most likely know if he was lying and Boyd knew at that point it was in his best interest to comply. "Yes."

"Ah, I see," came the low drawl. He didn't know if the man sounded disappointed or pleased by that knowledge. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Boyd said, lifting one shoulder just enough to shrug. "But I don't know; somewhere else. I don't keep track."

"Interesting." The man drew out the word. "You seemed like a couple of *maricones* to me."

"I dunno what that means so I can't say," Boyd replied unconcernedly.

Another snort of amusement and then the man seemed to get serious, as if suddenly remembering that he was supposed to be interrogating Boyd and not making idle chitchat. "Why are you hanging around here?"

Boyd could have answered that any number of ways but he opted for being disarmingly honest. There was no point in messing with a man who could cut off his testicles with one flick of his wrist. "I want to know what's in the crates. Mind telling me?"

"Why are you interested in what's in the crates?" came the fast retort. "What business does a seemingly unemployed artist have looking into my warehouse?"

This was something he'd thought of well in advance of ever staking the place out. He'd actually conceived a few cover stories but given the man's attitude, he knew which to go with. Boyd didn't have enough time to properly feel out the man's personality and figure out exactly what type of person he was dealing with, but since sarcasm hadn't gotten him anywhere he thought it would be best to tell the story that was just stupid enough to be true. As he'd learned in his months at the Agency, fact was sometimes dumber or stranger than fiction.

"Well, first I was just checking Monterrey out, you know, drawing the interesting places and scenery, trying to get a legit job which is hard as fuck around here, and the restaurant was nice so I hung around a few times. Then I noticed the crates and I wondered what was inside, just 'cause everyone was all hush-hush about it, moving it at night and acting all weird, and I thought, hey, who'd give a shit if it was a bunch of ingredients or some shit, right? You know," Boyd added as a casual aside, "I heard there's a pretty good racket in Monterrey for stolen and counterfeit art. A person can make a lot of money selling that shit, like if they had some source of it and they put it in a gallery and said it was real... There's a building four blocks over, great lighting, the landlord's ready to sell cheap 'cause her son just died and— Well." He shrugged idly with the shoulder the man's head was not hovering over. "When I noticed the crates were the same size and, far as I could tell, weight as those sorta boxes I've just happened to see in passing, I was curious what was up."

There was a long, almost incredulous silence and finally the man released him, spinning him around and shoving him violently against the wall in one quick movement. Although they were technically face to face the man was silhouetted by the faint light from the opening of the alley, his features cast entirely in shadow. He seemed to be wearing a hood so Boyd couldn't even tell what hair length he had or even the color of his skin. All he knew was his height and that he seemed well-built, which certainly explained his strength.

"There's bread in the boxes," the man informed him in a tone that made it obvious that he was lying. "And I'm the baker. I get very touchy--" The blade rose to Boyd's throat again. "--When people touch my bread."

There was a hint of movement in the shadows and Boyd could barely make out the man tilting his head to the side, obviously staring at him intently. "So don't be a constipator. Don't fuck with my shit and I won't be an unhappy baker."

"Alright, alright," Boyd said, seeming a mixture of shaken and annoyed as he lifted his hands harmlessly in front of himself and tried to give off an aura of innocence. "I won't touch your bread, sorry. It's just... I mean, I don't got a job, so I just thought I could, you know. Help. That's all."

"Uh huh." The voice didn't sound convinced but there was once again a hint of amusement. "If I catch you sneaking around here again I really will cut your prick off. Got it, *cabrón*?"

"Yeah," Boyd said, then paused and eyed him. "Does that mean I can't go to the restaurant either? They got good food..."

There was another snort and then suddenly he was being wrenched away from the wall and shoved unceremoniously down the alley. "Enough. *No me chingues*."

Boyd stumbled but caught his balance and turned. He tried to get a better look, but the shadows were too deep to tell him much. Something glinted as the man shifted his weight, but Boyd could not tell what it was other than some sort of necklace. He

didn't know what '*no me chingues*' meant, but he was going to assume for the moment that it meant not to follow or bother him.

"Who are you, anyway?" he asked, because he honestly was very curious.

There was a brief silence. "*Lo más chingón*," came the reply, drawled once again in Spanish.

"The— what?" Boyd asked, but a loud crash behind him caught his attention. He looked over his shoulder and saw one of the men stumbling against the building. The crate he had been holding tipped and hit another; both looked ready to topple and spill their contents. But before anything could happen, men swarmed over to steady the crates and rapidly yelled something to the worker in Spanish. Boyd didn't know what they said but it sounded irritated.

He looked in front of him again, towards the man he had been talking to, but no one was there. Boyd blinked in surprise and stared at the shadows. It was a dead end alley with the only exit past Boyd and the walls of the surrounding buildings were straight up with no way to climb them. Where the hell did he go? Boyd hadn't heard even a whisper of movement. Granted, there was the commotion behind him, but that shouldn't have mattered.

Boyd didn't spend much time on it, though. He just shook his head and muttered to himself in Kadin's drawl, "The fuck is he, the Mexican Batman?"

He didn't stay long enough to see if anyone else would arrive to threaten his genitals and inquire about his day. Slipping past the men hauling the crates, he wandered out into a crowd of partiers half a block down outside one of the alleys. Walking with them for a bit to draw less attention to himself as a person alone in the early hours of the morning, he broke off at the proper street and headed back to the studio.

Even if he didn't think the man was following him, he still wasn't going to be stupid. As a precaution, he wound through Monterrey to return home. By the time he

returned to the studio the adrenaline had bled out of him, leaving him tired from the day. When he silently entered, at first he thought the studio was empty, but as he quietly closed the door he heard paper rustling. He paused, just in case the man had somehow beat him to the apartment and was lying in wait even if he really didn't think it was his style, and Boyd silently slipped further into the room until he could follow the source of the noise without being observed. Sin was seated in a sprawl on the floor on the other side of the love-seat as he flipped through a dark-covered book. It took Boyd a few seconds to recognize it as his filled sketchbook.

Boyd blinked then stared, the tension leaving his shoulders. "You must have been very bored to pull that out."

Sin glanced up at Boyd through his bangs and raised an eyebrow. "You are a talented artist."

Raising an eyebrow in return, Boyd gave him a look as if he thought he was joking. He kicked his sandals off and walked over to Sin; the fuzzy rug was enjoyably warm and soft beneath his bare feet. He narrowly avoided a bag of chips Sin had resting next to him and crouched down.

"Seriously, were you that bored?" He didn't care that Sin was looking through the book; after all, it had been carelessly thrown on the living room table weeks ago. He just couldn't understand why Sin was even bothering; a lot of the drawings were of buildings, and while the point of sketching them was to have a good idea of different areas in the city, they were not very helpful without the context of where Boyd had seen them and the strengths and weaknesses of each site. It was done that way on purpose, so that if the sketchbook was found by unfriendly people it wouldn't compromise their mission but that also meant that it wouldn't be particularly thrilling to flip through.

Sin shrugged. "Yes and no." He turned the sketchbook over and pointed at a charcoal sketch that appeared to be of himself, smoking a cigarette and standing in front of Lunar. "You drew many pictures of me. Why is that?"

Shrugging, Boyd dropped to the ground, letting his legs splay in front of him. "You were really captivating that night," he said simply. "Other times I was bored or you caught my attention." He tilted his head and studied Sin's face, though he seemed to be viewing him as an artist more than someone interested in his expression. "Your features are intriguing and I suppose I like to look at you, so it only seems natural to record it."

Sin raised a skeptical eyebrow. "If you say so." He looked down at the picture again.

"I do say so," Boyd said matter-of-factly. He leaned back, digging his fingers idly into the fuzzy rug while he watched Sin thoughtfully. "What does '*meri*'— no, that's not it. '*Maricones*' mean?"

Sin stared at him blankly for a long moment, mouth twitching although it wasn't obvious if it was from amusement or annoyance. "Someone called you a faggot?"

"Ah, is that what that was?" Boyd mused, more thoughtful than upset. "What about *cabrón* and *pendejito*?"

"Asshole and little asshole," Sin replied, giving Boyd a strange look. "Where the hell are you getting this from?"

"A man I met," Boyd said dismissively, wanting to get all the translations before he continued. "What about '*no me chingues*'?"

"It means don't fuck with me," Sin replied, looking as though he were getting irritated by the lack of a decent answer. "Which man?"

"One more, but it's related. What is '*Lo más chingón*'?" He looked at Sin questioningly for a translation.

For a long moment Sin did not answer and his eyes narrowed slightly, mouth thinning into a line as he stared at his partner. The expression was not unfamiliar to Boyd; it was the one Sin typically gave Boyd when something occurred that displeased

him. The sketchbook sat forgotten on his lap as he considered Boyd but after a while the moment passed and Sin shook his head, raking a hand through his hair.

"It means bad ass motherfucker," he replied. "Now, who the hell is this guy you were talking to?"

"I'm not certain who he was but he called himself that. He caught me at the warehouse." Boyd quirked one eyebrow, continuing mildly, "Apparently he's the one who's been following us. I am not to go near there again or he'll cut off my balls and/or dick. By the end of the encounter he seemed to be changing his mind on which trophy to take."

Sin stared at him for a moment, his eyes narrowing even further. "Explain. In detail."

"Well," Boyd said calmly. "A man managed to come up right behind me with a knife, catching me completely off guard. He apparently leads the smuggling group or at least is in some position of power. He insinuated that he's been following us and somehow knows we're sleeping together. I gave him a cover story about illegal art but he didn't believe it and told me not to fuck with his shit. The only thing I got from him was that he says he is '*lo más chingón*.' I wasn't able to look inside the crates, either, but I'm positive now this is something like an arms dealer. He knew what he was doing - he was good."

Sin sat up straight and stared at him intently, looking extremely displeased by what he was hearing. "Was he simply attempting to ward you away from his operation or did it seem as though he would retaliate in some way because you saw anything at all?"

Boyd considered that for a moment. "I think it was a warning. At the time he was warding me away but I feel as though there could be retaliation if I pushed it. I'm not certain, though. But technically I didn't see exactly what they were doing; I just saw crates going in and out of a building. And frankly, that is not particularly unheard of in that area of the city, especially not into a restaurant. Theoretically they could just have a

ridiculous amount of ingredients they keep on hand, even if he and I both knew it wasn't the case. He claimed he was a baker who didn't want me touching his bread but it was obviously a lie. Still, even if I were inclined to try to alert authorities, nothing would come of it because there's no proof. And considering the fact that he could have killed me before I even knew he was there, he would know I do not pose a particular threat on my own. I think he was trying to scare me away but he won't fuck with me as long as I don't fuck with him."

Sin relaxed a bit, thinking about that. "I find it strange that this man was able to get the drop on you so entirely. And you say he just disappeared?"

"Yes," and Boyd did not seem particularly pleased with the concept either. "Either I am losing my touch or he was just that good. He reminded me of the more adept leaders of some of the groups we've run across; this was someone who could follow through with his threats, but he also seemed relatively at ease, in his element, rational. I also have no idea where he went when I turned around; there was nowhere to go. I suppose he could have had something like a grappling hook to reach the rooftops but I didn't hear anything."

"Hmmm." Sin didn't look entirely pleased by this either. "We will have to be more alert," he said, more to himself than to Boyd. "What course of action would be wisest concerning this man and his operation?"

"At the moment, unless he does something suspicious or continues to tail us, I would say we leave it alone for a while," Boyd said simply. "He could easily have killed me but instead he asked questions, and even when I was not fully cooperative he did nothing to retaliate. That leads me to believe that he is not interested; he was just investigating the person who was watching his illegal operation. We definitely need to do a thorough search of the warehouse and see what they are transporting."

Boyd paused. "Also, at that point we will have to decide who goes in. It's possible but very implausible that he would forget me but unless he did I doubt he would be pleased that I returned. At the same time, I don't know if it's really worth it to get you

involved when at the moment he seems to believe you're simply my lover. As a representative of 53 and apparently now into the illegal art trade, Kadin Reed has a reason to look into that sort of activity. But unless he was trying to get in trouble, Jason Alvarez does not."

"True enough," Sin replied, although he didn't seem any more mollified. "Did you get a look at him?"

Boyd shook his head. "No. He was tall, solidly built, strong, and may have been wearing a metal necklace. There is absolutely no way I would be able to identify him short of possibly recognizing his voice."

"Was there anything about his voice that should be noted? He had an American accent-- was there any dialect?" Sin pressed, seeming intent on having some way to identify the mysterious man.

"No particular dialect in English," Boyd said. "His voice was deep, smooth. By his pronunciation and sentence structure I could tell he is accustomed to using slang. He spoke Spanish fluently and also, it seemed, with slang. I couldn't place any dialect there, primarily because he spoke too quickly for me to understand, but his accent seemed slightly different than the natives."

Sin ran a hand through his hair and looked around the apartment, seeming displeased with every window, vent and door that he saw. "I feel like a sitting duck," He muttered. "I am fighting the urge to go look around down there."

"I'm not convinced it would do much good," Boyd said reasonably. "Normally I would be more paranoid about this but something about him indicates to me that after that encounter he will leave us alone unless we bother him first. If you want, far be it from me to stop you from additional investigative work, though I may wait a bit. He already had me against the wall with two knives trained on me once today and I had no chance to stop him. It would be stupid to put myself in a position for him to follow through with his threats before I've even given myself the chance to research who the hell he is."

Sin shrugged, agitated. "I feel as though I've been doing a poor job. Like I haven't been on guard enough. Maybe I'm getting soft."

Boyd raised an eyebrow curiously. "How did that transfer to you? I'm the one that was noticed, tailed, and eventually caught. Granted, I only felt someone watching me a few times and it's possible he was following more often, but for what it's worth he seemed to be quite good at surprise entrances; so perhaps it is impressive either of us noticed him at all."

Sin made a face and looked unimpressed by this information. "No one should be able to tail me unnoticed, no matter how good they are. I'm supposed to be better."

"I don't know what to tell you, then." Boyd didn't know if he was mildly insulted by Sin's comment or not; as if Sin were saying Boyd inherently was weak so of course he was caught. On the other hand, it was true that Sin was better at what they did and should be superior to any tail by virtue of the fact he had more experience and, quite simply, he was Sin. So, rather than being offended by something Sin was probably only irritated with himself over, he just flopped onto his back and stared at the ceiling with his hands beneath his head. "Like you said, you'll just have to be more alert."

Sin stared at Boyd for a moment as though he wanted to say more but before the words could come out, his eyes were drawn to the way Boyd's shirt had risen up, the way his hipbones stood out of his pants. They sat looking at each other silently and within a breath, Sin was straddling Boyd instead of standing, staring down at his partner from under his eyelashes.

"You're a distraction," Sin said flatly. "All I can think about is fucking you all the time." A slight shift so that the growing erection that was pressed against Boyd's crotch emphasized his point.

Boyd's lips stretched into a slow, roguish smile but he didn't move. "What can I say?" he murmured, watching Sin through heavy eyelids as he pressed his hips up against him. "It's a natural talent."

Sin stared down at him and ignored the shiver that went through his body, instead keeping his face frozen in the same serious, almost displeased expression. With the disapproving glare firmly in place, he rocked his hips slightly but otherwise didn't touch Boyd. "You are proud of corrupting me, are you?" He asked.

"Hmm, maybe a little. But don't lie, Hsin," Boyd teased, his eyes sparking with a hint of mischief. "I think you did some of it yourself; you can take the credit."

"Who gave you permission to call me that?" Sin asked in an almost cold tone. He began rocking his hips harder, faster, the movement pressing Boyd against the rug.

Boyd's eyes slid mostly shut and his mouth fell partially open; he took a moment to respond as he was distracted by what Sin was doing. "All those times," he started quietly, his breath increasing. For a second he had to stop to think then said louder, "You didn't say not to, I figured meant I could."

Sin grunted and leaned forward, putting one hand on either side of Boyd's head and bracing himself with them, leaning down so that their faces were inches apart as he continued to grind against his partner. "You're supposed to be my slave," He reminded Boyd in the same tone, eyes burning like green fire. "So you should ask permission to call me by that name, just like from now on you're going to have to ask permission to touch me."

His eyes narrowed, the only indication that he was affected by the movements of their hips was the way his breath hitched slightly. "It seems as though I will have to keep you on a short leash if I am going to maintain my job and our... arrangement."

Boyd started to say something but it slid into a moan. He watched Sin, just a glint of his dark blue contacts between his eyelashes, and let his mouth hang open as he panted. He didn't bother hiding how Sin was affecting him but he did bring his hands from beneath his head, lifting one toward Sin's shoulder as he asked huskily, "And what if I do it anyway?"

Sin grabbed Boyd's hand before it could touch him and pinned it to the floor on top of his other wrist. "You won't."

An experimental tug didn't loosen Sin's hold at all and when Boyd tried again a little harder he realized that he couldn't get either hand away. His heartbeat quickened automatically, but the usual fear was muffled by the way their hips ground together and the fact that he knew Sin didn't intend to hurt him. He didn't say anything; just watched Sin through darkened eyes and arched his back to get closer, trying to at least add more pressure but Sin immediately moved away and completely avoided the contact. As he stared down at Boyd his lip lifted in something that could have been a smirk or a sneer; it wasn't clear which. His breath came out in shallow pants as he continued to grind against Boyd and shook his head.

Boyd dropped back to the ground and panted, his eyes falling shut for a moment. The constant movement against his arousal was driving him nuts. Feeling their hips grind together just made him want to press against Sin, to rip off their clothing and run his hands all over his body but he couldn't get his hands away, couldn't get close enough to touch him, he couldn't even kiss him from here. "Fuck," Boyd whispered mostly to himself. Abruptly, he pulled harder at his hands but all it caused was slight pain to his wrists and when he tried to arch his back again, Sin just avoided him. He opened his eyes and glared at Sin almost in accusation, saying louder in an irritable demand, "Fuck, come on! Do something else!"

Sin's lips twisted in a definite smirk, still moving his hips at the same pace, in the same rhythm. "No."

Boyd let out a groan that was half frustration and half desire. He tilted his head back against the floor and twisted as if to get away from the slow torture but that just made it worse. His breath was heavy and quick now and his narrowed eyes were darkened by lust and irritation when he looked back up at Sin. Hoping to be able to push Sin off him, he bucked his hips up firmly.

Sin didn't move and only responded by pressing down harder. "Behave," He ordered, voice low, husky and incredibly sexy.

"Ahh," Boyd groaned helplessly and dropped back down to the rug. He stared up at Sin, gaze clouded with desire, and tried to bring his scattered thoughts together. He was entirely focused on everything about Sin; their erections pressed against each other, that sexy bedroom voice, the burning green of his eyes, the well-defined muscles of his arms as he held Boyd's hands down, the glinting of the light off that damn lip ring that Boyd wanted to suck into his mouth and twirl against his tongue and— "Fuck," he said again with a bit of desperation this time. "Dammit, Hsin, please— just— *do* something!"

Sin gazed at him for a long moment before finally shifting and releasing Boyd's hands, although the look he gave Boyd made it obvious that he was still expected to keep them above his head. He pushed Boyd's t-shirt up and ran his fingers over the trembling skin of his stomach and down to his hips, which were barely covered by his low riding pants. Sin's tongue once again swept over his bottom lip absently and he kept his eyes locked to Boyd's as he slowly unbuttoned Boyd's jeans before dragging the zipper down. "Don't move."

Watching his every move with intense eyes filled with desire, Boyd made a low sound deep in his throat that could have been distress or excitement; it was hard to tell which. Despite how much he wanted to just jerk his hips or say fuck it and surge up against Sin, to touch and kiss him and do what he'd been wanting from the start, he complied with Sin's command. His fingers curled into fists but he kept his hands where they were, his chest heaving and every bit of skin Sin touched tingling even after his fingers were gone, muscles tense as he tried to hold himself still.

Sin yanked his pants down almost violently, freeing his almost painfully hard erection from the constricting denim so that it stood up straight, tenting the fabric of his briefs. Those were ripped off next and Sin crouched there for a long moment, gazing down at him with a look that was pure hunger. Long fingers ghosted up one of Boyd's

thighs and Sin slid his fingers around his dick slowly, lightly, barely even touching it before he moved his hand away with an arched eyebrow.

Boyd's eyes narrowed suspiciously when he saw Sin's expression and it took all of his control not to jerk his hips up for more contact. He breathed heavily, fingers digging into his palms, and warred with his need to have Sin do more and his pride in not complying with everything Sin wanted. But he was so hard it almost hurt and Sin just made it worse with that teasing touch... "Touch me," he demanded finally, voice husky and eyes burning.

"No."

That single word made Boyd shake his head just a little in denial, his eyes narrowing further. "Touch me," he snapped again.

Sin's eyes narrowed and his mouth turned down into a displeased frown. He made no move to put his hands on Boyd. "No."

Boyd grit his teeth and let his eyes fall half-closed, watching Sin as he tried to measure how serious he was, how much it would take for him to give. But Sin didn't look like he would cave to demands and Boyd could hardly stand waiting. "Fuck," he hissed and abruptly jerked one hand down, intending to do it himself.

Before he could even make contact, Sin was pinning both hands above his head again. "You'll fucking do what I say," he said in the same quiet, intense voice, "Or I'll leave you here."

Boyd slid his eyes closed again and couldn't help a desperate, tortured moan. There was a brief, confused spike of fear at those words but it was overwhelmed by the intensity of his need at that moment and the circumstances. He didn't even tug at his hands this time, he just let his fingers curl helplessly and tried to ignore the trembling that wanted to overtake his body as he ached for more attention. It was hard to think clearly; he just wanted Sin to touch him and let him come already. His shirt shifted on his stomach as his chest rose and fell with each quick breath, in tune with the

hammering of his heart. Sliding his eyes open, Boyd licked his lips and watched him. "Please," he whispered hoarsely, "touch me."

Sin stared at him silently for another long moment and at first it seemed as though he wouldn't do anything, but then he was leaning down and his mouth was hovering above Boyd's toned stomach, breath whispering over his skin as full lips began to trail hot, wet kisses down his body. Sin's eyes never left Boyd's, even when his mouth hovered over Boyd's cock. His tongue slid across the head teasingly, the barest touch, before he pulled back a bit and watched Boyd silently.

Boyd's eyes widened and he stared at his partner, incredibly turned on. His body trembled from forcing himself not to jerk his hips up, not to demand more. Sin had never put his mouth anywhere near his dick before and even that brief amount of heat was enough to make Boyd crave more. He started to say something then had to stop and try again. "Please," he murmured, voice low and husky. "More." Green eyes locked with blue and suddenly his dick was being covered by Sin's mouth. Full lips fastened around the tip and slid down, his tongue stroking it the entire time. The feeling wrenched a loud, "Ohh *fuck*," out of Boyd that slowly degraded into a moan. He hadn't had a blowjob in years; the feeling of something warm and wet encasing him was fucking amazing, even better than he remembered. And for what was probably his first time, Sin certainly knew what he was doing.

His eyes almost fell shut but he couldn't look away from Sin, from his bowed head and that sexy mouth briefly wrapped around his dick. He couldn't really believe this was happening; that Sin was doing this without having to be asked and Boyd knew that now he'd crave this feeling again. He wanted desperately to tangle his hands in Sin's hair, to fuck his mouth until he screamed and came, but he remembered what Sin had said and forced his hands to remain above his head.

At first there was more licking than sucking. Sin ran his tongue up and down Boyd's erection, never dropping his eyes, making the scene that much more erotic. He lapped at it like a cat and when a drop of pre-come formed at the head, surprisingly he tasted that too. The tease of Sin's mouth was like torture and when his lips finally

wrapped around it again, he began moving his head up and down slowly, eyes slightly narrowed as his tongue dragged against the underside of Boyd's dick.

Boyd was completely incapable of looking away from those burning green eyes and he knew his own were wide with raw desire. He let mouth drop open as his panting increased and didn't even attempt to stop any of the sounds that he was making. Unabashed moans and the occasional half-formed word escaped him helplessly, even if he didn't know what he was trying to say. Sin looked like a fucking wet dream to him and he knew he would not be able to forget this.

But it wasn't enough; Sin's was moving too slow and the light drag of that lip ring up and down his dick combined with his lips and tongue was driving Boyd crazy. He almost couldn't hold himself still; his hands twitched and his hips jerked briefly but he forced himself down, panted heavier with eyes turning a little wild in frustrated need, and suddenly pleaded throatily, "Oh God-- *Please*, faster!"

Sin's mouth twitched up into a smug smirk around his cock and for a moment he continued with the slow, teasing torture until apparently deciding to take pity on the pleading young man beneath him. He seemed to be experimenting with the act at the same time as he performed it but no matter what he did, it felt incredibly good. When he sucked on the head of Boyd's erection, tongue swirling around almost curiously, loud moans fell from Boyd's mouth but when Sin finally began bobbing his head up and down, lips forming a hot, wet suction, it drove him insane and Boyd didn't last long after that.

Familiar heat built in his body and pooled in his stomach and Boyd could not keep quiet or even hold still any longer despite how hard he tried. His moans rose in pitch and volume; his hands jerked down to tangle in Sin's hair though he barely managed to stop himself from doing anything more. "Fuck," he said helplessly, "Hsin, I—" He didn't have the chance to say anything else. His back arched and eyes rolled back as he lost himself in orgasm, almost entirely unaware of anything that was happening around him.

Sin swallowed Boyd's semen and never once winced at or recoiled from the taste. He watched as Boyd shuddered and moaned, almost unable to keep his controlled, unaffected facade going with the throbbing hard-on that strained against his jeans. After a long moment, he pulled away and sat up, still staring down at his partner with the same expression on his face. Boyd's eyes were closed, head flung back as he panted through his mouth, shuddering from the intensity of his orgasm. Sin watched him silently, waiting for him to regain his senses as he undid his own jeans and let them slide down his hips.

Finally, Boyd slid his eyes open and watched Sin through his eyelashes, gaze moving down to linger on Sin's erection. He looked tousled and sated, but despite how content he would have been to just lie there for a few moments to recover, he looked back up to Sin's eyes questioningly as if silently asking what Sin wanted him to do.

Instead of speaking, Sin grabbed Boyd roughly and jerked him up before spinning him around and pushing him back down to the floor so that he was on his hands and knees. Although he didn't say anything, Sin's breath was coming fast in anticipation and he grabbed the bottle of lubricant that lay discarded near the furniture, applying a generous amount to his almost painfully hard dick. "What do you want?" He asked finally, voice low and as rough as the jeans that crowded his thighs and rubbed against the bare backs of Boyd's legs.

Boyd looked over his shoulder and said hoarsely, "You to fuck me."

Sin's eyes were almost entirely shut, only the barest glimmer of green visible from beneath his eyelashes. He pressed his erection against Boyd, rubbing against him slightly as he licked his lips and gazed at him with a hungry expression on his face. "How bad do you want it?"

Boyd's eyes were drawn down to Sin's lips; a trace of his come remained at the edges and his lip ring glinted dully in the light. His eyes clouded as he thought about the blowjob Sin had just given him, remembered what those lips looked like wrapped around his cock with those same green eyes staring at him intently the entire time.

"Fuck," Boyd hissed and pressed back a little even though as he expected, Sin just pulled away.

Sin was driving him crazy tonight; constantly teasing him with what he could have without actually giving it. Even if Boyd had just come he could only stare at Sin's expression, his body, and feel Sin's already lubricated erection pressing against him for so long before he felt the familiar lust and impatience take over. His skin was sensitive and flushed, his blood already warm with the need for more. He knew what it felt like to be fucked by Sin and it seemed like the anticipation was killing him. But he knew Sin would just do the same thing again and rather than go through the torture, Boyd just skipped straight to begging. "God, *please*," he pleaded, "I want it bad! Stop fucking with me and just fuck me!"

That same cocky smirk found its way across Sin's full lips and he didn't say anything else. He clamped one strong hand down on Boyd's shoulder and gripped it hard before shoving his cock inside Boyd, not giving him time to adjust before he began fucking him hard and fast. Boyd let out a sound that was a groan and yell combined but Sin barely heard him. His eyes rolled back in his head, mouth falling open as obscenities dripped from his lips once again in a language that Boyd did not understand. It seemed that Sin automatically switched to his native tongue whenever he was completely lost in pleasure.

His hands were clutching Boyd almost violently, movements rough and staccato as he pounded into Boyd unrelentingly. His breath came out in loud pants, mingled with low, deep moans as he gripped Boyd's other shoulder, using them for leverage as he slammed Boyd backwards onto his dick.

Sin's fingers were like vices on his body, his erection pounding into him with abandon. The sex was a little rougher than usual but Boyd welcomed it after all the teasing; he shoved back with Sin's hands in hard, quick movements, his mouth wide as he panted harshly. Pleasured moans, half-formed words, Sin's real name and the occasional 'please' mingled together in breathy desperation until he barely made any sense. With Sin fucking him like that, his dick once again grew hard, swollen. Bracing

himself with one hand, he started masturbating with the other; his eyes rolled back and moans rose in passion as his body thrummed with pleasure.

Sin bit down on his lower lip and seemed to be trying to fight the moans that were dripping from his lips but he couldn't seem to help it. Boyd felt too fucking good-- he was so damn tight... "Oh fuck yes," he groaned, as he slammed against Boyd even harder, voice getting louder. The pressure was building inside of him and he moaned something nearly incoherent, something that vaguely sounded like a warning. Boyd had barely begun to understand the words before Sin was coming inside of him. Sin stayed still, head hanging as he panted, hands still gripping Boyd firmly as he lost himself in the aftermath of his orgasm but Boyd was only vaguely aware of it; his attention was on his hand speeding up and the heat building within him unbearably once again. It wasn't long before he came with a strangled cry that he couldn't quite make into words.

He was overwhelmed for several seconds and the arm that supported him trembled with sated exhaustion. He sagged, trying to catch his breath, not caring if Sin held him up or not. After several moments of breathless panting with Sin hovering over him, he felt Sin's still swollen erection slide out of him and they both collapsed to the rug beneath them.

Sin grunted and lay beside him, closing his eyes briefly as he took several deep breaths as though he were trying to regain his bearings. He pulled his jeans up absently, zipping them up but leaving them unbuttoned as one hand extended towards the coffee table in search of his cigarettes. The silence stretched for a long time, the room reeking of sex and sweat, but then finally Sin opened his eyes and looked at him.

"I'm going to go check out that warehouse," he said calmly, completely switching back to the previous topic as if the intense bout of sex had not just happened.

Boyd didn't bother to pull his clothes back on at first; he just flopped onto his back and looked over with lazy curiosity. "When?"

Sin lit a cigarette and squinted up at the ceiling for a moment, rubbing his hand across his stomach idly. "Soon. Before it gets light at least. They are most likely still on alert at the moment so I'll give them time."

There was something about his tone that made it obvious that despite the way he'd temporarily lost himself in sex, he still wasn't over the fact that someone had bested him in some way.

Boyd nodded silently and turned his head to stare at the ceiling. Although he thought it may be better to wait, he could tell that Sin was not going to let this go. His pride was probably challenged by the fact that someone had stalked them without them knowing, and no doubt he wanted to check this guy out personally to see what was happening with him. Jason Alvarez didn't necessarily have a reason to go there but it was entirely possible that he would've wanted to check it out if he found out that his roommate and lover had been assaulted by someone who worked there. Also, even if Boyd was certain what was in the crates judging by all the hints he'd gathered, it was true that he still hadn't positively identified the contents with his eyes, so that could be another goal of them going down there.

However, Boyd couldn't deny that he would be a little annoyed if Sin could get the answer in one night when Boyd had been watching for weeks. He knew he was good at his job but it felt like Sin always had to be one step better at everything. The only thing Boyd had been better at before this mission was undercover work and planning, but after their stint in Monterrey no doubt Sin would be superior at that as well. The thought was not a particularly pleasing one and for a moment Boyd could see why Kassian would have issues with Sin. At least Boyd was one Level below him; if they were the same rank, he would especially feel like he had to be competitive. He sighed quietly to himself and sat up, making a mild face at the stickiness, and kicked his pants and underwear fully off his legs. He pulled his shirt off and threw it carelessly to the side, finally looking over at Sin again as he stood.

"I'm going to shower," he told him calmly.

Sin nodded distractedly, appearing lost in his own thoughts although his eyes still scanned the length of Boyd's naked body almost absently. "Are you going with me?"

"Well, we could risk you getting lost trying to follow my directions or I could just go with and lead you straight there," Boyd said mildly. He turned fully, giving Sin a better view as he raised his eyebrows. "I would guess both our preferences would be I come with."

Sin grunted, not bothering to hide his open stare and instead raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "I thought you already did that."

"Mm." Boyd tilted his head in agreement, his tone remaining mild. "That tends to happen in your presence, even if you're an evil bastard sometimes."

One dark eyebrow rose and Sin gazed at Boyd coolly. "Oh?"

"You nearly made me beg," Boyd reminded him dryly after a brief, pointed pause. "I think you just like me at your mercy."

"Nearly?" Sin asked with a smirk. "I'm pretty sure you *did* beg."

Boyd affected a haughty expression. "No, I merely requested that you continue. It's only polite to say 'please' after all."

Sin snorted and pushed his shoulders against the floor before springing to his feet easily. "Whatever lets you sleep at night, sweetheart." "Ah, the resurrection of 'sweetheart'," Boyd said in amusement. "Don't you get a nickname too?"

Sin grabbed a sleeveless shirt from the floor that he'd apparently discarded earlier. "No."

He slipped it on and it clung to his chest, clearly showing his well-defined muscles through it. The collar of the shirt was ragged and looked just as threadbare as his jeans. That taken into account with his disheveled hair, perpetually shadowed jaw

and the cigarette dangling from his lips made him look every bit the rebellious punk that he was supposed to be.

"Actually I want to go now. You don't need a shower, let's just go."

Boyd looked at him sidelong and thought about pointing out that of the two of them Sin wasn't the one covered in semen so of course he didn't care about showering. But rather than bother with that he just shrugged with one shoulder and swiped his shirt from the floor to wipe himself off. It didn't take him long to get dressed again in a new set of clothes, this time with his hair pulled out of his eyes with a baseball cap. He glanced at Sin but didn't say anything as he opened the door and walked out.

There weren't many people on the streets so early in the morning, which was good and bad. It meant they could move quickly but it also made them more conspicuous and Boyd didn't think it would be particularly prudent to be obvious about where they were headed. Even if the man could probably tail them regardless of the precautions and even though Sin seemed intent on getting there relatively quickly, Boyd didn't feel comfortable with a direct route. Despite that, it didn't take them long to arrive at what for Boyd was becoming the rather familiar warehouse with the restaurant huddled in front.

As they slipped through the shadows of an alley along the side, Boyd couldn't help but notice that it was especially quiet. He raised an eyebrow at that and looked over at Sin, tilting his head as if to ask if he noticed anything strange or any presence nearby. Boyd didn't sense anyone except Sin in the vicinity but that hardly meant anything; the man had already suddenly appeared once and he doubted it would be any different this time.

Sin's face was expressionless as he shook his head once at Boyd, indicating he didn't notice anyone either. They moved further into the shadows and although they weren't on a real assignment, it seemed as though he was in mission mode. They slipped into the alley where the confrontation had occurred and noticed that the restaurant was still closed-- something that wasn't surprising considering the time of day

it was. That wasn't important though, if Boyd was right about what was going on, the restaurant was just a cover for the warehouse in the back anyway.

Sin's eyes skimmed the vicinity and for a moment his mouth turned down in a slight frown. Whatever activity had been going on an hour ago had obviously ceased.

"Let's go in," He muttered and looked around.

There were no side doors into the warehouse from this direction and for a moment he puzzled at how the man had apparently disappeared when Boyd turned his back. Not only were there no entrances to the warehouse but there were no doors leading to any other building either. He stared up the side of the building before his eyes focused on the wide windows. The nearest one was several feet above his head but he jumped up easily and caught one of the small sills with his fingertips. It didn't seem possible that he would be able to pull himself up to the window but that is exactly what he did.

He stood at the edge of the window, blending in perfectly with the darkness. Although it seemed precarious, like he would fall off at any moment, he seemed completely unconcerned with the height and somehow was balanced well enough that he was in no danger. He peered into the warehouse with a slight frown on his face. Nothing could be seen from the angle and he shook his head at Boyd before looking up and carefully picking his way across the sill before pulling himself up into another window.

Boyd stared up at Sin with his eyebrows raised; it was obvious that Sin's method of scaling the building was most likely the same as the man's, there was no other explanation as to how he would have disappeared so quickly. However, there was no way Boyd would be able to reach the lowest window without something to stand on and even if it sounded like there was no activity at the moment he didn't think dragging something over to crawl up would be very intelligent. Instead, he moved back against the wall and looked around carefully. He still didn't sense anyone but he wasn't going to

push it by climbing the rickety and squeaky fire escape. So he just waited, watching Sin for some sort of signal.

Sin climbed higher and higher for several long moments until he finally got to a window with an angle that allowed him the best view of the inside of the warehouse. He looked inside for awhile before glancing down at Boyd with a frown. Without a word he began climbing back down the side of the wall but halfway down he gave up on that and just dropped to the ground, landing in a crouch. "Looks empty."

Nodding, Boyd walked quietly to the door and tried the knob. It was locked but that was to be expected. He took the baseball cap off and flipped it upside down, squinting in the dim light until he was able to pull a small pin out near the bill. Within seconds he had picked the lock and was able to open the door. Although no lights were on in the warehouse itself, there was enough ambient light through the window to see that there was nothing there. Boyd stopped just inside, not certain yet if he was impressed or irritated.

"Wow," he said in disbelief. "When you said 'empty' I thought you meant of people, not everything."

Sin walked farther into the room, looking around with a scowl etched into his features. "I thought you said they were unloading a bunch of shit?"

"They were." Boyd put the pin back in place in the bill and turned in a circle, as if somehow the crates would magically appear behind him. When the room remained just as empty, he put the hat back on and narrowed his eyes. "This shouldn't be possible. There was too much cargo; even if they doubled the amount of men and trucks, there was too much in here to clear in an hour or two."

Sin stared at Boyd as if he were debating whether or not he'd gone insane and imagined the whole thing before shaking his head. "How do yo--" Before he could finish his sentence, something caught his eye and he stopped, staring at the wall above Boyd's head.

Boyd looked at Sin strangely then turned and backed up a few steps to see the wall better. A demented looking smiley face leered down at them, the yellow paint glinting wetly even in that dim of light. Boyd stepped closer and reached up, putting one finger into a trail of paint that was dripping down the wall. It was so fresh that it was completely wet; he didn't think it had been drying for more than a few minutes, if that. Boyd raised an eyebrow and looked over at Sin.

"Well," he said, nonplussed, not even knowing what to say.

Sin's eyes flicked around the warehouse, taking in every entrance and every window in the area. There was obvious tension in his shoulders and he seemed torn between being frustrated and annoyed. "He's fucking with us," He muttered. "He knew you would come back."

"Seems so," Boyd agreed calmly. He looked around the room, remembering the piles of crates that had filled the place. He shook his head to himself and crossed his arms loosely. "I can't believe they cleared this so quickly." He sounded mildly impressed.

Sin ignored Boyd's comment. "So I guess I won't get to fight him. Not tonight at least." He seemed almost sullen as he said it.

Boyd looked over, checking if he was serious, but all he saw was Sin half-glaring at the empty room. He pivoted toward the door but watched Sin sidelong, feeling half-exasperated and half-amused. It figured that the thing Sin would note about this was being unable to confront the man who'd tailed them and not, say, the hundreds of missing crates with possible smuggled weapons tucked inside.

"Oh, don't say that," Boyd said sardonically. "Maybe if you wander for long enough he'll stop by to harass you. Or if you prefer I could be bait?"

Sin stared at Boyd as though he were considering the idea before shrugging. "Would you mind?"

"Oh not at all," and this time the sarcasm was dripping from Boyd's tone. "Why don't I just go out there," he pointed toward the door as if Sin could not understand, "and walk into the wall a few times, maybe crouch in the light more than shadows. You know, lure him out with my ineptitude. I could also have my pants undone for easy access castration. This sounds like a good plan."

Sin continued to stare at him blankly as he sucked on his lip ring. "Why are you always so eager to start taking your pants off?" He shook his head at his partner and headed towards the door.

If Boyd had nearly any other personality he would have smacked himself on the forehead. Instead, he just stared at Sin incredulously, trying to decide if he was joking. Although Sin seemed mostly serious, he did not seem as though he was trying to be mean. Even so, Boyd felt rather dumbfounded that he had missed such an obvious level of sarcasm. It took him a few seconds to even think to follow and when he did, he walked at Sin's side, looking over in mild indignation. More than the implications of Sin's half-joke, he was indignant that his tone could be ignored.

"That was an example of sarcasm. Here is another: Right, because you could never say that about you either."

Sin snorted and exited the warehouse, throwing it a final hateful glance as he did so, as though it were the reason for all of his problems. "I couldn't say that about me. You, however, I think liked your mystery assailant groping your crotch earlier."

"One," Boyd said pointedly, "you are a nudist so you dropping your pants is far more likely than me. Two, did I not mention he had a knife in his hand? Some people are into that sort of thing but, for me, it's not exactly wet dream material."

"Uh huh." Sin cast him a doubtful look, shoved his hands in his pockets and began walking away.

Boyd rolled his eyes and followed Sin silently.

## Chapter 34

In the summer, Monterrey sweltered. The heat was nearly palpable, the air heavy with humidity as the sun's surprisingly strong rays streamed through the mist of cirrus clouds which stretched across the sky. The pavement burned against the bare feet of unruly children and ice cream melted down their arms before they even took the first bite. People disappeared during the height of the day and reappeared in the evening when the sun was beyond the horizon. The smell of sweat was thick in the air and it rolled off the bodies of people whether they were standing and talking, jogging or fucking.

The heat was either an instigator or an aphrodisiac; it made tempers hot and lust hotter. It brought out the primal instincts in people; especially those who were used to the cool, steady climate of northeastern America where it barely reached above 60 degrees during any season since the war.

Sin and Boyd were no exception to that; sometimes they were irritable roommates who were not above arguing over whose turn it was to wash dishes or do laundry. Other times they were fuck buddies, panting and sweating against the sheets or the cool concrete of the floor, writhing and moaning, urgently making each other come and basking in a post-coital daze as the sun streamed through the curtains and heated their already burning bodies.

They fell into a routine and for most of the summer it was easy to forget that they were even on assignment. It was easy to forget who they were and what their purpose was when they had nothing more to do for several months than wander around Monterrey, eat and have sex. Their assignment and their partnership was almost forgotten unless one brought up the strange warehouse and the man who'd evaded them, but for the most part they were friends and roommates who pleased each other in every way they could come up with.

The long meandering summer allowed them the time to fully explore each other, to figure out each other's likes and dislikes, to become as accustomed to each other's

bodies as they were their personalities. Sin figured out that despite the fact that Boyd liked having control in most situations, he got off on being denied, on being teased and being made to beg for it, which he had no problems doing. Sin also figured out that Boyd could get loud; that he could moan in a way that made his toes curl and send a shiver down his spine. He also figured out a few things about himself; after the initial hesitation and paranoia about hurting his partner, he realized that sometimes he couldn't really help but be rough. He couldn't help but fuck Boyd almost violently sometimes, encouraged by Boyd's needy pleas and loud moans; by the way he came hard without Sin even having to touch his dick whenever Sin's erection slammed into his prostate. He learned that a kiss on his neck or ear could give him an almost instant erection and that he liked sucking Boyd's dick, liked swallowing his come.

He also realized that he was satisfied and that for the first time in his entire life, he could actually, honestly say that he knew what happiness was because he was experiencing it. He could honestly say that Boyd wasn't just his partner, he was his friend and, shockingly, he was a friend who had no qualms about stopping over at Lunar some evenings to hang out or just to get fucked in the grimy bathroom at the club. He was a friend who wasn't afraid to walk home at four in the morning in a bad neighborhood because he had the skills to silence any street thug who got cocky. People who saw them at the club automatically knew that they were sleeping together; it was in the way their eyes strayed over the other's body, the almost teasing smirks that seemed to be a promise for later although they were anything but affectionate in front of others, or even alone. Most people mistakenly thought they were in a relationship, gave them the titles of lovers, but Sin and Boyd always denied it because really it was not true. They were best friends and partners who'd finally gotten over all the bullshit and had come to terms with the mutual attraction, deciding that fucking was better than always being so tense about it and that was the end of the story.

Sometimes Sin wondered what the people at the Agency would say if they could see them now. He wondered if they would be smug or if they would be surprised; knowing that after all of that time the rumors were finally true. He wondered what Carhart would say if he knew that he indulged in alcohol regularly at the club, chain-

smoked more by habit than by fake persona and had more than one person in the city who considered him a friend despite the fact that he didn't go so far as to return the sentiment. He wondered what Connors would think if he found out that not only was Sin 'sexually functional' but experiencing the kind of raging hormones that only a teenage boy was capable of. He wondered what Vivienne would say if she knew that the scars Boyd had always been so ashamed of, the scars she'd damned as markers of his weakness and drama, could sometimes be the cause of passionate sex; were often traced by Sin's tongue as he worshiped Boyd's body with his mouth.

But most of the time he didn't wonder these things because he put them out of his mind. He pushed the Agency and the people who connected him to it to a place in the back of his mind which was usually left for his darkest memories. It stayed that way until early August when hiring began for the Global Arts Exposition and when Jason Alvarez handed in his two weeks' notice at Lunar. But it didn't really become real to him until his last shift at the club.

He realized with some irritation that he didn't want to quit, that he didn't want to go train for the Expo. He didn't want to start thinking in terms of mission parameters again and become consumed with the assignment. An irrational part of his mind wished that he could defect from the Agency, pretend he wasn't an agent and stay in Monterrey, pretending to be Jason Alvarez for the rest of his life. But he knew that was stupid and unrealistic so he ignored it and kept the ideas to himself, instead deciding that he would enjoy his last night at his decidedly cushy job and try to get Boyd intoxicated at the party that his coworkers had insisted on throwing in his honor.

Sin spent the majority of the night hanging around in the shadows, being talked to by the regulars who knew that he was leaving and never giving them the slightest bit of attention although as usual, it didn't deter them. The gaggle of girls who'd followed him around since the beginning seemed particularly mournful about his resignation and took turns daring each other to approach him although none of them actually managed to say anything worthwhile before they scurried back to their friends. His coworkers, however, seemed surprisingly disappointed with his decision to leave. Estella

complained that she'd never gotten him to really loosen up while Johnny and the bartender Veronica mourned the fact that they'd never managed to draw him into the threesome they'd often teased him about. Surprisingly Jessica hadn't said much about the matter although everyone kept informing him that she was really upset about it.

A part of him was thankful that she'd declined to comment further, that he wouldn't have to stand in front of her as she sprawled charmingly on her desk and he wouldn't have to pretend that now that he was accustomed to civilians, accustomed to intimacy and sex, that he didn't find her attractive. It was something he'd realized recently, almost accidentally after he'd caught himself staring at her large breasts and long, shapely legs. Having fourteen years' worth of pent of frustration and sexual desire suddenly loosened not only gave him a raging libido, but an almost overwhelming sense of curiosity as well. He knew it was the only time in his life that he'd get to act like a normal man and be around people who didn't know him well enough to be frightened of him, so when Veronica and Johnny murmured wickedly in his ears and described the things that the three of them could do together, Sin couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to have sex with a woman.

When Veronica told him that she got wet whenever she watched him fight, he wondered what it would feel like to have his dick inside of her 'tight little pussy,' as she so delicately called it. When they drank after work and she convinced him to dance with her, grinding against him like a stripper, he wondered what it would be like to hike her short skirt up and pound her like he did Boyd, but while fondling her half exposed breasts.

He was mildly disturbed by his preoccupation with sex but mollified by the fact that he would never act on any of the things that went through his mind. He was curious but not curious enough to actually approach anyone or give into the constant temptations that they threw his way. Because when it came down to it, his sexual curiosity wasn't strong enough to overpower almost two decades of paranoia when it came to intimacy.

He allowed himself to get that close to Boyd because after all of the things that they'd gone through together, he could safely say that Boyd was probably the only person in the world that he trusted. When he lounged in bed with Boyd, falling half asleep after a couple hours of foreplay and sex, he didn't have to force himself to stay alert because he knew Boyd wouldn't take advantage of him in that vulnerable state. No matter how nice and friendly and amusing his coworkers were, there was no way they would ever achieve that kind of trust with him in the short span of time that he'd known them.

Sin glanced at the thick banded watch he wore around one wrist and realized that after almost forty minutes of brooding in the gallery while ignoring everyone around him, it was almost time for his shift to end. Jessica had deliberately scheduled him to work the closing shift so that they could throw him the party without the customers being present and he realized with mild amusement that they'd even closed up early. It was barely three o'clock but there were only a handful of customers left in the club and Johnny was impatiently shooing them towards the door as the employees milled around the bar, laughing and joking loudly as they called for him to come down.

He shook his head with a wry smirk and shoved his hands in his pockets, wondering how the hell it was possible for these strange people to actually demand his presence and miss his absence when all of the people who knew his real identity could barely stand to be in the same room with him. He wondered if Jess, Estella, Veronica and Johnny would turn on him if they knew the truth about who he was and what he did or if they would accept it and still welcome him since they'd actually been given the chance to get to know him before finding out that they were supposed to fear him. Most of all he wondered how the fuck it was possible that he was so comfortable around civilians after such a brief amount of time.

It was all very strange.

"Where's your boy toy?" Johnny demanded when he finally kicked out the remaining customers. He yanked his black Lunar t-shirt off and threw it on the floor

carelessly, exposing his muscular torso and sweaty undershirt. "I'm about to deadbolt it but I was gonna wait until he got here."

Sin glanced at his watch again and shrugged. "My shift isn't supposed to end until 3:30; he'll probably be here then."

Johnny smirked and bobbed his head in time to the music which was still blaring over the loudspeakers. "Let's have a farewell three-way, just you, me and the kid. Whaddaya say? In the private rooms, you know? Hot shit."

Sin snorted and looked away, letting his gaze roam over to the spectacle his coworkers made on the dance floor as they talked loudly and danced excitedly, like children who'd just gotten out of school early. "You're not my type. Feel free to make the offer to him though."

"How would Kadin feel about that?" A female voice asked suddenly.

Sin didn't look at Jess as she sidled up to him and kept his gaze focused on Veronica and Frankie, as they did some kind of rendition of an exaggerated waltz only to have Estella interrupt and steal Frankie away. "Feel about what?" He asked uninterestedly.

Johnny wrapped his arms around Jess's slender shoulders and nuzzled her neck teasingly although it was obvious that he wasn't really trying to hit on her. Despite her appearance and friendly attitude with the staff, she commanded respect and received it. People knew better than to overstep their bounds. "Feel about his boyfriend offering him up to crude bouncers with overactive sex drives," She replied and batted Johnny away as she kept her gaze trained on Sin.

"He isn't my boyfriend so I'm sure he won't be terribly offended unless he finds Johnny to be that repulsive." Sin paused and glanced at the bouncer in consideration. "Which is entirely possible," He added with a smirk.

Johnny flipped him off even as he laughed good naturedly. "Fuck you, Jase."

“No. That’s the whole point.” Sin shrugged and leaned against the bar, ignoring the random kiss that one of the waitresses planted on his cheek as she passed by with promises of cake and alcohol.

Jess’s eyebrows shot up and she sat on the barstool next to him, long legs crossing and causing her short shorts to ride up, exposing more of her thighs. “You gave me the impression that he was your boyfriend,” She said with a slight frown, reaching out to turn Sin towards her and effectively blocking Johnny out of the conversation. He made a face at her and wandered off, claiming that he was going to investigate this cake business.

“Oh?” Sin didn’t remember doing any such thing although he supposed that it was possible that she’d assumed it on her own since he’d never actually explicitly stated what Boyd was to him. “He’s my roommate and my friend.”

“A friend who disappears into the bathroom with you during your break?” She asked challengingly, eyebrow arching. “I saw that, you know.”

He gazed at her from under his eyelashes and his lips curved into a smirk. “Yeah. Is that a problem for you? I’m surprised you didn’t try to watch. I heard you like that kind of thing.” She blushed darkly although her eyes narrowed slightly. “Maybe I do. Maybe I just like seeing what I can’t have.” Jess looked away for a moment before allowing her gaze to fall back on him and she cleared her throat. “So, you’re friends with benefits?”

“He didn’t offer me a 401K but I suppose that term would suit our arrangement.” Jess rolled her eyes at him. “God, do you have to be sarcastic every time you open your mouth? Is that some kind of defense mechanism that allows you to escape having to give out real information or something?”

Sin shrugged and glanced at his watch again. “Maybe.”

She made a face and kicked him lightly in the leg. “You suck.” She scowled and shook her head. “I never even got you to really... I don’t know. I never even got to know

you that well. I thought you'd be around a lot longer. I should have known better—someone with your résumé could do a lot better than a crappy night club like this.”

“Yes.” Sin nodded in agreement.

Jess kicked him playfully again and laughed. “Well, you’re not the only one who has a job at the fancy ass JKS, you know. My uncle works there and hires me from time to time to direct and plan events. I’ve organized banquets and conventions for all kinds of people. I’m on staff for the Expo as well although I’m not in charge this time, so I might even see you around.”

Sin paused for a moment and stared at her silently, all traces of amusement gone from his features as he thought about what that could possibly imply. “You’ll be at the actual event?” He asked finally.

She shrugged and rested her cheek against one hand. “Probably not or at least not for the entire thing. I just take care of the planning beforehand.”

“Oh.” He lost interest in the subject and his gaze strayed towards the door, wondering when Boyd would arrive.

There was a long silence and she continued to watch him as he watched the door and she shook her head, long hair falling around her face as her pretty red mouth turned down in a pout. “I’m going to miss you, Jase.”

He grunted and didn’t formulate a real response.

She looked down for a moment, hiding the hint of sadness that showed in her expression. “I wish things were different, you know. I mean I stopped... I act professional now but things haven’t changed. I still mourn the fact that you’re gay,” She admitted softly.

Sin finally looked at her again and both of his dark eyebrows rose. “Who said I’m gay?”

Jess looked up at him, head tilting to the side. "You did. Remember?"

He opened his mouth to protest and then remembered the incident in her office. "Oh. Right."

She frowned slightly, leaning forward to peer at him intently. "Well... aren't you?"

Sin stared down at her blankly for a moment and almost said 'yes' but something caused him to pause. Gay implied that he only liked men and while the sight and feel of Boyd's body was enough to drive him crazy, he had to admit that he had trouble keeping his gaze from straying to Jess's exposed cleavage and feminine curves. It was strange considering the fact that he'd previously felt nothing at all when looking at women but it had been the same for men so he didn't think he was gay so much as sexually repressed. "I don't know."

Jess opened her mouth, closed it, and opened it again but no sound came out. She screwed her face up in adorable confusion and ran a hand through her hair almost nervously. "Um... what does that mean? Have you— are you— have you never been with a woman?"

"You ask too many questions," He replied flatly and looked at the door again, cursing himself for responding honestly.

She frowned slightly and leaned forward. "Jase..."

His gaze snapped over to her, eyes narrowed in a warning glare. "What?" He demanded, annoyance evident in his tone. He'd escaped this idiotic conversation with her before and here they were again, drudging it up on the last night they'd most likely see each other.

She didn't respond for a moment but her mouth lifted in an almost shy smile. "If that's the case, does that mean it wouldn't gross you out if an icky girl kissed you goodbye?"

Sin rolled his eyes and shrugged. "Do whatever you want."

Jess grinned and leaned forward, grabbing his shirt and pulling him closer to her. He didn't resist, resigned to let her have her way so that she would shut up and leave him alone, and she seemed encouraged by his submission. Her grin widened even as her heart sped up nervously and she pressed her mouth against his full, perpetually pouting lips. The kiss was chaste, almost innocent and she pulled back a mere second after they touched although she didn't move entirely out of his personal space.

She gazed up into his heavy lidded eyes and wet her lips almost nervously, telling herself to sit down and not make a fool of herself, to leave it at that as she had intended, but for some reason she could never listen to reason when it came to him. There was something about his expression that was dark, warning, telling her she was getting too close and that it was unwanted but at the same time... she couldn't help but notice the way his lips had pushed back against hers. She held his gaze and leaned up, brushing her lips against his again, unable to fight the urge. This time she buried one thin hand in the unruly hair at the nape of his neck and her mouth opened partially as they exchanged another almost innocent kiss.

Sin shifted and stared down at Jess, wondering vaguely why the hell she acted this way around him and why she was beating around the damn bush. If she wanted to kiss him, she needed to do it and be done with it so that he could go find Boyd, the cocktails and the cake that Becky had been babbling about. "Just get it over with, woman," he said impatiently.

Jess raised her eyebrows at him and smirked. "Fine then."

This time when she kissed him, she wrapped both arms around his neck and tangled her fingers in his hair. She slipped her tongue between his lips and kissed him passionately, deeply, temporarily losing herself in his taste and smell and exalting in the fact that he didn't push her away. On the contrary, despite the fact that he didn't respond as excitedly as she'd always hoped he would, his lips did move against hers languidly and his hands absently rested on her hips.

They stayed that way for several, long moments and mostly ignored the catcalls and jeers that their coworkers directed at them.

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When Boyd entered the club, he saw Jessica and Sin kissing.

It was the last thing he'd expected to walk in seeing and it surprised him enough to stop and stare. He felt a sudden sense of distaste mixed with another emotion he couldn't quite define, although he knew it was centered on her. She shifted closer to Sin, who didn't seem inclined at all to push her away, and that just made the feeling intensify.

Boyd realized he was staring so he turned to shut the door behind him and absently looked around the room with the mannerisms that he'd perfected over the months. There were maybe twenty people in the room and he had met almost all of them throughout his visits to Lunar. Most of them were dancing and a few were crowded around them watching or talking, but some of them seemed to be sprawled at the bar loudly egging on 'Jason' and Jessica.

He didn't want to deal with what he felt at seeing Sin with Jessica so he decided to try to ignore it by approaching Johnny and Estella at the far end of the lounge. Cake and drinks nearly filled the table but they seemed to be having some sort of discussion rather than actually bothering to distribute it. Boyd meandered that way, trying to ignore the catcalls of coworkers toward Jessica and Sin.

He wasn't entirely successful.

He found himself glancing at Jessica and Sin again. The distaste grew.

It took him a moment to realize that what was bothering him was her proximity. Not only that she was kissing Sin but, somehow, that she was touching him at all. He didn't know why that was at first. He'd seen Johnny and Estella touch Sin when he'd stopped by Lunar before but somehow it hadn't annoyed him as much.

It was different with Jessica, though.

He felt threatened by her; as if she was somehow jeopardizing the position it had taken him a year to reach. All that time it took for him to be able to touch Sin without being in danger of losing his life and some big-breasted woman could walk right up to him and stick her tongue down his throat without Sin even blinking.

The enmity that came with that thought made the undefined feeling grow until Boyd realized with a start that it was jealousy.

After the initial moment of confusion at the feeling, he tried to reason with himself. As much as he didn't like the situation for his own reasons, he couldn't exactly complain about it. He'd never brought any of this up with Sin so there was no way he'd know. And any time they'd been confronted with words like 'relationship,' 'boyfriend,' even 'lover,' Boyd had been right there with Sin saying that really wasn't the case.

Boyd just knew that he trusted Sin, which was saying a lot because there were very few people he could truly say that about.

He didn't let the thoughts make it to his expression, though; he wandered nonchalantly over to the table as if he hadn't noticed or cared about Jessica and Sin. Focusing on the situation would just make it worse and he didn't particularly want to go through the night feeling annoyed or on guard. He'd spent months acting as Kadin Reed, and years ignoring what he was feeling or feeling nothing at all, so it made it easier to put the thoughts out of his mind.

Once within speaking distance, he waited for Estella to pause before he languidly drawled to Johnny, "Leaving the door open, man, that shit's dangerous. I could've been an axe murderer. Your security sucks."

Johnny grinned at him in greeting and wrapped a muscular arm around Boyd's shoulders in much the same way he'd done to Jess earlier. "I'm off the clock, bud. And your roomie is too busy playing tonsil hockey with the boss lady to care about security, which is just not fair in my book."

Estella rolled her eyes at Johnny and smiled brightly at Boyd. "What's up, Kadin?"

"Hey Estella, not much," Boyd greeted her with a lazy smile then turned to Johnny. "What's not, that you gotta do all the work?"

Johnny shrugged and made a face. "More the fact that my tonsils aren't in on the game."

"Well, you could always try to crash the party," Boyd said.

Johnny snorted and glanced over again. "I don't think I'd be able to even if I tried."

Across the room, Sin seemed to sense that Boyd had just entered the club and he looked over, pulling away from Jess finally and moving to stand. She stared at him, eyes slightly wild and lips swollen as she grabbed his arm and tried to get him to stay. She opened her mouth to say something but when he automatically pulled away, she followed his gaze and her cheeks reddened when she saw that Boyd was there.

They briefly exchanged words before Sin crossed the room to greet Boyd. He glanced down at the cake, which had his fake name on it, and shook his head in dismay. Civilians were strange. "Hey."

Boyd looked over when he heard Sin's voice. "Oh, hey," he greeted him idly. "How'd your last shift go?"

Sin shrugged and swiped his finger across the chocolate frosting on the cake, ignoring the look Estella gave him. "Uneventful."

"Eh, probably best. One time I had the shittiest last day at work; even those few hours seemed too long." Boyd looked down at the cake and then back up at Estella. "Can we eat this before he destroys it all?"

"Might as well," She replied with a shake of her head. "I spent a lot of time making this cake pretty."

Sin smirked and grabbed a chunk with his hand, not bothering to cut it or anything. "Tastes better without silverware."

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Not just silverware with you, plates too. I think there's a two-year-old stuck in your brain screaming to get out."

"Maybe I just don't care about unnecessary rules of etiquette," Sin replied blandly.

"I don't think you care about many rules," Boyd said, amused.

Sin raised an eyebrow at Boyd and his smirk turned wicked. "You should know."

Johnny reached out to follow Sin's lead with the cake but Estella slapped a plate and a fork in his hand before he could. He made a face at her but then turned to Boyd. "Did you sign up to work at the Expo too, Kadin?"

"Fuck no," Boyd said easily. "Wayyy too much work and I bet it's boring. Besides, if I did that I'd never get to check out the art. Definitely not worth it. Maybe I'll stop by to browse, though. Some really famous people are gonna be there."

"Where do you work anyway?" Johnny asked with a raised eyebrow. "I've never heard you mention a job."

"I probably haven't mentioned it," Boyd said with a shrug. "I don't really have one right now. I worked my ass off in the States before I came here so I'd have enough money to chill for a bit. There's some nice Art Uni's in the area that I wanted to enroll in if I can figure out how to pay for it. I was gonna get a job but it's hard here and I guess my résumé isn't good enough. So for the moment, I'm trying to do some odd jobs for extra cash."

"I have an odd job for you," Johnny said with a leer. "It involves nudity and a whole lot of lubricant."

Estella wrinkled her nose at Johnny. "Don't you have anything better to do than try to get every attractive human that crosses your path into bed?"

"Nope."

"Well, that wasn't exactly the sort of job I had in mind," Boyd said, amused.

"Thought I'd throw it out there just in case," Johnny continued with a smirk and winked at Boyd. "I heard I may be your type."

Sin raised an eyebrow at Johnny. "I don't believe those were the exact words I used."

"Oh really?" Boyd drawled. "What were the exact words, then? I'm curious how 'my type' even got brought up."

"I was trying to entice him into a threesome. Me, you and him," Johnny informed Boyd as he waggled his eyebrows. "He told me I'm not his type but I might be yours so I should take it up with you one-on-one."

"Ahh," Boyd said. "Yeah, sorry; I'm not really interested either."

"Well, can't say I didn't try." Johnny shrugged. "Guess I'll have to stick with my girlfriend."

Estella frowned at him. "You're such a pig."

"I know," he replied with a charming smile.

Sin snorted and grabbed one of the shot glasses from the table, ignoring the other people who began hovering around the table. Several people tried to engage him in conversation but he ignored them as he usually did and watched the interaction in front of him with a mostly uninterested expression on his face.

Estella rolled her eyes and turned to Boyd again. "Don't mind him. He's pretty unrelenting in his search for as much sex as possible. Although I think under the hound dog persona he's a sweet guy." She poked Sin suddenly, making a face at his lack of participation in the conversation. "Same goes for Jase. I bet he's just a talkative bundle of fun under that brooding exterior."

"You would lose that bet," Sin replied blandly, knocking back the shot.

She waved him off dismissively and looked at Boyd. "How do you put up with this guy? How did you even get to be roommates or friends anyway? You seem so opposite."

"He's not so bad," Boyd said in amusement. "We met 'cause I put an ad out on the internet saying I'd need a roommate when I moved here for the summer. He was one of a few who answered but he seemed least likely to fuck up the apartment or decide he didn't have to pay his half of the rent." He raised an eyebrow and gave Sin a sidelong, wry look. "Then it turns out he gets the steady job anyway, the fucker. A few more months and I'll be the one mooching."

"You're mooching already," Sin informed him.

"So more importantly," Johnny cut in before Boyd could respond. "Why'd y'all start fucking?"

Sin shrugged. "Why not?"

"Yeah," Boyd said unconcernedly. "You live together long enough in this heat, it's probably inevitable."

Estella raised her eyebrows, seeming intrigued by the topic. "Did you both know the other was gay or bisexual or whatever the heck you are? Well, I guess if you're gonna be roomies, it'd have to come up. Honesty is usually the best case for things like that. It'd suck to bring home a guy for the night and find out your roommate is a homophobe."

"Well, it's not like I put I'm gay in the ads," Boyd said casually. "That'd give me way too many annoying answers. I left the ad pretty generic but, yeah, that was part of the problem finding someone because I also wasn't gonna not tell them. So I told whoever responded and that narrowed it down. When I told Jason he just said it was fine, so," he shrugged, "it worked for me."

Estella's gaze swung to Sin. "He didn't share his sexual orientation?" She asked, directing the question to Boyd.

Boyd shook his head. "No, he didn't."

"So then how--"

"You ask a lot of fucking questions," Sin interrupted.

"--Did you hook up?" She finished, ignoring him.

Most of the people who had been surrounding them started to wander away when they realized that Sin was ignoring them. Because of that, Johnny and Estella were pretty much the only ones who were paying attention to the conversation. Boyd and Sin had discussed before what their cover was, how Kadin and Jason supposedly met, why they ended up being roommates. But they hadn't really talked about how this conversation would go; what they would tell anyone who asked about their sexual relationship. Boyd wasn't about to tell the truth but he could get somewhat close just to make it more believable.

"After a while I got a vibe that Jason was interested," Boyd said with a slight smirk, "so I just did what I wanted one day."

"A vibe." Sin stared at Boyd for a moment. "Why in the hell did you suddenly decide to come on to me anyway? What vibe did you get exactly?"

Estella snickered and waited for Boyd's response as Johnny looked on curiously.

Boyd looked over and met Sin's eyes. He'd forgotten that he never told Sin what he'd seen and heard that night, why his advances wouldn't be rejected, but this was hardly the place to explain. Besides, it somewhat amused him to keep that information to himself, to leave Sin wondering. Raising his eyebrows, he said, "The kind that said you'd be okay with me wanting to fuck around with you? That it wouldn't mess up the whole living situation."

"But--" Sin broke off and stared at Boyd, eyes narrowed slightly. "I see."

"Did he ogle you?" Johnny asked with a dirty grin. "I sure would have."

"You ogle everyone," Boyd said with a smirk.

"Lucky bastards," Estella said with a pout. "When I put out an ad for a roomie I didn't get any hot applicants. All I got were weirdoes and slutty females."

"At least you had something in common with them," Sin replied, matter-of-fact.

Estella glared at him and smacked him in the arm while Johnny sputtered with laughter.

Boyd smirked but before anyone could say anything else, there was the sound of someone tapping a glass across the room. They looked over to see Jess sitting on the edge of the bar, long legs crossed as she held a wine glass in one hand. Her eyes were focused on the group of her employees that hovered around the lounge area like greedy children and she announced with a smile, "I'd like to propose a toast to Jason."

Boyd stood back to watch her in the pause that naturally followed her words like a dramatic effect.

Jess looked around the club for a moment and her mouth stretched into a genuine smile. It was a far cry from the mortified expression that had been on her face minutes ago and it seemed that she'd managed to pull herself together quickly, most likely wanting to save face in front of her employees.

"After the war this city was a mess, but it's back on its feet now and it's one of the most thriving cities on this side of the world. I'm proud of it, I'm proud of its people. I'm proud of all of the people who moved here with the purpose of helping to make it better and who stuck by it through thick and thin. I'm proud of the people who work here who helped me turn this place around from a dive bar and into one of the most popular and prestigious clubs in Monty."

She paused and shook her head slightly. "We've had a lot of rough spots, a lot of times when it looked like this place would be shut down or that we'd never find a staff of people who were loyal, who we could trust. But over time I did and a few months ago I thought I'd found the perfect addition to it, the last piece in the puzzle. Someone who, despite his stand-offish attitude and intimidating behavior, managed to charm all of us in one way or another." Jess focused on Sin and her smile turned fond. "We're all sad to see him go after we only just started to get to know him better but I hope someday in the future, no matter what totally awesome job he ends up with, he'll always come back to the crazy people at Lunar and that he'll miss us as much as we miss him."

She raised her glass. "So here's to Jason."

Surprisingly, people cheered and smiled and clapped Sin on the back, echoing the sentiments that Jess had just declared. He stared at them in a kind of confused dismay, completely floored and disturbed by the actual genuine smiles he was receiving, by the fact that for some reason they really seemed to care that he would be gone. He scratched the back of his head awkwardly and glanced over at Boyd, obviously not really knowing what he was supposed to do in a situation like this.

Boyd leaned in and said quietly, "Say thank you."

Sin's mouth turned down into the beginnings of a frown and he looked at Boyd for a moment as if asking why the hell this had to be happening to him of all people and then he shook his head and glanced over at his coworkers.

"Uh. Thanks," he muttered.

Several people snickered and Estella laughed out loud. "I think we're embarrassing the poor man." She smiled at him widely and latched on to his arm, giving him a half hug as she rested her head against his shoulder. "Too bad. We like you, damn it. Deal with it!"

Thankfully mostly everyone began wandering away from him now that they'd made him thoroughly uncomfortable and Sin glanced over at Boyd again, a strange expression on his face. He looked away and stared down at Estella blankly, disentangling himself from her stiffly.

"I'll be back," he said when she gave him an almost hurt look, and he turned around, walking quickly towards the staircase and away from everyone else.

Boyd started to follow Sin but he was stopped by someone saying, "Kadin."

He looked over before he took the time to recognize the voice so he was mildly surprised to see Jess standing there watching him. He really didn't feel like talking to her but he couldn't exactly walk away now that she'd caught his attention. Turning toward her, he slid his hands into his pockets and gave her an almost bored look. "Yeah?"

Jess crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head to the side, studying him for a moment as if she were debating turning around without saying another word. She shook her head and shrugged languidly. "I want to talk to you."

Boyd found that odd but he didn't turn away from her. "Okay."

She looked around for a moment, noting that most people had moved out of earshot and then spoke. "I wanted to apologize for what you walked in on."

That mildly surprised him; he hadn't expected her to say that but he didn't bother to respond at first. If she had a problem with what she was doing or felt it was something she'd have to apologize for later, he felt she just shouldn't do it in the first place. He watched her a moment, waiting to see if she would continue or explain her thoughts further, but she didn't. They stared at each other until he finally asked, "Why?"

Jess shrugged. "I don't know. I guess because I'm not exactly sure what Jason is to you and I don't want it to come off like I was trying to put on a show for you? I had no idea you would be coming in so early."

As if it would have mattered if he came in later? "I didn't realize it'd be inconvenient for you if I did," he said neutrally, shrugging with one shoulder.

She raised an eyebrow and gave him a strange look. "I wasn't trying to imply that it was. I was just saying, I didn't want you to think I chose that moment on purpose."

His expression remained neutral but something about her wording irritated him. "What would've been a better moment for it?"

Jess stared at him silently for a moment. "Um. That wasn't the point. I was just trying to tell you I didn't pick that particular one just so you could see us kissing on purpose and that the reason I'm even mentioning it is because I'm not entirely sure what your feelings about him are. But I already said that, so..." She trailed off.

"Yeah, you keep saying you don't know how I feel but that supposedly it concerns you. Which is why I find it interesting that you went out of your way to talk to me, but not to apologize that it occurred at all. Only that I saw it." He watched her without giving anything away in his expression or tone. "It's an interesting distinction."

Once again, she shrugged. "Because I'm not sorry that it happened, only that I may have rubbed something in your face if it turns out you have deeper feelings for him than was implied."

Boyd was feeling more irritated the further this conversation went. "That's my point. Honestly, I don't really feel like explaining anything to you on my end. But you're not making sense. If you're assuming I may have 'deeper feelings than was implied,' did it not occur to you that this conversation would be even more offensive? You supposedly care if you hurt my feelings but only if it's in a way that makes you look bad, which is just more insulting. Maybe next time you should think about the situation before you suddenly decide to assuage your guilt. It's just the principle of the matter."

"Listen, I'm not trying to be offensive. I was merely saying that if that was the case, I'm sorry you had to see it. I don't feel guilty about anything. I'm not sorry I kissed Jason, I'm not sorry he kissed me back. I think I'm being fairly straightforward here." She flipped her hair over one shoulder, looking annoyed by his responses.

Somehow, the conversation just served to aggravate him. First of all, she didn't know shit about what Boyd really thought or felt and she didn't know him at all so he didn't appreciate her assumptions about his feelings. Secondly, he highly doubted she really cared what he did actually feel. Thirdly, even if she was pretending to care about his feelings, it was still only selective. From the way she spoke, it was like she could have just fucked Sin in the back room and everyone would know, and all along she would realize how Boyd may potentially feel about Sin, but she would do it anyway and feel absolutely no need to say anything about it. Which, assuming he felt the way she said, would be even more hurtful for him. But because he'd run into them kissing in the middle of a crowded room when she wasn't expecting him, she was suddenly now all apologetic.

"Well if you're not sorry about any of that then don't bother being sorry about me seeing it," he said pointedly after a moment. "Either be fine with your actions or be sorry for the whole thing. You shouldn't pick only the parts that could look bad for you in any manner and then say that part's wrong but the rest is perfectly fine. That's really selective."

There was a long silence and then she suddenly laughed. "Wow, why did I even bother trying to talk to you?"

"I dunno," Boyd said with a shrug. "You probably thought it'd make you look better."

Jess shook her head and looked up at the ceiling as if asking for guidance on how to deal with him from a higher power. "You obviously have a hearing disability or just want to be an idiot. How could anything possibly make me look bad? The two of you aren't in a relationship. I told you why I came over here, I told you why I apologized, yet

you just seem set on being rude or making assumptions about my intentions even though I'm being incredibly straightforward with you. So from that I'm going to make the assumption, since we're playing that game now, that you obviously do have feelings for Jason and if that is the case, then once again, I apologize."

Even if she thought she was being straightforward, Boyd didn't think she was listening to his point. Whatever her intentions truly were, he still thought her execution was terrible. And since he didn't like her in the first place, it just annoyed him that he was having to spend this time talking to her at all. He would have far preferred that she'd never approached him in the first place. Even if the kiss had made him realize he felt something unexpected, he hadn't thought of it as a big deal or put a lot of weight behind it until she had to come over and start flapping her mouth.

"Obviously we don't agree and we're not gonna get anywhere with this. So, fine. You've said you're sorry, you can go away feeling better now. Are we done or was there anything else you wanted to selectively apologize for?"

"You know, Kadin," she began slowly, shaking her head at him. "Obviously you want to be hostile towards me and deliberately misinterpret what I say, and obviously you have feelings for Jason that he doesn't have for you. So you need to take that up with him instead of blaming me when all I was trying to do was be nice and explain that neither of us was intentionally trying to hurt your feelings by having you walk in on that. But whatever, continue to be angry all you want but you should direct it at the right person or at least sort things out with him and figure out where you stand."

He almost raised an eyebrow incredulously. 'Obviously'? What the fuck was her problem? She didn't even know what she was talking about; even Boyd couldn't entirely understand what Sin thought or felt, and he had been around him for a year. Now she was suddenly some expert on all this after a few months? Because she hired Sin to be her bouncer, because she'd kissed him a few times and acted like a desperate, distasteful woman whenever he was around? Now she also knew what Boyd secretly supposedly felt *and* she was trying to tell him what to do?

"What makes you think you know anything about this anyway?" Boyd asked, somehow keeping the question from becoming a demand.

Jess opened her mouth to say something then paused, seeming to think better of it. "Let's just say..." She trailed off for a moment and hesitated once again as if trying to figure out how to word whatever she wanted to say. "I know guys don't like to talk about their feelings and all, but if you don't and it turns out I'm right, don't be surprised if one day down the road Jason ends up with a woman." She stared at him for a moment and then shook her head, turning around and walking across the room.

Boyd watched her go, words failing him. He didn't know which emotion he felt the most at that moment but none of them were particularly positive. It annoyed him that she continued to act as if she somehow had a superior relationship with Sin, as if she somehow knew exactly what was going on. As if she had as much history with him as Boyd did. He knew that she knew them as Kadin and Jason, that she was reacting to their cover personalities and that probably as far as she was concerned, she knew 'Jason' just as well as he did. But she didn't, so he found it to be a little condescending the way she implied he needed her shitty advice to figure out where he stood with his partner or, as far as she understood, his roommate and the person he slept with. Like she'd fucking know how to get closer or stay close with Sin anyway; it's not like Sin came home to her every night and ran his hands over *her* body. What the fuck did she know about any of this?

Even so, the confidence in her words was a little unnerving. She could just be reacting to the fact that Sin appeared to be kissing her back and had once seemed briefly interested in her, so she assumed he liked women, but it seemed somehow it must have been more than that. The carefulness with which she chose her words was obvious to Boyd, which lent them more weight. The way she said it implied to him that she thought Sin would ultimately end up and stay with a woman, that he would leave Boyd entirely. But why would she think that?

It was a confusing point for Boyd; he knew he was gay but he didn't know what Sin was. He knew Sin liked fucking him now, but would that always remain the case?

Would he decide in the future that he was bored? When Sin had first mentioned the time with Jessica in the office, he'd said for a moment he'd wanted to rip her clothes off and fuck her. But he'd stopped. Boyd had always taken that as a sign that somehow... it just wouldn't happen. But maybe...

Even if he thought Jessica was distasteful and he didn't like her at all, even if he thought she was stepping out of bounds by commenting on any of this or telling him what he should do and who he should supposedly blame, he still couldn't shake how certain she seemed when she said that.

He turned abruptly to walk to the staircase. He was trying not to think about it; all this was doing was irritating him further. When he made it to the second level, he found Sin leaning against the rail and smoking a cigarette while he looked down at the room below. He was standing just about where they'd nearly kissed the first time and the thought made Boyd slow as he approached. He watched the way shadows played across Sin's face, the glint of the silver ring through his lip, the casual way he held the cigarette and the smoke pouring from his mouth. The man was incredibly attractive and somehow being in this environment seemed to emphasize his sexiness.

Boyd leaned against the railing next to Sin and, trying to put the thoughts out of his mind but not feeling immediately successful, he looked away. His expression would be unreadable to most but Sin knew him well enough to realize he was irritated.

He raised an eyebrow. "What'd she want?"

"Nothing." Boyd's tone made it clear he didn't want to talk about it and he didn't look over.

Sin exhaled slowly, blowing smoke toward Boyd's face and narrowing his eyes slightly although he didn't say anything else about it. He shook his head and closed his eyes briefly with a frustrated sigh.

Boyd looked over sidelong, considering him for a moment. Watching Sin rest against the railing made it a little easier to put the distracting thoughts out of his mind;

he couldn't do anything about whatever Jessica thought she knew and he really didn't want to talk about what was going on between them so it would be stupid to let her words make him incapable of carrying on how he always did. He could see the way Sin seemed a little distracted, a little tense.

"How are you doing?" he asked quietly.

Sin shrugged one shoulder and took another drag from his cigarette before opening his eyes and looking at Boyd again. "I'm being stupid," he said with an annoyed grimace. "I've... grown fond of the way things have been. Of acting... normal."

Somehow the topic was almost a relief to Boyd; this was something he could deal with, this was something he could understand. "That's not stupid," he said without a doubt. "It happens in these situations. You've been a high-level bodyguard for a while," and though there was nothing different in the way he said that, it was clear that he was referring to Sin's normal life in code, "and now you've had the chance to be someone less... dangerous, just a normal bouncer. Anyone in your position would feel the same, but I think it's more pronounced for you."

Sin shrugged with a slight frown.

Boyd watched him for a moment, studying his expression. The fact that he could read some of Sin's emotions and thoughts was a big change on its own; when they'd first met, Sin had been so guarded that it was nearly impossible. But he still couldn't read him completely, and though he could make any number of assumptions he wanted regarding what was going on in Sin's mind, there were some things a person just needed to talk about. "What are you thinking?"

Sin shook his head slowly, considering this, and dropped his eyes again. "I just think I don't deserve it," he replied flatly. "All this-- it's because they don't know what I really am. But still, for some idiotic reason I wish--" He stopped speaking abruptly. "Never mind."

Boyd studied him, letting a pause fill the air to show that he was listening, that he was considering his words and not just automatically replying, but then he shook his head. "I don't think that's true," Boyd said seriously. "The problem is that people don't often look beyond the first thing they see or hear about someone else. You've always been at a disadvantage because of that. But you don't know what they'd think if they heard everything now that they've gotten to know you. They may not care; they've had a chance to see more of you than most people bother with. And regardless of what they'd decide, it still doesn't mean you don't deserve it. You deserve kindness and acceptance just as much as anyone else, if not more."

There was a brief silence as Sin seemed to let that absorb. His expression was so conflicted and confused, that it wasn't surprising when he shook his head and ran his hands through his hair.

"I've changed."

Boyd lifted one shoulder in a partial shrug. "Is that bad?"

"Yes." Sin lifted the cigarette to his mouth again. "It is for me. To do the things I am expected to do, I am not supposed to grow attached to people. To people like them." He looked down at the group and took a long drag. "I'm supposed to easily let people go, to go from assignment to assignment--" He continued, speaking generally in code, "And not care about the people I come across. I'm not supposed to miss people like Johnny and Estella. Like Jessica."

Boyd considered that. He didn't think about the idea of Sin missing Jessica because he knew it would just distract him from the point. When they'd first started, Sin had been so certain he would never blend in, but now there were all those people downstairs who he'd developed rapport with, had come to grow used to having around, had come to accept as they'd accepted him. But that was an inevitable progression of that sort of situation, Boyd felt, and he also felt that Sin would probably look at it as a weakness on his part.

"It would have been foolish if they expected to give you this job without realizing that something was bound to change," he said reasonably. "Anyone who finds themselves in another situation for so long would naturally grow used to the people."

Dark eyebrows drew together and Sin shook his head. "No. It's not that. I don't care what was expected of me. I don't care what... they want. / don't like it. / don't want to be this way. I don't want to care about people. I don't want to miss people. I don't want to feel normal and then go back to... to reality. It's not possible for someone like me. For someone who does what I do. It's--" He stopped again. "Forget it. I can't explain."

Boyd shook his head. "No... you don't have to; I understand what you mean. I just..." He paused, looking away as he tried to gather his thoughts. He could understand what Sin meant; when he compared the Sin next to him to the one he'd first met in the Agency, the one he'd watched for hours on the live feed at night... He had to admit that they were different. Sin smiled more now, he actually laughed; he joked around with people, he was casually touched in manners that were not meant to harm him. When he walked into the room, people didn't look over in suspicion or away in fear; if they ignored him it was the way they'd ignore anyone else. It wasn't personal. Here, Sin had a chance to relax, to show more of the person Boyd had known for a long time was buried somewhere inside, and... And he knew... what Sin meant. The idea of Sin returning bothered him as well.

It was stupid; it wasn't like the entire mission wasn't planned out, as if they'd never been on a schedule and never realized they'd be going back. But somehow he hadn't given himself the chance to think about it too much over the past several months. He knew it was a tactical error but he'd been too distracted by the freedom of the city, of their situation, of his ability to just reach out and run his lips or hands down Sin's body whenever he wanted. Probably because he hadn't wanted to take away from his enjoyment and relaxation, he hadn't seriously compared that to the inevitable future of Sin back in the Agency. There was no real way for them to rebel against that concept; there was no way the Agency would just let a valuable 'resource' like Sin run off, not to

mention they had him tracked on GPS at least and who knew what else. If he disappeared, they would probably track him down and drag him back and... who knew what would happen at that point. It wasn't a pleasant thought, especially considering the fact that he was enjoying Sin the way he was in Monterrey, the same as he imagined Sin probably enjoyed the freedom to act how he was, to be so relaxed. After a moment, he said,

"After the initial uncertainty in this position and city, I think... you've grown more comfortable. So, I'd prefer..." He looked over at Sin again, his expression serious but almost a little wistful. "It makes me wish you didn't have to go back."

Sin didn't answer at first. Instead, he put out his cigarette and stood up straight and looked over with intense brown eyes. "I don't want to think about this anymore." He abruptly pulled Boyd close, pinning him against his chest and crushing their lips together in a way that seemed to firmly put an end to the discussion or any possible ideas of reviving the topic in the future.

But the taste of Jessica's lip gloss remained strong enough on Sin that Boyd's first instinct was to recoil. He stopped himself before he actually pulled back but he couldn't help remaining a little tense. The idea of even indirectly being that intimate with Jessica was incredibly distasteful him. And even if Sin didn't want to think about it, Boyd knew he couldn't as suddenly ignore the conversation about Monterrey. He truly did wish that Sin didn't have to go back to the Agency; that he could just be normal and not have to be treated like he was a monster, that he could just have friends. Even if Sin could stop his thoughts with physical touch, Boyd could only do the same with concentration. With the taste of Jessica's lip gloss tainting Sin's lips and the thought of Sin returning to the Agency, he found that his preoccupation was making it difficult to properly respond.

Sin, however, either didn't notice his distraction or was too intent on shoving everything out of his mind to care. He pushed Boyd against the balcony and locked his hands around the railing, moving his lips against Boyd's mouth as he pressed their bodies together. Long, dark eyelashes rested against his cheeks and although it

seemed as though he were trying to completely immerse himself in Boyd, his eyebrows remained drawn together and his body was very tense.

It wasn't long before Boyd pulled away. He rested his hands on the railing behind him, watching Sin with half-closed eyes. He didn't say anything at first but there was nothing in his expression that implied rejection. "We shouldn't stay up here too long," he said finally, softly.

Sin didn't look very pleased with this but he glanced down at the ground floor again and nodded, pulling away slightly. He ran one hand through his hair, aggravation evident in his movements, and cleared his throat.

"Fine."

Boyd looked at him. "Even as the guest of honor, you technically don't have to stay all night," he pointed out. "They know you're not used to this much attention, but even so it'd be better not to leave for a bit longer." He paused, reaching up to brush his fingers through Sin's hair with a light touch that was somehow comforting. He raised his eyebrows mildly and added as he leaned against the railing again, "And I'll be there to help or distract if you need it."

Sin gave a one shouldered shrug and his lips quirked up into a small smile. "I'm sorry I'm being like this. Thank you... for putting up with it."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Boyd said easily. He smiled back but it soon morphed into something a little more teasing. "Besides, haven't you noticed yet that I'll put up with a lot as long as it's related to you?"

"Hmmm." Sin's mouth curled up even more until it resembled a sexy half-smile and he pulled Boyd against him again, leaning down to drop a lingering kiss against Boyd's mouth. "You better."

Boyd chuckled softly, sliding his hands down to rest on Sin's hips, his thumbs absently slipping beneath his pants. He leaned in to suck on Sin's lip ring, running his

tongue along the metal and Sin's lip before he slowly pulled away, watching him. "Just so you know, I expect the same in return or I may grow bored."

Sin gazed at him for a long moment as if trying to decide if he was serious or not before shaking his head and reluctantly moving toward the stairs. "Let's get this over with."

Nodding, Boyd turned and headed for the stairs.

One of the staff members looked over as they came to the first floor; Boyd recognized her but could never remember her name. She smiled brightly when she saw Sin and said something to Johnny, who made her laugh with whatever he answered.

The party wound up going on until the first rays of sunlight began to stream through the clouds. It seemed that the staff was used to staying up, or 'breaking night' as they called it, and none of them seemed ready to wind down at all despite the hour. It was strange watching them all together, strange seeing how they acted around Sin and how several different people seemed to take turns vying for his attention. It was fascinating and slightly bizarre when taken into comparison with the way he was treated at the Agency and showed just how different things could have been for him if he'd never gone there, if he'd never been trained as an Agent. If people were so drawn to him now when he was aloof and intimidating, what would they have been like if he was slightly more approachable? Or maybe the aura of mystery and danger around him was part of the charm?

Whatever the case was, they seemed to genuinely enjoy his presence. Most of the people there insisted on giving him their numbers so that he could keep in touch and although for the most part he stared at them blank faced and made no effort to give his own, they seemed used to his behavior and weren't fazed. Despite that, it was obvious that Sin was comfortable with these people; or as comfortable as he ever would be with civilians.

On more than one occasion a smile crossed his face, a smile that had once been reserved exclusively for Boyd. He exchanged sarcastic jabs with Johnny and Estella,

not missing a beat and proving how adept he'd gotten at interaction with them. For awhile it was easy to forget that he was an assassin and that these people were nothing more than means to an end for his cover. For awhile, as he sat there doing shots and seeming to enjoy it, it was like he really was Jason Alvarez. There were no signs of his mental instability, no signs of the danger that sometimes came along with his consumption of alcohol and no signs that he wasn't in his element among the young, drunken people who seemed so fond of him.

Boyd knew that Sin was accustomed to being around civilians but he didn't know if he would need his help as distraction after all at some point. Because of that, in the beginning he stayed in Sin's general vicinity and glanced over occasionally to check on him. But it became obvious soon enough that Sin was perfectly fine so he allowed himself to be pulled farther away and became more engrossed in the conversations. One of the waitresses, Lila, happened to be an art student and they had a long-standing friendly disagreement over what was the best media for drawing. From there, it somehow transferred into movies which became a larger discussion that morphed into other topics.

It was not in his natural personality to party or be in a crowd of drunken, laughing people for an extended period of time without feeling rather wearied by it. He stayed in the midst of it for awhile, knowing it was Kadin's personality to hang around, but eventually he took a moment to sit to the side and idly watch. He could tell by the way the people congregated around Sin that they were truly interested in talking to him. He was mildly impressed, he had to admit. Despite Sin's insistence that he'd never be able to be normal, that he'd never *been* normal, that he didn't know how to be around civilians, he was doing an excellent job. There was nothing suspicious about the way he acted; if anything, the occasional blank stares and intimidation just made him seem more like what one would expect of someone with Jason's background. After all, someone who had worked as a bodyguard in such prestigious positions could hardly be amiable all the time.

On the other hand... Boyd saw Jessica talking to Veronica and his gaze slid away. He turned to the bar and studied the bottles lined along the far wall. Now that he had a moment to think when people weren't talking to or directly around him, his mind inevitably drifted to things he'd been trying to avoid. As the night had worn on, he'd realized that although he'd thought he was fine with the way Sin interacted with others like Johnny and Estella, there was something that was... off.

He'd been to Lunar many times, he'd seen Sin interacting with the others and he'd heard stories, but he hadn't been surrounded by it so obviously and consistently for such a period of time. It was giving him more exposure to the way Sin acted around the others. He couldn't figure out at first what was bothering him but once he did, it surprised him somehow. It was a slightly shameful thought, but he had to admit that there were parts about this that he didn't like. He'd always wanted Sin to feel normal, to feel human because that's what he was and how he deserved to feel. He'd wanted him to understand that he was not simply a killer, that there was something about him that anyone could like and it was only the idiots at the Agency who didn't realize it. But now that Sin was experiencing that, Boyd couldn't help feeling a little... left out. It was stupid, but he didn't want Sin smiling for anyone else quite like that, didn't want him getting into quite the same sarcastic or teasing conversations with anyone else, didn't want him to be quite so outwardly amused around anyone but him. He didn't want anyone else to be able to touch him quite so casually. Or maybe he just wanted there always to be another level that only he was privy to; if Sin smirked around others then he would only genuinely smile around Boyd. If Sin snickered around someone else then he would only outright laugh with him.

He considered that as he slowly nursed a drink. He hadn't anticipated this feeling of isolation and jealousy; he hadn't expected to feel that territorial about Sin, to not want anyone else being intimate with him or for Sin to act the way around others that he did around him. It confused him to think about, because he'd always been pushing for Sin to be accepted as a normal person. That exact scenario was happening here, so Boyd should be happy. Yet somehow it made it seem like the more successful his initial goal of proving Sin to be human was, the less important he himself would be to Sin. After all,

what had been unique about Boyd had always simply been his fearlessness of Sin; once everyone else was the same, what was there really to set him apart?

The question stayed in his mind for several minutes and he still didn't have an answer. It started to meld with Jessica's earlier words, that someday maybe Sin wouldn't be as interested, and from there he thought about when they'd return to the Agency and whether they'd continue as they had been. Little bits of doubt and confusion started to slide their way into his mind, into things he hadn't thought about and he didn't want to continue to consider. He didn't really know what he was thinking but the contradictions were becoming too confusing for him to want to disentangle. Giving up, he finished his drink.

There was no use thinking about it; it wouldn't do anything but increase his confusion and end up frustrating and irritating him. It was better not to consider this too seriously and instead to just enjoy the party.

## Chapter 35

The sun was so bright that rays had broken through the clouds, making him squint. Boyd remained leaning against the building, the wall hot enough to nearly burn his back even through his cotton shirt. His pose was languid, casual, and with the tilt of his head it would not have been apparent that he was actually watching a building across the street.

People passed him by without even giving him a second glance; he was one of a few dozen people scattered down the street also resting to the side as the sun slowly moved to its zenith. In a few hours, the city would sluggishly shut down for a bit while the majority of the people would retreat to the cooler confines of the shadows and air-conditioned buildings. For the moment, the markets were still filled with shouts, bargaining, and the general bustle of humanity.

A small, rather dirty boy suddenly came running barefoot out of the building Boyd was watching. Dirt stained his face and his shock of dark brown hair was matted and wild. He wore a stained white tank top and ragged shorts, and the sandals on his feet looked almost worn through. Boyd looked over to watch him as the kid slowed to a stop in front of him.

"Found them," he announced, self-satisfied.

"Hey, good job, Jorge," Boyd drawled easily with a lopsided smile, holding out his hand.

Jorge gave him a look and made no move to relinquish the property. Boyd raised his eyebrows but Jorge did not budge, only narrowed his eyes slightly. "Where is it, *gringo*?"

Although Boyd had heard the term used simply to refer to foreigners, especially English-speakers, Jorge's tone made it derogatory. "That's not very nice," Boyd observed mildly. "I thought we were on good terms, Jorgito."

"Don't call me that," Jorge said, his tone hard. "You're not *mi viejo*."

"It's true," Boyd agreed, leaning against the building and looking idly around as if bored. "It'd be weird if I was your dad; we look nothing alike and I'd've been really young when I had you."

Giving Boyd an entirely unimpressed look, Jorge narrowed his eyes slightly. "We are finished."

"No," Boyd said patiently, the languid air of Reed's personality keeping him relaxed and unperturbed as he returned Jorge's gaze. "We've already been over this; one more stop and then you're done, remember?"

Jorge stared at him briefly before abruptly pivoting and heading down the nearest alley. He waited just long enough for Boyd to follow before he turned toward him again, dark brown eyes narrowed as he studied him sidelong. Noticing the calculated look and the fact that Jorge had not answered, Boyd gave him a pointed look and stopped walking. After a few steps, Jorge stopped, turned around and frowned up at Boyd. Neither said anything but there was a battle of wills that stretched the few moments out. Even in the shade of the alley it was hot and sweat trickled down their skin as they simply stared at each other. Finally, Jorge's eyes narrowed and he reached into his front pocket, pulling out two small black boxes that he dropped into Boyd's hand. Boyd quickly but casually hid them before anyone would be able to properly see what he had.

Jorge stared at him a moment in calculation before he turned and started walking again. "I want more money," he said seriously.

"Kid, you're already getting enough," Boyd said, lazily looking around the alley as they walked. He automatically noted where all the doors, windows, and fire escapes or facsimiles thereof existed. There was also a large pile of garbage nearby with an old, rusted garbage can that he could probably find a use for if he needed to run away or hide quickly.

"*Mi mano* gets more," Jorge said firmly.

Boyd blinked and looked over at him strangely; he hadn't exactly been distracted by noting the status of the alley but he was fairly certain he could not have heard that correctly. "Your hand does?"

Looking at Boyd in disgust, Jorge said, "*Hermano*. Brother. *No hablas Español, huevón?*"

Boyd almost smirked but he stopped himself; it wasn't every day someone decided to call him 'balls.' In the months Boyd had spent in Monterrey, he'd learned more of the language. It was close enough to French that he found it to be easier than he expected, but slang was still something that caused him some confusion until he learned what it meant.

"I speak Spanish just fine," Boyd said with mild indignation just as he knew Reed would, even though he did not actually feel upset. "You're just throwing random shit in there. What, you want me spouting English slang too, little punk?"

"I would understand," Jorge said confidently, taking them across one street and leading them down another alley, which was extremely small.

Boyd made a face at him. "I liked that part when you first came over and you were pleased. Go back to that, it was cuter."

Stopping suddenly, Jorge turned around with a bright, charming smile and said, "Give me more money, *ese*, or I leave you here."

"See, you only half listened," Boyd pointed out reasonably, standing at slouching ease a few feet from Jorge. He quirked an eyebrow. "Before, with the niceness? The cute part was you not threatening or demanding shit; you were just helping out. What happened to that kid?"

Dark brown eyes glinted stubbornly. "You called him Jorgito and won't pay."

Boyd watched him, judging the amount of stubbornness and how upset he really was. He could read him well enough to know that at this point if he didn't give in a little

he would just be making things more difficult for himself. He finally raised one hand in a gesture of surrender and shook his head. "Alright, alright, you're so pushy." He pulled several pesos out of one pocket and held it toward him. Jorge reached out but Boyd pulled his hand back and looked at him pointedly, his tone a friendly warning. "You're still gonna help me once more, right?"

Jorge scowled at him but couldn't reach the money. With narrowed eyes, he nodded firmly and the second Boyd had lowered his hand enough, he snatched the pesos away and already had them hidden somewhere in his clothing before Boyd could even follow the movement. "You learn faster than others, *güero*," he said with something approaching approval.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. At least Jorge was calling him an American rather than a foreigner now. "Thanks. I think."

"This job is dangerous," Jorge said seriously, giving Boyd a scrutinizing look. He looked entirely older than the eight to ten years he probably had lived. Initially Boyd had noticed him because of that part of his personality, the fact that he was especially small, looked like he could be seven or eight, but the way he spoke and looked around placed him closer to ten or older. Right then that maturity was making itself very apparent; something about him showed that, rather like the children who had grown up in the aftermath of the bombs, he had seen more than children his age should. And he hadn't forgotten. "Those people, they don't like us talking. That's why you pay more."

"I understand," Boyd said, taking the comment seriously. "Thanks for the help so far but I just need one other thing. So let's go, huh? I don't

exactly feel like waiting around alleys where we can be jumped. And go back to being a cute little kid so no one looks at us strangely."

"A normal kid here would be more strange," Jorge said pointedly but he turned and started walking again anyway.

Boyd followed at a proper distance, keeping his pose casual and absolutely languid. There was nothing in his mannerisms to imply that he was in the midst of illegal activity as Kadin Reed, and certainly nothing that showed he was actually an Agent pretending to be a rebel activist. Although he looked relaxed and there was nothing calculating about him, he had actually been planning this for a while. While Sin had been training for the security position at the convention during the last two months, Boyd had been working very diligently on mapping out the city and in general thoroughly investigating any spots that caught his attention. He'd found a number of buildings and a few neighborhoods that he was certain Sin and he would be able to lose themselves in, either apart or together, for long enough to shake off anyone who may be watching them.

Through exploring the city he'd realized that there were more smuggling groups than the one he had found initially and they were all quite good at circumventing any security in Monterrey's borders. There were ways to sneak into the city that he never would have expected, including a few that circumvented the mountains and one that involved a nearby waterway that had been created for irrigation after the war in America.

A few nights were spent watching some secret passages before he'd realized that the smugglers were not the only ones who knew of them, though they were certainly the ones policing them and frequenting them most. And that was only the ones he could access; there were others he didn't dare touch because the area or people surrounding them would be too difficult to try to pass. In the more accessible, though still hidden, passageways, Boyd had noticed a trend.

Although it seemed that the adults of the area walked past the entrances without ever noticing, some of the children were aware. It was by monitoring a few of these passageways that Boyd realized the black market was even larger in Monterrey than he'd expected, and that he had to pursue this.

He'd waited, watching, until he saw a kid he thought he could trust enough to follow through with any promises. Jorge may be very intent on getting his payment, but

considering the poverty he lived in and, as he'd rightly pointed out, the possible threat to his life, it really wasn't that much that he was charging. And Boyd felt that he could trust him; after all, so far the kid hadn't led him wrong, and he was straightforward enough that he didn't seem deceitful.

Jorge stopped at a squat, pale building that simply read '*Farmácia*.' Boyd moved to stand to the side but Jorge tipped his head, motioning for him to follow. "They give me it only if they see you," he said simply and walked inside. Boyd didn't let his expression reflect the fact that he thought that was interesting. A small bell rang on the door as they entered and he had to blink a few times to readjust his vision; it was far darker inside than it had been outside and the aisles looked almost smoky in the gloom. For a strange moment he felt a sense of déjà vu; the store was set up almost identically to the first mission he'd been on, only this one didn't have a second story that housed wealthy, lazy rebel leaders and there was no broken meat locker to the side with men crouched around a table and map.

No one greeted them when they entered; the place seemed abandoned and the dust he saw on the shelving only emphasized the desolation of the area. He followed Jorge quietly, feeling... something as he looked around. He wasn't quite sure what the emotion was, but it may have been a vague sense of regret. He could tell by the handwritten, yellowing sheets of paper falling off the walls and the way the store was set up that this had been someone's dream, that this had been a family business. Once. Long ago.

This wasn't just a front to shady black market dealings; this had been someone's life before it all fell into disrepair. It made him wonder what had happened, where those people had gone, why this memory had stayed in empty shelves and little cartoons drawn on paper, why the building hadn't been remodeled and why no one seemed to care despite the fact that Monterrey was one of the most frequented cities in Mexico.

If even in a city known for its progress and business there could be a place like this, an echo of past lives that were truncated or skewed, then what must the other cities be like? The towns and villages? How much desolation was there in the world

today, how much more now than had been even two decades ago before that first bomb exploded on foreign soil?

The thought was a little disquieting so he tried not to dwell on it. Even so, he couldn't help noticing that he had been in dozens of places like this since he'd started in the Agency but somehow he'd never really cared to think too clearly on the history of the place. He'd never particularly cared why this store had handwritten notes but the next had everything printed; he'd never cared that judging by a filthy, disintegrating doll discarded in the corner, a child probably once played here.

It made him wonder, briefly, what someone would think walking into his house back in the States. They would never be able to fathom what had happened in there, the history of the place, the sucking darkness of the shadows; to them, it would look like a place filled with such clean lines it did not look lived in and the fine layer of dust everywhere would simply emphasize how much it seemed uncared for. What stories could be told in this store? What emotions had saturated the area? Were the people even alive anymore or was this place a living memory for a dead story?

Jorge's sandals scuffed against the floor, a loud noise that echoed in the emptiness of the place and made the walls seem that much closer. Boyd noted that although the shelves were covered in dust, the floor had footprints all over.

It took them nearly a minute to walk all the way to the back of the building, which was surprisingly long for how small it seemed from the outside, and without a word Jorge led him down a set of stairs and into even further darkness.

There was a moment when Boyd recognized that this could be an incredibly stupid move; he knew Jorge enough to banter with him but in truth they'd only been acquainted about a month and although the kid had led him through dangerous areas before, Boyd had never followed him in. And they'd certainly never descended into a building that Boyd knew he could easily get trapped in and attacked if he was betrayed. But even thinking that didn't stop him; he knew he would be able to get out of most situations and that Kadin would not have backed away if he were here.

Kadin Reed had a penchant for danger and dealing with the black market; that was what had gotten him into 53 in the first place. Boyd knew very well how interested he would have been in the smuggling groups so he felt no qualms with even very casually getting his name involved in the activity in Monterrey.

"*Huevón*," Jorge said suddenly and something in the tone of those two syllables made Boyd stop where he was; it was not an insult this time, it was something closer to a warning. Jorge looked over his shoulder, his eyes gleaming faintly in the darkness, and jerked his chin forward. "I go first. Wait until I say."

Boyd nodded silently and watched him walk to the end of the hallway and disappear down a right turn. A few seconds passed and he could hear voices echoing from ahead of him but he couldn't understand what they were saying. Even though he could understand some Spanish, there were still many words he didn't know. And there was a surprisingly large variety of accents that made it difficult for him to comprehend when it was spoken too quickly. In this case, the echo was certainly not helping matters and Jorge had a tendency to use a lot of Spanish slang; sometimes he seemed to drop entire parts of words and use unknown suffixes and abbreviations.

Whatever they were saying took a few minutes and Boyd looked around the passageway as best he could in the dark. He'd heard that when the war first hit, some of the people feared that the fighting would spread across the globe, possibly destroying Earth's entire environment. The clouds closing in on even the brightest of locations must have been especially disturbing and so in many cities across the world, including Monterrey, some people took to building underground passages and bunkers to use in case they couldn't go above the surface.

Boyd thought that was a sign of paying too much attention to the old doomsday books and movies but he did have to admit that at least it was cooler down in the passage beneath *Farmácia*, even if he doubted it would have saved them from radiation should there have been nuclear fallout above ground.

A scuffling noise drew his attention to the end of the hallway again and he looked over just in time to see Jorge gesture for him to follow. They entered a small door that Boyd had to tilt his head down to go through and emerged into a room that was probably two-thirds the size of Sin and his studio. He was mildly surprised to find two women at a table studying him.

One woman had black eyes and thick black hair held back in a messy bunch, her skin caramel-colored. He couldn't see much of what she was wearing from her angle, other than that she had a tank top and sleeveless coat on, with a gold necklace glittering at her throat in some sort of rectangular design with points on top. A deep red tattoo of a snake wrapped around her upper left arm, curving onto the front of her shoulder and disappearing beneath her clothing. She watched him very closely and by her body language he could tell she would be a good fighter, but her facial features were actually quite pleasant and almost friendly. The woman next to her looked more like a punk; blue streaked her choppy dark brown hair and she wore several layers of tank tops with a pleated red and black plaid mini-skirt over black pants. Her boots had more buckles and chains than was necessary and she wore a belt with a large silver skull and cross-bone buckle. Another belt looped over that at an angle, pulled down by a sheathed pistol at her left hip, while a third, thinner chain belt seemed to carry some sort of small knives. A similar tattoo to the first woman's wound around her right arm but it was dark blue, and on her Boyd could see that the tongue of the snake licked out to end on her collarbone. Her left eyebrow was pierced with a silver loop and she had as many hoops dotting her ears as Sin did as Jason. She watched him lazily but he could tell she would be able to react quickly if she needed to.

The punk woman whistled slowly then smiled in a manner that showed off too many teeth. "We found ourselves a fox," she said, her accent English but somehow a little off. Boyd suspected she came from one of the other countries that England had once colonized.

He kept his body language almost looked bored as he glanced around the room, noting that Jorge was standing in the shadows near one wall with a decidedly neutral

expression. He had expected the first woman to reply but when only silence met the comment, he turned back to the blue-haired woman.

He had no idea what he was supposed to be doing in there, what they wanted or expected, or even if he would accidentally do or say something wrong simply because he knew nothing about these people. He had asked Jorge to help him specifically because the smuggling groups and black market areas had many levels of security and some of them, like the ones he needed to work with in order to get the high-end materials, were completely inaccessible to anyone who did not have an in.

Without Jorge, Boyd knew he certainly would not have gotten the boxes and without a doubt he would not have even known these women existed. He'd tried to research them but there wasn't much to be found; they were known as the Snakes, they had access to the materials he needed, and some said they were not exactly like smugglers.

When he'd asked Jorge he wouldn't say much either; he just seemed to imply they were pirates who stole from smugglers and then he refused to say anything further, not even giving their names. That was probably to test Boyd to see what he would do.

Even though they weren't quite what he was expecting, he was vaguely relieved that at least neither of them seemed to be Mexican natives; if this transaction had been done in Spanish he didn't know if he would have made it without Jorge translating the words that were too fast for him to understand. Although the fact that the women were not from Mexico also explained why he'd heard especially heavy accents echoing into the hallway.

After a beat of silence, he finally drawled, "That gonna be a problem?"

The woman watched him, her lips slowly stretching into a smirk. She seemed pleased somehow but he didn't expect for that to necessarily make this any easier. She flicked her gaze to the other woman, who had not moved from her calm, politely interested scrutiny. "He's a bit of a hard case," she said smugly.

The long-haired woman finally turned her attention from Boyd to the woman who was speaking, though she only smiled faintly and didn't reply at first.

"I told you Jorge wouldn't bring us a wanker," the punk woman insisted as if the first woman had said something. She idly played with the strap sheathing the pistol at her hip and watched her as if waiting for something.

The long-haired woman looked at Boyd again thoughtfully. Although her pleasant features were a bit of a relief against the punk woman's more intimidating look, her silent, intense expressions were mildly unnerving. The fact that she still looked friendly somehow made the fact that she was doing nothing but scrutinizing him seem especially distracting. He also wished she'd just say something already.

As if she understood that wish, she asked smoothly, "Why are you here?"

Boyd was certainly not expecting the question and he blinked at her while he considered the answer. She seemed content to just sit in silence and wait, staring at him. "Cause I was brought here," he said after a moment, watching her with an unruffled expression. Silence dragged between them and he realized she wanted more of an answer. "And maybe you two have the answer to a problem I've got."

The long-haired woman watched him with unwavering black eyes, nothing in her expression showing what she was thinking. "What was the question?"

"How to do something," Boyd answered.

She considered that, seeming to note the vagueness of his reply. "And you believe we have the answer to a question you cannot even ask fully aloud?" She asked it simply, curiously, but he knew it was a challenge wrapped in pleasantly polite words.

Boyd did not look away from her but he tried to note Jorge's expression in his peripheral vision. That didn't help, though; his expression was as neutral as it had been when he'd entered. The punk woman was watching Boyd with an amused expression that seemed strangely entertained, as if she was enjoying how odd this seemed to him and wanted to see how he'd react.

This was obviously some sort of test but the entire situation seemed odd to him, as if they were speaking in a code he hadn't been taught. He took a moment to try to decide on the best answer before he returned his gaze to the long-haired woman with a thoughtful, more serious expression. "There're lots of questions people can't ask aloud. Maybe you don't know the question; maybe you just can't get yourself to say it. But the whole point of asking's so you can realize what you need. Answers are like missing words to a question."

The woman stared at him for a long moment, her expression giving absolutely nothing away. The room seemed very still around him and he wondered if he'd said the wrong thing. But he wasn't about to specify exactly what he needed anything for; that would be sheer stupidity when dealing with the black market. The whole point of going underground was so no questions would be asked, which was why it was strange that she was pressing for answers. There was no real way to answer her question without ignoring it or giving away too much information so he chose the philosophical route which, judging by the tension building in the room, may have been a poor choice after all. He kept his posture almost bored, though, and waited for some sort of reaction.

The room was dead silent until the punk woman suddenly burst out laughing. "You people are too serious," she drawled. Boyd looked over at her just in time to see her grin widely, a flashing of teeth that seemed at once a challenge and a welcome. She pulled her boots off the table and sat down normally, the front chair legs thumping loudly on the cement floor. "I'm Tayla, this is Liani. Don't let her poker face fool you; she's actually an emotional mess inside."

Liani looked over at Tayla and raised her eyebrows. "That is a lie. But he will do."

With that simple acceptance, the mood in the room relaxed quite a bit. Jorge padded over to Boyd's side as Tayla kicked a chair underneath the table; it clattered and tilted and almost fell over before Jorge reached out to balance it.

"Sit down," Tayla ordered lazily. Boyd reached for the chair Jorge had caught while Jorge looked between the three of them. Tayla nodded her head toward the door. "Be the look out, would you?"

Jorge didn't look away from her but somehow Boyd felt like he wanted to glance over. Instead, Jorge just nodded and disappeared out the door, shutting it behind him. The room seemed especially quiet when he left, despite the fact that Jorge hadn't actually said a word since they'd entered. Tayla kicked her feet out noisily in front of herself and studied Boyd for a moment while he watched them. Liani smiled at him in a small, quiet sort of way, then reached down into what appeared to be a bag sitting on the ground next to her. Boyd dropped into the offered chair and waited for them to do something.

Tayla broke the silence by pulling a wrinkled piece of paper out of one of the many pockets on her pants; she then stuck the edge in her mouth while she dug through her pockets for something else. "Reed, right?" she asked, her voice muffled.

Boyd nodded. "Yeah."

Tayla tilted her head in acknowledgment while Liani slid a relatively small black case across the table.

"Here is your answer," Liani said with a pleasant smile. "There are two transmitters in here and two receivers or trackers, whatever you wish to call them. The transmitters are the same but the receivers, though both shaped as watches, are two different styles to make it less obvious that they are related to each other." Liani looked at him curiously. "Are you familiar with GPS?"

"I've used similar stuff before, yeah," Boyd said with a nod. "What's the range?"

"This is low-functioning," Tayla said from the side, noisily unfolding the paper and plunking a pen down on the table, which was apparently what she had been searching for. She quirked her pierced eyebrow. "Depends on the weather and your location— the ionosphere, troposphere, your altitude, all that — and the battery power of your

receiver. The watch has an internal lithium-ion battery but the life is maybe ten, twelve hours. You should keep a spare if you have to use it a lot and somehow you seem the type. In a best case scenario, you'd have it narrowed to a city block or two. That's sweet-as considering the size and price."

Boyd didn't know what 'sweet-as' meant but he assumed it was something good. He didn't have the chance to ask before Liani smoothly continued from Tayla's words.

"The receivers and transmitters are civilian-grade but dual frequency," Liani added in a calm, almost gentle tone. Now that she'd seemed to accept him, her gaze was no longer scrutinizing. "They are relatively reliable but it is possible for a fake signal to interfere with yours. It was made this way so it would not be tracked by the military satellites or code; several governments have been planning a way to access the data of the location of all military-grade GPS receivers or transmitters. These will not be tracked that way because they are using civilian code and I am not aware of any government that cares enough about the location of its civilians to track that."

"So," Tayla said, holding up the watch at a cocky angle, "these little beauts track these external transmitters," she held up a box with what looked like small silver earrings, "and send the location back to the receiver," she jiggled the watch with her eyebrows raised. "Exciting, eh? But since you're tracking externally there can be an automatic delay. You can use the watch without the external transmitter; they have their own transmitter inside so you wouldn't get a delay but you'd just be tracking yourself. Depending on why you want this little gem, maybe that's better. Use the buttons on the side to flip between self-tracking GPS, receiving the signal of the external transmitter, and other exciting features like how many laps you've run and what time it is in military or civilian format."

"There is a feature to install a password to access the external tracking system," Liani continued; they seemed to inherently know when the other was done speaking, allowing for smooth transitions between their comments and making it seem like one monologue with two accents and voices. "The assumption is that if you're tracking something, you may not want others to track it too if you lose the watch. There is no

keyboard on the watch, of course, but you can create a password with a Morse code, using the buttons on the left in whatever pattern you choose."

Tayla smirked at Liani sidelong. "Of course, if you're a civilian with this fancy GPS watch and you make it password-protected they're going to start wondering what sort of bloke carries that around."

Liani tilted her head forward. "Yes, which is why you should quite clearly consider your question before you create this to be your perfect answer." She watched Boyd closely as she said that, making it an extra word of caution.

"Any questions?" Tayla asked, grinning in a challenge and smoothing the paper. "Because otherwise I have something interesting for you."

"Actually, I do," Boyd said, looking distractedly down at the paper. "But I can wait a sec. What's that?"

"A game," Tayla said, smirking rather smugly.

It just looked like a blank sheet of paper to Boyd, so he looked back up at her. "What kind?"

"The kind where I test you and if you pass, something good happens," Tayla said offhandedly.

There was a beat of silence before Boyd asked, "And if I don't?"

Tayla grinned, showing more teeth than anything, in an expression that was slightly evil. She didn't say anything and from the corner of his eye he could see that Liani was watching him without commenting as well.

Well, there was hardly a question; he saw no reason to walk away from the challenge-- partially because he wondered what he would get, and partially because he knew it would look bad and jeopardize any future dealings he may have with them. He shrugged lazily with one shoulder and leaned back in his chair. "Kay. I'm game."

"Brilliant," Tayla said, pleased. "I wouldn't have offered if you seemed like a piker. Now... I'm going to draw something. You get two guesses what it is." Something about the way she stated that made it seem like even the second guess would be one too many.

Boyd nodded and leaned forward, staring at the paper. It seemed like an incredibly odd test; what if she was a terrible artist? It wasn't like he'd have a clue what she'd intended. Unless this was something like a Rorschach inkblot test at which point she would be analyzing his psychology. That would be a little trickier, primarily because he'd have to consider what Kadin Reed would answer to the questions rather than what he would. But how would he know what someone who was not himself would see in a psychological test?

At first nothing happened and Boyd waited for a long moment before he finally glanced up. He saw them both scrutinizing him; Tayla in a manner that was somehow lazily mocking, as if she was waiting for him to fuck up, while Liani stared at him in the same pleasant but unwavering manner she had since the beginning. He met their gazes one after the other then looked back down at the paper again.

Tayla hadn't moved her pen at all before she asked, "Right. So what do you see?"

Boyd studied the paper for a long moment, quickly trying to figure out what the hell she was talking about. He knew for a fact she hadn't moved the pen; even when he'd looked up, he'd been watching the paper in his peripheral vision and he hadn't seen any movement. This was obviously a test but he didn't know what it was for, what answer she expected. But judging by her expression, he thought there was probably a trick to this. He considered many replies before he finally raised his eyebrows and gave her a mildly impatient look. "You bullshitting me."

"True," Tayla said with a smirk and leaned forward on one elbow, giving him a challenging look. "What will you do about it?"

Shrugging unconcernedly, Boyd leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, kicking his legs lazily out in front of him. "Wait you out, probably. I still had questions about the GPS, you know. You're the one who interrupted this with some random shit you're not even doing."

Her smirk grew until she seemed pleased. Nodding once to herself, Tayla sat up at a better angle and quirked an eyebrow at Boyd. "Won't be a long wait. You still only get two guesses. And since you mouthed off a bit, Liani'll time you; two minutes."

This time, she started moving her pen immediately and Boyd studied the paper intently, vaguely keeping track of the time in the back of his mind. At first he couldn't tell what she was doing. She seemed to be drawing random dots scattered across the sheet of paper, moving from one dot to mark another across the page, and it did not seem to be in any sort of order he could decipher. He glanced up at her briefly to see if she still was messing with him but she was watching the paper with narrowed eyes as she concentrated, seeming to be taking this seriously. That just made it more confusing so he looked down at the paper again, thinking quickly as he tried to imagine what it could mean.

At first he thought it was some sort of bizarre connect-the-dots picture but there didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason and there wasn't any shape he could decipher that they would form. Next, he considered other options, such as that it was a type of code or bizarre Braille spin-off but that didn't seem right either. It could have just been a lazy drawing of a starry sky, but he noticed the way her pen moved, the times it shifted one way or the other just a tiny bit as she was about to draw, as if she was making certain the dot was placed in the correct spot. But that's all they were; dots scattered across the paper. The same size, no rhyme, no reason; just dots. There had to be more to it, though.

He could feel his time running out quickly and he knew he didn't want to fail this test. He narrowed his eyes further and tried to approach this from another angle. Rather than trying to put the dots in relation to each other, he tried to study the overall dissemination of them. As she filled in a few more dots, one area with a few dots

crowded next to each other caught his attention. Something was almost familiar about it but he didn't know what at first. He looked quickly at the other dots then back at that grouping, running through everything he could think of that it could be related to. It took him a few dragging seconds until he realized it was in a similar grouping to a few of the secret passageways he knew that were near each other.

The second the thought occurred to him, he imagined Monterrey overlaid on the dots, orienting the map in his mind so the correct street was in that area. He had worked with blueprints so many times for missions that he was able to imagine schematics and twist them around in his mind, keeping himself in relation to them. Once he considered the dots that way, he noticed that one of the other dots fell precisely on another passageway he knew of, and when he quickly glanced across the page he realized there were others that also fell into place. There were many dots in areas he didn't recognize, however, which meant one of two things; either he was completely wrong about this, or she just knew about other locations he was unaware of. He'd been doing a lot of research but that didn't mean he expected to be more knowledgeable than people who had been in Monterrey far longer.

Looking up at her, he didn't even consider waiting any longer. He had to be coming up on the two minutes and even though he didn't think he really had two guesses, she had technically said he did. It was better to be on time and wrong than be late and have no answer.

"Monterrey's secret passageways," he said confidently.

Tayla looked up at him, meeting his gaze while her hand stopped moving. She didn't say anything and although her eyes narrowed, her expression otherwise did not change. He couldn't read what she was thinking and he didn't think breaking eye contact to check with Liani would be intelligent at that point, not that he'd be able to read her any better. They stared silently at each other for a long, tense moment, before Tayla finally dropped the pen to the table with a clatter and leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed. "That's your answer, eh?" she said, sounding disappointed.

Boyd didn't look away, didn't let his own expression change. "Yep," he said simply.

Eyes narrowing, Tayla frowned at him. In his peripheral vision he could see Liani shift her hands so they were hidden somewhere beneath the table. He knew she had some sort of weapon but he hadn't been able to see what it was; although he didn't hear anything, she could easily be aiming a gun at him from the cover of the table. He could have looked over at her, could have jerked away or even casually stood up and moved to a position where he would be in a better position to defend himself. But that would require breaking eye contact with Tayla; that would make him look weaker, uncertain. And even if he couldn't be positive he was correct, he wasn't about to change his mind now.

"Sure you don't want to change it at all?" Tayla insisted, raising an eyebrow. "I said you'd get two." The disappointment had grown and the way she looked at him made it seem like she was trying to help him by giving extra time.

But Boyd was stubborn and he wasn't convinced this wasn't part of the test. "I'm sure," he said firmly.

Tayla's frown increased until she sighed heavily and looked over at Liani. Some unspoken communication passed between them and Tayla's frown became stalwart. "What?" she asked, as if Liani had said something argumentative. "No, I definitely heard 'monorail's seeker pass away.' And that's obviously wrong."

Liani didn't say anything but she stared at Tayla, the smile growing just a hint at the edges of her lips. Tayla's eyes narrowed as if Liani had just said something rude.

"Well how can you tell?" Tayla asked insistently. "Americans have terrible accents." Liani didn't move or speak but Tayla still rolled her eyes. "Fine, he does at least. Can't understand a single..." Liani quirked one eyebrow slightly and Tayla sighed, waving a dismissive hand. "Right, right, I know." She propped one elbow on the table and rested her cheek on her fist, giving Boyd a strange look. "Well," she said heavily. "That's no fun for me. I wanted you to say something strange."

"You are sulking," Liani informed her calmly.

Tayla gave her a long-suffering look before she grinned suddenly at Boyd. "Right. Good on ya, mate; I didn't think you'd win. But, since you did..." She slid the paper across the table and raised her eyebrows. "Happy birthday, present from the Snakes. Sneaky ways in and out of the city, provided you don't get killed. We're not responsible for maiming, death, nightmares, anything unpleasant, you know. But if there's something good," she smirked, "then you have only us to thank."

Boyd studied the paper, making a mental note to look into some of the passageways he hadn't been aware existed; this would be incredibly helpful to their escape plans. "Thanks," he said belatedly and looked back up at her.

Waving a hand, Tayla said dismissively, "*Mi información, su información*. At a price. You know how it is."

He nodded and looked back down at the map, studying it. He hadn't expected it to be any different; even with the game she threw in there, they were still people who provided information for money. They had never met him before so there was no reason for them to give him something that important or helpful no matter how many tests he'd pass. Even so, it would be helpful enough to him that he doubted he'd mind the price they'd set and somehow he got the feeling it actually wouldn't be too high.

"I believe you had other questions?" Liani asked from the side, sliding her hands back onto the table in full view.

He set the map to the side where he could see it and make sure he didn't lose it. Looking back up at them, he nodded and pulled the box with the GPS equipment closer so he could study it. "A few," he said, then took a moment to consider all the technicalities and details he would need to know while also considering questions that would throw them off from exactly what he was trying to get at. Although he thought they were fairly trustworthy, in that line of business it wasn't like they were saints. He didn't believe they would tell others what information he had been seeking or that they would analyze it and then sell him out later if they somehow realized he was related to

the JKS explosions that would occur, but at the same time he wasn't going to risk it. The better way to do it would be to get his answers while also getting answers he didn't particularly need or want, and by that he would throw them off from his main interest.

They answered all the questions Boyd had, including more specific ones on the GPS and a few other unrelated questions that he'd wanted to ask someone for a while but hadn't found anyone willing to give the information. Tayla told him half-jokingly to burn the map after he had memorized it, but he wasn't entirely certain that was a bad idea. At least Tayla had drawn it in a manner that did not make it obvious it was a map of Monterrey unless someone knew to overlay the streets and city.

By the time he paid them and stood, the two women seemed to be on surprisingly good terms with him. They didn't say anything as he said, "Thanks," and turned to go, but as he reached the door Tayla called out suddenly, "Next time you'll lose my test."

He paused at the door then looked over his shoulder with an eyebrow raised. "I wouldn't bet on it."

Tayla's grin was fierce and pleased. She kicked her feet up on the table and leaned back, the chair creaking, and she interlaced her fingers behind her head. "I would."

At her side, Liani either ignored their conversation or didn't see any reason to comment on it. Instead, she smiled pleasantly. "Stay safe."

Nodding, Boyd slipped through the door and shut it behind him quietly. He was just slipping the map into his pocket when he emerged into the upper room and saw Jorge, who was leaning against one of the dusty shelves. Jorge saw the white corner of paper disappear into his pocket and looked up at him with mildly impressed dark eyes.

"You are lucky," he said, moving to walk ahead of Boyd. "The Snakes are some of the few who are not afraid of *lo más chingón*. They research everyone before they

consider to meet so they know they are not liars, officials, bad people. Even if they meet, they do not like many. But if they like you and you pass, it is good."

"Who is *lo más chingón*?" Boyd asked casually, although he knew. He couldn't imagine anyone else called themselves that in Monterrey, not when the man who did could come upon even Boyd and Sin unsuspected and threaten Boyd's life. No one else would stand a chance against that man and he would not be surprised if, like Vivienne, the man was the type who knew everything that went on.

"Someone not to fight," Jorge said darkly. "He is strong. His people are strong. He owns many passages to Monterrey and other cities nearby. He is well known and has many rivals so he hides his appearance a lot. Not many know what he really looks like. In this city, it is hard to know who you can really trust."

"What's he deal?" Boyd asked as he slid his sunglasses down and idly looked around the deserted alley they were just entering. They were nowhere near anyone else and he didn't feel like they were being watched, but that didn't mean the man couldn't be overhearing. After all, he had surprised Boyd once before so it was not inconceivable that it could happen again.

"Weapons mostly," Jorge said, his eyes narrowing. "Anything. He has many connections; he can get what he wants."

"Is he affiliated with anyone?" Boyd asked curiously.

"No," Jorge said, shaking his head. "He is on his own. But he sells for the best price."

"Would he sell to the big rebel groups if they offered the most?" Boyd asked the question so casually and off-handed that Jorge answered without realizing what he was saying.

"Yes. Once, he—" Jorge cut himself off suddenly, looking around the alley in heightened paranoia. He looked rather like a skittish rabbit sensing a fox nearby and

when he turned to Boyd it was with eyes that were angry and afraid. "I want my money," he demanded.

Boyd nodded easily and slipped twice as much into Jorge's palm than he had said he would pay him. "Thanks, Jorge," he said sincerely.

Jorge looked down at the large wad of pesos and back up at Boyd. He slipped the money away and turned, then hesitated and looked back at him with narrowed eyes. "You should not ask those questions. He is too strong, even with the Snakes helping. And there are many others who are not *lo más chingón* but who like questions even less. It is dangerous."

Boyd smiled and patted Jorge on the shoulder. "Got it. Thanks, man."

Jorge looked down at his shoulder with a strange expression then back up at Boyd. "Careful, *ese*," he said as a parting shot, but this time the term seemed less derogatory; it seemed to be used more in the manner it was intended, as if he was saying he knew Boyd well enough now.

Boyd's smile stretched into a grin but Jorge only barely saw it before he turned and ran away to disappear into the shadows. Slipping his hands into his pockets, Boyd casually strode away, intending to take the long route back to the apartment just in case he was being followed.

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Sin had decided early on that this entire part of the mission was obnoxious, idiotic and a huge waste of time. What he didn't understand, was why he needed to experience what essentially was an irritating rendition of a try out, if the human resources department of the JKS Convention Center did as thorough a background and reference check as they claimed to. He had all of the fake and forged documents needed to impress their stupid, self-important checks and he knew Jason Alvarez had worked for what he supposed was extremely impressive corporations but no; that was not enough.

In addition to that he had to obtain a license to work as an armed guard for the city of Monterrey and then even after that, he had to do nonsense “training” with a large pool of other candidates before the actual team would be chosen.

He just didn’t get it. It wasn’t exactly a position with homeland security. It was a fucking convention center.

He was particularly irritated at Carhart and whatever other dimwitted people had planned this mission because they could have easily forged in a fake license to make his job less irritating but no; they couldn’t do that. They obviously wanted this mission to fail miserably when he began killing irritating civilians who thought they knew more about guns than he did.

Generally ‘training’ went something akin to this:

“So what you have to do is—“

*Shoot you in the fucking head with your own gun because it would be painfully easy to disarm you with the way you’re holding that weapon.*

“Understand?”

Sin stared at the man blankly before raising his own weapon and unloading his entire clip into the paper target. He didn’t speak and didn’t even look at where he was shooting before placing the standard issued gun in front of him as he watched his ‘trainer’ expectantly.

The man, whose name he had not bothered to pay attention to, gave him a strange look and examined the target as it slid closer to them from across the range. His expression became incredulous as he took in the completely obliterated ‘head’ and he turned on Sin with a frown. “You killed it.”

“Yes.”

“You were only supposed to immobilize it...”

“Oh.”

Fucking civilians.

Despite his ineptitude at immobilizing suspects they decided that having possibly dead civilians was a risk that they were willing to take in order for buildings and convention centers to be guarded and secured. In short, they gave him the license and then he was allowed to move on to the actual preliminary trial for the job at the JKS.

The training consisted of a variety of tests, physical and written. The written portion of the exam wasn't really written though; it was on a computer and appeared to be nothing more than a personality assessment to make sure that you were neither a retard nor a psycho. Sin wasn't entirely sure if that left him out but if one used common sense it was easy to see the obvious answers. He was quite surprised to see that about 45% of the applicants had none because they were sent home shortly after the test was complete.

The next portion of the trial was what he supposed was a standard medical check-up to ensure that applicants were able to perform physical activities without dropping dead of heart failure on JKS property. The doctor asked him a variety of questions about his medical history even though a copy of it had been included in his application and mostly gawked at him as he stood there half naked in her office.

“Those are some scars you have there,” Dr. Adler noted as her gaze drifted from the scar at his neck to the gunshots on his chest and abdomen and finally rested on Shane's attempt at castration.

Sin's eyebrows rose and he gave a one shouldered shrug. “Rough childhood.”

“Okay then.” She stared at him for a long moment before shaking her head and gesturing towards the scale.

He stepped onto it without commenting.

“6’4 and... 170 pounds.” She stepped back and surveyed him again, a disapproving frown on her face. “You are one point away from being considered underweight which would have immediately disqualified you from this position.”

“Oh.”

“Doesn’t that concern you?”

“No.” He’d weighed less before coming to Monterrey.

Dr. Adler glared at him. “Don’t you eat, boy?”

“I eat plenty.”

She frowned again and poked at his toned abdomen. “From what it looks like, you don’t consume enough calories for how much you work out.”

Sin stared at her and looked relatively unimpressed. “Are we done here?”

She sighed in exasperation. “Yes.”

The last part of the preliminary test was a basic obstacle course which he completed in less than a quarter of the time permitted. He didn’t particularly see why such a test was needed but he supposed that they wanted to make sure applicants had some small speck of endurance before hiring them. The entire process of getting a license and passing the preliminary trials took nearly a month and then he was finally officially hired. They required him to dye his hair entirely black, which he was glad about, and to also remove any facial piercing. In a strange way he was sad to see the lip ring go; he’d gotten quite used to it. On the other hand he was almost relieved because he’d begun to suspect that he was developing some kind of oral fixation. It was entirely possible that that also had something to do with Boyd though.

After he was formally hired there was a lengthy orientation that mostly involved him sitting in one of the large auditoriums with dozens of other new employees while not paying attention and then several more weeks of training. Although the training was

tedious, it was not as useless as the preliminary tests. They were trained on the standard procedures when encountering suspicious activity, the several codes for the different levels of emergencies and alarms and most importantly, they were told to study the entire convention center.

He'd assumed that he would only be required to learn the wing that the event would take place in but the fact that he was given free rein to wander the entire complex made things a lot simpler. He made careful note of all exits, staircases and vents, even snapping pictures with the tiny, lighter shaped digital camera that Boyd had given him.

By the time late September had rolled in they'd constructed a detailed map of the center and had even mapped out several possible escape routes for the night of the attack as well as good places to plant the bombs.

It was in the beginning of October when he noticed that the east wing of the center was suddenly off limits due to 'construction' purposes. There were no visible signs of constructions or construction workers although he noticed several times that there were several cars parked in the lot of that wing. Questions about the strange activity led to vague answers and when he realized that even his managers seemed to have very little idea about what was going on, he came to the decision that the East wing was most likely their target area.

October seemed to be the beginning of the cooler weather in Monterrey, which meant the average temperature was 80 degrees Fahrenheit instead of 100, so that evening Sin chose to walk back to the studio. The last stage of their assignment was only three weeks away and he felt a combination of impatience to get it over with and disappointment that their time in Monterrey would be ending so soon. Despite the fact that the entire mission had seemed like a mini vacation he'd always known that eventually they would have to go back to the Agency, go back to reality. He'd thought about it many times over the last several months but now that it was so close he realized, and not for the first time, that he was dreading it.

He wasn't looking forward to returning to his cold, lifeless apartment now that he'd gotten used to their colorful and almost homey studio. He wasn't looking forward to the reminder that everyone who surrounded him at the Agency was an enemy; that most of them were just waiting for him to show any sign of weakness so that they could pounce. He wasn't looking forward to trying to adapt the new side of his personality, the side that had emerged in the Monterrey heat, to his usual persona at the Agency. And he wasn't looking forward to the way he would have to hide his new sexual relationship with Boyd. Sin had never quite forgotten Connor's warning about what he'd do if he ever found out that Sin was 'sexually functional' and he didn't really want to know if the man would actually carry out the threat.

By the time he returned to the building his hands were shoved into the pockets of his stiff, black slacks and there was a slight frown plastered onto his face. He ignored the neighbors who greeted him and entered the studio to find Boyd sitting at the small dinette with a variety of objects in front of him. "What are you doing?"

"Playing with some expensive toys," Boyd said casually, then looked over at Sin with a slight smile. "How was your day? Mine was interesting."

Sin wandered over to the table as he began loosening his tie and eyed the toys in question. "What was so interesting about it?"

"Well, first of all, this," Boyd said, tilting his head so Sin could see as he pushed his hair away from his right ear. A silver post was situated at the top, the skin a little red around it.

"Um. Great?" Sin gave him an odd look and pulled the tie from around his neck entirely.

"You should be a little more enthusiastic," Boyd said with an amused smirk. "You're going to have to wear one too." He held up a small black box, with a matching silver post lying inside.

"What are we, going steady?" Sin tossed the tie on the table and began unbuttoning his shirt as he stared down at the box. "I don't think I'm ready for such a commitment."

"Are you ready for a GPS commitment instead?" Boyd asked, quirking one eyebrow.

Sin's long, tanned fingers paused in their unbuttoning and he sprawled down in the chair opposite Boyd. One dark eyebrow rose and he studied the earring skeptically. "That thing? Where the hell did you get something like that?"

"At a pharmacy." Boyd slid a watch closer to Sin and looked at him expectantly. "We'll both be wearing one of these too. It tracks the transmitter. I've already set both the codes into the watches so we will be able to track each other if we need to. This is rather like a far superior grade of tracking devices we had in Canada. You can toggle between regular time, your own position, and my position, by using the buttons on the side. There are other features but they aren't as pertinent right now. It should be accurate to two city blocks or less, and the battery will need to be recharged every ten to twelve hours. I've already bought us each a recharger and one extra battery. While we have the outlet, I would suggest keeping the spare battery charged at all times." He slid them toward Sin.

Sin examined the watch and then the charger with an impressed look on his face. "Will any average rebel figure out how to access the GPS in the watch if they look close enough or should we smash it if one of us gets caught?"

"We have a few options," Boyd said, pulling out the second watch and turning it around to study it thoughtfully. "I doubt many would figure it out but it's a possibility, especially if Janus gets involved. We can set a password that would work like Morse code with the buttons on the side; that would seem suspicious if we were just typical civilians but at the point of someone getting that close to discovering our identities, it's probably better to look suspicious than reveal the other's location. There is also the possibility that you can get interfering signals, but it's not likely, and there may be a lag if

you're ever trying to track me rather than yourself. If you do the self-tracking, it's actually tracking your watch instead of the earring."

"I think setting a password would be a good idea," Sin replied and began unbuttoning his shirt again. "Where did you obtain such interesting gadgets?"

"I told you, at a pharmacy." Boyd smirked. "Actually, I bought it from these women I met. They're smugglers, sort of. They call themselves the Snakes. I'm not certain if they have the same range as *lo más chingón* or even if they smuggle anything themselves; they may just steal from others. Regardless, they are apparently some of the very few who are not afraid of him."

Once again, Sin's hands paused and he looked up at Boyd for a long moment before he finally finished and shrugged the hot, sweaty shirt off. "Did Jorge introduce you to these people?"

"Yes," Boyd said, inclining his head, "They seemed decent enough and Jorge said they aren't afraid of *lo más chingón*. As far as I can tell, they are not scamming us and I did extensive research before I even attempted to contact them; they're definitely not related to Janus or any of the American rebel groups."

"Hmm." Sin ran a hand through his hair and leaned back in the chair, arching his back in a stretch. "What else did they say about him?" He didn't specify who 'him' was but his tone made it obvious whom he was referring to.

"They actually didn't talk about him, but Jorge said he's someone to avoid," Boyd said, setting the watch down to give his full attention to Sin. He rattled off the facts the way he usually did when speaking of missions. "He apparently owns and/or operates several secret passages from Monterrey to surrounding cities. He deals mostly in weapons but he is not limited to that; Jorge said he could deal anything, he has enough connections. He is not affiliated with anyone; he just sells to the highest bidder. He would definitely sell to large rebel groups like Janus, though I can't say if he has in the past. It sounded as though he probably has at least once but Jorge was very nervous, I could barely get him to talk about it. He seemed concerned that they have contacts

everywhere and even conversations in the alleyways could be overheard, which is probably not untrue given the apparent extent of the man's power."

Sin grunted and leaned on his elbows as he studied his partner calmly. "Well for the time being I'm going to assume the man isn't a threat until he thinks we're a threat to his business, which we aren't. It would be interesting to find out more about him though. At least he most likely isn't affiliated with Janus and most likely will not interfere with the mission." He picked up the watch again and eyed it thoughtfully.

"He probably won't, unless he suddenly gets involved with Janus at the last minute." Boyd shrugged with one shoulder. "I highly doubt he would, though. That reminds me." He pulled a large ream of paper from the center of the table and noisily started to unfold it so that Sin could see. It was the same map they'd been working on for weeks, detailing the convention center, but there was an extra circle that Boyd had penciled in an area he pointed to. "I've been looking at the map again and it occurred to me that if we place another bomb near B12 we would better compromise the structure. As it is, I think that section would just be a lot of flash and smoke."

Sin studied the map before nodding. "I think you're right." He tapped the map before sliding his finger over to the East wing of the complex. "Remember when I mentioned the alleged construction that appears to be going on in this wing? Well there continues to be no signs of actual construction although today I once again noticed several cars in the parking lot as well as activity in that area while I was doing my rounds. I asked my managers if they had any information about what was going on and whether or not I should pay attention to any strange visitors but it seemed that they were completely clueless as to what was actually occurring. Mrs. Morrano even voiced her own skepticism about whether or not they were actually doing construction although she didn't seem to have any alternate theories."

Sin leaned back in his chair again and pulled his pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. "I believe it's safe to assume that Janus is beginning to make preparations for their conference and that the East wing is the one that they will occupy. It is also safe to assume that lower management has no idea about who or what Janus is involved with if

we go according to the people I encounter. It's not surprising though. I doubt Janus and their inside contact would tell random civilian employees at the JKS about their plans."

"Hmm." Boyd looked at the map with his eyebrows slightly furrowed. "So how many innocents are we talking about here? I know the idea is to get all the leaders at once, but if a lot of the staff is entirely unaware of the situation, we'll want to minimize the overflow of explosives or fire as much as possible..."

"It seems that the preliminary amount of guests per night including artists and JKS staff would be around 500. Of course we want to minimize civilian casualties but we also have to make sure that the rear exits and all exits leading to the East wing are blocked off, so it may not be possible to completely avoid losses."

Sin didn't look too pleased by the idea but he didn't seem intent on focusing on that aspect. He pointed to the long corridors and adjoining rooms that ran between each wing of the complex. "The main civilian event is being held in the Grande Ballroom of the South wing so the Southeast corridor will be a problem area. Entrances 4 and 5 need to be blocked off on the Southeast corridor and so do 7 and 8 in the Northeast corridor. If there are any staff in the Southeast section they may have difficulty escaping although if they aren't completely idiotic, they can easily make their way to the main exits in the South wing."

Boyd studied the map, taking into account what Sin said, then finally nodded. "Alright. Well, I'll obviously be in the Janus convention for a lot of this but I can take the Northeast corridor if you take Southeast. We can communicate with these." He slid a small radio over to Sin. "It's a short distance radio, which means once we get out of range, they're useless. If for some reason we are unable to meet up again after setting off the explosions, I suggest we give ourselves a two week time period after the convention before we try to meet; that should be long enough to lose any tails we may have inadvertently acquired. What do you think about meeting in the forest I showed you? That should be out of the way enough that we could meet in private, and it's bordering a few smuggling passages I was recently alerted to."

"Sounds good," Sin replied.

He studied the radio and the wireless headset that went along with it, noting that it was small and discreet enough to not gain them any unnecessary attention from others. They would come in handy for their communication since he would primarily be placing bombs in his section while Boyd covered his own and identified target locations. They'd already realized early on that they would possibly get separated in the ruckus; after the bombs were in place he would take up his position in the mezzanine above the conference hall where the rebels would be as he waited for word from Boyd to begin taking their targets out.

Although the commotion and the bombs would likely provide cover, it was still possible that they'd be able to pinpoint his position and target him after tracking the location that the bullets came from. If that was the case, meeting up with Boyd could potentially risk both of their identities or take away their ability to escape. They'd already have to take separate routes out anyway, so if that happened it was best to just meet later. He would escape from the South exits, detonating bombs as he went and Boyd would escape from the North as he did the same.

"Carhart and Jeffrey would be quite alarmed to actually see me sitting here forming detailed plans," he commented wryly.

"Mm," Boyd agreed, then grinned teasingly. "Maybe I should take a picture for the scrapbook."

"Only if I can include a picture of you naked and on all fours begging to be fucked," Sin deadpanned.

"It wouldn't work," Boyd said smoothly despite the fact he hadn't been expecting that answer. "That would be a classified, for your eyes only picture. If we put that in a scrapbook that Carhart and Jeffrey saw, I'm afraid I'd have to kill them."

"Afraid they might like it?"

That mental picture was certainly something Boyd could have lived without. "I hadn't thought of it," he said, raising an eyebrow. "Why, do you want them to?"

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did," came the retort. Sin scooted his chair back from the table and stood again, unbuckling his belt as he eyed his partner thoughtfully. "Are you looking forward to seeing any of those people again?" The question was sudden and more than a little random for the current conversation but it was something that had been on his mind lately.

Boyd blinked. "I don't know. I wouldn't mind seeing Ryan again."

"Oh." Sin turned away from him slightly as he finished taking off his uniform. "Why?"

"I like him." Boyd slid the radio back into its protective case then glanced over at Sin. "He's my friend. He'd be yours too if you let him; he's cared about your well-being for a long time."

That earned him a skeptical snort as Sin stepped out of his pants and began rummaging in the dresser for a pair of shorts. "I don't see why he should care about me but I suppose I will have to take your word for it." He paused and pulled out a pair of baggy basketball shorts. "I don't know what it means to have a friend so I don't know how I am expected to let him be one."

Boyd shrugged and leaned back in his chair, watching Sin idly. "There aren't exactly any set rules on how to earn or find friends, but it's basically trusting others, I suppose. As for what it means... I don't know, but I'd consider myself to be your friend, and you to be mine."

"That's different," Sin replied with a slight frown. Was it different? He didn't even really know. "You're my partner, that is why I eventually began to trust you. And now I suppose we are friends if that's what one goes by, but we are friends who also have sex. If that is the standard definition of friendship, I'm not sure I want to engage anyone else with it. I have no desire to fuck Ryan."

"Well, no, the sex isn't typical," Boyd said, mildly amused and somehow pleased to hear that Sin didn't want to have sex with others. "You can be someone's friend without ever doing anything like that. It's not like I've slept with Ryan but I still like him."

"I wouldn't be surprised given your alleged history of bedding anyone at the Agency who catches your eye." Sin smirked and sat down on the couch, automatically reached for his pack of cigarettes and realized he'd left it on the table. "It doesn't matter anyway. I have no reason to spend enough time with Ryan to develop any kind of relationship other than the one we have now. The only reason you and I became so close is because I was forced to have you as a partner."

Boyd was further amused by Sin's wording. "That's nice of you to say," he said mildly.

Sin smirked. "What can I say? I'm a charming guy."

Shaking his head with a smirk, Boyd pulled out the map Tayla had given him earlier, he showed it to Sin and explained how it worked, using a map of Monterrey as reference. They discussed further specifics of every aspect of the mission, including what to do in different scenarios in case anything went wrong. The date when Boyd would have to leave the apartment and check into a hotel room as Kadin Reed was quickly approaching and he wanted to make sure they had gone over everything as much as possible before they would no longer have the chance to easily communicate. Studying the maps and considering the alternative plans took up most of the rest of the night, and though it was a lot to memorize and remember, in a way it was almost enjoyable.

Although neither of them particularly wanted to leave Monterrey, the life they'd become accustomed to there and the ease with which they could interact and be near each other, at the same time Boyd found the act of planning missions and trying to guess all the eventualities to be almost invigorating and he wouldn't deny that he preferred the times when he could do this with Sin helping him. Sometimes Sin had solutions that hadn't occurred to Boyd, that were far simpler than the complicated

strategies he would create. It gave them something to focus on, even if it wasn't something either of them was particularly looking forward to.

## Chapter 36

The Grand Ballroom of the Joel K. Solar Convention Center was huge, easily able to accommodate two thousand people despite the fact that there were only about four hundred in attendance at the Global Arts Exhibition. The sheer size of the ballroom could have dwarfed the number of people attending but great care was taken in the way the room was arranged and decorated. Although the décor was obviously on the expensive side, it was a subtle decadence that every guest took in with pleasure, and created a welcoming feeling.

The ceiling rose far overhead with architecture that provided several large artistic skylights as well as intricate designs in the structure of the ceiling itself that gave it dimension and made even the act of looking up a pleasant experience. Crystal chandeliers hung at varying heights, filled with candles that provided dancing light for the four hundred people below. The entire room was bathed in neutral and earth colors; the walls were a rich cream that did not appear to be wallpaper but was almost satiny to the touch, while the thick velvet curtains were a deep shade of forest green that provided a pleasing contrast. The floor was marble with an elegant pattern inlaid in a manner that complemented the design spreading across the ceiling.

A stage rested in the front of the Grande Ballroom, providing a perfect platform for the speeches and presentations that were scheduled later in the evening; it appeared to be constructed of mahogany that had been polished to an understated gleam. Small groups of tables were placed across the main area of the ballroom in a particular pattern; they were each decorated with an elegant crystal vase with long-stemmed yellow roses, as well as a crystal-clear mirror with several small dishes of water with floating candles inside that reflected light in a soothing manner. However, the main attractions were the four exhibits that were situated in each corner of the room. Each space was carefully planned to give the most space for guests to view the works of art while at the same time providing an area for the artists to speak. Rows of soft, comfortable-looking chairs were situated in front of the stage to provide seating for

anyone watching the speeches, and similar chairs were located near the exhibits for the artists to rest on.

Many of the attendees were dressed as elegantly as the room, with women in gowns that ended just above the ground, in quicker movements allowing a hint of their perfectly matched high heels. Many of the men wore tuxedos, their cummerbunds and ties carefully pressed and arranged. Waiters moved unobtrusively through the room, offering complimentary champagne to any who tilted in their direction. The guests milled about the room, drifting to and from each exhibit, mingling with each other or resting at the seating areas as the sounds of a husky female voice flitted through the room from the stereo system, the cool jazz and her French accent fitting perfectly with the ambiance of the Grande Ballroom.

Although the guest list appeared to be made up primarily of celebrities and artists, philanthropists and humanitarians, no one appeared to be flaunting their status or their wealth. No woman wore glittering jewels or outrageous fur and not a one of the guests had the assuming air of upper class superiority or prestige. People spoke quietly about the art and about the current events but mostly about the past. Everyone seemed to have a story regarding someone they had lost, someone they wished could be here to experience the evening with them. Everyone seemed happy to be there, honored to have been invited; the Exposition was obviously something that inspired hopefulness in them all, a sentiment that was echoed in the art that was showcased around the room.

There were five main artists at the exposition and although each person's work had a particular tone, the overall theme was hope and recovery from the scars of war. No one seemed to focus on pointing the blame, on hate or bitterness towards any government or nation which was possibly due to the fact that all of the artists were from countries which had chosen no sides during the war; something which had been difficult for the entire world during that time.

Corrina and Toby, originating from Egypt and Greece respectively, were a husband and wife artist duo whose work seemed to focus primarily on landscapes. One particularly striking, albeit morbid, piece was a painting of a war-torn field. What

appeared to have once been grass was charred black and the stain of ash washed over the remnants of buildings in the distance. The field was littered with skulls, skeletons, the burnt remains of clothing and other personal affects, which presumably belonged to the people who had died there. However in the midst of the smoggy clouds which hovered low in the sky, the beginnings of a spectacular sunrise could be seen shining through, beams of light illuminating the otherwise dismal landscape.

Most of their paintings had similar scenes; light from sunsets or sunrises shining through scenes of death and gore. They seemed to use primarily muted colors giving each piece a particularly bleak quality that made the streams of golden light that much more striking.

The artist representing India, another one of the neutral countries during the war, was a middle aged woman named Neha. The centerpiece of her collection was a painting simply titled 'Nations'. An endless looking ocean dominated the piece, the vivid blues and greens of the sea capturing the attention of nearly anyone who passed. Above the ocean was a flag but it was hard to say which country it was from. There was a portion that was obviously the American flag, the French and English flags and finally the Russian flag; the main instigators of the war. The flags were intertwined in an almost confusing blur but the most fascinating part was the way the red (a primary color in each) seemed to be bleeding out and dripping into the ocean, mixing together until it was impossible to tell which nation's flag it had come from.

The third exhibit was the work of A.K. Hayes from Iceland, a surprisingly young girl who looked like an ingénue but was obviously a prodigy at sculpting. She seemed to have a preoccupation with the human body and her self-proclaimed masterpiece was a stunning sculpture entitled 'Venus Reborn.' The piece was of a tall, voluptuous woman who was mostly nude although there was nothing sexual implied. Long curls tumbled down the woman's back and spilled over her shoulders, arms thrown back and stretched behind her as what appeared to be bandages hung from her body and revealed scars on her otherwise flawless form. There was a small brass plaque at the base of the sculpture with an explanation about the title and the piece; apparently it was

a recreation of the famous painting 'The Birth of Venus' by Alexandre Cabanel but in this version, love was being reborn into a world which had briefly been filled only with hate.

However despite the creativity and talent of all of the other artists, as Sin wandered the edges of the Ballroom, it was a painting in the fourth exhibit that caught his attention. The sky in the painting was gray and brown, exactly how it had looked for a long time after the second wave of bombs had shattered the world, and a lone figure stood in the middle of a bombed out city. It appeared to be a soldier but as Sin moved closer and actually paused to stare, he realized the soldier was actually a teenaged boy. He wore army fatigues and clutched a military helmet in one hand, a rifle lay discarded at his feet; his face, hands and uniform was streaked with blood and soot. However it was the look on his face, the almost lost expression and the eerily vacant stare, which made something in Sin ache, something in him churn and roil and remember things better left forgotten. It was like he was staring at a portrait of himself at that time; the age was right, the expression, the blood...

"Do you like?"

Sin looked to the side, shaken out of his strange reverie and stared at the woman who stood at his side. He recognized her immediately as Yara, the artist responsible for the piece. She was Brazilian, in her late twenties and extremely attractive. She had a kind of understated beauty that was only emphasized by the lack of makeup she wore and the simple dress that hung from her slender shoulders. She would have been the picture of feminine grace if it weren't for the chunky combat boots and the way she wore her short cropped hair in dozens of spikes.

Sin looked away from her and stared at the painting again. "I guess."

Yara smiled and crossed her arms over her chest. "It's called Atonement."

He glanced at her briefly. "He doesn't seem to be atoning for anything there."

Yara tilted her head to the side. "It is interesting that you chose to take it in that way." Her almost black eyes stared up at him as though she were trying to read his thoughts. "If I may ask, to satisfy an artist's curiosity about how others view her work, would you mind telling me what conclusion you would have drawn had you known the title without having an explanation for it?"

He didn't speak for a long moment and continued to study the boy on the canvas. "Soldiers-- fighters in general, people who were involved in the war, sometimes feel as though they need to... atone for the things that they did in battle, actions they took... lives they took. I'd probably think this depicted a time directly after the war when he was looking for a way to make up for the past."

Yara nodded and pursed her lips. "A valid conclusion but not exactly what I had in mind when I painted this piece." Her lips abruptly turned up into a small smile and she continued to gaze up at him as if she were trying to figure him out, or more precisely, as if she already had done so. "Perhaps it is not him who is in need of atonement. Maybe it is... the world." She gestured with one slender hand, her fingers barely brushing the painting. "The world, the powers that be... they created a generation of soldiers like him. Boy fighters, child killers, ones who did not have the chance to live before the world armed them and so, they had no idea how to live when the fighting was no longer needed."

Sin said nothing for a moment but once again, something about her words, something about the painting, struck a chord within him. He started to leave, to nod and excuse himself, but before he could the words were coming out of his mouth. "A lot of people would think you're insane for having that viewpoint. They view that generation of soldiers as mindless drones, puppets of the government who killed without questioning why they were killing. Some people think soldiers from that time are monsters."

She nodded in agreement and raised one shoulder in a shrug. "I know. I do know. But I've seen so many of these boy soldiers become empty, soulless men that I feel..." She trailed off for a moment and her eyes seemed almost haunted during that pause. "I feel that despite the fact that many activists show no empathy towards the

soldiers of that war, the men they only see as bomb droppers and civilian killers, they were also victims. They also had their lives destroyed." He said nothing to that and she looked at painting again before her gaze slid back to him. "I am usually the more aloof artist in these events," She said suddenly as if sensing his discomfort, slightly accented voice sounding wry, "But when I saw you looking at my young man, I could not help but think that you reminded me of him."

That earned the woman a startled stare before Sin covered the expression and shook his head. "I don't know about all that."

"It's true. The eyes I think, your expression..." Yara smiled again, face as serene as her voice. "Something about you seemed lost, haunted, as you stared at him... But I guess it is just me being a strange artsy type who sees more than there is, maybe?"

Another shrug. He maintained the appearance of nonchalance despite the way her comments, her explanations, hit entirely too close to home. "Maybe."

Yara stared at him, head still slightly tilted to the side, studying him in a manner that was more than a little unnerving. After a moment someone called out to her and she looked over distractedly before turning back to Sin. "Well..." She peered down at his nametag. "Jason Alvarez, it was nice to be meeting you."

He looked at her briefly. "Yeah."

Another sweet smile and then Yara was going on her way. Sin shook his head, gave one final glance at the painting and then continued towards the back of the Ballroom. He felt off-balance, shaken, but he wouldn't let it show. He couldn't let it show. But despite the fact that he was able to maintain his composure, it still disturbed him that some painting, some civilian, could have such an effect on him and his state of mind. But it was just that... he was not accustomed to someone, anyone, understanding. Boyd understood-- he always had, but the idea that there were other people who did, who could, it threw everything he'd ever been taught and told, out the window. "If I stay here any longer I'm going to hurt myself," he muttered softly, confident that Boyd had heard the entire exchange through the microphone.

"If you do in that room, I guarantee you'll be the focus of about a dozen works of art in no time," came Boyd's voice into his ear.

Sin snorted softly, barely moving his lips as he spoke. "How are things on your end?"

There was an extended pause in which Sin could overhear several muted conversations in the background, none of them clear enough to understand. "No one," Boyd said finally, his voice as quiet as Sin's. "Maybe too early."

Sin looked down at his watch and tilted his head slightly. It was still pretty early in the evening and it was a logical move for Janus to wait a while to bring their inner circle in. The more time they spent in such a public place was like an invitation for their organization to be decapitated although that is exactly what was going to happen anyway. "Probably."

They kept their interaction to a minimum for the most part and despite the fact that it was annoying to have to constantly give an abbreviated version of events, the short range radio was so obnoxious that it made him not even want to use it. The convention center was extremely large and the range between his position in the southern wing and Boyd's station in Theater B of the northeast wing was apparently too far at times to pick up a strong signal. Whenever he went towards the west side of the Ballroom he picked up static and came close to losing Boyd entirely. Despite the fact that it was annoying, the lack of range did not really concern him; their plan was set and if something happened to prevent them from escaping together they'd already decided what to do.

They'd spent the last week perfecting the minute details of their plan and memorizing hand drawn maps of the city and of the center. By the time Boyd had left to check into his hotel as Kadin Reed they were pretty confident about how everything was going to go down. Sin had planted the explosives in the pertinent areas around the northeast wing and his sniper rifle was carefully hidden in the mezzanine above Theater B.

The only thing to do now was to wait until the targets arrived and Sin was more than a little anxious to get this all over with; his job as a security officer was dull and tedious. After all of the preparations and training they'd put him through, all he seemed to be doing was making rounds in the South wing to make sure no one was doing anything or going anywhere they weren't supposed to.

Other than getting rid of a few attempted party crashers and handling a couple of guests who'd had too much to drink during, what appeared to be for many, such an emotional occasion, nothing had really occurred all evening.

It seemed like a waste to have spent so much time and money training such a large force of guards for the event but he supposed that it had more to do with the fact that it made the rather famous guests feel secure than anything else. And besides, he thought with a hint of unease, if there wasn't anything going down at the moment there certainly would be when the bombs started going off. In the back of his mind he hoped that the other guards on duty would be able to get all of the guests out safely; he didn't want to be responsible for civilian casualties.

"Good evening everyone. Welcome to the 5th annual Global Arts Exposition! I'd like to thank everyone for coming on this night, the 20th anniversary of the start of the war, to honor our fallen loved ones and the people that were left behind after the last of the bombs fell."

Sin looked towards the stage and saw that Diane Goldberg, the founder of the event, was standing there and officially starting the ceremony that would follow. He rolled his eyes and moved closer to the exit that led to the southeast corridor. The good thing about his position was that he had freedom to wander around the entire wing and the surrounding corridors in the pretense of doing his rounds so he really didn't need to listen to emotional speeches and sentimental babbling about the plight of civilians post-war. "I can't wait until this is over," He grumbled and slipped out of the door and into the wide hallway. On each side of corridor were various doors which led to maintenance closets or service and employee areas.

"Won't be long," Boyd said over the radio.

Sin didn't reply as he began surveying the area; since there were adequate bathrooms and exits in the Ballroom and the surrounding rooms of the south wing, he didn't think any guests would have reason to be in this section of the center. Casualties could be completely avoided if they followed safety procedures when alarms began to go off and if the guards did their job of keeping order. He did, however, note the staff which moved in and out of the corridor for access to the service areas and he hoped that they would be smart enough to run south when explosions began going off in the northern part of the building.

He moved towards the northern part of the hallway with the intentions of seeing whether or not the staircase which led to the mezzanine was being used but before he could go any farther, a familiar voice was calling out to him. Or to 'Jason' rather.

Sin paused, almost debating entirely ignoring her and going about his business but knowing Jessica, she would most likely just follow along and he didn't want her going anywhere near the mezzanine or the northeast wing.

He closed his eyes briefly, fighting the sudden surge of irritation that flowed through him, and turned slowly to face her. His first response to was to be rude but he honestly didn't want to give anyone any reason to note his bad attitude tonight; most likely every member of the staff and guest in attendance would be questioned and asked about anyone or anything that had caught their attention. "Hi Jessica."

She looked beautiful as usual but for a change she was not clothed in anything remotely provocative. She wore a white blouse with black and silver suspenders and slim cut black pants, hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and makeup at the minimum. He actually thought that he preferred her this way and if it weren't for the situation he was in at the moment, he may have even paused to admire her. "I didn't think I'd actually see you," She said with a big smile, eyes wandering over him. "You look so handsome in a suit."

"Not really. It's just clothes."

She rolled her eyes and reached out, running her fingers lightly through his hair. "They made you dye your hair, huh? Not too surprising. They can't have a total punk wandering around all of the elite guests. Too bad about the lip ring though." Her smile turned slightly flirtatious, one arched eyebrow raising. "I think I miss it already."

He couldn't help but make a face at her and slid his hands into his pockets. "Didn't you say you weren't going to be here?" He asked pointedly.

She shrugged, leaning against the wall to get out of the way of waiters who were rushing back and forth to refill champagne glasses. "I wasn't originally but I decided to stick around for the art. Those people are so disturbingly talented, it's just mind blowing to me how they can create such beautiful paintings. I especially like the sculptor. I'm a big fan of the painting that inspired Venus Reborn, so I was really impressed with it. I can't believe someone so young could create something so amazing."

Sin stared at her blankly and absently looked at his watch. "What exactly do you do here anyway?"

She shrugged again, not seeming bothered by his complete lack of interest in her previous comments. "Like I told you, I helped to plan the event. You know, the decorations, furniture, placement of exhibits-- the music too. How do you like Madeleine Peyroux?" Jess waved a hand in the direction of one of the speakers which sat perched in the corner of the wall. "I think her voice is just amazing."

"Never heard of her," Sin replied uninterestedly.

"She's a French American jazz singer, was really popular around the time the war was going on. She actually sang at the first Exposition but has since died of radiation poisoning, which is why I chose her." Jess' expression dropped a little as she thought about it but after a moment it passed and she shook her head. "Anyway, I'm sure you don't want to hear about that..."

His eyebrows rose and he said nothing in response. What could he really say? That the deaths of civilians during and after the war didn't move him no matter how

prettily they sang? He'd seen enough death in the past twenty years, killed enough people, that he was incredibly desensitized to everything the people at the Expo seemed so forlorn about.

Jessica shook her head briefly and smiled at him again, completely changing the subject. "So how are you? How have you been these last couple of months? I haven't even been able to find someone to replace you. I tried out a couple of guys but they were just no good." She made a face. "Everyone seems like a complete pansy compared to how efficient you were."

He glanced his watch briefly before scanning the area around them. "Everyone is," He deadpanned.

Her laugh floated down the hallway although it eventually got lost in the clapping that emanated from the Ballroom. "I've missed you, Jason."

Another shrug. He saw another one of the guards, Eric Jiminez, leaving the Ballroom with an exasperated look on his face. Apparently Sin wasn't the only one unmoved and bored by emotional speeches; the same speeches that were probably given every year at this event. His eyes followed Eric and although the man thankfully didn't come any closer to them, his eyes fell on Sin and he shot him an impressed smirk after giving Jessica a once over.

She remained oblivious to the silent communication and moved closer to him, tilting her head to the side as she reached out and slid her hand up his chest, slender fingers wrapping around his tie. "I mean that." She tugged him close and he didn't pull away, not really wanting to make a scene with so many people randomly passing them. Despite the hesitance that she'd shown in the past when touching him, this time her movements were full of confidence and she seemed very sure of what she intended to do, what she wanted to say.

"Would it be out of line for me to ask if we could see each other sometime? Now that you're no longer my employee and I can no longer be sued for sexual harassment?" A teasing smile played on her full lips and she continued to gaze up at

him through her eyelashes. It seemed obvious to him that this was her usual routine when going after someone she wanted; the flirtatious gestures, the smiles, it was all very well practiced but despite that the look in her eyes seemed to be genuine fondness, hopefulness.

It made him pause for a moment and truly consider the question. Would it be? He honestly didn't know how to respond. After tonight he would never see her again but she wasn't supposed to know that. Would he have agreed if this hadn't been the end of the assignment? He really didn't know but since this would probably be the last time he ever spoke to her, he didn't see the need to upset her. "If you want."

Her smile widened. "I'll call you then. Unless of course, you want to meet up after this shindig is over? My apartment isn't too far from here..." She let the implication hang in the air and once again, he wasn't entirely sure how to respond.

"We'll see what happens," He said finally and slowly backed away from her, unsure of how to go about dealing with her or the proposition. He had too much going on to deal with it at the moment. "But for now I have to finish my rounds."

Jessica nodded. "I'll message you later, then." With another smile she turned on her heel and headed back towards the Ballroom.

He watched her go for a moment before shaking his head and going back to what he was doing once she was far enough away. The woman was frustratingly determined.

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Boyd had arrived at the JKS Convention Center a little early in order to acquaint himself with the people and, he had to admit, give himself a chance to see the art. Part of it was for his cover; because he'd mentioned at Lunar that he may stop by the JKS to see the art, he felt that it was important for him to be seen in the area wandering around. Even though there shouldn't be anyone at the Center who knew him as Kadin, and certainly no one who knew he'd made that comment, he didn't want to create

anything suspicions later by not being seen where he'd told several civilians he would be.

But the other part was that he was honestly curious. He was a child of the war; maybe not so much as those like Jorge, who had not been alive before the second bombings and who did not know what a totally clear sky looked like, but he was still born in the time of the first bombings.

So having a convention centered around art and the war was something that somewhat interested him; he wondered what others had to say, he was mildly curious about their stories, their views. He didn't suspect that his views would necessarily align, but somehow he still could not let himself be at the JKS during such an event without stopping by.

On some level, in his mind he almost felt as if he owed it to people like Jezebel, even to an extent Lou, Ryan, or the idea of people that he'd never met like Anderson McCall. Everyone's lives had been inherently changed by the war, regardless of how close to the front line they or their loved ones had been, regardless of if they knew anyone who'd died. There were, he knew, those who had hated the war or were devastated by the fact it had existed at all.

Beyond that, he just wanted to see the art. He would never call himself an artist and he would not even claim to be adept at drawing, but he did have a certain appreciation for some art. He'd always wanted to learn how to paint in vivid colors but somehow had not found himself very good at it; Lou used to inform him that it was because he spent so much time in that gloomy house wearing nothing but black that he'd forgotten what colors looked like. Whatever the reason was, it was true that when he drew he typically used charcoal, shades of black and grey against white without any color in between. But he still remembered loving sunsets and he still remembered crawling up the mound of debris by Crater Lake to watch the colors meld across the stagnant water.

That was probably the reason that Corrina and Toby's paintings had caught his attention. The sight of the sun contrasted against the harrowing scenes had made him slow and pause. Several others were around him at the time, staring at the paintings and commenting, expressing their interest and how impressed they were. Corrina and Toby were each involved in a conversation with an admirer and did not seem to notice at first that others had appeared. Boyd stood to the back, looking at the centerpiece at first before one of the side paintings attracted his attention instead. He shifted so he could see it better, noting that this was the only one that was a cityscape rather than landscape.

Skyscrapers were twisted and destroyed, leaving the skyline a mess of jagged edges that looked like metal mountains and crags. The painting was done at a perspective that was looking into one of the levels high up on a half-destroyed skyscraper; the ceiling and most of the walls were missing from the room in the foreground although were strewn by a bed that looked like it had just been slept in. A body was half-obliterated and tossed to the side like an unwanted doll, and in the other rooms that were seen through the broken, smoky windows and rooms behind walls that had been destroyed, there were any number of other corpses. Many of them looked as though they had fallen while trying to run away but a few, somehow even more eerie, were simply lying in beds as if they were sleeping despite the fact that they were missing most of their body or they were clearly dead.

The sky was dark and gloomy like the other paintings, but in this one he could see far in the distance, tiny, insignificant-looking, and lined up like little ants marching toward food, there were people in all black headed toward an unknown destination.

Sheets of paper were caught in a moment of a twisted dance through the air, many of which were on fire; dull red the color of blood eating away at the edges and obscuring the history and memory of the people whose lives were represented. Most of the sheets of paper were twirling at angles but on a few he could tell there was very small writing although he couldn't read it because most of the sheets were shadowed, too dark. Behind it all, the sun stood out in a brilliant golden hue, intense light sparking

off bits of the buildings, the people below, highlighting some pieces of paper so words could be read more clearly.

One in particular was closest to him and after a moment he realized from the way it was angled and the particular pattern of the torn edge that it actually came from a journal strewn by the bed in the skyscraper. He stepped in closer to read and realized that it was an excerpt from a letter; it read, 'Dear son, Time is shorter than I'd hoped. All I can do is sit here, writing, knowing you will never have the chance to read this, to know what happened here, to know how I felt. Knowing I will never see you smile or hear you laugh again, that you will never ask me another question. I wish I would be coming home to you but I know there is no--'

The fire had eaten the rest.

"If you have questions, please ask," a voice said suddenly behind Boyd and he, unable to keep from thinking of his father between that letter and the line of people in black far below, looked over, startled.

The artist Toby stood next to him, a somber smile on his face, his dark hair pulled back in a ponytail to reveal his hazel eyes. When Boyd only managed a slightly confused, "Oh, thanks," Toby looked past him to the painting.

"It is a small departure from the others, yes? We painted that first before we focused on landscapes instead," Toby explained.

"Oh," Boyd said then turned back to the painting. "Why'd you change?"

Toby was silent a moment. "Too personal."

Boyd blinked at the answer and held one hand up like he'd seen Reed do when he thought he was encroaching on personal territory. "Oh-- Sorry, man. I didn't mean..."

Giving him a startled look, Toby shook his head. "Ah, sorry. Not for us, for the lives we show. The city has more lives to exploit and we did not want to disrespect them like that. We realized it was more important to show humanity contrasted to nature, the

overall feel, you see?" His expression turned more pensive as he studied the cityscape. "Those resting in nature, where they should be safe in their afterlife, are still haunted by the mistakes their brethren made. Here, they find no nature."

"I dunno about that," Boyd said, studying the damage the war had wreaked. "They found human nature." In his peripheral vision, Boyd could see Toby's eyes narrow and the way he studied him, the alert tilting of his head. Silence briefly fell between them as Toby studied him and Boyd refused to look away from the painting.

"I saw you reading the letter," Toby said finally, gesturing toward the letter from the father to the son. "What do you think the next word was?"

Considering that for a long moment, Boyd finally decided that Kadin's answer would have been the same as his. "One."

"No... one?" Toby asked, seeming like he was trying to prod Boyd into more details. But Boyd only nodded and looked over with a one-shouldered, lazy shrug. "No one to what?" Toby inquired after a moment of waiting.

"No one nothing. That'd end the sentence. Why," he asked curiously, "what's it supposed to be?"

"There is no answer," Toby said, shaking his head. "I have heard 'hope,' 'help,' 'escape,' but not yet 'one.'"

Boyd didn't really know what to say to that so he shrugged. "So, how'd you get that brilliant color for the sun, anyway?"

Toby smiled at that and that led into an extended discussion regarding a few tips for painting and how to get the proper colors. Boyd was honestly interested in the answer so he asked for several details, committing the answers to memory in case sometime in the future he got ambitious and attempted to paint again. He stayed with Toby for a bit until the other admirers started overrunning Corrina. Toby eventually bid Boyd farewell to go rescue his wife from the inundation.

Boyd couldn't help his gaze lingering on the pictures once more, focusing on the cityscape and the distant stream of people passing through the streets like ghosts. It made him remember the smell of match smoke, the flickering of candle flames around him, his mother's fingers curled around his hand as she silently led him down the street toward the large memorial service they were holding for everyone who had died in the second wave of bombs.

He looked away decidedly after a moment and put the thought out of his mind as he walked around the rest of the center, studying the other pieces of art. When he saw Atonement with the image of a soldier standing in an ashen field, looking as though he didn't know where he was headed or where he had come from, knowing only that blood surrounded him, he'd thought that he could see Sin in that painting, in that soldier. He hadn't said anything or spoken to the artist, though; by then, it was time for him to head to where Janus would be meeting.

Boyd didn't know what he'd expected when he'd walked into the Northeast wing, but it wasn't what he found. The room was very open and decorated with warm colors, with a high ceiling and a raised stage toward one end. Pictures of flags, scenery from various countries, and maps lined the wall, representing the majority of the population of Earth regardless of any stance in the war. Tables were arranged across the room in a manner that gave the maximum seating with minimum clutter, allowing plenty of room for people to flow between. Several of the tables had simple white clothes covering them, with a pitcher of cold water and glasses available for anyone who wished to rest for a while. There were outlets with opened covers that were installed in the floor so that each table had access to electricity and, Boyd presumed, the internet. The covers appeared to be the color of the floor, which indicated that when closed it would not be apparent that they even existed. It would have been an amazingly expensive bill if everyone actually utilized the outlets at once, so Boyd doubted the room was used for much other than high-class conferences in which the attendees were those who were rich or powerful enough to still use and feel the need to bring their personal laptops.

Technology had become something that was inconsistent; it was seen very prevalently in some forms, and in others it had become rare. It was not uncommon for people to have computers, but it was less common to see people walking around with laptops. Part of the reason was that they were very expensive and difficult to maintain; even if the owner had batteries, electrical outlets to charge the batteries were not always available. The internet was not available across the globe and many of the landlines had been destroyed and never fully rewired after the bombs. And although wireless networks were found in wealthier, fully functional cities, it was still rare everywhere else. Not to mention, with all the scavengers around it would be stupid to visibly be carrying something that could sell for thousands of dollars to the right buyer.

Beyond that, in the wrong country words and recorded information could be lethal. If there was belief that a person was a terrorist, sympathetic to past enemies, or in some manner a threat to those around them, there were quite a few places where that person would not live long. In some areas of the world, the very act of carrying something with so much identifying information that could so easily be stolen was tantamount to signing a death warrant. This area of Mexico was luckily not such a place. Even so, it was a little strange to see a room apparently made specifically for the usage of laptops post-war.

Janus drew support from across the world and that fact was certainly represented by the people milling about. There was no particular stereotype for the demographics; they were varying ages, ethnicities, physical descriptions, gender, even how wealthy they appeared to be judging by the way they dressed. It was well done, actually; if Boyd did not know what the conference was for, he would not have guessed that it was a room full of rebels. The only thing conspicuous to Boyd was the absence of even a single target they were there to assassinate, but he figured they would just be coming later. The speech wasn't scheduled until a few hours into the conference, and the leaders would have to be stupid to spend too much time in one place for fear of an attack exactly like he and Sin had planned. Even if the rebels didn't know they were there, it didn't mean that the event couldn't have drawn others in with similar goals.

Although Boyd knew that there was supposed to be a speech later in the conference, which he assumed would take place on the raised stage, he didn't hear anyone talking about it. It made sense as the present Janus representatives wouldn't want to pin down the exact time the leaders would be there. No one but Janus supporters was supposed to know about the conference but Boyd knew that if he were in their position, he still would take precautions just in case. In the context of Janus and the governments they rebelled against, it was in its own way war.

To blend in and gain information, Boyd spent a lot of his time walking around talking to people. There wasn't much else to do in the room; it wasn't like in the South wing where there was art to view and the artists to speak to. The organizers couldn't very well put out pro-Janus materials on tables for people to browse through so instead everyone was basically mingling.

Some were exchanging stories of past successes or bragging about missions that had everything go wrong but still were somehow pulled off perfectly. Others were talking about the people they had lost in the war, the friends and family that were now dead due entirely to countries with too much greed in the people in power. Boyd saw people representing every major country from the war, which was expected but no less quelling of a thought. Even if Janus was a rebel group that originated in America against the American government, it was amazing how quickly and powerfully its voice had spread.

Not everyone in that room was necessarily against the American government; many of them were more interested in their own government and wanted Janus' support and help to grow as strong as they had, to pose as much of a threat in their homeland as Janus had in America. With the amount of power Janus was steadily building, it made Boyd wonder what would happen if they decided to stage their own war, worldwide, against the countries that their factions were in.

If every government in the world that Janus felt was corrupt was attacked at the same time in an organized manner by their constituents, then most likely even the allies of the afflicted countries would not be able to help fast enough, or give enough support.

It wasn't necessarily that Janus had such a huge population, although they certainly had a large following, but more that of all the rebel groups Boyd had ever had contact with or heard about, they seemed to be the most intelligent and cunning. They were determined down to the last soldier and the people in power were very good at what they did.

What Janus offered to the masses was hope, salvation, the power to stand against those in power. Walking through that room and listening to the conversations, it almost seemed like Janus was a religion, an ideology, something that brought people together in a way that didn't seem like a motley crew joined for one goal, but rather a gathering of individuals who all had their own goals that just happened to coincide with each other.

It was a bizarre thought and not something Boyd could entirely relate to.

He didn't think he had ever been passionate enough about anything in his life to have reached that same level of belief in anything, let alone a better world. And for all of Janus' pretty words and stirring ideology, they were still just a group of humans forming what basically equated to a cult following. For all that they had formed from idealistic college students -- probably the very same people who marched in the peace rallies -- the fact was they still killed people, and that included innocents. It wasn't that Janus targeted innocents, but it wasn't like the government did either. Sometimes bystanders were caught in the crossfire of battles between groups with differing views.

Janus' intentions were not absolutely pure or selfless; even if many of the people who joined had lost someone in the war or were angry that lives were lost at all, they had ultimately ended up creating their own group that was vying for control just like any other founding government. They had their own rules, regulations, they had their own laws. They probably had their own punishments for those who broke them. In a way, they used the people to spread their word, to gain further power and support, to try to encompass the world and from what he could see and hear from the people at the conference, it was working.

From what Boyd could tell, most of the representatives from the smaller rebel factions were actively trying to compete with each other as to who had the most successes. Many people were crowded around tables, showing off schematics and information on laptops or papers that some of them had brought. In some cases, it looked as though smaller factions were discussing their territories and even perhaps ways to merge groups or shift the boundaries to be more convenient for them. As a representative of 53, especially as Kadin Reed who was in upper level support, it was Boyd's job to basically do the same. And as a field agent from the Agency, it was his job to also find as much further information as he could on Janus; its structure, its people, everything. Unfortunately, he wasn't hearing anything he didn't already know. The Janus representatives seemed to be pretty low-level; they basically knew the goal of the group and a few minor details that the Agency had learned long ago, and they spouted nothing else. Even when Boyd talked to several of them casually and overheard other conversations, they would say nothing of import. He did absolutely nothing to imply he was anyone but Kadin Reed or had any interest beyond what Kadin would have, but he was not having much luck.

So he drifted between conversations, getting deeply involved in some and eavesdropping on others. The microphone and radio set that he and Sin were using was convenient in that they could each hear everything that was happening around the other. That eliminated the need to constantly check in with updates and progress, as well as cutting down on the suspiciousness of repeatedly and apparently talking to oneself.

On the other hand, it also provided a lot of background noise that had to be dealt with. It was a little difficult at first; he could constantly hear what was happening on Sin's end, yet he was attempting to carry on coherent conversations on his end or overhear what others were saying. The first time he tried to talk while Sin also happened to be having a conversation he needed to listen to, it was rather distracting but Boyd did not let it affect his interaction.

After a few hours he was able to ignore a lot of the background noise from Sin's side and could concentrate on listening in on conversations around him. Having so many people around ended up being a blessing; it was less conspicuous when he spoke to Sin quietly by barely moving his lips because he could be talking to someone nearby and it also made it less likely anyone noticed him in the first place since he was surrounded by so many others. At times when he needed to say something longer to Sin than a few words, he wandered to one of the walls; it wasn't rare for anyone to just want to briefly get away from the crowd and it gave him the opportunity to pretend to study the pictures.

It was pure luck that he happened to be turning toward the nearest picture when Jessica somehow managed to show up. In the months since Sin had left Lunar, Boyd had not thought too much about the people from there but when he heard Sin say her name he'd automatically tensed and stared blindly at the picture in front of him.

There was a range of reasons he was not pleased to hear that she was there. The first was because she could potentially blow their cover if she somehow managed to see 'Kadin' and mention to someone there that he and 'Jason' were connected. Although at Lunar Boyd had made a casual remark that he was considering stopping by the convention for the art, he still didn't want anyone connecting the two of them. But she really had no reason to go to the Northeast wing of JKS so that was unlikely. More than anything, it was because of who she was.

He didn't want to have to listen to her flirt; the very fact that he had to hear it raised his defenses, making him guarded and start to grow irritated. He hadn't had a chance to see Sin that day, he probably wouldn't until later, so he did not appreciate in the least that she commented on how handsome he looked in a suit.

Boyd remembered the first time he'd seen Sin cleaned up; it was before the flight to France when he had turned to see Sin standing framed in the doorway to the training room. The sullen way Sin had held himself had only enhanced the effect, the starch white shirt against his tanned skin and the way his eyes had stood out even more without his hair messy and half-hiding them...

He'd looked amazing.

Boyd didn't like the idea that Jessica got to see Sin in a similar way at all to the way he'd seen him then. He could tell at that point that he was definitely not going to like the conversation. Not that it was a surprise, as he doubted any conversation Jessica would choose to have with Sin would be one he would relish overhearing.

She made it worse, however, when she mentioned the lip ring. He felt strangely possessive of the lip ring – he'd liked the idea from the start, even if Sin hadn't, and over time it had become a familiar part of kissing him. Boyd had run his tongue and lips along it enough to know exactly what it felt like, he'd sucked Sin's lower lip into his mouth and played with the hoop of metal and when he'd pulled away he'd still found his eyes dropping to the way the silver ring disappeared between his lips.

Over the months, Boyd had acquired a fascination with it and it had been a little disappointing when Sin had to get rid of it. So it started to annoy him that she said anything about it; somehow he felt like she didn't have a good enough reason to miss it whereas he certainly did.

When she started complaining about the help they had hired since Sin, Boyd couldn't help but think she was an idiot. Of course no one was as good as Sin; she was damn lucky she'd had him there in the first place. No one of that caliber would normally think to work for such an unprofessional woman and establishment. Even Jason Alvarez would have been far overqualified; it was not typical for someone who had worked such prestigious jobs including for high-up officials to suddenly decide to break drunks apart at some random, unimportant night club.

She was dreaming if she ever thought she'd find a decent replacement. Sin was exceptional at what he did and if it weren't for the fact that Sin had started to like some of the people there and that he'd become more comfortable in a civilian setting, Boyd would have thought that Sin's talents were wasted at Lunar just as they would be at any nightclub.

Everything she said from that point on just made the entire exchange more irritating. Boyd could feel his annoyance growing the more flirtatious she sounded, the closer and clearer he could hear her voice.

He could just imagine her touching Sin, trying to win him over and when she propositioned Sin, Boyd barely stopped himself from saying coldly into the radio, "Tell her to fuck off."

He knew he was just being jealous as well as, to an extent, possessive of Sin. He knew that he was being irrational, that he should be ignoring this conversation because it was not likely to contain pertinent information, that he should go talk to a few more people and try to ascertain when the leaders would arrive.

He logically knew a lot of things but that didn't change the fact that he wanted Jessica to get the fuck away from Sin, to stop trying to charm him and touch him and just in general to stop being herself. He'd managed to ignore much of his ire for her in the months since Sin had worked at Lunar, but hearing her voice and thinking of his last conversation with her only served to renew it.

"You must be American," a man suddenly said at his side and Boyd looked over. He'd felt him approaching but there were so many people in the room that it was not an uncommon occurrence; it was just that most of them continued past him. This man, however, had the sort of amiable expression that showed he was probably stopping to talk to anyone who seemed interesting.

"Sorry?" Boyd said, trying to shut out the annoyance he'd been feeling so he could concentrate on his part of the assignment.

"The flag," the man said with a smile and nodded his head toward the picture in front of Boyd. "The way you were glaring at it just now, I could tell it made you angry."

Boyd looked at the picture and realized it was a painting of an eagle with a small American flag pressed over it and protected by the glass. More than the fact that he

hadn't realized what he was looking at, Boyd was surprised by the man's comment. Had he really been glaring?

It used to be that it didn't matter what Boyd was feeling inside, his expression just shut down and he became entirely unreadable, especially in the context of a mission. He knew he'd been angry but he hadn't realized it had made it to his expression, not when he'd been so careful so far to make sure he didn't break character at any point.

What the hell was wrong with him? Had Monterrey and Sin changed him that much? Had he just grown that bad at his job? He didn't think so; truthfully, he thought it was probably just Jessica. It was almost to the point that her presence was apparently enough on its own to lead him down the path of irrationality.

"Oh, right," Boyd said belatedly, giving the man a lopsided grin. "I'm that obvious, huh?"

"No, not at all," the man said with a laugh. He turned his own eyes on the flag and his expression darkened a little. "I think it's that way for all of us. We all lost someone, you know? Some of us lost everyone. When we see the flag... it comes out."

"Yeah," Boyd said somberly. He stared at the flag, and even if he personally didn't think the war was a result of the American government in particular but rather just the inevitability of human nature, he wasn't about to let the man know. "Guess I can't help it when I look at the flag. I keep thinking that red on there should be their blood, not ours." He wondered what Sin thought of the conversation if he was listening in. He'd probably assume that if Boyd had been glaring at the flag, it had been a carefully calculated move to blend in as Kadin Reed rather than pure dumb luck.

"It should," the man agreed. He looked over and smiled again. "I'm Pat, originally from the United Liberation for Truth but here it's USNE5. Where are you from?"

"Kadin, True Democracy Movement and USNE7," Boyd answered, referring to 53's original group name and Janus' designation for all of their inducted cells.

Andrews had already told them that Janus had their own way to track their constituents, just as the Agency used a numbering system. ULT and USNE5 both referred to what he knew as Sector 62.

It was complicated, really; the Agency used sector numbers, Janus used their own designation system, but the rebel groups (including those unaffiliated with Janus) used the names they had given themselves when speaking or referring to each other. Most of the names of the rebel groups were referred to by acronyms such as LoRS for the Liberation of Repressed Society, which Boyd knew as Sector 89.

"ULT, huh? We haven't heard much from you lately. Word on the street was few months back you were gonna be bigger than LoRS then suddenly you're off the radar." He knew that Pat would be familiar with both 53 and 89; most rebel groups in the same regions knew of each other's movements and activities for possible alliances or even rivalries. In their case, they were both from a group in northeast America, designated for Janus by 'USNE.'

Pat made a face, looking uncomfortable. "Well," he said after a moment, "you know how it is. Someone doesn't agree with the boss, he gets some followers, the group breaks up... Same thing happened to LoRS except we kept more of our original people." He looked around then leaned in closer. "Truth is, we're trying to grow big like that again. It's part of the reason we wanted to join Janus... With them backing us, we'll be able to expand, get our guys back, all that."

It also meant they'd lose their identifying characteristics and simply be assimilated into a greater whole, but Boyd didn't say that. "We're probably all thinking the same to some extent," he said easily. "Even the people out of America."

"Yeah," Pat said. "There's a lot of them too. You know they're even starting to recruit in new countries? A few guys over there said some Latvians are getting in on it, same with Estonia, Lithuania."

Boyd hadn't known that but he didn't think it was too surprising. "Yeah?" he asked. "But you just said it's some guys, bet it's not even real info."

"No way, these guys know what they're talking about," Pat insisted, leaning in to speak more quietly while he glanced around. "They've been getting all the info they can on Janus 'cause they been trying to get into them for a long time now. I know them, they're legit."

"Hmm." Boyd appeared to consider that for a moment, looking at Pat doubtfully. "Latvia, though? Lithuania? What's there?"

Pat shrugged. "Probably plenty of people who are unhappy with their government. They're close enough to Russia, maybe it's also a strategic point."

"Could be," Boyd said, sounding unconvinced even though he suspected Pat was correct. "I dunno, though. What else did they say?" He asked it as if he were trying to find a reason to believe Pat.

"Well," Pat said thoughtfully, "They're going for neutrals now, too; I heard they've got some feelers out in Greece mostly. The guys said Janus is trying to get most of Europe and after that they're gonna focus more on South America."

That was another tidbit of information he had not heard yet but, once more, did not particularly surprise him. "Hope they can make some headway in South America," Boyd said, seeming to consider the information. "I hear they're real interested in staying out of the politics of the war right now."

Pat waved a hand dismissively. "They've always been like that. It's only a matter of time; once Janus starts scouting the area, they'll realize they're right."

"Yeah." Boyd glanced past Pat to the nearest Janus representative, who was halfway across the room and in a very intent discussion with one of the representatives from a rebel group. "Unless they're stubborn. They wouldn't be the first."

"You mean China?" Pat said with a grimace. Boyd idly slid his gaze back over to Pat and just shrugged languidly without saying anything, not wanting to give away any amount of information he may or may not have, but Pat took it as an assent. "Yeah, they're having troubles with them," Pat said, "Those die-whatever people."

"Nah, I heard it's dee-something," Boyd said lazily. "Deebees or Deejees or some shit."

Pat shrugged unconcernedly. "All they've got is farmers on their side. Those guys said the die-people are causing troubles now but, personally, I bet it won't last long. Janus is more powerful. They'll get China, Europe, the Oceanic Republic..."

"Sounds like they're taking over the world," Boyd said with a little smirk and Pat nodded, pleased.

"Hey Patty, get over here," someone called from across the room and they both looked over. A man was standing by a table, grinning widely and waving him closer.

"He from ULT too?" Boyd asked curiously, noting that the man was next to one of the people Boyd recognized as one of the Janus representatives he'd run into earlier. They were standing by a table with stacks of paper spread across it but he couldn't tell what any of it said from that distance.

"Yeah, that's Roger," Pat said distractedly, then looked back at Boyd and smiled. "I'll go over in a second. Say, whatever happened a few months back? I heard you guys almost got taken out."

"It was an exaggeration," Boyd said with a rolling shrug. Word traveled pretty fast between rival groups, but whether what was said was truth, fiction, or a blending hidden in a rumor was difficult to ascertain. He'd assumed someone would ask about what happened when Sin and he had attacked 53, when they'd acquired Warren and the group as their mole, so he already had a cover story. "We got shook down by some people but we took 'em out. You know how it goes."

"Who were they?"

"Rival faction," Boyd said, looking irritated. "Well, they were related to the first offshoot from LoRS. They thought they'd fuck us up but Warren got 'em."

"Hmm." Pat glanced over at Roger then back at Boyd. "I'd heard all this crazy shit. Guess they were just rumors."

"Usually are," Boyd said, nodding. "I heard all sorts of crazy shit about you guys, too. I hear it about everything, really. Can't trust what someone tells you unless it's straight from the source, I guess."

Pat nodded then waved back to Roger when he impatiently called for him again. Smiling a little distractedly at Boyd, Pat said, "Well, nice meeting you," and gave Boyd just enough time to say, "Same to you," before he left.

Boyd waited until no one was in listening range before he walked to the next picture as if continuing his perusing of the flags along the wall. "Something's wrong," Boyd said quietly into the radio as he studied the Russian flag. "They're not here, seems like an orientation."

There was no immediate response and at first all he heard was the buzzing of background conversation as Sin presumably walked about the South wing. After a while there was a quiet, "What do you mean orientation?"

"New cells being trained in." Boyd waited until a few people passed behind him and he was alone again with no one close enough to overhear. He barely moved his lips when he continued, "No one's who we expected, no leaders, not even from the groups. Just messengers."

Another long silence and then, "Proceeding regardless?"

Boyd casually moved to the next picture. "Yes."

"ET?"

Boyd glanced at his watch, then the stage. A few people had congregated around it, trying to get a microphone to work while they adjusted the volume. "Ten." It wouldn't be long now and he needed to have a good position to see those on stage as well as be able to get out to the Northeast corridor quickly in order to continue to the

next stage of the plan. He calmly wove his way through the crowd, sat down, and waited.

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The interesting part to Sin about the security of the JKS was that they had a rather surprising amount of holes in the actual surveillance aspect of it. During his training they'd given him a lengthy tour of the surveillance room and he'd even been taught how to operate their system and how to switch between locations on it. It'd been rather easy to feign computer illiteracy and take longer than was really necessary to learn the ropes of it all so now he knew very specific things about the placement of every camera in the building. He also knew that the actual surveillance room was not monitored around the clock and according to the staff schedule for the event, there would coincidentally be no one actually watching the cameras at all in the later part of the evening.

The reasoning behind that was shady at best; they claimed that they needed all manpower on the floor. In translation, Sin supposed that meant that the director of the center and the Janus link had ordered that room to be left unoccupied so that regular civilian guards would not be aware of the activity occurring in the Northeast wing of the complex. This meant one of two things; A, he had complete range to move in and out of the blind spots in the system so that he could suitably disguise himself before heading up to the mezzanine and take his position without having to worry about anyone seeing the tapes of a masked shooter until later. Or B, that there were Janus agents occupying the security room for the time and that although he could continue on with his plan and could stay in the one blind spot of the mezzanine, it was entirely possible that his location would be found sooner after he began to take out the targets and that he would most likely have several people on his tail as he attempted to get out.

Sin glanced at his watch and then at the stage in the Grande Ballroom. Speeches were still going on as well as visual presentations and an introduction of a deceased video artist was next on the itinerary. He didn't know if it was a bad thing that

he was relieved to finally be leaving this event but he supposed it probably was. He'd never been fond of long-winded babbling and assassination was his forte.

He gave the room another once over before catching the eye of Pyanin, his supervisor for the evening. He strolled over to the man as casually as he could and stopped next to him at the rear exits. "I'm going to take my break."

Pyanin gave him an incredulous look. "You've been on for six hours and haven't taken it yet?" He demanded in quiet annoyance. "That's a meal violation, you know."

Sin shrugged, attempting to look apologetic and most likely failing. "I was paying attention to the speeches and I forgot. Sorry."

That earned him a skeptical eyebrow raised and Pyanin rolled his eyes. "If that's true, you're a crazy man. I've never been so bored in my life but then again I didn't expect this evening to be very action-packed."

*Just wait thirty more minutes and you'll get more action than you need,* Sin thought idly. "Should I take a forty-five to cover the fifteen I didn't take?"

Pyanin nodded. "Just clock back in after thirty."

Too bad the break room would most likely be in flames after thirty. "No problem."

Sin slipped out of the Ballroom and headed down the Southwest corridor towards the employee lounge and break room. Once in the break room he shrugged off his suit jacket, loosened his tie and left the jacket laying on the table before punching out and heading back out the door. Each wing had an exit that led to the large, diamond-shaped courtyard which sat in the middle of all four wings and he paused before the exit for a long moment. He knew there was a camera angled at the door and so he made a big production out of finding his cigarettes, popping one in his mouth and then flipping open his cell phone. Anyone watching would think that Jason Alvarez was simply going outside to the deserted courtyard for some quiet and an extended smoke break. By the time his thirty minutes were up, the complex would be rocked with explosions and it would be no surprise that he did not come back the same way in order to punch out. In

essence, his persona would at least be preserved assuming he did not somehow get apprehended later on.

He stepped out into the courtyard and lit his cigarette as he continued to mess with the cell phone. The reception in the area was off at times and once again, he made a show of raising the antenna and attempting to get a signal. After another moment, he shook his head in disgust for the benefit of the camera and paced back and forth a bit before finally moving into one of the courtyard's several blind spots. The surveillance was poorly planned and they relied on cameras which hovered at a limited view and swung back and forth between specific areas. None of the cameras had a far enough range to pick up anything beyond the pathways and so when he disappeared into the trees that stood against the buildings, he was completely out of its line of sight. He instantly dropped the cigarette and put away the cell phone before yanking off his tie and white dress shirt to reveal a black, fitted long-sleeved shirt beneath. He kicked the clothing into a bush and yanked a ski mask out of the shirt sleeve before slipping it on. He knew that depending on who was monitoring the surveillance room he would possibly be spotted sooner rather than later and even if he escaped notice at all, during his exit there would be places where he would not be able to avoid cameras. In order to continue to preserve his identity until they could flee the city, the ski mask was a necessary precaution to make their jobs easier later on. His form was barely distinguishable from the shadows against the walls as he moved to the northern part of the courtyard. At times he heard soft laughter drifting from the various benches that spread throughout the area but he paid it no heed. The area had perfectly manicured grass, draping trees and an assortment of different kinds of flowers which bloomed around a large fountain in the center; the idea of couples from the Expo going there for alone time was not exactly strange.

He continued to slip through the trees silently, staying just out of view of the cameras until he was finally at a stone staircase which led up to the second floor mezzanine of the Northeast building. There was a roving camera just above the staircase but he had an approximate window of fifteen seconds to get up the stairs and settled into the blind spot before it returned to its original location.

Sin hovered there for a moment, counting out the seconds and deciding on the perfect moment before finally jumping up and grabbing hold of the railing. The camera moved out of view and he pulled himself up effortlessly, jumping over the side silently and immediately sprinting down the short pathway until he was just within the archway of the mezzanine and behind one of the columns.

The mezzanine was like an indoor balcony of sorts, winding its way entirely around the complex, and part of it was situated above Theater 3. There were a number of archways and walls along the structure; the design was so complex that it left quite a number of spots that were completely unreachable by the interior surveillance cameras of the area. He used that to his advantage and ducked down beneath one of the low walls, crawling along the floor until he reached the spot where he'd hidden his rifle. The outer part of the mezzanine's walls were made of stone and not all of them were completely stable; it'd been easy to pry a number of them out and place the rifle inside the makeshift cavern that he'd created.

He slid into position beneath one of the walls and peeked over, using the scope of the rifle to see clearly down into Theater 3. Speeches were starting as far as he could tell but as he scanned the faces of each man on the stage, he realized that none of them were familiar. "Status?"

Boyd's voice came quietly after a moment. "None."

Sin's mouth turned down into a frown, eyebrows drawing together as he stared down into the hall beneath him. He didn't recognize the man giving the speech; it wasn't someone who'd been on their list even though he appeared to be the person in charge of the entire event. He didn't seem to be discussing anything pertinent at all, let alone the future plans of the organization as a whole.

It was just like Boyd had said; the entire thing seemed like an orientation for new inductees into the massive organization that was Janus. Nothing specific was said about the details of future plans and for the most part they seemed to be perpetuating the same idealistic propaganda that Sin had heard hundreds of times before.

The speech droned on regarding the state of world affairs, nothing that wasn't common knowledge to anyone underground, and all the different organizations who were moving against Janus at the moment. The man seemed to be rallying the troops before a battle; inciting them against the international 'bad guys' and reiterating the fact that every man in the room was extremely courageous for taking part in the fight against the fascist state that the super powers of the world had created. It was not unlike the speeches the American administration gave to soldiers who fought rebels and terrorists.

Nearly fifteen minutes passed before the man introduced a woman named Choral Smith, who in turn gave a brief summary of who else would be speaking that evening. She didn't name anyone that had been on their list of targets. "What the hell is this," He muttered, not really expecting a response.

Choral began discussing the expectations of every group who joined Janus. She said very firmly that once they became a cell they were no longer a part of the organization they had previously identified themselves with; they were part of something much larger in scale.

She emphasized loyalty, respect, dedication and many of the things she said seemed very similar to the things rookies were told at the Agency, including the fact that traitors would be punished quickly and, essentially, without a trial. Part of her tactic seemed to be attempting to frighten the people in the room, letting them be very aware of just how serious this all was and that it was anything but a game. Her dark brown eyes swept the room as she spoke, seeking signs of weakness or indecisiveness in the audience and Sin had no doubts that anyone who seemed weak, who seemed like they would not cut it, would be silenced before they could ever step foot outside of the convention center.

But despite the fact that this was an interesting way of seeing Janus in their true colors, it had nothing to do with the information that had been so heavily encrypted on that disc. "Something is wrong. This is wrong."

"Mm," Boyd agreed over the radio, barely a breath of a sound.

Sin shifted his position, impatience mixing with aggravation as he once again searched the room in vain for his targets. "I have no one to fucking shoot," he muttered softly. "There's something wrong," he repeated, not hiding the frustration that was building inside of him. He didn't understand this. He couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that they'd spent nearly a year preparing for something that wasn't going to happen. They'd spent months creating personas, plotting, and learning the city, all with the understanding that the grand finale would allow them to finally significantly damage much of the Janus powerhouse.

But that wasn't going to be the case. The leaders weren't there; no one in the inner core was there. Not even the leaders of lower tier rebel groups were there; it was a mixture of what appeared to be Janus administration and rebel flunkies.

Something inside of him twisted and he exhaled slowly. "The information was wrong," He said flatly. "Thierry was wrong." He sat up abruptly, still crouching in the shadows, and shoved the rifle back in the cavern of the wall. He had no use for it now; it could stay there since he didn't need any unnecessary baggage. "Fuck this. I say we proceed with stage 2." There was a long pause, as if Boyd was giving himself the chance to either get away from others or perhaps waiting for a moment when there was enough noise around him that any response would not be overheard. Finally, he said quietly, "Agreed."

"B12 first," Sin said softly. As Boyd had said weeks ago, an explosion in that area would compromise the entire structure of the Northeast wing and both connecting corridors. "7, 8, 6, 4, 5; five second intervals," He continued cryptically, naming the exits they'd previously discussed. The explosions would turn Theater 3 into an inescapable inferno until it completely collapsed in on itself as well as causing severe damage to both corridors. The plan was to destroy the Northeast exits, 7 and 8, which led out into the parking lot and then when they had both escaped out of their assigned exits in the Northeast and Southeast corridors, they would destroy those as well and hope the civilians had managed to escape after the first explosion. "Regroup at Calle Treinta and Amarilla unless otherwise stated."

He was already moving quickly, going back the way he'd come as he listened to the blur of background noise on Boyd's end and assumed that meant he was moving through the crowd. It would have been easy to exit through the Southwest wing but those exits led directly into a very public part of the boulevard, one that was especially populated at night and the exits at the Southeast and Northeast corridors offered the best routes to their designated meeting place. He moved through the courtyard the same way he'd done it the first time and entered door A; one of the entrances that led directly to the Southeast corridor from the courtyard. He stayed in the shadows of the nook the door opened into and slid his hand into his pocket, finger on the detonator. "Go."

"Roger," Boyd said after a moment and a lot of the sound had fallen away from the background on his end.

The explosion rocked the entire complex and even though it occurred in the very bowels of the structure, all of the wings and surrounding areas shook violently as if an earthquake had suddenly begun. He could hear screaming in the Southeast corridor, the sounds of running feet and shouting as loud crashes echoed up and down the long hallway. He closed his eyes briefly, counting it out, wondering if all service staff had managed to get out of the corridor before--

BOOM.

There went Exit 7.

BOOM.

And 8.

More screaming, this time coming from the direction of the Grande Ballroom and he assumed it was more due to panic than anything else. At this point all exits leading directly from the Northeast wing and Theater 3 to the outdoors were completely destroyed; all that was left was to block the exits leading into the corridors as well.

He sprinted into the Southeast corridor, not bothering to remove his mask as he dodged falling debris from the ceiling and jumped over fallen tables, serving trays and whatever else the serving staff had dropped in their rush to escape. By the time he was nearly to his appointed exit and the site of the last two bombs on his end, he heard the sixth exit go and knew that Boyd had completed his part. Sin continued to run, noticing that so far no one was spilling out of the Northeast wing which meant that they were either all injured, blocked off by debris, or dead. He was almost at the doors when he suddenly skidded to a stop.

The soft moan had caught his attention first and his eyes had automatically dropped to the source of the sound; Jessica lay sprawled on the floor. Two large ceiling panels had fallen on top of her and crushed her to the ground. Her face was covered in blood, hair matted with it and as smoke began to invade the corridor, as flames licked at the doors that led to the Northeast wing and whooshed inside like a wave, she didn't seem to be moving anytime soon. "Fucking shit," He swore loudly.

"What's wrong?" Boyd asked immediately over the radio. People could be heard screaming in the background on his end, asking what was happening, trying to figure out if anyone was hurt. Even if Boyd had been overheard, his question would have blended in with what everyone else was yelling.

"Jessica. She's badly injured." Sin stared down at her, finger trained on the detonator as he glanced at the door leading to the Northeast wing again. Still, no one appeared and the flames were growing stronger, waves of heat washing over him as the smoke made it unbearable to breathe. Without another moment's hesitation, he grabbed one of the panels and yanked it off her, tossing it to the side as he started on the other. She opened her eyes into slits and peered up at him, face a mask of pain, confusion and fear before she fell into unconsciousness once again.

"We don't have time for this shit," Boyd said testily. In the background, the faint sound of sirens could be heard. "Just fucking leave her, the cops are on their way."

Sin grit his teeth in annoyance and ignored Boyd, grunting as he shoved the other panel off her legs. The sheet of metal gave a loud, whining sound as it scraped against the floor but finally she was freed.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Boyd's voice rose. "Get out of there!"

"Just shut the hell up! I'm not going to detonate explosives that will fucking kill her!" He shouted angrily and hoisted Jessica's slender frame easily, throwing her over one shoulder as he turned back towards his appointed exits. By now he could hear people on the opposite side of the door, coughing and yelling, attempts to move debris and get into the corridor. He resumed his sprint in the direction of his exit, coughing violently as smoke swirled around him. "I'm taking her out of here," He snapped into the microphone.

"You fucking idiot," Boyd growled, and there was a pause as the sounds of people screaming grew fainter behind him and static started to grow on the radio. "Fuck it. I'm too far away now, I can't make it back. Switch to Plan B." He paused, then added coldly, "If this gets you caught you fucking deserve it."

Something in Sin twisted and for a moment all he could feel was anger; the kind of anger that completely consumed him and made him temporarily forget the heat of the flames because the fire spreading inside of him was so much hotter. He continued to run, noticing that the static on the microphone was getting louder and that Boyd really was leaving him and running completely out of range. Why couldn't he fucking understand that Sin couldn't just leave her to die? She was innocent. She was only there because of him; because he'd made her think he'd be around to see her later. Why couldn't Boyd just fucking get that? Why couldn't--

"Fuck you," He snapped into the microphone and before Boyd could respond, they were abruptly out of range and static completely filled his ear.

He ran out of the building and detonated the rest of the bombs. The explosions nearly knocked him off his feet and the flames burst out of all possible seams of the Northeast wing, illuminating the night sky. Surrounding trees were consumed by flames,

they looked like enormous candles as the leaves caught fire rapidly. There was the loud whining sound of the infrastructure giving way and loud resounding booms echoed around the quad as the ceiling started to cave. Smoke and waves of heat washed over the surrounding area and became so overpowering that he grew dizzy briefly; the combination of the heat and the smoke almost caused him to lose his footing.

But he didn't fall and he didn't let go of Jessica.

As the building behind him began to collapse to the ground, he disappeared into the darkness.

## Chapter 37

Boyd's legs cramped as he crouched in the darkness, his heart beating a little too fast although he kept his breath silent, even. The thump of footsteps on the steps shuddered dust down onto his hair, almost getting in his eyes. The footsteps were heavy, ponderous; he could tell it was a man and judging by the sounds when he kicked things over, he wore steel-toed boots. Boyd also thought he heard evidence of a shotgun; the way the gun was handled, the heaviness when it was set down, the rustling of the strap against clothing.

*"No nos haga daño, por favor, señor, por favor,"* a woman was moaning repeatedly, sounding as terrified as she was upset. Boyd knew her as María, currently crouched in the room at the top of the stairs. Even though Boyd was pressed into a crawl space in a wall, he could hear her clearly through the open door to her room upstairs. A child's voice drifted down as well; muffled sniffles and the occasional fearful cry.

*"Cállate,"* a man ordered languidly and Boyd could hear a few things being shoved over. There were two of them in the room, walking around slowly and overturning anything in their way.

*"No,"* María pleaded, tears in her voice. *"No nos mate, no nos dispare, por favor, somos inocentes, por favor..."*

Something crashed to the floor and she cried out, though it sounded more as though she was frightened by the noise than that she was actually hurt. The man made a disgusted noise, his footsteps pausing in one area for a long moment, before he said something rapidly in Spanish that Boyd couldn't understand through the floor. The door slammed shut and Boyd could hear him as he walked to the landing above him.

María made another loud, moaning wail that drifted into sobs. Boyd barely breathed as he heard two sets of footsteps descend the steps down toward him. The moment seemed to stretch alarmingly as the men paused near the hidden entrance to the crawl space.

He could hear the now-familiar sound of a cigarette being pulled out of a pack followed by a lighter flicking on a flame. The two men murmured something to each other but they were cut off by the insistent beeping of what sounded like a radio.

One of them made a noise of annoyance, there was the rustling of clothing as the radio was presumably pulled out, and the clicking of a button as he said louder, *"No está aquí."*

There was white noise and then someone over the radio said, *"Sigán con la búsqueda. El capitán cree que el sospechoso está en el área."*

*"¿Tenemos información más fiable?"*

There was a pause as the man on the other side of the line rattled off something too rapid to understand, his voice muffled as if he was speaking away from the radio. Boyd heard one of the men on the landing shift and make an impatient noise in the back of his throat. *"Llevamos varios días recorriendo esta área,"* he continued with clear irritation in his voice when the man on the radio was paying attention again. *"¿Sabemos si realmente está aquí?"*

*"No, pero las otras vecindades han investigado sin resultados."* The man on the other end paused and added pointedly, *"Sabemos que Independencia sería el mejor lugar para esconderse, pero de ninguna forma un gringo puede sobrevivir allí."*

Both men standing on the landing snorted derisively, one of them letting out a truncated and harsh laugh. *"Sin duda,"* the one holding the radio said.

*"Así que la prioridad es concentrarse en el Barrio Antiguo por ahora,"* the man on the radio continued almost offhandedly. There was a brief pause while the man spoke rapidly to someone on the other line, his words too muffled and accented for Boyd to catch, before his voice became clear as he spoke into the radio again.

*"Pues,"* the man on the radio said dismissively, *"dése prisa. Vayan a la siguiente casa y a la siguiente después de esa, si es necesario. El capitán quiere al sospechoso arrestado e interrogado antes del fin de semana."*

The man acknowledged the comment. Once the radio was turned off the men spoke back and forth rapidly, both clearly tired of the monotony of the search. Still, they didn't hesitate to follow orders and head to the next house. Boyd forced himself to stay still and count to five minutes even though his entire body thrummed with the need to get out of there. He didn't have much time. If the Federales were concentrating on this neighborhood, he likely only had a small window to escape notice and run to his next safe house. And with the directive to catch him and interrogate him by the weekend, time was even shorter.

Time seemed to drag. When he finally hit five minutes, he shifted and silently crawled forward, peering through the opening as best he could. He couldn't see anyone in the vicinity. The tension didn't quite leave his shoulders even then; he was quick as he grabbed his bag and crawled out of his hiding space. Dust clouded around him, catching on his hair and face. He was filthy; he'd been crawling through so many dirty areas that it coated him and he'd left almost all his clothing behind so he didn't have much to change into. His dark, plain clothes were made darker by days of grime and his hair was a mess. Although a few of the places he had stopped had running water and he'd briefly been able to clean up, it actually worked to his advantage to look like a vagrant.

He'd cut his hair shorter and dyed it dark brown. Once he stopped wearing the blue contacts, the dark, short hair and his natural brown eyes gave him a different look than anyone who knew him as Kadin Reed or even Boyd Beaulieu. Although when he'd left the JKS he had been certain he'd done his best to blend in, from what he'd been able to gather from newspaper headlines and the talk around the city, there had been a single witness to see him go and that had been enough to change everything.

From the sound of it, it seemed as though a woman who lived in one of the nearby apartment buildings had looked out the window when the explosions began. The police and authorities had questioned everyone in the building with windows facing the center and they'd come upon her. Although she'd mistakenly told them that the sole person she'd seen exiting the property had been the only person to escape safely from

that section of the building, the police had jumped on the information and deemed this lone survivor as a suspect.

And then the Federales were brought in.

Although they were actually correct about him being the suspect, it made Boyd's life much more difficult. Authorities were searching for any slender men of his height who was Caucasian, around seventeen to twenty-five, and had light-colored hair. Even though he'd dyed his hair, he'd noticed that as the search wore on, the Federales were snatching up any white man of his height and age off the streets. Rumors circulated that 'suspects' were being interrogated under harsh conditions and white foreigners without work or student visas were getting the brunt of the aggression as the government put on the heat for someone, anyone, to be found.

They wouldn't necessarily know who Boyd was or even care, but even though he had a passport stating that he was Kadin Reed, he'd been in Mexico under the pretense of an extended vacation so he didn't have a visa. The fact that he no longer looked like the picture in his passport would most likely add to the suspicion. The last thing he needed was to be captured and detained in Mexico, probably for a ridiculous amount of time until the Agency managed to somehow get him out of it.

And there was Janus.

It was harder to discern their methods but he had very little doubt that they were searching for both the culprits and any attendee of the Orientation who remained unaccounted for. He and Sin had placed the bombs to do maximum damage to Janus while minimizing the danger to any civilians. But there had still been a few Janus attendees who had escaped.

Janus had to be searching attendees with a fine-toothed comb. And when Kadin Reed showed up missing, not in a hospital, and not among the confirmed dead, he was likely to be investigated. Even if he tried to claim he was afraid and fled, he didn't know how far that would get him. Not to mention the possibility of Janus being connected to

the authorities. If that was the case, his position was more precarious than ever if law enforcement caught him.

He heard light, quick footsteps approaching. Jorge's familiar, messy head appeared around the corner, quickly glancing around the room to be certain no one else was there.

"Go," he ordered quietly upon entering the room. "They are gone."

"Thanks, Jorge," Boyd said softly, looking quickly past him to the hallway and listening intently for any sound. It wasn't that he distrusted Jorge; it was simply that he was on high alert. Jorge either did not notice or care and Boyd slipped a few bills out of his pocket, pressing them into Jorge's hand. "For María, tell her thank you. She sounded very convincing."

Jorge shrugged and said calmly, "She knows," but he pocketed the money anyway. He jerked his head impatiently. "Go. They can return."

Boyd slipped past Jorge, moving quickly to the back door of the house where he paused to listen for any movement on the other side. It was as silent out there as it was in the house now that María wasn't feigning terror, but he still waited a few seconds to be certain. He opened the door just enough to search the surroundings, then slid into the shadows outside and headed through the tiny space of green this area had behind the houses. He only looked back once, where he saw Jorge watching him silently from the doorway with his serious dark eyes.

Boyd had to move cautiously but quickly through the streets. The city was on a lock-down. All transportation to and from Monterrey was blocked and every official entrance and exit was heavily guarded by the authorities. No one was making it in or out of the city without being seen. Although Tayla had helped Boyd immensely by telling him of the secret passages into Monterrey, that only helped keep them out of the radar of the authorities. It didn't mean the underground groups claiming the passageways as their territory would appreciate anyone else using them, especially if they didn't know who he was. The security in the city had been worse right after they'd destroyed the

JKS but even now, nearing two weeks later, it would still be a challenge. Boyd was hoping that in three days' time when he and Sin were scheduled to meet, the secret exit he thought they would be least likely to be hassled trying to use would be a little less guarded than it had been when he'd walked past it four days prior.

He'd been doing well to stay under the radar but there was no doubt that even for him it was difficult. If he hadn't known people like Jorge, if he hadn't learned Monterrey so well, including a number of backup safe places for each area of the city, he almost positively would have been caught. The opposition was swarming everywhere.

He wound his way through the city, hiding his tracks to his next hiding place. He'd initially been going toward this safe place earlier when he'd almost stumbled upon a few Mexican authorities who were doing their rounds and had ducked into Jorge's.

The safe house on Sur loomed before him in the dark. This was one of the streets that had a dramatic drop of a hill on one side, and long stretches of space where either no one had bothered building a house or what had been built had long ago deteriorated. It should have taken less than ten minutes to get there but with the amount of presence on the streets, it took him almost three times as long.

Finally he saw his safe house.

Boyd hopped over a mound of broken wood and corrugated metal, his feet twisting at an angle to keep him upright as he partially slid down the hill. As he darted around the side toward the back door he lost his footing on loose dirt and tripped over an unexpected wooden beam. He nearly careened down the hill and had to snap a hand out to catch himself on one of the few rogue bushes. He stopped and stayed still for a moment, heart pounding so hard he could practically feel it in his throat, and looked around to see if anyone had heard the scraping and rustling.

There wasn't a sound so, after a heart-stopping moment, he crawled his way back up the hill.

Crouched and hidden by the shadows, he pulled out a small flashlight and waited a few seconds to listen for any movement. It was dark enough that no one would see him but that also meant he couldn't tell if anyone was watching him. And, poised as he was on a relatively bare hillside, any light he showed was liable to stand out more than just in his vicinity. After a moment he turned back and leaned down so he could see the bottom corner of the door. The flashlight was flicked on and off within the space of a breath and he was already out of the yard and onto a side street before he heard movement in what should have been his safe house. One of the tests he'd left behind, the small line he'd left at the back door, was broken and indicated that the building was no longer abandoned. He could no longer trust it to be secure.

He slipped through the shadows, his heart pounding every time he heard a noise or he thought he saw movement around him. It was torturous trying to head to his next location; it was nearly all the way across the city from here and required him to pass more than one busy thoroughfare, including both freeways on either side of the river. Walking in good conditions would have taken him nearly three hours, so he was forced to steal a small motorbike at one point and ride it as long as he dared. He had to squeeze between buildings and duck into carports more than once to avoid being seen by vehicles and law enforcement.

He was almost halfway to his destination when he heard the rumbling of an open-backed truck full of Federales rolling his way. He had no place to go with the motorbike and absolutely no time to be subtle. He was forced to drop the motorbike right on the side of the street and run to the nearest yard. He was only barely able to hop the concrete wall and duck out of view before a flashlight swept past his location.

The truck rolled to a stop next to the motorbike. Boyd heard them discussing how suspicious it was, thrown down like that, and he swore inwardly. He stayed crouched and silent as he wound through the tiny back yard and hopped the fence into the next door courtyard space. He was able to make it about halfway down the block that way before he ran out of back yards and ran straight up against buildings pressed against each other.

He could hear the Federales moving around down the street, presumably starting to check out the area. Cursing again under his breath, Boyd looked around for an escape route. He ended up having to climb to the top of the wall, risking being seen while he leaped to the metal railings on a second floor balcony and scrambled up. The lights were off inside the apartment and he felt adrenaline crash through him. He heard the Federales growing closer, starting to talk about fanning out to check the backyards, and he saw the sweep of a flashlight cross the ground a few buildings away.

*Shit*, he thought, and hoped like hell no one would wake up when he was forced to quickly jimmy open the window and duck inside. He landed silently in what looked to be a tiny apartment, in the ambiguous area that was the kitchen, living room and dining room combined. He heard soft snoring from the other side of a closed door and, wincing and watching that door like a hawk, he slowly but silently shut the window again. He didn't want to show the Federales exactly where he'd fled. Without waiting for the resident to wake after all, he darted across the apartment and quietly let himself out of the apartment. After that it was a quick navigation through the building down to the street, where he peered out the main door and, after determining the Federales weren't there, running out onto the street and as fast and far away as he could from his hunters.

After a few blocks he had to stop running to keep his footfalls from echoing in emptier streets. He wove in and out of shadows, trying to stay out of sight and away from anyone who could report him.

He'd just thought he may be safe, entering into neighborhoods where they were less likely to be looking for him, when in the middle of a skinny street the size of an alley back home he suddenly heard the thumping of many boots down the street ahead of him. He froze and turned, ready to run back the way he'd come, but he realized immediately that it hadn't just been echoes he'd heard-- there were people on that side too.

There was no time to think and he wasn't lucky enough this time to have an easy escape route. With no other choice, he dove to the side of the street, falling into an apparent drunkard sprawl at the base of some garbage bags under which he shoved his

messenger bag. Grabbing an almost empty glass bottle of tequila that was lying by him, he tipped the dregs of it onto his shirt and let his eyes seemingly fall shut although he watched the street through his eyelashes. He fell back against the garbage pile, the bottle held in his loosely curled hand at his side, and left his mouth open as if he were asleep. He was just able to even his breath when he heard the police passing by. Conversations in Spanish echoed from the troop of police. Although it was mostly too muffled for him to understand, he knew they were talking about something serious.

Flashlights were shone down the side streets and he knew they found him when the light passed over his prone body, moved up to see his skin color, and stopped. One man broke away from the others and headed down the alley, followed after a moment by a second. The first man shone his flashlight along the ground until a beam fell directly on Boyd's eyes.

*"Levántese,"* he barked, gesturing with his shotgun for Boyd to stand.

Boyd ignored him at first. The other cop glanced at the first, paused, and then moved forward. He kicked Boyd roughly in the side. Boyd jerked as if he'd just been woken and peered at them bleary-eyed. He saw the shotgun aimed at him and the uniforms they wore, and dragged his eyebrows down in seemingly bewildered confusion.

When he didn't move, the first officer's eyes narrowed and he nudged him with the shotgun. The barrel dug into his ribs.

*"Muévase,"* he commanded.

Boyd grimaced and made a big production out of just managing to sit up straight. *"Cómo?"* he asked blearily.

The second cop stood to the side, glancing out at the street as a few more officers strode by. Looking back at Boyd, his lip lifted when he saw the empty bottle still clutched in his hand. *"Pinche borracho,"* he spat. He jerked his head toward the street. *"Vámonos-- esto es inútil."*

The first cop shook his head, the shotgun still aimed steadily at Boyd as he scrutinized him. *"No huele."*

Making a face, the other man just shook his head and gestured to the garbage. *"¡Chale, Javier! Él huele a basura y meada."* He paused and added with impatient derision, *"Al igual que todos los otros vagabundos de la ciudad."*

*"Alcohol, idiota. No parece que haya bebido lo suficiente como para desmayarse en un callejón sucio,"* Javier, the first cop, said. Boyd thought darkly that it was just his luck he managed to run into one of the few people who would be that dedicated to the job at this hour. His partner was dismissing Boyd as a drunk and a vagrant but Javier just had to notice that Boyd didn't smell enough of alcohol.

*"Muévase,"* Javier commanded again.

This time Boyd scraped the bottle against the ground as he grumbled about being woken up and stumbled to a stand, using the wall for support.

*"Soy inocente,"* Boyd slurred, continuing to emphasize the impression of him being nothing more than a drunkard. *"Bebiendo. Ningún crimen."*

The second cop gave him a disgusted look then turned to Javier. *"Tenemos mejores cosas que hacer que perder el tiempo con este cabrón,"* he said impatiently. He gestured emphatically to the west. *"Los otros están a punto de hacer la redada de drogas en la casa de Juárez. ¿En serio quieres perdértelo por este pedazo de mierda?"* he asked incredulously, jerking a rude gesture toward Boyd. He scowled at Javier and straightened, crossing his arms. *"La cárcel está llena. Sería un coñazo hacer el papeleo a estas horas de la noche. No vale la pena. Vámonos."*

Javier narrowed his eyes into a glare and didn't seem convinced. Boyd wished he would just listen to his partner and dismiss him already. He swayed on his feet to look the part of a drunkard, although it wasn't entirely feigned. He really was exhausted and he needed to get to the next house before staying up for too many hours and eating too little food caught up to him.

The muzzle of the gun pressed beneath his jaw, forcing Boyd to tilt his head back. Javier nodded toward his partner, who looked annoyed but turned his flashlight onto Boyd's face so they could see him better. Boyd squinted, the light blinding him while the familiar smell of gunpowder and metal drifted around him.

*"Enséñeme su identificación,"* Javier ordered.

Boyd blinked at him and gave him a look as if he didn't understand.

*"Identificación,"* the officer said again, sounding as though he was getting angry. *"Baje la maldita botella. ¿Dónde están sus papeles?"*

Frowning in a slow, confused manner, Boyd shook his head slowly. He didn't have proper identification to show that wouldn't alert Janus to his whereabouts immediately so he lied. *"En mi casa,"* he said finally. *"Mi novia..."*

*"Claro que sí,"* Javier drawled as if he'd heard it all before and didn't believe it the first time. *"Y si llamamos no va estar allí"* He kept the gun aimed at him but stepped back. His chin jerked toward his partner and then at Boyd. *"Diego. Regístralo."*

*"Este es el quinto hombre que he registrado esta noche,"* the second man, Diego, said in irritation. *"¿En serio crees que el que puso la bomba va a estar borracho en la calle?"*

Javier just gave his partner a look to which Diego sighed heavily and grumbled under his breath, *"¡Qué chinga!"*, as if this was the last thing he wanted to do. He flipped the flashlight off.

Boyd blinked in the sudden darkness. Dark purple afterimage burned into his eyes and hovered everywhere he looked.

He was roughly pushed back a step, causing him to almost fall over the garbage heap. The officer yanked the bottle out of his hand, throwing it carelessly to the side. The crash of glass against the ground was loud in the night and although Boyd didn't look away from Javier, he made sure he remembered where it sounded like the bottle

had landed. He could use the shards as a weapon if it came to that, but he was still hoping he could get away without a fight. If he took these officers out, he'd have the authorities looking specifically for him. Especially with his recent brush of escaping the Federales, he had no doubt half the city's law enforcement would converge on him in minutes.

Diego made a face at the stench of garbage and the dirt and sweat that clung to Boyd before he began patting him down. Boyd rocked with the movement, bracing one hand against the wall at one point as the officer, in his apparent need to get this over with as quickly as possible, pushed him around harder than was necessary.

"*Nada*," Diego said finally with a shake of his head. He stepped back with his hands up as if he didn't want to touch anything else for fear of contaminating it.

Javier raised his eyebrows, the shotgun still trained on Boyd. "*La ciudad está bloqueada*," he said pointedly. "*Es ilegal que se haya ido sin sus credenciales. Usted debe saber que - todos el mundo debería.*" His eyes narrowed and his lips thinned. "*¿Qué estás haciendo borracho en la calle por la noche?*" His tone turned sharper with suspicion as he jerked the gun toward Boyd. "*Si usted tiene una casa y una novia, ¿por qué no está allí ahora mismo?*"

Shaking his head as if he didn't understand, Boyd stalled.

Javier was asking too many questions-- challenging his story about an alleged girlfriend and why he wasn't home with her. He could come up with answers, of course, but it wasn't going to change anything. Javier didn't trust him and no amount of bullshit answers Boyd threw his way was going to change that. Even if Diego was convinced Boyd was a waste of their time, even though Javier himself hadn't yet fixated on the idea of Boyd being the bomber, it was only a matter of time before he decided Boyd must be due to his inability to provide any concrete evidence of who he was or what he was doing there.

Adrenaline started to tingle through his body as he realized he was probably going to have to run for it. Javier seemed like he wasn't ready to give up on this and

Boyd couldn't risk being taken into the department. His mind worked quickly. If he dropped to the ground and swept Javier's legs from under him, even if the shotgun went off it would most likely be at an upward angle. Then he just had to steal the gun and get whichever of them was a threat first before turning to the other. If he ran fast enough and stole a car or another bike, maybe he could even get away before the other officers and the Federales were on him. He didn't have a safe house close enough to this location to protect him so he may have to break into a house and, worst case scenario, hold the people hostage until he could find a way to escape.

But if he did that, they would know it was him.

*Shit*, he thought darkly even as he shifted his weight. It was a bad plan but he didn't have a choice.

Javier nodded his head toward Diego, who sighed in annoyance but still reached for his handcuffs. Boyd started to tense but before anything could happen, the officers' radios blared to life.

Boyd could hear shooting in the background and what sounded to be chaos with people yelling in fear and anger.

*"--disparos en la casa--"*

*"¿Dónde?"*

*"--Chilpancingo--"*

*"--seis sospechosos--"*

*"--mos con un sospechoso de un robo--"*

*"¡Me importa una mierda! García está muerto--"*

*"¡Hijo de puta! ¿Ahora mismo?"*

*"--necesitamos refuerzos cuanto antes--"*

In the cacophony of voices, Boyd caught that a cop had been killed in a gunfight. He could already see several officers running down the street in the direction the two officers had initially been headed.

Diego grabbed the radio instead of the handcuffs and yelled, "*Estamos yendo.*" He gave the Javier a furious look. "*Maldita sea-- ¡Suéltalo, Javier!*" he snapped before he turned and ran.

The shotgun stayed aimed at Boyd for a stretched second before Javier finally relented. He gave Boyd a warning glare then turned and sprinted toward the action.

Boyd waited just long enough for them to move to the main street and out of his sight before he quickly snatched his bag from beneath the garbage and took off running into the shadows. It took quite a bit of maneuvering to get around the officers without being seen; most of them were intent on whatever was happening several streets away, but he didn't want to risk getting caught. He could hear the resounding echoes of gunfire.

It took him another hour to make it safely to the next location. He was really hoping this one wasn't compromised as well; he was about to fall over and didn't think he'd be able to risk the extra forty minutes it would probably take to get to the next place.

The apartment building on Nueva Amsterdam looked safe enough as he approached but he still checked the perimeter. He jogged up the steps, heading to the third floor. There were several apartments but he didn't hear anyone in any of them.

When he'd found the place a few months ago there had only been a few squatters living there, mostly on the first and second floor, and it didn't seem to have changed since then. He made it to the designated unit and to his relief saw that all his tests were still intact. He picked the lock and was cautious but quick when he entered.

The apartment was tiny; the main room had a single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling that had barely worked when he'd been there before, a stove and sink to the

side, and there was a small bathroom with the door wide open the way he'd left it. There was no running water and the only electricity came from someone who'd tapped into a neighboring building's supply.

The only furniture was a mattress lying in the corner and a heavy table that he had moved to mostly block the front door before he'd left. It barely gave him enough space to slide into the room, but it also meant that once he shut and deadbolt locked the door behind him, it required little effort and virtually no noise to move the table flush against the door as further precaution.

That left his only escape through the window in case of an emergency. Unfortunately that involved a three story drop to cement.

At the moment, though, he didn't care; he would plan an escape when it came. What he really needed was sleep. The curtains were heavy and closed so he couldn't be seen as he wearily walked across the room and dropped heavily onto the mattress. It was lumpy and musty but after days of adrenaline highs, running around constantly being on the alert, and not being able to sleep for more than a few hours at a time, it was enough to make him fall asleep within minutes.

Even asleep he was on high alert and even the slightest of sounds continually woke him. He'd just managed to find some manner of sleep when a rattle at the window made his eyes shoot open and heart jolt. He threw himself out of bed, his mind racing with how to get out of there, where to go next, and what was happening. He peered around the edges of the curtain on the windows until he could verify that it had only been a gust of wind that shook the pane.

It was lighter outside, the dawning of the eleventh day since the attack at JKS and three days until the meeting with Sin. He sighed, rubbing his burning eyes, and returned to the mattress. He sat there a moment, his legs drawn up loosely in front of him while he rested his arms on his knees, and stared blankly into space.

He was exhausted. He hadn't slept or eaten properly for almost two weeks. It shouldn't have been so tiring but he felt like he hadn't had a chance to relax since

before he'd left the studio the last time, before he'd had to check in at the hotel as Kadin Reed. After months of relatively low stress, this constant hyper-awareness, the adrenaline that kicked in each time something happened, as well as the constant running and stopping was all wearying.

And the worst part was it hadn't needed to happen this way.

Boyd's gaze slid over to his messenger bag, abandoned at the edge of the mattress where he'd blindly dropped it earlier. After a moment, he leaned forward and pulled the bag closer. Everything inside would seem fairly innocuous to a casual search but there were still some essential items he needed to protect.

He pulled out his cell phone and stared at it a moment before he sighed and flopped back on the mattress. He held the phone in front of his eyes before his gaze dropped to the wristwatch that doubled as a GPS monitor.

All the running around made him wonder how Sin was doing.

The first few days, he'd been angry for a number of reasons and although the feeling hadn't left entirely, the intensity of it had faded.

He was angry that they'd spent so many months preparing for something that hadn't been what they'd expected. Thierry had lied or the information was bad. Everything they had gone through for that information, the months of Jeffrey decrypting it, the discord between he and Sin, his valentine status, his mother's disgust, Alexis' death, his hopelessness-- at least it had all had some purpose as long as they were able to fulfill their mission. As long as they could take out a large part of Janus' organization.

But they hadn't. It turned out Thierry had lied more than to get Boyd in his bed and now everything was fucked up. Even if they'd had to go forward with the bombs to salvage the mission somehow, Boyd couldn't help feeling affected by knowing that people he'd been in the company of for three days were all dead now. People he'd had conversations with and had played games with and had talked to for hours...It was a

little disturbing. Although he knew he and Sin were doing their job, just as the messengers were doing theirs, and even a small delay in adding to Janus' power was helpful in the short run, there was still a sense of uneasiness that lingered within him.

And then there was Jessica. Much of his ire centered around her and Sin. She always had to show up at inconvenient times and get in the way. She always had to distract Sin. They'd already had too many problems with the mission but at least after they'd proceeded with the plan, they could have hidden together. All of these days of little-to-no sleep wouldn't have existed; they could have taken turns on lookout if it was necessary and could have watched each other's back.

But Sin had felt it necessary to stop for Jessica and put everything off track. Law enforcement had been closing in and it would have cut it too close for Boyd to return undetected by the time Sin found that idiot woman. To make it worse, she probably would have been fine. Emergency responders were on the way. And if she was too stupid to run to an exit in the middle of an attack then maybe survival of the fittest should have come into play anyway.

Everyone else had to die; why did Jessica get to be the exception to the rule? Why was she so important to compromise everything? What if Boyd had gotten killed trying to return so they could unnecessarily save that woman-- would that have been an acceptable loss for Sin so he could have his precious boss back?

Resentment flooded him, making his hand tighten on his phone.

He wondered if while he was running around, filthy and exhausted, Sin was staying with Jessica and using her as a cover. Sin could leisurely stay there for two weeks while they fucked as much as they wanted and all the research Boyd had done on where to hide in Monterrey and all the time he took to explain it to Sin would be for nothing. Just like all the work with Thierry ended up being for nothing. And now, because of that one woman's presence, they lost contact with each other. It was aggravating. They'd agreed upon radio silence during that time period to minimize the chance of being caught. With little access to places for recharging batteries, he'd been

alternating having his phone off and on and hadn't bothered checking the GPS function on the watch. It was time to turn his phone on again so he did so, feeling it vibrate in his hand to signal it was on.

He flipped the phone closed, keeping it in his hand as he dropped his arm back onto the mattress. He stared at the ceiling, too tired to want to move but knowing he couldn't go back to sleep, and tried to decide how long he could stay at the apartment. He fell in and out of a restless doze while he worked on formulating plan B.

He was half asleep when he suddenly felt his hand shake.

His eyes snapped open and he brought the cell up so he could see it. The phone vibrated to signal a call but he didn't recognize the number displayed on the screen. He hesitated. No one should know the number except Sin and very few people from the Agency. That definitely wasn't Sin's cell number on the screen, but then again that didn't mean Sin couldn't be calling from another phone. Or it could be a trap. He ran through a few options in his head quickly but ultimately decided that if this was some sort of trap from Janus or the Mexican authorities, he could turn off the phone and flee the apartment before they could pinpoint him.

Pushing himself up and bringing his bag closer so he could grab it quickly to run if he needed to, he narrowed his eyes and flipped the phone open. He didn't say anything; just waited to see what the person on the other line would do.

There was a pause. Nothing could be heard in the background other than a faint whirring sound that was hard to distinguish. After a while a man's voice could be heard asking, "Is Mr. Grey available?"

Boyd didn't recognize the voice but that was definitely Agency code. "Yes, this is Terrence speaking."

There was another pause before the man spoke again. "Is your position secure, Agent?"

"Yes."

"Then perhaps you can explain why Agent Vega is deceased."

The question was so unexpected that Boyd blinked, thinking he couldn't have heard that correctly. There was a pause as he ran the sentence over in his mind again, but it was still the same words and still didn't make any sense. "What...?"

"Deceased, Agent. As in dead. No longer with us. Departed from this Earth. How did he come to be that way?" The voice was calm, flat, and although it did not seem like the man was necessarily trying to be cruel it did seem like he was running low on patience.

"He's not-- What?" Boyd said again, feeling a mixture of anxiety and irritation build. He didn't know who the hell this person was but they weren't making any sense. Sin wasn't dead; Boyd had just seen him the other week and there was no way he didn't make it out of the building alright. Sin would probably survive the apocalypse. "We aren't supposed to meet for three days."

"I see." A pause. "As of November 12th at approximately 0300 the chip in Agent Vega's throat, the one which monitored his vitals, flat-lined before it stopped responding entirely," the man said in a matter-of-fact tone.

The words moved through Boyd's mind as he stared at empty space. That would have been three in the morning, several hours after the explosions. How could that be? If Sin had escaped, he should have been fine. Unless he was hurt in the explosion? But Sin was the one pressing the detonator; he never would have hit the button while he was still in harm's way. Even with Jessica, Sin should have been able to escape notice. The entire situation made no sense. This couldn't be right.

Not knowing what to say, he stayed silent.

The man continued in the same tone after a brief pause, "A team has been dispatched to search Agent Vega's last known position as well as to recover you, Agent. We have your coordinates and should arrive in approximately five hours. It would be in your best interest to remain where you are until that time."

The connection ended abruptly.

The room seemed entirely too silent and it took Boyd several seconds to even think to drop his hand into his lap. He stared at the cell phone as if it would make any of this be more understandable. The part of him that was not struck dumb by the call absently noted that he still had a few bars left on the battery and that it should last long enough until the team arrived. The team. At least that meant he was being recovered. He had a way out of Monterrey...

Flat-lined? The words echoed in his mind, interrupting any other flow of thought; *flat-lined, stopped responding, dead.*

The very concept seemed so impossible that he couldn't comprehend it. Maybe their equipment failed. Sin could have gone somewhere that the GPS couldn't track him. He probably went very deep underground, or... But there wasn't a place like that in Monterrey, Boyd knew that, he'd been all over... But he could have missed something.

He held the phone in front of him, his thumb resting on the numbers, and for a moment he almost called Sin's cell phone just to clear this up quickly. He could call and Sin would answer, pissed that he'd left him at JKS like that. And Boyd would say of course he did, Sin was being stupid...

He drew in a slow breath that somehow was a little shaky and let it out, staring at his thumb. It would be so easy. Just a few numbers...

But the man who called him would also have Sin's phone number. Surely they had checked that first. Maybe Sin just lost the phone. He couldn't be bothered to have so much shit with him all the time, right? He may not have thought to have a bag like Boyd did. It was entirely possible it had fallen out at the convention center, maybe even when he was helping Jessica. Or else someone found him. Someone took his cell phone away and...

Boyd flipped his phone shut suddenly and dropped it to the mattress next to him, turning his attention to his wristwatch. He stared at it for a long moment, his fingers

hovering near the button on the side to activate the GPS, to let him track the earring he'd given Sin as a precaution. But he stopped himself.

Five hours. The battery would last around twelve. If Sin was... If he was...

Boyd narrowed his eyes, staring intently at his watch. If Sin was... not moving for some reason then he would be wasting the battery. He just had to wait a few hours and then he could show the man who called him that he was being an idiot. They could go straight to Sin, find him just hanging around somewhere, and they could all go back a few days early. It was fine like this. It meant they were able to go home.

Home. As if it was a friendly place for Sin, who preferred it here. As if they wouldn't just start using him again for anything they wanted and if Sin really was hurt would they try to make him work immediately? What if... What if he'd lost a lot of blood? What if shrapnel had hit him as he ran and because he had Jessica with him he couldn't get away?

But Sin was strong. He could throw Boyd around easily. Sin had carried Warren and Boyd out of a building filled with rebels, had killed dozens of people even with them slung over his shoulders like dead weight. He'd run into a building filled with people shooting straight at them and he'd protected Boyd as well as himself. Sin would be fine; he always was. These people didn't know who the hell they were talking about.

But if what the man said was true-- If Sin really was in trouble, if he was hurt that much, if he'd... Boyd crossed his arms at his stomach and stared intently at the floor.

The last thing Boyd had told him was that he deserved it if he got caught.

Ever since they'd at least started treating each other as partners, Sin had always come for him. Even when they'd been angry with each other, he'd saved Boyd. And what had Boyd done in return?

Sin had told him so much over the past months he'd never told anyone else. He even slept around Boyd-- something he'd hardly done back home, as Boyd had seen

when watching the live feed. In their studio he'd been relaxed even with Boyd right next to him.

Because he trusted him.

Sin trusted him and Boyd had left him at JKS. It didn't matter that Sin had made a tactical error by going after Jessica or that it could have compromised Boyd's safety for him to return. Sin was his partner and he should have been there to help him. No matter what the truth ended up being-- he still couldn't deny that he had abandoned Sin.

There was a long moment of silence even in his mind; a stillness that came from the acknowledgment that he'd run when he had the chance to help someone he cared about. He'd let his anger and jealousy dictate his decision and then justified it with logic, but that didn't change the facts. After years of regretting standing there watching his best friend be murdered and doing nothing about it, was it any better to have run away like a fucking coward when someone else he cared about as strongly needed his help?

He felt sick.

He laid back down on the mattress but he knew he wouldn't sleep. His body was tense and his mind raced, alternating between all the reasons the man had to be lying or misinformed by faulty equipment and worrying with a sickening knot in his stomach that the man had sounded so certain...

Time stretched, the seconds going agonizingly slowly. He couldn't help wishing at once that the team would get there faster so they could find Sin, and wishing they never got there at all.

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It was almost exactly five hours later when Boyd heard a knock on the door. The short, staccato rap somehow fit the personality of the man he'd heard on the phone. He silently approached the door, being certain to stay to the sides for further protection in case anyone shot through it. He had already moved the table aside in anticipation of their arrival. There was a crack on the side of the door that worked more or less like an

eye-hole and Boyd used that to look out into the hallway. He counted five people standing in the hall; they wore civilian clothing but each of them had at least one large duffel bag that Boyd recognized from the Agency.

Even so, he enacted the Agency protocol for this type of situation. "Who are you looking for?"

"Terrence Grey," came the short reply.

Boyd flipped on the light and opened the door, stepping to the side so they could enter.

The five agents filed into the room and subsequently spread out as if they were checking it for strengths, weaknesses and overall security. No one spoke at first or even so much as glanced at Boyd as they continued to search the room. Only when the tallest man locked the door did anyone actually focus on him. The tall man appeared to be in his early thirties and around 6'2". His fit, muscular build was well defined by the thin t-shirt he wore. He had dark blond hair that he wore short in military style and blue eyes that seemed to peer straight into Boyd's soul and didn't care for what he saw.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Agent Beaulieu," the man said calmly although it seemed to be more of a formality than anything else. Boyd recognized his voice from the phone. "I've heard much about you although I've never been able to officially make your acquaintance."

Boyd looked at the other four briefly before settling his attention on the man. "It's a pleasure to meet you as well, but you'll have to excuse me if I'm not certain who you are."

The man nodded and let his duffel bag drop the floor at his boots. "I'm Senior Agent Kassian Trovosky and this is my team."

Boyd kept his expression impassive, hiding the surprise he felt at the knowledge. Kassian? Somehow he'd expected him to look different. He supposed it made sense to

send the other rank 10 in for something related to Sin, but it seemed strange. He thought Kassian was on an extended undercover mission.

He glanced at the others quickly, silently wondering who they were.

Kassian nodded towards the other people in the room although he continued to watch Boyd. "The two gentlemen to your left are Rank 9 Field Agents Casey Archer and Jonathan Jones." Both men were Caucasian although Casey had light hair and was muscular while Jones was dark haired and had a leaner, more average build. Kassian gestured towards the only female in the room; a tall, athletic-looking black woman who had the striking features of a model even if her expression was anything but pleasant.

"The lady is Rank 9 Field Agent Harriet Stevens and the gentleman to your right is Rank 9 Field Agent Michael Alvarado." The last man was the shortest in the room and appeared to be the youngest. He was thin and seemed to be Latino. "In cases like this, I'm allowed to hand pick a team to accompany me. We've all worked together on high priority missions for years."

"I see," Boyd said after a moment. He tried to be polite and respectful considering these were his superiors but he was finding it difficult to reconcile his worry for Sin with the casual, albeit professional, way everyone else was acting. He felt like they should be more urgent.

"Thank you for the introductions. I'm assuming none are needed for me."

"No, we know all about you, Agent Beaulieu," Harriet said coolly, brown eyes trained on him critically. Kassian's gaze snapped to her and his eyes narrowed slightly. She caught the stare and said nothing more, although her expression didn't change.

"Before we go any further it is imperative that you give us any pertinent information to the assignment that you and Agent Vega were on. I am not here to debrief you as I do not have the specifics of the assignment, however it is imperative that we know precisely when and how you became separated before we continue." Kassian stared at him expectantly.

Boyd nodded and answered in the typical matter-of-fact manner he used when explaining missions. "Agent Vega and I were in the JKS Convention Center on November 11th on an assassination detail. We planned to destroy a wing of the convention according to plan. I escaped but Agent Vega noticed an injured civilian on his way out. I instructed him to leave but he stopped to help her. Law enforcement was in the area and I wasn't able to return to aid him without risking capture. We had agreed that if we didn't connect immediately then we would meet two weeks later at a predetermined spot. During that time, we were to observe radio silence except in the case of emergencies. I never heard from Agent Vega and we were not supposed to meet for another three days."

"So much for not being debriefed," Harriet murmured quietly.

Michael rolled his eyes at her. "Shut up, Harry."

"My name is Harriet," she corrected, giving him a flat look.

"Like I said. Harry." Michael grinned at her cheekily and it was obvious that they'd had this exchange more than once before.

"Enough already," Kassian snapped, looking at the both of them impatiently before his gaze slid back to Boyd.

Boyd kept his gaze trained on Kassian, not giving away anything in his expression. He didn't know why Harriet obviously didn't like him but it wasn't helping. He was outnumbered five to one, they all had a history with each other, and a lot more experience. He just wanted to know why they were so convinced Sin was dead, then find him and make sure he was okay.

He stayed silent and ignored her comment.

After a moment, Kassian nodded shortly. "Since it appears that you have no idea as to how Agent Vega was killed or when it happened, I will tell you what we do know." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Shortly after 0200 hours, the tracker reported that Vega's vitals were quite erratic. The device does not tell more than his current heart

rate but it seems as though he was experiencing some sort of trauma before he subsequently flat-lined at approximately 0309. The plan is to search his last known position for signs of Janus perpetrators in case it is one of their bases. It has been assumed that it is they who are responsible for his death, although that has obviously not been confirmed as of yet."

It was years of practice that kept Boyd's expression from not so much as twitching at the words. Kassian spoke of it so casually, as if Sin really was dead. Boyd considered the information for a moment before he asked, "Is it possible the equipment malfunctioned or it came back as a false flat-line?"

Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd and the look on his face was almost disapproving. "Unless we are all suddenly believing that coincidences are the most likely solution to any situation, that is difficult to accept. I find it improbable that after nearly an hour of an increasingly unsteady heartbeat, the device just happened to flat-line because of malfunction before it was destroyed. And yes, the assumption as of now is that it was destroyed most likely in the same manner in which he was killed. A possible gunshot to that area of his neck or any other number of scenarios."

"Understood," Boyd said calmly. He kept a neutral stare on Kassian despite the alarmed increase of his heart rate. The mental image that automatically came to mind of Sin being shot in the neck and discarded made him feel sick. This was surreal. He wondered distantly if maybe this was all an extended fever dream. Or maybe Sin had tried to flee the Agency and had found a way to remove the GPS. Maybe he hadn't had the chance to contact Boyd to tell him he was okay. But an increasingly unsteady heartbeat..? It could have been the surgery. That was probably all it was. Surgery.

While Boyd's mind reeled, Kassian was talking in the background. Boyd made himself focus on what the man was saying.

"We are to infiltrate the location with the utmost caution. My methods are very different from what you were used to when you were with Agent Vega and I suggest that you accept that now. I do not run into a base wildly shooting and killing as many as I

can; I respect the lives of others, especially the people on my team, and I do not do anything that would endanger them."

Kassian nodded at the other four people in the team and they began unzipping their bags and removing gear as he started to do the same. "It is also important for you to take into consideration that you are not officially a part of this team." He pulled a black, plated vest out of his bag and tugged it on, eyes never leaving Boyd's. "For now you are no more than our charge. Part of our mission here was to retrieve you and that is what we have done. Although you will accompany us to the base, any action that you take which goes against my command will be dealt with swiftly and you will be handled appropriately from then on."

"Which means keep your mouth shut and do what the boss says. Got it?" Michael asked with a smirk and tossed a bulletproof vest to Boyd.

Boyd automatically caught the vest and put it on without saying anything. He was glad he'd at least been told of the mission but he didn't want to just tag along. He wanted to contribute. And if the Agency had been monitoring all that, why the hell hadn't they alerted him immediately so he could have gone and helped Sin?

Casey put on his gear with expert efficiency while he watched the exits as if enemies were about to burst through and attack. "Just follow our lead and you won't get in the way," he told Boyd seriously, glancing at him only briefly before he looked away again. "Stay in the back and don't fuck it up."

Boyd looked at him steadily, not bothering to answer. It wasn't like he'd never been on a mission before. He may not be from this team and he may not have been a rank 9 as long as they had, but they didn't have to act like he was an idiot.

He felt someone watching him and he looked over at Jonathan, noticing that the agent was studying him with a quiet intensity. He didn't seem disapproving like Harriet; he just seemed curious. Boyd met his eyes blankly for a moment before he turned his attention back to Kassian, ignoring the others. "We have little to no information about the building he was in but we do know its location and that it is on the edge of the

industrial district, near the waterfront." Kassian finished strapping weapons and ammunition to himself and nodded approvingly when he saw that the rest of his team had also finished. No one gave Boyd a weapon or seemed intent on doing so. "It's entirely possible that we will find nothing there but a corpse and if that is the case, I want to be perfectly clear as of now that our orders are explicit in this regard and we are not to recover it."

"What?" Boyd asked before he could stop himself, looking at Kassian in surprise.

They weren't even intending to bring him back, to give him a decent burial? If Sin really had died in the line of duty, he didn't even get a fucking tombstone or anything? Did they seriously intend to just leave him there to rot in Monterrey, like garbage they didn't feel like hauling home? The thought angered Boyd as much as it sickened him.

He knew right then that they could punish him all they wanted but if he really did find just Sin's corpse-- God, he desperately hoped that wasn't the case, that despite all appearances Sin was still okay-- he wasn't about to just leave him there and walk away.

Kassian's eyes flicked away for a moment and just then it seemed that he was almost uncomfortable with what he was saying. Considering the things Sin had said about the man, about his moral code, and by Kassian's own comment about how much he valued life, it wasn't exactly a surprise that he didn't seem thrilled with this aspect of the assignment.

"It isn't my choice but it is what we were ordered to do," he said quietly. "If we were to disobey orders and retrieve it, it is extremely doubtful that it would be handled any differently than the other bodies that are constantly incinerated on the compound." He looked at Boyd again, face once again neutral. "So you see, there is no point in going against the decision. It would be a fruitless effort and if we find that you become difficult or irrational if this time comes, you will be detained accordingly. Remember, our orders are also to bring you back."

Boyd stared at Kassian for a moment before he spoke, his voice decidedly neutral but just a hint cold. "Understood."

If they did find Sin's body he would have to find a way to get away long enough to contact Jorge and arrange a decent burial for Sin. But it wouldn't come to that. He didn't need to worry about funerals, they just needed to worry about hospitals. Sin would be okay. He had to be.

"Good." Kassian picked up his bag and gave the room a final once over. "Then let's move out."

They trooped down the stairs in just as efficient a manner as they'd entered the room; not moving until they were positive that every nook and cranny of the building was secure. They didn't seem concerned with the authorities or drawing notice and at first it puzzled Boyd, even more so when he began to wonder exactly how they'd entered the city in the first place with as many weapons as they had. However, he didn't have to dwell on it long; once everyone was situated in the team's van, he received an explanation without having to ask.

Kassian glanced at him in the rearview mirror as he began to drive. "I suppose you're wondering how we entered the country and city when it is under such heavy lockdown," he began in an almost conversational tone. "It was fairly simple and uneventful, as we were prepared in advance and had suitable cover stories and identification to placate the border patrols. We took a plane to the Mexican border before driving to Monterrey."

"Our cover is that we're pretty much bad ass bounty hunters from the States, looking for a specific criminal in the city," Michael interjected. "Mostly American bounty hunters get in trouble for coming into Mexico with that shit but it's easy to pay off the right people and Johnson's has more than a few connections in these parts, know what I mean? Besides, they don't care so much as long as we're bringing an American criminal back to the States. They mostly get mad when bounty hunters fuck with their citizens." He raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "By the way, you're the specific criminal. That's your cover for when we leave."

"Ah," Boyd said. That made sense and explained a few things, though he wondered if they weren't giving him weapons due to that cover or if they just didn't trust him with any. "What's my crime?"

"Grand larceny," Harriet said in a bored tone. "And tax evasion. White collar crime for a white collar boy."

"Hmm. I must be a dangerous rich boy if it took five of you professionals to take me in," Boyd observed, looking over at her with an unaffected expression.

She looked at him as if he was the stupidest person she'd ever seen. "I sincerely hope you are not trying to imply that you would ever pose a threat to anyone else in this vehicle."

"I certainly don't look like I could, which is why I was commenting on the fact that according to that cover, five of you would be coming down to pick up a simple white collar criminal," he replied calmly.

Harriet made a disgusted noise. "Even white collar criminals have protection and your specific profile implies that you have ties with organizations that would give you an ample amount of it."

She paused and gave him a condescending look. "Despite what delusions of grandeur Mommy's help has caused you to obtain, you do not only look like you could not hurt us but you simply cannot. And if you are trying to somehow imply that the cover is in some way inadequate, you should take that up with General Stephen because he is the clever one who devised it. However, since our cover has gotten us much farther than any of your strategies have gained you, I don't think you have room to criticize anyone. All your plans have gotten you so far it seems is a terrible stench and a dead partner."

"Oh lay the fuck off already, Harry," Michael piped up suddenly, twisting in his chair to glare over at her before Boyd could reply. "We all know you're asshurt about

him getting special treatment but do we really need to hear about it for the rest of this mission?"

"I concur," Kassian muttered, not taking his eyes off the road.

Harriet made a face at them but remained silent.

Boyd turned his attention out the opposite window, not bothering to look at Harriet again. At least now he knew what her problem was. He couldn't be surprised by it since she wasn't the first and certainly wouldn't be the last person to hate him due to the idea that he received special treatment. What bothered him more was her comment about a dead partner. She didn't know what Sin was to him, she didn't know how much it would rip him apart if it really was true, so her condescending attitude really irritated him.

Keeping his expression devoid of any emotion, he stayed silent as they drove through the streets. For a few minutes, no one said anything. He could feel a gaze burning into him and he finally looked over to meet Jonathan's eyes.

Jonathan was watching him with that same intense curiosity from before and it was starting to unnerve Boyd, like he was a bug under a microscope. He stared back at Jonathan who didn't say anything for a few drawn out moments. Boyd was just about to look away dismissively when the man suddenly said, "Hey, you know David?"

The question caught Boyd off-guard. "What?"

"David Nakamura. He trains people," Jonathan said intently. "He was your trainer, wasn't he?"

"Yes." Boyd stared at him. "Why?"

"He's good people. We trained together." Jonathan's gaze, if anything, only seemed to intensify. "You know how he names his moves sometimes? There's one called the helicopter?"

The man was seriously strange. "I don't recall that move," he said after a moment.

"Oh." Jonathan looked disappointed and he leaned back in his seat. "Well. I named it."

"Oh." Boyd stared at him, not really knowing what to say. Silence grew between them before he added, "Maybe he hasn't had the chance to teach it to me yet."

"Maybe," Jonathan said, though he seemed mollified by the explanation. He suddenly gave Boyd a briefly pleased look then peered out the window. "Call me Blair, by the way. And he's Archer." He nodded toward Casey, whose raptor-like gaze was focused on the van and what he could see outside the windows. "Don't call him Casey; he hates that."

"Alright." After a moment Boyd looked out the window as well. In the reflection off the glass, he could see Harriet and Archer both looking incredibly unimpressed.

The scenery rolled past and in his mind Boyd found himself automatically placing them in context of the city and the secret passageways. The city was confusing as hell, with streets that started and ended abruptly, areas that had no rhyme or reason to the layout and other areas with sections that seemed logical but were intersected by diagonal streets that cut the blocks into strange shapes. Some streets wound back in on each other and disappeared and reappeared across the city like a serpent winding in and out of the water. The street names were all over the place as well, after almost anything a person could think of: People, days of the year, heroes, Zodiac signs, countries, capitols, seemingly random words... It had taken Boyd awhile to even figure out how to navigate the city in the first place but all those months paid off as he watched their progress.

As they drove, he felt increasingly anxious about what they would find.

Their target area came upon them abruptly; it went from increasingly poor residential homes to large blocks of concrete and foreboding buildings rising around

them. Kassian drove around the back on a service road until they reached a building that provided cover. He pulled the van up to the back, parking it next to an outcropped wall that would keep them out of view while they silently unloaded from the vehicle.

It was obvious that the team had worked together before. Kassian didn't even need to give a signal before they spread out and without a sound approached the neighboring building. Boyd started to go with them but Archer suddenly put his hand on his chest and shoved him back a step with a sharp look. Boyd slid his gaze over to him, meeting his eyes evenly, but stayed behind them by a few steps anyway.

Once he was around the corner, he could see the target building. It was a squat clinic, looking long ago abandoned judging by the faded address spray-painted on the wall and the creaking, half-broken sign. The doors, on the other hand, looked curiously well taken care of. Kassian's team moved in silently and quickly, securing the perimeter before they even attempted the building itself. Boyd could feel his heart thundering in his chest as he followed them, wanting to push them aside and run in to see what was happening. Instead he stayed back and tried not to imagine Sin's corpse, images that kept flashing through his mind growing more grotesque and vivid the closer he came to the building.

The entire area seemed completely deserted. No other sounds could be heard other than the faint drilling of a jackhammer several blocks away. The wind picked up slightly, whipping Boyd's choppy, uneven hair.

He stared at the door intently, wishing they would just go in already. Wishing they would stop being so fucking thorough when he sensed no one in the general area except them.

Finally Archer approached the door, .45 in his hand as he walked sideways along the wall and seemed to listen for any sounds on the inside. He glanced at Kassian, who looked at Boyd with a tense expression on his face. The look was strange and it was hard to tell what the man was thinking. Finally Kassian's eyes slid to Archer and he nodded once, shortly.

Archer abruptly spun towards the door and kicked it open, before ducking out of the way again and pinning himself against the side of the building once again. Nothing happened; no one called out in alarm and no one began firing out at them. From Boyd's angle, all he could see was darkness beyond the doorway. He felt his muscles tense with the desire to run in there. Finally, Archer, Harriet, and Blair all moved in. Michael continued to watch the perimeter and Kassian, surprisingly, continued to watch Boyd.

"It's empty!" Harriet's voice called out eventually.

Kassian finally nodded at Boyd and strode toward the clinic himself.

The first thing Boyd noticed about the inside of the clinic was that it looked filthy; the walls were covered in a thick layer of grime and dust that didn't seem to have been disturbed in years. But as he looked closer, he realized that other things in the small lobby didn't look as dirty. Chairs weren't covered in the same layers of dust as the walls and there were obvious footprints tracking through areas of the room.

There were only three doors from the main lobby and the team checked them all one at a time. One room was completely covered in the sheen of dust and obviously hadn't been used in some time. The second appeared to be a small office. Although there were no stacks of paper sitting around, there were obvious places in the grime on the desk where objects had been sat down recently, one of which appeared to have been a large box or case.

Finally the team turned to the third door and Kassian hesitated, eyes once again finding Boyd's in the darkness as he slowly twisted the doorknob. Boyd's heart sped up, breath coming a little faster as his stomach twisted with anxiety. He shifted his intent gaze to the door.

Kassian pushed the door open and stared inside. Before Boyd could see anything, Michael immediately looked over Kassian's shoulder and his eyes widened slightly.

"Well, shit."

Hearing Michael's tone, Boyd moved so he could see in.

The room was eerily covered in blood.

Sin wasn't there.

The air was dank and abandoned. The smell of blood was thick and overwhelming. Splatters could be seen on the walls, mixing with the dust and grime. Dull metal shone from what appeared to be a surgeon's table, covered in long streaks of blood that twisted and stretched in patterns that told stories on their own. Small pools of coagulated blood had gathered on either side of the table as if something had been steadily bleeding and dripping in those particular spots.

But the most alarming part was the drag marks. The layer of dust on the floor was not only interrupted by footprints there; a solid chunk was entirely rubbed away as if something had been dragged from the table and toward the back door. A disturbing amount of bloodstains streaked across that section of the floor and a smeared, bloody handprint was vaguely visible on one side of it.

Boyd's eyes widened and he stared in shock, gaze darting around to take in every splatter. He couldn't seem to concentrate on any one area until he saw the pools. He looked back up at the surgeon's table and his imagination gave him a ghostly flash of Sin strapped down, screaming, or maybe he'd just been lying still like when he'd been drugged in the box and he'd been incapable of even defending himself. Boyd felt nauseated and almost swayed, placing a hand against the wall to steady himself. His heart was resoundingly loud to him, like an echo it seemed everyone else would be able to hear around him. When he saw the drag marks he grit his teeth and slid his eyes closed to give himself a chance to gather any sense of control.

It took much of his willpower not to just shove between Michael and Kassian, to run across the room and follow those drag marks. The door was shut but it didn't matter. He'd already been out back. He knew nothing was there.

But somehow, standing by that room, he felt like maybe if he just opened the door Sin would be there. It would turn out that all the blood wasn't his, it was his attackers', and there were no bodies because he'd already disposed of them. If he just opened that door, Sin would be slouched against the wall and would look at him mildly, saying he'd been waiting for them to come pick him up already.

Boyd let his breath out in a slow, quiet release, then managed to say, only slightly shaken, "They took him. Do you know how to find him?"

No one seemed to listen to him. Harriet walked around the room as Michael and Blair opened the door and began looking around the back more thoroughly, flashlights on as they examined the floors.

"It looks like they did him here," Harriet said flatly, gesturing to the surgeon table. "Dragged the body out back."

Michael reappeared in the doorway, nodding as if he were confirming the theory. "There's some blood and tire marks in the back. They probably took it elsewhere to discard."

Boyd looked immediately at Kassian, his gaze intense. "Do you know how to find him?" he repeated more firmly because they either hadn't heard him the first time or were ignoring him. "Because I do."

But Kassian didn't seem to be paying him any mind. He glanced at his watch and then surveyed the room again. He walked over to a corner of the room where what looked to be a pile of garbage was situated. Harriet took out a small digital camera and began snapping pictures of the scene.

"Obviously they're not here," Kassian said. "Since we have no data on their actual base of operations, let's spread out and find any information, if there is any, before heading out." He crouched down and picked at the pile of discarded sheets and cloth before extracting what appeared to be a torn white shirt, stained with blood.

Boyd immediately recognized Sin's shirt. His eyes narrowed and although it was upsetting to see, more than anything it angered him. The people who took Sin had hurt him so much that they'd actually managed to overpower him. They had, he assumed, kept him strapped to a surgeon's table and dragged him around like he was garbage.

And now, the rescue team was ignoring the one person who had been in that city for months, who was telling them he had a solution. The longer they waited in that room, the longer those five screwed around poking at blood pools and trying to reconstruct the scene, the less chance they had of finding Sin in time before something worse happened.

Even with all that blood, he refused to believe Sin was dead. Even if he had flat-lined, it was possible he'd somehow been revived. And even if that wasn't the case, Boyd was still going to find his fucking body.

Making a noise of disgust, Boyd turned his back on the room and strode further into the main part of the clinic. He wasn't going to be able to help Sin by staring at that scene; there was no point in focusing on the past when what was important was the future.

Within a few seconds he had removed his watch and flipped it over to the GPS tracking system, waiting with his heart pounding and breath held as the screen went briefly blank. For a moment, he thought Tayla and Liani had failed him, that the GPS wasn't working after all even though he and Sin had tested them when they'd first put them on. Then green lines spread across the screen and a small dot languidly blinked up at him. He felt such a sense of relief that he slouched and slid his eyes closed, his head tilted down for a moment.

He didn't get the chance to do anything more before Kassian strode into the lobby and abruptly yanked him backwards. "I told you not to go anywhere unless I said so," he said in an irritated tone, although the unidentifiable expression remained on his face.

"You weren't listening to me," Boyd snapped, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice. He held the watch up so Kassian could see. "Look, he's only fifteen minutes away if we take the right streets. There's no point in staying here anymore."

Kassian stared at him for a moment before snatching the watch away and looking down at it. Harriet and Archer had come partially into the room to observe the exchange and they stared down at the watch in confusion.

"It's a GPS receiver," Kassian said out loud, although he spoke to no one in particular. He looked up at Boyd with slightly narrowed eyes. "How is it tracking him? Not through the chip."

"That chip only tracks to the Agency and wouldn't be any help in this type of situation," Boyd said dismissively although he was trying to keep a tight rein on his irritation. He didn't want to be explaining this, he just wanted to go. "So I got us each a receiver and transmitter. And before you ask, yes, it's encrypted, yes, we took the proper precautions, yes, I trust the technology, and no, it won't pinpoint him directly but it will give us a hell of a lot better idea than just wandering around looking at bloodstains and hoping the bad guys were nice enough to give us tire tracks all the way to their home base."

Kassian stared at him blankly. "Does that answer my question? No. I asked how it is tracking him. What is the device that was used. I am aware of what the chip does and I could personally care less about your feelings on the current situation. If you don't like how things are done you can be easily detained and kept out of the operation until we return to the States. I am only allowing you to be here out of the kindness of my heart." He held up the watch. "Now answer the fucking question."

"An earring," Boyd said after a moment, trying to stay calm. Frustration and impatience burned within him. He pushed his short hair out of the way and pointed to an innocuous silver post in his upper ear. "Like this one."

Kassian raised an eyebrow. "While I have to admit that your method is clever, let's take the facts into consideration. It is highly doubtful that the perpetrators thought to

remove his earrings because the idea of hiding a transmitter in an earring is not one that would normally spring to mind, but I want to understand your reasoning behind obviously thinking that this means Vega is still alive. It is entirely possible that we could follow this tracker and find nothing but a decayed corpse with an earring still in." He paused and looked at the GPS again.

"I don't care," Boyd said firmly. "He's my partner. I want to find him or his corpse. I need to know what happened. You need to confirm it for your mission as well, right? I'd rather we followed all the leads and just found whatever is at the end, regardless of what is there. If he's dead then I can't do anything about it, but if he's still alive then hurrying could save his life."

After a moment Kassian slipped the GPS into his pocket. "I didn't say I wasn't going to look into it. I just want you to be aware of the possible outcome."

He turned away from Boyd and called out to the rest of the team. "We have a new objective. It appears that Agent Beaulieu and Vega set up a tracking system. We're to follow the signal as it very well may lead us to the rebel base." He made no mentions of saving Sin's life and it clearly was not the motivating factor in his decision. Boyd followed behind the others as they returned to the van. Kassian drove, letting Blair navigate with the GPS while Boyd sat in the back and tried not to let his worry spiral out of control. He concentrated on the parts of the mission that he could affect.

From what he'd seen of where Sin's transmitter was located, he was in a particularly rundown district, one of the original neighborhoods of Monterrey that had never been restored and never been properly taken care of.

He'd heard Jorge refer to it simply as 'the place of bad omens,' the sort of area of a city that Americans would darkly refer to as a graveyard. It wasn't that there were a lot of dangerous people there; it was that anyone who stayed in the neighborhood had no hope, no ambition.

They were like ghosts to this life; barely touching it; barely alive. Although Boyd had been there several times to determine if there were any places he would be able to

hide, he hadn't felt comfortable. He'd only seen two people when he was there, and both of them had peered out of broken windows from upper floors of nearby buildings, their faces skewed by the dirty glass and their hands leaving dusty imprints on the pane. It had been more than a little disturbing, making him feel like he was back in his house, with the half-seen and half-heard memories gliding in and out of his perception.

It wasn't until he happened to see out the window what street Kassian planned to take that he realized the GPS wasn't giving them the fastest directions.

"Wait," Boyd said suddenly, "go straight and take a right on the third street down instead." He saw Kassian's blue eyes turn to survey him through the rear view mirror but he just shook his head. "I know where we're going, and the GPS would be correct but they started construction down there last month. Even at this time we'll get stuck in traffic. If we go straight, we can bypass it and get on one of the quicker side streets."

There was a moment when he thought Kassian may ask him more or just ignore him but instead he followed his directions. Boyd relaxed against the seat and watched the windows more closely from that point to navigate them as quickly as he could to the correct area. As they were drawing closer to their destination, he thought it would be in the best interest of their mission as well as his peace of mind to explain what he knew of the area so they could more quickly locate Sin.

"The tracker is civilian grade so it won't pinpoint him specifically but it should be within a one or two block area," Boyd said, watching out the window as they rolled through the desolate streets to finally stop, hidden by a building where they could see the area ahead of them that the GPS pointed to. Several buildings crowded against each other like dirty, desolate children; most of them long ago partially collapsed. There was the stench of hopelessness and death in the air. A dog lay in the middle of the street, the carcass half-eaten by insects and probably other dogs.

Boyd glanced quickly at the street to get his bearings, then leaned toward Kassian so he could point things out without being obvious.

"There are really only five buildings they'd even consider using here; the rest would collapse if anyone stepped inside or are already occupied by people who I guarantee would not give it up. The most likely choices would be 1635, 1639, 1739, 1741, and 1747, all depending on their intentions. 1635 is a rarity and has a deep lower level that would be good for security but it doesn't have many exits and its backyard is tiny and runs right against a building, which would make it difficult to escape. 1639 has a very good view of the street around it and the upper floor is well-fortified, providing multiple escape routes as well as a good vantage point."

He paused and gestured down the block. "The 1700 block has buildings that are falling apart more. 1741 has electricity hooked up by previous squatters who leeches it from a few blocks away, but they've since died, possibly of electrocution. Their corpses were still inside as of a few weeks ago and are unlikely to have been moved. 1739 has heavy-duty locks on all its doors, including one room in the far back in the downstairs that seems as though it would make a good holding cell. 1747 has running water and one of the rooms upstairs was covered in some sort of material that seemed to me it would make it more soundproof."

Kassian absorbed the information before dispatching the agents into groups of two. Just before they split up, Blair stopped Boyd with a hand on his upper arm. Boyd looked over at him questioningly, his mind already several steps ahead as he tried to pre-plan every move, but Blair just gave him an intense, solemn look before he pressed a gun into his hands.

Boyd looked down at the semi-automatic in mild surprise before looking back up, but Blair just said, "What if Kassian needs backup?" before he disappeared out the back door.

Boyd checked the magazine; it was full. Good. At least he would have some sense of protection now in case they were attacked. He jumped out the door and followed behind Kassian as they headed toward 1639.

The house was exactly as he remembered it; abandoned, forlorn, filled with dust and the haunted memories of those who had passed through before. They secured the perimeter first, entering the building in much the same way they had the clinic. Kassian went first, his gun drawn as he slipped through the house, with Boyd following behind.

They checked the house and then walked quietly up a set of stairs. They were slow, methodical, and it made Boyd's heart just beat faster and his worry grow. It was agonizing, going so slowly when he didn't know what would be around the corner. When he didn't know what he'd find or if they'd even find anything at all.

At the top of the stairs, Kassian kicked the door open and entered in a quick, well-practiced manner with Boyd right behind him as cover. The room was empty, unused, and Boyd felt shaky as the adrenaline continued to pump through him but he had nothing to spend it on. He wanted the wait to be over, the torture of imagining every possibility and yet not having anything to focus on in front of him.

He moved to a window to peer out sidelong, trying to determine if he could see anything from that vantage point. There was nothing outside; abandoned toys from years ago, overgrown vegetation mixed with broken concrete. The place was desolate and showed no sign of recent use. It didn't seem as though anyone had touched it for years. He was just walking to the next window when Kassian's radio made a noise. Boyd's heart leaped and his gaze snapped over immediately.

Within a breath Michael's voice suddenly came over the radio: "We found the body." Kassian didn't look away from Boyd's widened eyes as he raised the radio to his mouth. "Copy."

## Chapter 38

Heart thundering, Boyd was immediately behind Kassian as they ran to 1741 where Michael had been assigned. Like Boyd had said, the stench of death was powerful in the home; the two corpses remained in the middle of the living room, their bodies decaying and half-rotten. It was a staggering smell that made their eyes water. Even Kassian automatically covered his nose and mouth as they passed by to where Blair motioned them down to the lower level.

Cords hung from the ceiling, in some places with the rubber entirely peeled away, exposing the filaments beneath. The lower level was small, dark, dank, and the electricity that came into the room shone from flickering bulbs strung along the ceiling. They made buzzing noises, like insects being killed by bug-zappers, and the inconsistent light kept throwing the house into darkness that seemed only enhanced by the smell of decay from a floor above them.

Kassian nodded toward Blair as he passed him by, but Boyd was barely paying attention. He followed Kassian immediately to the downstairs hallway and was headed toward the room when he felt arms pull him back. The suddenness made his heart leap and for a moment, in the alternating darkness with his fears staining reality around him, he almost yelled out, as if he was in a different time of his life. But then he heard Blair's voice right behind him, saying that he should wait a minute. Even though Blair held him firmly he wasn't hurting him; he was only keeping him still. Boyd only stopped himself from struggling away because at that moment he could see Kassian entering the room down the hallway ahead of him.

He couldn't see into the room; he could only see the door angled open and a patch of flickering darkness beyond. But he could see Kassian's face, thrown in relief from the light ahead of him, and when he saw his expression turn aghast, he couldn't stay still any longer. He grit his teeth and fought Blair suddenly, violently, hitting him hard enough that Blair stumbled back a step with a pained release of breath. Boyd ran forward, feeling like he wasn't quite in reality, that this wasn't quite right, because the sounds around him were muffled and on the other side of cotton. The light was

inconsistent; ghostly, pale yellow lines spreading across darkness that wanted to eat the building alive. He felt like he was in slow motion, moving past Kassian in time that crawled, stretched thin like a rubber band that refused to break.

And when he broke into the room, he barely saw Michael standing to the side and looking over at him in surprise, he barely even saw the blood that stained the walls and concrete like paint. He couldn't interpret any of the sounds that were coming around him, that may have been voices but were too far away to understand.

All he saw was Sin, lying on a surgeon's table like before, strapped down.

Not moving.

It took a portion of forever to get to him. Even though Boyd was running, his steps were too slow and his breath was too fast. He almost fell into the table, not thinking to stop in time, and it was only by dropping his hands onto the metal to brace himself that he didn't fall over.

Something slid beneath his palms, cool and thick and coagulated, and when he looked down he realized it was blood, Sin's blood, and when he stared with widening eyes at Sin he saw his eyes were closed, his skin pale white in a way that shouldn't be possible with his olive skin tone, and his lips, those full lips Boyd had kissed and laughed against and drew into his mouth, were a pale blue. He looked down at the rest of him, a shocked sort of desperation as he tried to understand what was happening, but he could barely see anything beneath all the blood. It was like a second skin; dark, rusty and dried, and even though he could tell there were any number of wounds beneath, he couldn't actually see what they were or where they existed. Stitches were roughly sewn into the side of Sin's neck where the GPS chip must have been taken out, dried blood coating the entire side of his throat where he must have bled profusely.

Boyd brought a shaking hand up, muscles stiff and difficult to move as he touched Sin's cheek. Sin's skin was cold even through the coating of his blood on Boyd's palm, on Sin's body, and Boyd felt the world starting to tilt around him as he looked down at Sin's chest. It wasn't moving. He wasn't fucking moving, his chest didn't

look like it was moving, his skin was cold and Sin wasn't fucking breathing, he was dead, he was dead--

There was confusion of sound behind him that Boyd didn't understand but suddenly he was roughly yanked back, the movement causing his fingers to slide along Sin's cheek and pass over his cold lips where the lip ring used to lie. Where Sin used to smirk and smile and sometimes even laugh.

"Wait!" Boyd said desperately and lunged forward as if to reach Sin, but another hand came and held him tightly. Dragged him away while he struggled increasingly violently to get away.

"Wait, no! Let me go, *let me fucking go!*" Boyd shouted louder, trying to get out of the hold. Trying to break free so he could get close again so he could at least touch Sin's body one more time. So they couldn't pull him away before they just left Sin there to rot like the bodies upstairs and oh God, oh God, he was really dead, he was actually dead, Kassian was right, the earring was there but it didn't mean his heart was beating, it didn't mean he could be saved.

It didn't mean Boyd hadn't let him be killed.

Archer held him tight against his chest, completely overpowering him and trapping him there as the others stared at Sin's body with various expressions ranging from alarm to dismay. Although they'd all seemed so sure, although they'd been so matter-of-fact about his death, it seemed that none of them had actually expected to find his body in the state that it was in. None of them appeared to have actually expected Sin, invincible, indestructible Sin, to have been tortured to death on a makeshift table inside an abandoned, filthy house.

"Check his pulse," Kassian barked suddenly, seeming to snap out of the momentary reverie he'd fallen into.

Nobody moved and he sent an annoyed glare at Harriet, who jumped and hurried over to Sin's side. She hesitated before actually putting her hands on him, eyes focused

on his face, on the undeniably striking features that were pale and covered in blood. Then finally she touched him, fingers groping through the stiff layer of blood at his neck as she searched for a sign of life. But after a moment she shook her head and looked at Kassian.

"I can't find--"

Kassian grunted impatiently and stepped forward, pushing Harriet out of the way unceremoniously as he grabbed Sin's hair and yanked his head back. Sin didn't so much as twitch and Boyd's eyes widened and breath caught at the sight. He froze for just half a second before he suddenly surged against Archer's hold, struggling even more viciously to break away. Archer didn't even budge; his arms were like vices around him and no matter how hard Boyd tried to get closer to Sin, he was stuck.

Kassian's brow furrowed as he worked, as he listened for breath and pawed at Sin's neck, his wrist, before finally...

He looked up and met Boyd's eyes. "He's alive."

The words filtered through Boyd's frantic mind inefficiently, taking a few seconds to register. When he realized what Kassian said, he abruptly stopped struggling. He sagged in Archer's arms, breathing heavier from exertion, and stared at Kassian with a mixture of relief, fear and hope that struck him silent.

"Barely alive," Kassian amended and finally looked away from Boyd as he began barking orders. "We need to get him out of here now or he won't be for long. Get the gurney." When nobody moved, his eyes narrowed dangerously. "Now!"

Everyone sprang into action at the same time but in the end, it was Michael and Blair who rushed up the stairs and out to the van.

Kassian looked down at Sin again and turned his face to the side gingerly as he examined the sloppy stitches in his neck. Despite the fact that he was apparently trying to appear calm and in control, he seemed visibly taken aback by the fact that Sin was allowing him to touch him. "It seems that they operated on his neck to remove the

transmitter; they probably did a scan and found it there. The trauma of their hack job and loss of blood probably caused him to temporarily flat-line before they crushed the chip."

Harriet nodded and slipped on a pair of gloves before she began doing a quick examination of the rest of Sin's body. He was naked save for a pair of black shorts and she ghosted her hands over his torso, arms and legs. Most wounds had long ago crusted over with dried blood but there were some that were still bleeding. She ripped strips of cloth from her own shirt and tied off the open wounds as Kassian began unstrapping his limbs. Despite the fact that Kassian claimed to have found a pulse, Sin didn't look anything close to living. His eyes remained closed, eyelashes not giving the barest of flutters as they moved him around. When he was finally unstrapped his limbs hung off the table awkwardly.

Boyd couldn't stop staring at Sin, at his arms hanging strangely, at the way he was being moved about. "Fuck," he whispered to himself, disturbed by the sight. The relief of Sin being alive, of there still being a chance, was so strong that it made him feel lightheaded.

But his adrenaline was still high and his heart was still racing. Even if Kassian said he was alive they still had to get him help. All that blood, the way Sin was laying, the fact he was letting Kassian touch him-- Boyd couldn't look away. His fingers twitched and he wanted desperately to get closer, to touch Sin and tell him that it was alright, that he was there now and he'd help him, protect him. That Sin was going to be okay.

But when he tried to move forward again, Archer kept him absolutely still. He tried again, a little more viciously, but he couldn't even move. The fact that Sin was right there in front of him but they wouldn't even let him fucking touch him caused Boyd to snap loudly, furiously, "What the fuck! Just fucking let me go!"

But Archer just crushed him against his chest with unrelenting pressure. "Stop moving," he ordered harshly from behind him. "I told you to stay out of the fucking way

but that's all you're trying to do. Let Senior Agent Trovosky do his job. If you keep this shit up I'll fucking hog tie you and throw you in the corner."

It was hard to breathe between Archer's hold and he was still upset enough that his breath was still coming quick, inconsistent. After a moment, Boyd grit his teeth, his body tense but going still. He knew he wouldn't be able to get away from Archer without a lot more effort and he didn't want to waste his energy or risk being detained before he could get closer to Sin. So, instead, he focused on watching what was happening.

"His arms and legs are broken," Harriet said. "His shoulders also appear to be dislocated and I believe his left hip. We'll need splints. We don't know how long he's been here and if they heal improperly, he's fucked if he actually survives."

Michael and Blair came charging back down the stairs and immediately began assembling the gurney. Kassian grabbed one of the duffel bags that Michael had brought down and yanked it open, pulling out various medical supplies and kits. "It seems as though they left him here to die. Which either means they got the information they needed out of him or they couldn't get any at all. Knowing Vega, I'd guess it was the latter."

He pulled out the necessary equipment as Harriet poured generous amounts of water on Sin's face and chest so that she could properly locate the worst of his wounds. His entire body appeared to be covered in bruises, burns and gashes and still, he barely seemed to be breathing at all.

"I don't think we have much time."

They began working quickly, nobody speaking as the four of them hovered around Sin's prone form and began setting his bones and attaching the splints.

The knowledge of what had been done to Sin made Boyd feel at once deeply sickened and angry. Janus had somehow, he couldn't even fucking figure out how, managed to compromise Sin enough to get him strapped down. They'd managed to incapacitate him to the point that he stayed that way. But even if they were trying to

force information out of Sin, how could they do that to another human being? How could they hurt him like that?

Sin must have felt so hopeless. He must have been in agony, and they still kept going. The thought gave Boyd the image of Sin gritting his teeth, a sheen of sweat appearing on his skin as he stayed silent despite what they were doing. As he refused to show how much it hurt, just as he always used to back at the Agency.

What had he been thinking while they did that? What if he'd been hoping for Boyd to come, what if he'd been expecting him to rescue him or help him? But, and the thought hit Boyd hard enough that he felt nauseated, why would Sin think he even cared? He told him he deserved to get caught. He told him...

Staring at the evidence of the torture-- the blood, the bruises, the limp, awkward tilt of his limbs, imagining the agony Sin must have been in-- He felt sick. He hadn't meant it. He hadn't really meant it, Sin didn't deserve it at all. Had he been thinking during that time that Boyd would have welcomed this? That the person he'd trusted enough to tell about his past would have stood to the side and said he was getting exactly what he should? All because he'd been so angry about a stupid woman that he'd betrayed all the trust Sin had given him?

"Oh God," he whispered to himself, feeling guilt rush in with the anger and anxiety.

By the time they had Sin on the gurney only a few moments had passed but it seemed like an eternity. Michael and Blair immediately carted him out of the room while Harriet moved ahead to clear the doors and Kassian went ahead to get the van ready.

The four of them disappeared from the room before Archer finally released him from the hold, giving him a serious look. Boyd didn't even notice; the second he was free he started to run after them. He needed to be near Sin, to tell himself that even if he had let him down, betrayed him, abandoned him, he was at least there for him now. He could at least try to make amends somehow, help heal him, help stabilize him. Just... *help* him.

Behind him, he barely heard Archer make a disgusted noise before he was suddenly yanked back by his upper arm. Boyd didn't realize at first what had happened; he tried to rush forward again but Archer did not so much as shift and all that happened was his shoulder hurt.

He rounded on Archer with a glare, demanding coldly, "*What?*"

Archer gave him an entirely unimpressed look and, holding him by the upper arm, dragged him along at his side. "How did you ever get to be Rank 9 if you can't even follow a simple order?"

He was sick of being pushed around and held back. Sick of them acting like he was an incompetent idiot. "Just let me fucking--"

"No," Archer said unwaveringly, not even bothering to let him finish the sentence. He turned a serious, hawk-like stare on him. "And shut up." Boyd's eyes narrowed but before he could say anything, Archer just gave him a look that clearly said, 'Do you really want to try me?'

Boyd stared at him for one long moment before he looked away silently, fingers curling into fists and teeth gritting as he let himself be led to the van like a child.

By the time they got to the vehicle, the other four had folded all of the back seats down to give enough room for the gurney in the center. Kassian and Michael were sitting by Sin's head while Harriet crouched at his side, already concentrating on stitching one of his nastier wounds. Blair sat at his feet, just shutting the back doors as Boyd and Archer arrived. Seeing that there was enough space for one more to squeeze in, Boyd automatically tried to go for the back doors but Archer just pulled him toward the front without even bothering to look over.

"What are you doing?" Boyd asked, staring through the windshield toward the back of the van as Archer calmly led him around the front toward the passenger door.

He could see them all crouched around Sin and he wanted to be back there with them. It didn't make sense not to have all the available help working with Sin. He was in

terrible condition; they needed as many people working on him as possible until they could get him to a more stabilized location.

"I've had my med training; I can help Harriet." Archer didn't reply; he just reached for the passenger door. Boyd narrowed his eyes, following the movement of his hand, and said as indignation started to war with annoyance and worry, "I know what I'm fucking doing, I won't be in the way!"

Archer met his gaze and held it as he opened the door and shoved him unceremoniously inside. Boyd landed awkwardly on the seat and while he was still trying to get his balance, Archer yanked him forward and within seconds, with the quick, practiced movement of someone who has done this before, he flexicuffed Boyd to the hand-hold above the door.

Boyd stared in disbelief at his hands and then looked at Archer with an angry, "Archer, what the fuck!" "I have plenty of tape for a gag," Archer informed him before shutting the door firmly in his face.

Boyd watched Archer in growing anger as the man walked around the front of the van and calmly got into the driver's seat, reaching back only long enough to get the keys from Kassian. Boyd yanked on the restraints but it only dug the plastic into his wrists painfully and the hand hold didn't budge at all.

He didn't know what the hell their problem was but it aggravated him that they kept ignoring him, acting like he couldn't do anything right. Like he'd just get in the way. Did they seriously think he'd jeopardize Sin's safety by acting like an idiot, delaying any medical help he could receive? He just wanted to be back there with him, that was all! He just wanted to touch him and reassure himself that it was true, he was alive, even if earlier it hadn't seemed possible.

He'd touched his face. He was so cold, so still, like a marble statue thrown carelessly to the side and not at all like the person he'd grown used to being around. The person he'd been intimate with and the person whose touch had left fire in its wake.

Archer turned the key in the ignition and, ignoring Boyd completely, he put the van in gear and drove quickly down the street. Boyd pulled on the flexicuffs once more, irritated that Archer had chosen something that made it impossible for him to escape.

He gave Archer a cold look before he twisted awkwardly to look behind him. At least he could still see Sin from this position, even if his view was occasionally blocked by Kassian's back. He listened to what they were saying, trying to get an idea of Sin's condition.

"--trip is eight hours," Harriet was saying. "I don't think he'll last that long. His pulse is so weak, I can still barely feel it and who knows what kind of internal injuries he has? We don't have the equipment to properly care for him." She hovered over his torso, hands steadily stitching a long, wide gash in his side that appeared incredibly deep.

Kassian rubbed his chin and stared down at Sin in aggravation. "He isn't at all responsive. He doesn't react to anything. It's possible he isn't even mentally efficient anymore, depending on the level of head trauma." He pointed at the nearly black bruises that stained the otherwise pale skin of his head. "But we can't just take him to any medical facility. They'll ask questions and we don't need questions. We'll have to wait until we're with our people."

The thought that Sin could have been found while still alive but it was still too late, that he was already too far gone and would never recover or would never even make it through the rescue, was a terrifying thought. Boyd quickly ran through every medical facility he could think of in the city, but unfortunately that was one area he hadn't been able to get any contacts in.

Jorge knew next to nothing of the underground doctors and all that Boyd had managed to discover pointed to them all being the kind that went to the highest price or already were in the jurisdiction of smuggling or other black market groups that wouldn't appreciate anyone going into their territory. It had been something he had felt was a loose end as he'd gone into the two week hiding period, but he'd been hoping it wouldn't

come up. As it was, he couldn't think of anyone in Monterrey that would be able to help them without delaying the matter even longer than it would be if they just kept driving.

But if they didn't get Sin help soon...Michael watched the scene with what seemed to be growing uneasiness as Kassian began performing simple tests to see if Sin would respond. Sin didn't even give the slightest of twitches, his eyes never once moving under his eyelids.

"Um..." Michael frowned and glanced at the others hesitantly. "What if he actually *does* wake up?" he asked slowly.

Kassian looked up at him with a strange expression. "Then we know he isn't brain damaged."

"Um..." Michael hesitated again and glanced at Boyd quickly before saying in a rush, "But shouldn't we restrain him in case that happens?"

There was a long silence and both Kassian and Harriet paused in their actions to give him incredulous looks. "*What?*"

Michael shifted and wet his lips, looking both uncomfortable and determined as he glanced down at Sin in something akin to fear. "I mean I know he's in bad shape right now but does that really mean we should forget who we're dealing with? This guy is insane and prone to snap. Who knows what will happen when he wakes up and is all delirious? He'll probably kill us all!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Boyd could see Archer nodding once, as if he agreed with the reasoning. Boyd's eyes narrowed but he didn't get the chance to say anything.

Kassian stared at Michael as if he were the biggest idiot he'd ever seen. "The man can't fucking move," he said in a low, warning voice. "How the hell do you expect he'll manage to kill us all?"

"How does he manage to do anything they say he does?" Michael countered stubbornly. "How does he manage to wipe out entire bases and make it out alive with a bunch of injuries? How did he manage to kill all of those guard captains when he was surrounded by them and being sent to the fourth? I mean, I'm not trying to be a jerk here, but I just don't think we should forget about what this guy is really all about just because he's injured."

There was another silence and Harriet shook her head and began stitching him again but Kassian continued to stare at Michael. "You are an idiot."

He looked down dismissively and focused on another grotesque gash in Sin's other side-- it was just as deep as the one Harriet worked on and in exactly the same place on the opposite side. Tissue and meat hung out of it and Kassian grabbed the tools for stitching out of the pack.

"I don't care what 'they' say he does. He's still a man and he's still an agent and I'm not going to treat him like a wild dog just because you think he's the boogeyman."

"Even if he could move," Boyd added edgily, "he's not a mass-murdering psychopath. He'll recognize Kassian--"

"Senior Agent Trovosky," Archer corrected him without looking away from the road.

He spared Archer a cold glance then pulled at his restraints as he twisted to look at the others in back. "And if you'd just fucking let me back there, he'll recognize me too." Kassian didn't spare Boyd a glance or respond to the comment as he worked calmly, not bothering to put on gloves as Harriet did and effectively getting his fingers covered in blood. "I am very aware of the threat he can become if he is provoked-- but that is if he is provoked. One, it is highly doubtful that he is going to wake up any time soon, if at all, and two, if he did he would be more likely to regale us with examples of his stunning sense of sarcasm than attack us. However if he does for some reason snap out of what appears to be a coma in a violent, delirious rage, we will then restrain him to prevent him from injuring us or himself."

He glanced up at Michael. "Feel better now?" His tone wasn't mocking but it was obvious that the comment was meant to mock.

Michael shrugged, still looking uneasy, and glanced up at Archer although he said nothing more. Blair didn't comment on the conversation and instead peered out the back window to ensure that they were not being followed. Although no Janus operatives had been present at the site, it was entirely possible that someone could have been watching it from a distance depending on how long ago they'd abandoned it.

There was another long silence as they continued to work and Boyd watched everything intently, not bothering to speak since they weren't listening to him anyway. His heartbeat and adrenaline still seemed too high, too quick, and he kept darting his gaze back up to Sin's eyes, hoping for some sense of movement but never seeing any.

When Harriet finally finished stitching, she sat up partially and surveyed his body to decide which wound warranted the most attention first. There were severe burn marks that appeared to be oozing pus as well as many other deep lacerations.

"You know," she began mildly. "I'd never seen him in person before. He's not what I expected."

Kassian raised an eyebrow, not looking up. "And what did you expect?"

She shrugged and poked at Sin's legs. "We're going to need to flip him over, he has severe lacerations under both knees." She watched Kassian for a moment, waiting for him to finish. "And I don't know what I expected." Her eyes flicked over to Sin's face, skimming over his full lips, long eyelashes and straight nose before they followed the length of his lanky, muscular body. "Perhaps for him not to look so young and attractive? From all the stories it seemed that he'd look older, meaner."

Kassian snorted but it was Michael who spoke up. "He does look mean. He's all strange-looking in my opinion with those freakish, creepy green eyes."

"Can we stop making Vega out to be some mythical creature already?" Kassian snapped suddenly, seeming more than a little irritated by the direction the conversation

was going in. "He's just a fucking man like everyone else and he gets his features from his father who was anything but freakish and creepy. Now change the subject or shut up."

The van fell silent for a few moments and Boyd was uncomfortable enough staying twisted around that he turned to sit normally in his seat, staring out the windows blankly. Kassian had moved just enough that he'd been partially blocking his view of Sin so it wasn't like he could see much anyway. And just staring at Sin without being able to reach him was starting to wear on him, as were the conversations they were having around him.

He was glad that Kassian kept calling Sin a man rather than some sort of monster, that someone at least seemed intent on defending him to some extent since he really couldn't with them ignoring him. He could also tell that Kassian and Harriet knew what they were doing, so he at least knew Sin was getting the best treatment he could under the circumstances.

A passing building caught Boyd's eye and his eyebrows drew down. He sat up straight to peer out his window before turning toward the front again, searching the nearby streets. He knew this area but it didn't seem a particularly good direction to be driving when they were trying to escape notice. Four blocks away was one of the main stations for the Police Department, and two down from that was a building that housed some sort of activity he had never fully identified but he did know was official as well as secret.

There were usually plenty of officers hanging around the area and he knew there would be even more now with the word out to stop any Caucasian foreigners who even vaguely met the description of the bomber. He looked over at Archer to see if he seemed ready to turn or knew where they were headed but he seemed more intent on checking for any suspicious activity than he did getting them off that street.

"Take a right here," he said suddenly but Archer ignored him. They passed the street Boyd would have preferred they turned onto and were quickly headed toward the

next. He looked around them, thinking quickly of the best route to keep them clear of any place they probably shouldn't go past just so they didn't push their luck.

There were a few routes in which one had to take a specific street because the surrounding streets were blocked off with construction or were built in a manner that forced them down certain side streets. The next road would work but the one after that wouldn't and at that point they would be going right under the radar of the authorities.

"Turn right here, then," he said urgently as they approached the intersection. When it seemed like Archer wasn't going to listen, the worry over Sin mixed with the frustration of being ignored, causing Boyd to snap. "Archer, fucking turn right! I've been here for eight fucking months and you people won't listen to anything. You're going to take us past the fucking Police Department and I guarantee you they'll notice us. So just *listen* and--"

Archer calmly turned right at the street Boyd had indicated, though he didn't even so much as glance over. For all the world, it was as if he had intended to turn all along and hadn't even heard a word he'd said.

Boyd dropped his head back against the seat and squeezed his eyes shut, so frustrated that he couldn't even think for a moment. He couldn't wait until he was back at the Agency just so he could get away from this team. It wasn't like he'd never been ignored before in his life but it was grating on his nerves that they kept doing it in such a tense, nerve-wracking situation, and that they kept pulling him away from Sin like he'd fuck him up more just by being in the vicinity.

After a moment he asked tensely, entirely expecting them to ignore him, "Do you people even know how you're getting out of Monterrey?"

"Who hired this child?" Harriet asked calmly, not looking up from Kassian's work.

"Connors," Archer said.

"Ah."

At first the comment served to escalate his annoyance, anger and frustration, but somehow the connection to Connors caused him to stop and think about the situation; as if by bringing up Connors' name they were saying he was as bad as him, a concept which irked him. He was silent as he took a moment to try to calm himself.

He didn't think the last two weeks were really helping his ability to deal with everything that was happening at the moment, but Kassian had warned him that he wasn't part of the team so it shouldn't be too surprising that they were acting like this. He was usually better about reining in the snappy comments and being more respectful.

He obviously wasn't getting anywhere with the way he'd been acting so he made a conscious effort to try to ignore any extraneous emotions or information and just concentrate on the steps and the things he could affect. It was hard not to get too frustrated or upset. To not let the worry and fear take over and make his tone sharpen and his actions grow hastier. His fear that Sin would not live after all was causing him to be illogical and was taking away the calm he needed in order to be an asset to the crew rather than a detriment.

He took a moment to draw in a breath and let it out slowly. Judging by Archer's seeming lack of direction, he really didn't think they had any particular idea as to how they were going to escape Monterrey, but he needed to be certain.

He slid his eyes open then twisted so he could look into the back and tried again, more calmly this time. "Senior Agent Trovosky, do you have a plan for how to leave the city?"

Kassian didn't even look up until he'd completed sewing the wound closed. "I have no idea why you would assume that we came here with no knowledge of how to get out. We were able to get in legally and therefore, there was no need to plan an 'escape' since we also have documentation for you. Your condescending sense of self-importance will get you nowhere with me and I suggest you stick to your current attitude if you want your opinions and suggestions to be taken into consideration. If you want Agent Archer to turn in a specific direction, do not presume to bark orders at him.

Remember, everyone in this vehicle is technically your superior. Just because they gave you a rank doesn't mean it matters when you take tenure into consideration." As usual he did not say it in a particularly angry or cruel tone and he held eye contact with Boyd as he wiped his hands on his dark-colored shirt. "Now that being said, we do have a problem."

Boyd's expression didn't flicker and he waited a moment to be certain it was alright for him to say anything. He'd noticed what had been left out of Kassian's explanation. "Even with documentation for me, you don't have any for Sin, nor an explanation for his condition."

"Precisely." Kassian scowled and looked out the window. "I will be perfectly honest and tell you now that we were told specifically not to search for Vega because they seemed quite sure that he was deceased, with good reason. But I will explain to them that we were following a lead on an alternate location for the enemy's base. However it is because of that reason that they gave us no documentation for him and that is the only way to leave the city at this point, even the country, without making trouble for everyone involved. I also highly doubt that our superiors will look kindly on us instigating a fire fight with the Mexican authorities if Vega only ends up dying or if it turns out that he is a vegetable. The only possible scenarios in this situation are to somehow obtain forged documents, which I highly doubt will happen in the span of time needed to get him medical assistance, to leave him here to die, or for us to sneak out of the city without having to go through officials."

He finally glanced over at Boyd again and this time he raised both eyebrows. "Since, as you said, you've been here for nearly a year I assume that you have more knowledge on our chances in two out of three of those options."

Boyd nodded. Truthfully, there really was just one option for him since there was no way he or Kassian would leave Sin to die. "I agree that there isn't enough time to create fake documentation," he said seriously. "The quickest person I know would take several hours and he's forty-five minutes in the opposite direction we're headed. However, there are secret passageways in and out of the city. They're all under the

jurisdiction of the various smuggling and black market groups, which is problematic because they're extremely territorial and a few of them are more likely to shoot first and possibly not even ask questions later. But not all of them consistently monitor their passageways and even if we do run into them, with the majority of the groups I believe we have a good chance of success provided we don't anger them. I don't know which route was planned for once we're out of the city, but I could navigate us to a passageway that would be closest to your preplanned destination."

For once no one had any sarcastic comments for him and Kassian replied directly. "Getting out of Mexico won't be the problem. Once we're out of Monterrey I can arrange for a helicopter to pick Vega up somewhere out in the desert. As long as it flies below radar, there should be no issues getting back into the States. However, the helicopter with the highest success rate for remaining unnoticed is not designed to hold seven people, especially not including one who is stretched out on a gurney. Vega will be airlifted accompanied by Harriet and Archer, who is my second in command, and the rest of us will follow the original route and head to Laredo."

As much as Boyd would have preferred to be on the helicopter with Sin, he wasn't about to argue the point after he was finally being taken seriously. And for all that he wanted to go with, he had to admit that as far as planning a mission went, it made most sense for those two to go. It was going to be hell taking the longer route back, wondering the whole time if Sin was alright because he wouldn't even be able to see him by then, but at least he had the clearance to be able to go straight to the medical wing when he returned to the Agency. In the meantime, he would help Sin most by getting them out of Monterrey as soon as possible.

"Understood," he said, considering the information and already thinking of the quickest routes out of the city. "If we're headed to Laredo, I'm assuming we'll ultimately be taking Federal Highway 85 but prior to that we'll need to head toward a secluded location? So we'll probably need to exit somewhere in the Northeast section of the city?"

Kassian shrugged. "It depends on the coordinates I get for where they'll be making the pickup." He shifted slightly and pulled out his cell phone to call whoever his contact was. "I'll have the information in a second."

When Kassian shifted, he gave Boyd a full view of Sin again. It was inevitable that his gaze dropped to him, running the length of his body as he cataloged every wound, every bruise, painting a mental picture of what had happened during those two weeks that they didn't see each other. Although he had been having a difficult, stressful time, he'd never once seriously thought that Sin would be any worse off. Now it seemed like such a petty, trivial thing to have been so jealous of the idea of Sin staying at Jessica's. That would have been nothing compared to this; the pallor of his skin, the obvious signs of torture, and Kassian's comments earlier that he hadn't wanted to contemplate.

Brain damage. A coma. Sin may never wake up.

He felt incredibly sick and wanted to slide his eyes closed, to turn away and rest his head against the seat and try not to dwell on how much that idea terrified him, of how helpless and hopeless it made him feel. But he refused to look away from Sin. No matter how much he may think it hurt to think about what Sin went through, Sin actually experienced it.

He was the one who would have to deal with the consequences of Boyd's bad decision. He was the one who had to pay for that stupid mistake. If Boyd had just fucking gone back to help him, Sin would probably be perfectly healthy and fine right now. But he had not.

And Sin may never be the same. The thought made his heart pound, which only intensified as Harriet shifted and gave him a better view of the nasty wounds behind Sin knees. So much blood, pain, and for what? Sin hadn't given them any information they wanted, they'd just tortured him and left him to die. He was so unimportant to them that they just abandoned him to bleed out in obscurity.

Although Boyd had been annoyed by the way the others were treating him, he had to admit that he didn't know what he would have done if Kassian's team hadn't arrived. If three days from now he'd waited around at the meeting place and finally, after probably another day of waiting, found Sin by using the GPS.

If he'd walked into that room alone and if Sin really had been dead.

It was a nauseating, overwhelming thought. He had grown accustomed to having Sin around. To knowing that even if they pissed each other off he could still return to him and even if they were sarcastic or quiet, Sin was still there. He was still alive.

But there was the possibility he would still die, even with Harriet and Kassian working to save him, even with the helicopter coming, even with the advanced medical wing of the Agency.

It may simply be too little, too late.

And if that happened... He honestly didn't know what he would do. Part of him automatically tried to think of contingency plans, to consider the future, the different ways this could go. But each time he started down a path where Sin would be dead, it was like he was passing into a blizzard; fuzzing white everywhere, no distinction and nowhere to go.

His thoughts just stopped, frozen.

If Sin died like this... if he was hurt that much and if it was Boyd's fault... If Sin would never smile or laugh or say something sarcastic again, if he'd never be there to tug him closer to kiss him, touch him, fuck him... If his green eyes would never darken in desire or stare at him so intently it was like he could see through his body to his soul... If he'd never talk about his past quietly again, if he'd never run his fingers along Boyd's scars and tell him the one thing he had regretted more than anything else in his life, Lou's death, wasn't actually his fault...

He'd already lost one person who meant more to him than anything. He didn't know what he would do, what he *could* do, if Sin was suddenly gone too. Sin had to be there. He *had* to make it. If he didn't, Boyd was lost.

The sound of Kassian clearing his throat caused him to snap out of his reverie and he opened his eyes to find Kassian staring at him with a peculiar look on his face. But he didn't say a word. Instead he slipped the phone back into his pocket and adopted the serious expression he always seemed to wear. "The pickup will be between 85D and 54 in the desert, forty miles Northeast of Monterrey. The meeting time is at approximately 0330 hours and that gives us," he paused and looked at his watch, "sixty-five minutes."

Boyd nodded, putting the alarming thoughts out of his mind as he concentrated on remembering the closest exit points in that direction and who controlled them. He looked out the front window briefly, searching out the street names as they passed and placing them in context in his mind with the rest of the city, then turned back to Kassian.

"Alright," he said after a moment. "I'll explain the route as we go but there's an area I know we can head. We'll have to turn the lights off among other things we can discuss closer to the area, but ultimately that will lead us to Santiago's nearest passage. He's a lazy man and barely ever watches his territory so the odds are high in our favor that we'll pass through without incident. Even if his people happen to be there, they're easily bribed and unless someone else in the van speaks Spanish more fluently, I can talk to them. They won't even bother looking into the van or asking questions; they'll just try to talk us out of more of our money. That will actually take us out between 85 and 54 so we won't even have to cut over any major roads. Even with the JKS aftermath the authorities barely have any presence in that area; they don't expect anyone to come from or go straight into desert between two major highways. There are barely any cities in that direction, and they're understaffed enough that they don't consider it to be a high priority. Getting out of Monterrey would take us," he thought about that a second, "probably about twelve to eighteen minutes if we allow travel time and possibly having to deal with Santiago."

Kassian nodded and glanced over at Archer, who met his eyes in the rear view mirror. "Understood."

When they stopped at the next intersection, Archer leaned over and cut the flexicuffs without saying anything. Boyd looked over at him in surprise and automatically dropped his arms to his lap and rubbed his wrists when they were free. Archer slipped the switchblade back into his belt without a word and Boyd stayed silent, although he gave him a sidelong, grateful look.

After that, his expression automatically turned remote as it always did when he was serious and concentrating on anything related to a mission. He turned his attention to navigating them quickly and unseen through Monterrey. Archer followed his directions without question, though it probably helped that this time Boyd gave him plenty of warning and was not demanding anything.

The city was obviously still on alert around them and more than once they had to pass by a few streets that seemed to have a lot of activity even just half a block away. Each time, Archer simply continued driving without drawing any attention to them and they were not stopped. Boyd's directions led them away from the areas of the city that seemed more well taken care of and clean. When they turned down one street, even the streetlights seemed to disappear one by one until the streets were almost entirely dark and the only light that could be seen was from the sky and the occasional flickering candle or lamp from a house. The buildings huddled around them, half-broken and never properly mended, and at first no one was seen.

They were passing through a particularly desolate neighborhood when a large group of people appeared from the darkness silently, sliding into existence like ghosts. They walked right up to the vehicle even as it kept moving; their clothing was ratty and dirty, falling off their too-thin bodies while they held their hands out imploringly. Archer continued to drive slowly but there was a point when Boyd told him to take a right, yet the people were crowding the street, making it impossible for them to keep going without hitting anyone.

Boyd made a soft noise of discontent then glanced over his shoulder at Kassian. "Is it alright if I handle this?" he asked and waited for Kassian to flick his gaze out to the group of people then return to him with a nod.

"Please stop for a moment, Archer," Boyd said before turning to roll his window down just enough to let their beseeching voices drift in.

It was almost eerie; in the dark of the night, they seemed like ghosts who had appeared from the edges of vision to crowd around the van as if hoping it would lead them back to life. There were women and children mostly although a few of them were older with grey hair. They raised their voices in supplication when they realized he could hear them and they saw that they'd stopped.

He knew this group of people; they stopped passersby, pleading for help, mercy and hope, and if they were given any of it they swarmed in, taking everything. It wasn't that they were cruel or bad people; they were simply desperate, without proper money or food or even shelter, and anyone who drifted into their territory risked falling prey to them. They were also charged with guarding some of the exits; the smuggling groups brought them what resources they could in return for them warding off anyone who just happened to be passing by.

It had taken him several months of earning Jorge's trust, but eventually he had brought Boyd straight through this sort of area, what Jorge called 'the land of the lost.' The people had run their hands along his skin, his hair, whispering things just behind him while fingers caught on his clothing then disappeared when Jorge barked something in Spanish. Jorge told him that if he ever ran into them, there were certain rules to follow. Never give them anything, never take anything from them. Never get out of the car, never walk alone. Never anger or insult them.

*"We are not here to harm,"* Boyd told them in Spanish. Jorge had told him the code words to use if he was ever in this situation although he had warned that sometimes, even with that, it wasn't enough. Sometimes they still came closer and sometimes they didn't let go.

*"My children are hungry,"* one woman said, moving closer to the van with her hands upraised, her expression desperate. *"Please, do you have any food?"*

*"We need help! My children are dying!"* another woman cried out, holding a malnourished toddler to her chest as she rocked back and forth. The child's head rolled with the movement, making him seem dead except for the way his quiet dark eyes watched Boyd's every move.

Behind and around them, nearly twenty other people raised their voices and hands, begging for everything from food and water to shelter and clothing. They spoke of their dead and dying families, their need for help.

Boyd carefully stayed out of their reach without seeming rude and turned his attention to the women who spoke. *"We were given this path in a dream,"* he told them quietly.

The people in back continued to cry out but the two women in front fell silent; although their expressions did not change there was something that was more alert about them. *"What were you told?"*

*"That by your grace we would pass safely,"* Boyd murmured. *"And we should look for Cristobal."*

The first woman watched him with unreadable dark eyes that gave away nothing. *"Do you see him?"*

Boyd didn't even bother to glance past the woman; he simply shook his head. *"He has gone before us to clear the way."*

The woman stared at him for a long moment before she nodded curtly and backed away. The others saw her and one by one fell quiet until the street seemed to echo with the sudden silence. The women held their children back and they moved off the street, giving them plenty of room to pass through. Boyd thanked the woman before he rolled the window up and, after glancing at Archer with a nod, they continued on their way. As they drove down the street the people watched them, dark eyes shining

unblinkingly from the shadows until the people seemed to fade into the darkness as if they'd never existed.

After that point, they didn't run into anyone else. The streets were empty and silent around them, the buildings looking dark and foreboding. Boyd instructed Archer to turn his headlights off as he talked him through a rather complicated route that wound through side streets and alleys until they finally arrived at the base of a large, crumbling wall.

"I'll be right back."

Boyd silently left the vehicle and, with a glance around to see if anyone was watching, ran up to the wall and after a few moments of searching in the dark, found the edge of the gate they would have to pass through. Despite looking derelict and completely abandoned, the gate opened soundlessly. It was maintained that way because it hardly made sense to have an entrance to a secret passage that squealed horrendously any time anyone tried to use it.

He slipped through the shadows back to the driver's side as Archer cracked the window just enough to hear his whisper to pull forward and leave the lights off until he could shut the gate behind them. The van's tires made a soft noise as they rolled across the pavement and within moments the van was encased in the even darker tunnel. Boyd shut the gate behind them then got back in the vehicle.

They were encased in darkness that Boyd had barely been able to see through enough to even get back to the van. There was no way they'd be able to navigate without some sort of light, so Archer flipped the headlights on and started driving again. The walls rose around them, stone blocks that didn't seem to match up properly with vines growing along the sides. The tunnel was tall enough to hold a van and wide enough for a few across but it would have been pushing it to try to get a tall bus inside. The ceiling was low enough that they could see it barely illuminated by the fading edges of the headlights. More vines hung from the arched ceiling, appearing suddenly from the

gloom like pale green tendrils of spiderwebs that trailed along the windows and made soft sliding noises along the roof of the van.

It was utterly silent inside, like the shadows were eating away slowly at sound itself. Time seemed to stretch and slow, dragging out endlessly in the hidden passage completely removed from the realm of the rest of the city. Taken in context with the ghostly people earlier, it seemed like they were passing through a forgotten land between death and life.

Boyd watched ahead, searching for any sign that Santiago's crew was around, while Blair stared out the back doors and whispered suddenly, "This place is creepy."

"Let's just--"

Before Kassian could say more, a sudden high-pitched gasp caused him to stop in mid-sentence and everyone's eyes snapped down to Sin in surprise.

At first it wasn't immediately clear what was wrong with him-- it was difficult to see him in the gloom, difficult to make out his features as strange wheezing sounds and strangled gasps escaped his mouth. But then Kassian flicked on the dome light and Sin's face was illuminated, seeming pastier than it had less than an hour ago. His eyes were still not open, eyebrows not so much as twitching, but he continued to gasp as though he could not breathe. Before anyone could comment he began to twitch and jerk violently.

Boyd's eyes widened at the sight and Archer snapped one arm out between the seats just in time to stop him from trying to jump into the back. Archer's other hand remained on the wheel and he suddenly pulled the van to the side and parked it.

"What's wrong with him?" Boyd asked in rising alarm, trying to get back there but Archer just grabbed onto him and held him in the seat. Boyd twisted to look back at what was happening. Archer kept him still despite his automatic attempt to struggle away, to get closer to Sin while he watched him in horror.

"He's having a seizure," Harriet barked, expression twisted in confusion and concern as she automatically moved to cradle his head. Sin's whole body began to jerk, muscles spasming wildly as a sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead. "He has a high fever-- he's had one but it's worse now an--"

"Can't you do something?" Michael asked, eyes narrowed as he stared down at Sin in alarm. Behind him, Blair's eyes were wide and slightly haunted as he stared at Sin.

"No." She shook her head, looking helpless. "We just have to wait until he--"

Sin's movements grew more violent, more intense and chaotic, and for a moment it seemed that he would rip his arms out of the splints, that the movements were so uncontrollable that he'd injure his tentatively set bones even more. But then suddenly-- with one final, wheezing gasp-- all motion stopped and he collapsed against the gurney again.

But this time, it was wrong. This time the stillness was unnatural and when his head lolled to the side like a broken ragdoll, everyone froze.

"Fuck." Kassian scooted forward instantly from his position at the back window and shoved Harriet out of the way, frantically checking for a pulse as he grabbed at Sin's wrist. "His fuckin--" He broke off and leaned down lower, eyebrows knotted. "He's not breathing, his heart stopped."

"What the fuck!" Boyd yelled immediately, frantically trying to get past Archer's grip. "Help him!"

"Begin CPR!" Kassian looked up at Michael, who had the best access at the moment. But Michael hesitated, eyes focused on the blood that stained Sin's lips and his eyes flicked back up to Kassian uncertainly.

"Now!" Kassian shouted, voice bouncing around the silent vehicle strangely. When Michael still did not move, Kassian growled in disgust and jumped up-- shoving him violently out of the way as he began attempting to resuscitate Sin himself. He

pinched Sin's nose between his fingers, breathing air into his mouth before pressing down on his chest hurriedly as he struggled to get the oxygen flowing again.

Nothing happened and Kassian swore softly, tilting Sin's head back and holding it in place with one hand as he moved to seal their mouths together once more. He breathed in, glanced down at Sin's chest, and then breathed again before sitting up to do another hurried set of compressions. Once again, nothing happened, and he became visibly agitated.

"Come on you fucking punk," he snapped at Sin impatiently and began mouth-to-mouth for the third time.

No one moved, no one spoke, and everyone just watched Kassian work.

Boyd couldn't get away so he stilled suddenly against Archer's grip, his heart thundering as he stared helplessly at Sin's pale, unmoving body. His hands were resting on Archer's arm to push him away but now he dug his fingers into the skin painfully, barely daring to breathe as if somehow the air in his lungs would be transferred to Sin's.

What seemed like several moments passed and as Kassian finished the fifth cycle and started on the sixth, Harriet put a hand on his shoulder. "Kassian, he's dead. Just stop."

Boyd would have turned a cold, furious glare on her if he wasn't completely absorbed in watching Kassian work. He thought in distant, frantic fear that somehow looking away would mean he abandoned Sin again.

"He's too stupid to die," Kassian muttered stubbornly and breathed into his mouth once more, then again, before sitting up and doing a violent set of compressions. "Come on," he growled, almost seeming angry, pressing down on the center of Sin's chest hurriedly. "Come the fuck on, Vega. How am I ever going to win a fight with you if you just fucking die?"

Nothing happened and it really did begin to look hopeless. But Kassian refused to give up, even as his teammates began shooting each other mildly concerned looks

about his own state of mind. But then Kassian practically punched Sin in the middle of his chest and--

Suddenly there was a low, hoarse gasp, and Sin began breathing once again.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Boyd whispered shakily, trembling as he slumped against the seat, his hands still holding onto Archer's arm tightly as if it was some sort of anchor. He stayed in a position so he could watch Sin's chest as it rose and fell, a deep sense of paranoia growing within him that each time would be the last.

Before he had a chance to do anything more, white light abruptly flooded around them, throwing stark relief on the inside of the van and making Sin look even sicker. Everyone's heads snapped up and Kassian looked at Archer immediately; from his view, he couldn't see anything.

Archer looked out the windshield, finally letting Boyd go so he could shade his eyes as he peered into the bright light bathing them from in front of the van. Three trucks blocked their way completely, their headlights set to bright. Dark figures of several men were silhouetted against the light, their shadows long and casting odd blind spots across the ground as they stood there aiming assault rifles at the van.

Boyd whipped around, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the sudden light while his heartbeat and adrenaline increased with a violent jolt that shook through his body. He could barely see anything so he squinted, trying to figure out what the hell was going on. He knew for a fact Santiago wouldn't have that many people with him at once and they certainly wouldn't use their brights. They were the type to use flashlights and big words, sauntering up to the side of the vehicle before they bothered saying anything at all.

"We have company," Archer informed them calmly as he slid one hand to his waist to clear his gun from the holster. "Armed, M4s. Ten men, three trucks, the others are filled but the front is empty aside from two men. Probably thirty men in all."

Kassian stared at him incredulously before his gaze snapped over to Boyd. "I thought you said this tunnel belonged to some pushover?" he demanded, voice no longer holding the calm, controlled quality that it had earlier. The situation finally appeared to be affecting him as much as it did Boyd. In the bright lights of the truck, his bloodshot eyes and the dark circles under them became visible for the first time that night. The man looked as exhausted as Boyd.

"That's not--" Boyd started to say but he was finally able to make out the side of the truck. '4FF' was painted in bright yellow letters along the doors and he felt his heart nearly stop. "*Fuck!*" he yelled viciously and without stopping to explain anything he suddenly threw himself out of the van, holding his hands up as he peered through the light at the front truck.

The men aimed their guns at him immediately, appearing to be on the verge of shooting when a man's voice called out casually in Spanish, "*Stop.*"

There was a long pause as the men continued to aim their rifles at Boyd and he continued to stand there awkwardly with his hands in the air. After a moment, the passenger side of the truck was kicked open and a tall, muscular figure jumped out. The man turned towards Boyd and sauntered over to him casually, thumbs hooked into the loops of his pants as he went. There was no doubt in Boyd's mind as to who he was; the almost cocky stride gave it away entirely.

*Lo más chingón's* figure appeared more clearly as he came closer although he was still mostly shadowed by the lights of the truck. He wore a wide brimmed hat pulled down so low that it completely hid his eyes and a black and gold scarf which was pulled over the lower half of his face. It was looped over his ears and hanging down the front of his shirt, making him look like some kind of Wild West Mexican bandit straight out of old movies.

It seemed that Jorge had been right when he'd said the man was paranoid about showing his identity if he was wearing that getup in the heat.

He wore a loose, white shirt rolled up to his elbows which showed a strange tattoo that entirely encased one forearm although the shadows and darkness made it impossible to see exactly what it was. His fingers were adorned with chunky rings of silver and turquoise and his scuffed combat boots came all the way up to his knees, encasing his faded leather clad legs. A gun sat on either side of his hips in a low hanging ammunition belt and a large hunting knife could be seen strapped to one leg although Boyd knew for a fact that he carried several more somewhere on his person.

He didn't stop walking until he was standing directly in front of Boyd.

Boyd stayed still, keeping his hands held up harmlessly as he peered at him although he couldn't see his expression at all. Between the man being silhouetted and the bright lights, it was too hard to focus on him. His heart was pounding from adrenaline and stress but he didn't say or do anything, opting instead to wait for *Chingón* to make the first move. It was just his fucking luck that of all the people to take over Santiago's passage and happen to be using it while they were trying to flee the city with Sin in critical condition, it had to be *Chingón* who appeared.

*Chingón* was completely silent as he stared at Boyd for several long moments but then his arm suddenly shot out, fingers gripping his chin as he turned Boyd's face from side to side.

"Aww, *qué lindo*," he cooed in Spanish. "*What happened to all of your pretty red hair?*" He clucked his tongue as if he were trying to get the attention of a stubborn pet and continued to examine Boyd.

"*I was tired of it*," Boyd answered in Spanish, letting *Chingón* move him however he wanted.

The man made a disapproving sound. "*Too bad*," he said mildly. "*You actually had some style before.*" His grip tightened painfully and Boyd could practically feel the glare radiating from under the brim of his hat. "Now tell me what the fuck you're doing in my tunnel. And don't answer in Spanish. Your accent is one of the worst I've heard in a while, *blanquito*."

"I didn't know it was your tunnel," Boyd said calmly despite the tension increasing at the glare. He didn't want this to end terribly; they desperately needed to get out of there, Sin didn't have time for him to fuck this up by angering *Chingón* before they could even leave Monterrey. His expression and body language stayed carefully blank and without any sense of challenge. "It was Santiago's a month ago."

If it weren't for the scarf covering his face, Boyd would have been sure that *Chingón's* mouth had curled into a roguish smile as he responded in a low purr, "A lot changes in a month, *chico*. I made Santiago the nonfactor that he always was."

"I can see that," Boyd said and though there was nothing disrespectful or demanding in his tone, it was clear he felt a sense of urgency. "I'm sorry we inadvertently entered your territory but we have an injured colleague and he needs immediate medical assistance. We were on our way to save him."

There was another long pause and *Chingón* released his chin, looking up and surveying the surrounding area as though he were waiting for someone else to appear. When he didn't find whatever he was looking for, he shouted something back at his men in Spanish and the closest one tossed him a flashlight. *Chingón* caught it without even looking back and studied Boyd for another stretch before shifting and walking past him, shoulder brushing against him almost rudely.

"Well, what do we have here?" he asked mildly, speaking loud enough for everyone in the van to hear him. "A van full of unemployed artists in SWAT gear perhaps? Or is this a kinky *maricon* costume party?" He stopped in front of the open van door and shone the flashlight in Archer's face. "Hi."

Archer's eyes narrowed and he kept his hand near his gun, though he didn't bother answering.

"Goodness," *Chingón* drawled in mock concern. "Your friends are mighty aggressive, *chico*. Perhaps you should teach them some manners before I begin to feel offended." He tsked at Archer, appearing highly amused by the entire situation, and shone the flashlight toward Harriet and Kassian, who could be seen peering through the

space between the front seats. The beam of light stayed on Kassian's unflinching face for a long moment before finally sliding away to hover on Harriet. "Mmmm. Who knew there would be such an attractive woman with this group of *gringos*," he said in an almost scandalized tone. "You should come be in my gang. I'll even give you a nickname. How do you feel about *La Chingada*?"

Harriet made a face at him. "I know enough Spanish to tell you quite confidently that I'll never be fucked by you, buddy."

*Chingón* laughed, seeming genuinely amused, and tilted his head to the side. "I love a woman with spirit. What fun are they if they don't put up a fight?" He gazed at her for another long moment before shifting the flashlight to whatever he could view of the vehicle from the angle he stood at. "Now why do I think I'm not seeing everyone?"

Boyd tensed, watching *Chingón* closely as he approached the side door. "I already told you we have an injured colleague," he said calmly, taking a step closer to him.

The man didn't respond and reached for the handle, sliding the door open so that Blair, Michael and Sin's prone body were all in full view.

*Chingón* barely had a chance to see inside before Boyd suddenly slid between him and the open door, his back straight and gaze intense. There was something almost protective about the way he stood there between Sin and *Chingón* and even though he didn't seem to be challenging him, there was a warning in his eyes.

The taller man stared at him silently for a long moment. "Move."

Boyd didn't say anything but it was clear he had absolutely no intention of following the order.

There was another tense stretch of silence but this one was broken by a handgun suddenly appearing in *Chingón*'s hand a portion of a second before he pressed it between Boyd's eyes. "I said move." The humor was completely gone from

his voice and for the first time he sounded completely serious. A deadly threat was evident in his tone.

"I heard you the first time." Boyd didn't even flinch although his eyes did narrow. There was no fear in his face; only determination.

"Hmm." *Chingón* tilted his head to the side, letting the muzzle of the gun slide against Boyd's face like a caress. "How very brave," he drawled softly. "Are you brave enough to die protecting your... colleague?" The way the word rolled off his tongue clearly implied that he knew Sin was more than just that.

"Pull the trigger and find out," Boyd said unflinchingly.

The man made a sound in the back of his throat that seemed like a mixture of amusement and disgust. "How sweet," he said, tone heavy with sarcasm. "But unfortunately your gesture would be highly unnecessary as I do not consider myself to be a scavenger." He pressed the gun against Boyd's face harder. "I don't attack the weak or the dying. Now move out of the way or I really will blow your fucking brains out since you are obviously neither."

Boyd hesitated, giving *Chingón* a strange look at the comment. Even though he would never say he could trust this man, he did still stand by his initial impression that he could probably take him at his word. Considering the fact that he'd had multiple times to kill Boyd and he hadn't, he didn't believe *Chingón* would actually shoot Sin. It was, more than anything, his need to protect Sin from anyone else who could potentially hurt him. It was the fact that since they'd found Sin, Boyd had been held away, able only to watch, incapable of doing anything to help. After a moment, he stepped to the side enough for *Chingón* to get past him.

The man shone the flashlight into the van just enough to illuminate Blair's alarmed, deer caught in the headlights stare and Michael's blank look of confusion and surprise. However the beam didn't stay on them for long before finally dropping to Sin. *Chingón* kept the light trained on his pale, slack face for a moment before sliding it

along the entire length of his body. He seemed to focus on every major wound, on each of his broken limbs before finally returning it to his face.

The moment stretched for quite awhile until Kassian shifted in the van and stared at *Chingón* with narrowed eyes. "I think we're done here," he said to the man flatly, obviously more than tired of the games.

*Chingón* didn't respond, didn't even seem to register that Kassian had spoken, but he finally turned away from Sin and focused on Boyd once again. "You should take better care of your toys, *chico*," he said mildly.

"He's not my toy," Boyd said, watching him with an unwavering gaze.

*Chingón* watched him for a moment without replying before he gave a languid, one shouldered shrug. "Whatever you say." Although Boyd couldn't see the man's eyes, he had no doubt that they were staring intently into his own. For awhile it didn't seem entirely obvious what would happen, what the man would do, but then he tucked his gun away and hooked his thumbs in the loops of his belt again. "One more strike and you're out. *Comprende?*"

Boyd nodded. "I won't get in your way again."

The man nodded, shrugged again, and began to stroll casually away.

There had been any number of sarcastic comments that had come to mind during the course of the conversation, but Boyd had stopped himself so that he wouldn't offend him. But he couldn't help it this time; it was probably a combination of his frayed nerves, his tiredness, and the relief that the man was going and that they'd be able to get Sin out.

"Sorry for interrupting your clandestine overnight bread delivery. Hopefully it won't ruin too many breakfasts," he said suddenly.

*Chingón* paused mid-stride and turned towards Boyd in a manner that was obviously incredulous. He stared at him for a long moment before reaching out to

almost casually shove Boyd into the side of the van. "You're an idiot." His tone was a mixture of amusement and something not as identifiable.

He shook his head and strode towards his truck, gesturing at his men vaguely although they seemed to understand since they immediately lowered their weapons. *Chingón* yanked the passenger side door open again and slammed it behind him, leaning out the window and pounding his hand against the side of the truck. "*Vámonos muchachos!*"

The men jumped back into the front truck while the vehicle engines revved and in a single file they drove past the van without another incident. Boyd stared as they passed, watching *Chingón* in the front truck. However before it passed him entirely, it slowed down and the smuggler leaned out the window to stare down at him for a moment before jerking his thumb towards the South. "Beware Laguna de Sánchez, boy. Some people there wouldn't be too fond of the company you keep."

The truck took off before Boyd had a chance to reply. He watched the taillights disappear down the tunnel before moving back towards the van. He had only vaguely heard of Laguna de Sánchez, but he knew enough to realize they wouldn't be headed in that direction anyway. It was an odd thing for *Chingón* to say, but it fit him somehow. The man was so strange and although there were any number of things that caught his attention when they interacted, he was frankly too exhausted to even try to decipher any of it at the moment.

He shut the side door on the van and strode around the front. He hopped back into the passenger seat, shutting the door behind him. Archer was already putting the van back in gear and resumed their course as if nothing had stopped them. Boyd stared blankly out the windshield, feeling jittery and a little scattered with all the adrenaline spikes he'd been experiencing that day and the lack of proper sleep he'd had the last two weeks.

After several long moments of stunned silence, someone broke it. "What in the hell was that?" Kassian demanded in a tone that implied he couldn't quite believe the

entire incident had actually occurred. "Wha-- Boyd. Who the hell was that?" It was the first time the man had used his first name and Boyd wasn't quite sure what that meant exactly.

"The leader of the most successful and, probably, dangerous smuggling group in Monterrey," Boyd explained, his tone tired, although he kept it professional. He turned his head so he could see Kassian, his expression unreadable. "He deals pretty much anything he wants, though I believe it's primarily weapons, and sells to the highest bidder. The locals won't touch him and I've heard of very few underground groups that would stand up to him. He calls himself *lo más chingón* and marks his property with '4FF.'"

Kassian stared at him for a moment and then glanced out the back window where he could see the barest glimmer of lights disappearing down the tunnel. "And how did you come to know this man?"

"He caught me staking out one of his bases." He said it simply, not bothering to defend the fact that as an agent that was sloppy work.

Again, Kassian stared at him for a stretch before speaking. "Why did he seem completely unsurprised to see... everything that he saw inside of this van?"

"I don't know," Boyd admitted. "He knows Sin exists but just as Jason Alvarez. I came off as interested in shady deals so he may have just assumed you were an underground group I was working with. Or it may just be his personality; he's strange and not very predictable."

"Strange is right," Michael muttered, shaking his head.

Kassian's eyes slid over to Michael and the expression on his face was anything but pleasant. "Let's just get the hell out of here," he said to no one in particular and pressed his back against the side of the van, with his arms crossed over his chest.

Boyd looked down at Sin, studying him intently to make certain he could see he was still breathing, that nothing had changed while he was outside the van. Although he still looked as sickly and lifeless as ever, at least he was alive.

Even so, the tension wouldn't leave his shoulders. He didn't know if the delay with *Chingón* had been too long; if they'd still be able to make it to the meeting place on time; if Sin would have another seizure; if that seizure meant that there had been too much damage to his brain for him to even recover in the future...

And what if his heart stopped beating again? He knew the image of Sin lying there, completely unmoving and unresponsive while Kassian desperately did CPR, was going to haunt him for a long time. He looked up to see Kassian watching him; they met eyes for a moment, neither saying anything nor giving their thoughts away in their expressions. Boyd broke the look by turning toward the front in case Archer needed him for navigation.

The van fell silent as Archer quickly drove the rest of the way out of the tunnel. They had to stop briefly for Boyd to open the gate on the other end of the tunnel while he also checked for anyone watching.

At least one part of Boyd's predictions had come true; there was no presence of the Mexican authorities in that area and they were able to drive straight into the night without further incidents.

## Chapter 39

As Archer increased the speed and they drove straight into the desert, the van jolted around more frequently. Boyd couldn't help looking back any time he thought Sin may be hurt more in the movement, but each time he saw the other four carefully holding him in place, protecting him from the shock of movement as much as possible. It gave him enough peace of mind to return his attention to watching for any danger and checking the map to be certain they were on course. They made good time once they were completely free of the city and any surrounding large roads. Archer sped the entire way and Sin's health seemed to have returned to the tenuous stability of when they'd first discovered him.

Even so, the drive seemed to take forever.

Sometimes the undercarriage of the van scraped against something on the ground, a quick high-pitched noise that caused Boyd's heart to leap and throat to close each time, thinking Sin was going to have another seizure. But Sin was always just jostling with the movement of the van and the other four were always holding him still.

Once in a while, he would see Kassian watching him before he looked away, and other times he noticed Blair's eyes, dark and intense as always, looking up from the back of the van. The silence lengthened and strengthened around them and Boyd let it pass over him. He tried to let it build silence in his mind as well, to take away the extra emotions that caused paranoia and fear to erupt each time he thought he was hearing Sin die again.

It was an impossible task, really, but he at least had other things to concentrate on. In his peripheral vision, Archer's expression seemed perpetually calm and in control. And, somehow, it was reassuring because of that. Even though they sped through the dark alarmingly quickly, Boyd couldn't help feeling like it was taking too long. Like they were inching along while time ran out. The sentiment seemed to be shared by the others in the van, judging by the intense silence and the tension that could be seen in all of them.

The meeting spot was just another part of the landscape and would have blended in completely if it weren't for the dark, sleek helicopter waiting on the ground. Relief threatened to darken the edges of Boyd's vision at the sight and he released the breath he hadn't even known he was holding.

Archer's eyes narrowed and he spun the van around quickly to get the back of it closest to the helicopter. They hadn't even parked for a second before Blair and Kassian jumped out the back and pushed the doors wide open. Blair grabbed one end of the gurney and Michael took the front by Sin's head. They pulled it out then quickly wheeled it over to the helicopter while Harriet moved alongside, still working on Sin without even so much as looking around her.

Boyd jumped out of the van and started to follow but he stopped at the back of the van, hovering there and staring worriedly as Sin was slowly engulfed by the darkness. He wanted to get closer, he wanted to make certain he was alright, but he knew it would only delay help longer so he stayed still and crossed his arms tightly. Kassian stood to the side near him, watching the scene closely with a strange, unreadable look on his face that seemed on the verge of anger.

Archer strode around the van, heading toward the helicopter and ignoring the pilot who leaned out the open door in the cockpit with a sarcastic, "Hey, glad you girls finally joined the party! Don't worry, I've only burned five minutes of fuel; that'll only cost a few thousand bucks."

A medical assistant was there with equipment already set up and she leaned out the back, helping them as they loaded Sin into the helicopter. Blair stepped out of the way, watching intently as the gurney disappeared into helicopter, then turned to walk toward the front.

"Hey Blair," the pilot said loudly over the noise of the rotor blades as he approached. "You couldn't tell them to make the meeting point more interesting?"

"You should bring the interesting with you, Jim," Blair informed him, staring up at Jim as he lounged in the pilot's seat.

Jim snorted. "I did bring something interesting-- my complete lack of fucking patience. I was in the middle of one of those hoagies from Brownie's, you know, where they actually fucking heat it up," he said it with pointed anger, favoring Blair with a glare, "when I'm told to come medevac that crazy bastard. I didn't even get the chance to finish it, and don't try to fucking tell me it'll keep or heat up as good, I've tried that hundreds of time and it just tastes like shit. There's a prime time to eat it and it's gotta be all at once or the whole thing's ruined. Then I get here, and I gotta wait anyway! You know, five minutes would've given me plenty of time to finish. Instead, I had to sit here staring at this wasteland."

"Hmm." Blair considered this for a long moment before he frowned. "You beat me on the last test."

"Barely," Jim said dismissively, looking distractedly toward the back. "Hey, go tell them to hurry the fuck up. We don't got the resources to sit on our asses waiting for Jamie to take for-fucking-ever putting a single man into a pre-prepped area!" His voice rose by the end, loud enough for everyone in back to hear. He received no answer and scowled, turning back to Blair. "Not like she'd fucking listen anyway. She was bitching the whole time over 'cause I played my music too loud. Like she's got any fucking right-- she listens to opera for chrissakes. That shit would've put me to sleep and we would've crashed long before we made it."

"Oh, you got the radio working?" Blair asked, perking up. He started to step into the cockpit, apparently not bothered by the fact that this meant he had to crawl onto Jim, but before he could get a very good view of anything they suddenly heard Jamie yell from the back, "Jim, we're green -- Go!"

"I'll fucking go when I want!" Jim shouted back at her in annoyance, but he sighed when he turned toward the front and gave Blair a look.

Blair crawled backwards out the open door and dropped down to the ground, looking disappointed. "I'll never see it in action. Tammy keeps stealing the boomcopter when I'm around."

"Well, this ain't near that shit yet," Jim said with a shrug. "The stereo system in the boomcop vibrates the whole thing, though. When you're flying, it's like you're in some crazy fucking turbulence when it's really just the bass."

"I know, I've heard the stories and I've decided they all hate me," Blair said with a frown.

"The stories?" Jim asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Everything," Blair said without blinking.

Jim snorted and Jamie suddenly slammed on the wall. "Jim, fucking go already!" she shouted furiously.

"What's her problem, it's not like they don't got all the shit they need back there anyway," Jim grumbled, though he sat up straight and started checking the instruments. "All day long, hurry up and wait, hurry up and fucking wait. Two hours in line at Brownie's and I didn't even get to spend three minutes in heaven." He reached to shut the door then paused, looking at Blair. "Hey, by the way, you're coming over Saturday night for beer and the nastiest barbeque ribs you ever ate. And you're gonna love it 'cause Nellie's making it and it's my ass if anyone says shit about it."

"Okay. I'll just mark 'puking' in my calendar in the following slot," Blair informed him and Jim laughed.

"About fucking right," Jim said, pleased, and grinned at Blair as he shut the door.

Blair was the last one standing near the helicopter so he quickly got out of the way, ending up near Boyd as they squinted through the sand and dust kicked up in the powerful winds created by the rotor blades. The helicopter rose into the air, turned toward the North, and quickly disappeared into the darkness of the sky.

Boyd stared at it, not even realizing that his arms tightened across stomach, barely aware of anything around him. He'd been watching Sin so closely, staring at any bit of him he could see between the people working on him, that it was like nothing else

existed. It wasn't until the helicopter was gone and he couldn't see him anymore, not even the helicopter he was in, that he realized his heart was pounding heavily, his body felt shaky, and he felt completely helpless.

The night was heavy and silent around him, making it too difficult to think, and it took him a few seconds to realize that no one was around him.

"Hey, Boyd," a voice said behind him suddenly and he turned to see Blair sticking his head out the back door of the van. He glanced up at the sky then at Boyd again, his expression shadowed but somehow sympathetic. "We're leaving."

Boyd stared at him a moment, the words not totally registering, before he nodded and ran his hand through his hair. "Alright," he said calmly and crawled into the back of the van. Blair shut the door behind them and Kassian glanced briefly into the rear view mirror at them before he started the van and they drove quickly across the desert.

The ride was a blur to Boyd; he rocked with the movement of the van and found himself staring blankly at the floor in the back. The four of them were silent in the van and the only time he glanced up briefly was because they swerved suddenly. When he looked at Kassian he saw that the man's expression seemed to be growing angrier by the minute. Returning his gaze to the floor, Boyd just took his bulletproof vest off then drew his knees up to his chest and rested his head against his forearms.

He felt sick; from emotional and adrenaline overload, too little sleep and food, probable dehydration, and simply the fact that he had been up for too many hours and a headache was starting to form. He couldn't stop thinking about Sin, about how he'd looked, about the torture. It pulled at him and made his heart actually hurt as if it could somehow feel a vestige of the pain Sin had been through.

They made it across the Mexican border with no difficulty at all due to their documentation and it seemed like no time before they crowded onto the Agency plane that was waiting for them in Texas. It was a small plane, although it was big enough to have two compartments, rather like coach and first class. They all loaded their gear into the correct area and moved into the back of the plane. There were short rows of seats

against each wall and when they sat down, they had no choice but to face each other. There was a slight delay before takeoff and the pilot informed them that the flight would be approximately three hours long.

There was complete, almost awkward silence. It stayed that way until they were finally in the air. At that point Kassian's gaze snapped over to Michael and the tension that had been building in him since the incident in the tunnel seemed to boil over. "Who gave you medic training, Alvarado?"

Michael looked up, startled. "What?"

Kassian grit his teeth and took a slow, calming breath. "I said. Who gave you medic training."

"Wh--" Michael hesitated and glanced over at Blair and Boyd before returning his gaze to Kassian. "Smith did, sir. Franklin Smith."

"Franklin Smith," Kassian repeated, blue eyes like chips of ice as he stared. "And did Franklin Smith train you to let men die because of your personal feelings about them or is that something you just made up on the fly?"

Blair studiously looked away and Boyd watched the exchange with a blank, slightly distant expression on his face.

"What th-- I didn't-- What are you--" Michael broke off, indignation and confusion evident on his face as he finally looked Kassian directly in the eye. "I don't know what you mean, sir."

Kassian seemed to lose patience finally and he leaned towards Michael, his mouth turned down in a scowl. "Are you senile and stupid or just plain stupid?" he snapped. "I gave you an order and you ignored it. You looked at me like I was speaking a foreign fucking language when I told you to give Vega CPR. Do you think that's the kind of man I want on my team? The kind of man who would let an ally die?"

The indignation melted off Michael's face and was replaced by an expression of pure guilt. "I--I--I-- It's not that I didn't want to, it's just--"

"You--you--you," Kassian repeated in an obviously mocking tone this time. It seemed that exhaustion and stress had finally brought him to the point where he couldn't or wouldn't remain neutral anymore. "You what?"

"He had blood in his mouth!" Michael blurted out suddenly.

Kassian's eyebrows drew together and he actually blinked in confusion. "...And?" He shook his head slowly. "And you're... afraid of blood? And you've suddenly turned into an eight year old girl?" His voice rose slightly and confusion gave way to impatience. "And what, Alvarado? Please enlighten me as to what the hell that has to do with anything. The man was covered in blood the whole time he was in our care."

"Well excuse me if I didn't want his blood in my mouth!" Michael practically yelled. "You know what they say-- I mean..." His eyes flicked over to Boyd in an embarrassed, almost apologetic way. "You know what they say about the two of them..."

Boyd felt struck by the words but kept his gaze blank.

There was a long, incredulous silence and then understanding dawned on Kassian's face. "Do you mean to tell me that you didn't give Agent Vega CPR because he had blood in his mouth and so because of the ridiculous rumors that circulate the Agency, you thought you'd get what? A sexually transmitted disease? AIDs? Are you kidding me? Are you really this stupid?"

Michael shrugged and stared at his boots, looking suitably chagrined. "Well when you put it that way..."

Kassian raised a hand and held it up to silence further comment. "Just-- Just stop speaking now." Once again he shook his head in disbelief. "I took a chance on you, Alvarado. I didn't want you on my team because of your inexperience but I gave you a chance. If you disappoint me again you're fucking gone. Got it?"

Michael nodded stiffly. "Yes, Senior Agent Trovosky."

"Just... go away. And you too, Blair. Go harass the pilot."

Blair finally looked over, focusing on Kassian with a nod. His gaze moved to Boyd again, that same silent watchful look that was almost unnerving, before he stood. He waited for Michael to stand and move ahead of him before he trailed along in his wake. Michael didn't look at Boyd as he passed him and Boyd didn't bother looking over.

It hadn't even occurred to Boyd at the time that the reason for Michael's hesitation would be something like that and he was too tired to even know what he thought about it. He'd had people saying and implying any number of things about himself earlier in the year but it hadn't been a life-or-death situation. The idea that Sin almost didn't get help simply due to those stupid rumors that Sin could be gay... It was an offensive thought, that simply due to the idea of Sin having any sort of homosexual activity he was somehow automatically contagious or diseased.

By extension, that meant Michael must think the same of Boyd.

And wasn't that just great for Sin? People already considered him to be a monster but now there could be some who wouldn't dare touch his blood, who would let him die in front of them, not because they thought he was anything like a serial killer but just because he could be gay. Because they were afraid he would give them a disease.

The entire situation just wearied him.

He stayed silent, emotionless, and blankly listened to the door shutting behind Blair and Michael.

When the door closed Kassian collapsed against the seat and for the first time, the wearied expression completely overtook his features. He reached up and began undoing his vest as he closed his eyes briefly and rested the back of his head against the cushioned chair. He took a long, deep breath and yanked the vest off, dropping it on the floor before he also pulled off his outer shirt and sat there in a black tank top.

He raised one hand and rubbed his temples, not looking over at Boyd as he said, "How are you feeling?"

Boyd didn't answer at first, feeling like it was a stupid question. How was he supposed to feel? He'd just found out he'd let his partner and lover be tortured and nearly die-- no, his partner actually *had* died at least twice but had managed to be revived-- all because he had been jealous. Then he hadn't even been allowed to be near him, to touch him again after that brief moment, because he was considered to be a fuck-up of an agent. The mission he'd spent the majority of the year on had been an abominable failure and he'd somehow managed to be seen when escaping so he'd had to be on alert for the past two weeks. Apparently he was also diseased because he liked men. And he felt like shit.

"Fine."

"Liar." Kassian dropped his hand finally and rested his chin against his fist as he watched Boyd from under hooded eyes that were circled by dark shadows. "You've had a rough night, probably a rough few weeks. I apologize if I inadvertently made the situation any worse for you."

Boyd sighed, not really wanting to have to expend energy or mind power on a conversation at the moment. "It's fine," he said, not looking at Kassian still.

One blond eyebrow rose and Kassian made a face. "Well it's good to know I won't have to overextend myself with apologies around you."

"Not usually, no," Boyd said and finally looked up at Kassian. He looked as tired as he felt although his expression was unreadable. "Why did you make them leave?"

"Because when I'm around people on my team I feel like I have to continue being Senior Agent Trovosky and I don't think I can handle that anymore at the moment," Kassian replied with a shrug. "In addition to that, I haven't slept in days and I'm just cranky enough to shoot Michael in the face if he makes any other stupid comments." He watched Boyd quietly before continuing. "And I wanted to speak to you alone."

Boyd watched him for a long moment before he spoke. "About what?"

"I'm curious," Kassian began slowly. "About you."

Raising an eyebrow, Boyd stared. "What is there to be curious about?"

"What's there not to be curious about?" Kassian countered mildly. "At first I thought you were unprofessional, impatient, childish and a bad agent. However as the night progressed, I realized that my initial assessment wasn't correct. Well. Not entirely correct." He looked down the aisle idly. "Now I'm curious as to whether or not my new assessment is correct."

"I don't know what you think of me now so I don't see how I can be any help," Boyd said tiredly. "It would imply I'm still at least one of those descriptions and I don't see how talking to me will change that."

"Well let's see," Kassian said slowly. "Explaining your actions can change first impressions dramatically. But in this case I think I'll just come right out and say what I'm thinking." He tapped his finger against his cheek and stared at Boyd. "I think you're very impatient and very unprofessional, probably because you've only been exposed to Vega's skewed way of operating. However, the parts where you appeared childish and idiotic were probably because you were extremely worried about your partner, because you're in love with him."

The comment was met with a beat of stunned silence. Boyd stared at him, then blinked, and finally managed to convince his tired mind that he really had heard what he thought he had.

"What?" he asked finally, surprised and confused. "I don't..." He trailed off, not really knowing what he'd intended to say.

"You don't what?" Kassian replied. "You don't love him or you don't know if you love him?"

Boyd stared at him for a long moment before he turned his head away with a sigh, covering his eyes with his hand. His palm felt cool against his skin; he hadn't realized how dry and sore his eyes were until then.

"Why are we talking about this?" he asked wearily. "I was worried about him, you're right. He's my partner; I hadn't seen him for two weeks and suddenly the Agency contacted me, telling me he was dead. Then when we found him..." He shook his head, his voice falling quieter although he kept any emotion out of it. "He looked terrible. I don't think anyone would be thrilled to see that."

He dropped his hand and looked at Kassian with an unreadable expression. "If I acted... out of line, it's because you're right. I haven't had as much training and all my experience has been with someone who is not a good example of following the rules. Your team is well-versed, completely different from what I'm used to. I probably overreacted in general."

Kassian stared at him for a long moment before he responded. "I hope you don't think my intentions are to mock you. When I made that statement it wasn't because I found the idea to be particularly outrageous or revolting." He paused and rubbed his temples again, as though he were trying to figure out what he wanted to say. "I can't tell you how many times I've seen people on my team dying. Archer..."

Kassian frowned slightly and shook his head. "Archer in particular has scared the shit out of me on more than one occasion but..." His eyes slid over to Boyd again. "But never once did I look at him how you were looking at Vega." He held up his hand to halt any protests. "You can say I don't know what I'm talking about and hell, it's entirely possible that you don't even realize it yourself at the moment, but I know what I saw. I suppose what I am most curious about is how Vega can inspire that kind of emotion in a person."

This was probably the last conversation Boyd would choose to have at the moment, especially with someone he barely knew. The only person he could imagine he would actually consider it for and answer honestly was Ryan, and even that would take

a while because he really didn't have the mental capacity to consider the thought right then. He searched for some way to get off the topic and thought of something he'd been meaning to bring up.

"He seems to inspire some sort of emotion in you," he replied with a slight shrug. "As I understand it you have a history of rivalry but you seemed... especially concerned for his safety."

Kassian snorted and rolled his eyes. "Is that what he told you? 'Rivalry'?"

That was a curious response. "How would you categorize it?"

"Well," Kassian crossed his arms over his chest and slumped down in the chair, stretching his legs out in front of him. "I would categorize it as our employers being idiotic and him being an asshole. To be frank."

Boyd watched him, finding it interesting to actually get the other side of the story. He'd heard about Kassian infrequently but over a long enough period of time that he'd created a view in his mind that hadn't really matched up to the actual person. "How so?"

"Our employers..." Kassian trailed off and gazed at Boyd steadily for a moment as if he were trying to figure out just how much he wanted to say. "...Have used him since he was a child. I was there in the beginning, I watched it happen. He was talented, insanely so, impossibly so, however I am of the opinion that it didn't give them the right to... exacerbate whatever his problem was. And so I had sympathy for him in the beginning. A lot of people resented him, they resented the fact that a teenager achieved Rank 10 in such a short amount of time. He assumed I resented it too I imagine, but in the beginning I just thought it was ridiculous to put such... responsibility in the hands of a child."

He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. "But as he grew older, he became a bit of an asshole and no matter how sad his story is, I can't hold sympathy for assholes for very long. I suppose after a while I did begin pushing myself harder, trying to catch up to him, maybe to prove to myself that I could achieve what he had because

I'm good at my job, prove that maybe... the Agency isn't as fucked up as I've started to realize it is--"

He broke off suddenly and waved his hand in annoyance. "I don't know what I'm talking about anymore, I'm exhausted. Long story short, I work my ass off to achieve the things that he has but I can't do what he does because I'm cursed with a pesky thing called a conscience, called morals. So they don't trust me and it pisses me off because I'm damn good at what I do. I'm better at what I do than he is, but the only exception is that he can kick the ass of just about any man in the known world and kill thirty more in 0.89 seconds. It is difficult at times not to feel competitive with him. He's undisciplined in so many regards, disrespectful-- he's a lot like his father in that way, I suppose."

Kassian paused briefly and shook his head. "And he enjoys making a fool of me so that does not help matters. The times I've sparred with the man, despite the fact that he is allegedly so hungry for any kill, he took great pleasure in toying with me and didn't seem at all interested in taking the fight seriously because he knew there was no way I'd beat him."

It was quiet a moment as Boyd considered that and Kassian fell silent. He could see what Kassian was saying and he found it interesting what he said about the Agency. He wondered what Kassian would say if he knew what Sin thought about this all, about the morals Sin had and how he'd felt about McCall's assassination. And although he'd already seen examples of Kassian insisting that Sin was just a man, it still made him feel somehow better to have him say something about that outright. He made a soft noise to himself; the irony did not escape him that, in a way, Kassian and he were very alike yet they'd definitely reached different conclusions about what Sin was to them.

"I know what you mean, actually," Boyd said after a moment, leaning back against the seat and watching Kassian. "He didn't want a partner so he did his best to cut me down and wait for me to die at first. At the same time, I never thought he was a monster and I never agreed with his treatment. It seemed to me it would just encourage

the very cycle of reactions that they resented him for. And the way he can finish in seconds something that takes me so long to even prepare for..."

He shook his head to himself, lifting a hand and then letting it drop on his thigh. "When I think about it, I become frustrated. I can't tell you how many times I've worked hard on something only to have him dismiss it entirely, do his own thing, and rub it in my face that he was faster anyway. So I just stopped comparing us. It would probably be more difficult for you because you were here first, you have more of a history, and you're the same rank. But at least for myself, I don't think it would be productive. He's just... different. It doesn't make him better or worse; he's just not the same. There are things he can do that I can't, and things I can do that he can't. The same with you and Sin. And what Sin can or can't do has nothing to do with your individual ability as an agent. Or who or what you are as a person."

Boyd paused, trying to figure out how to word what he wanted to say. As much as Kassian had annoyed him earlier, the way he'd been ignoring him and acting as if he was simply something to be held to the side so he wouldn't get in the way, he had to admit that his own assessment of Kassian had changed over time as well. The memory of Kassian so desperately trying to revive Sin was enough on its own for Boyd to respect him.

Holding Kassian's gaze, he said honestly, "I personally think that a person who is fair; who, regardless of personal opinions, protects the lives of allies and does not tolerate disrespect, is a good choice for a leader. I may not be a terrifically moral person myself, but... I think that's the sort of person that people can look up to and believe in. And that should definitely count for something."

The side of Kassian's mouth lifted in a half smile and he raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "Well, thank you." He opened his mouth to say something more but it ended in a yawn and he made a face. "Sorry."

He stretched, rolling his shoulders and cracking his neck as he continued to look at Boyd with the same expression on his face. "And like I said earlier, I apologize if you

think I was being an asshole earlier. I just returned from a long-term undercover assignment and thought I'd be able to get a decent night sleep in my own bed before they informed me that I was coming here. I was on edge, easily aggravated and honestly wasn't expecting you to be cooperative with my method of doing things. However, I have to say, you impressed me more than once."

He seemed to remember something he'd been wanting to ask. "What was all of that business with... 'Cristobal?'"

The compliment was nice to hear but Boyd didn't particularly believe in it at the moment; he was too tired and he'd fucked up too much for it to give him much solace. He ran his hand through his hair and sat up straighter. "My informant brought me to one of those places before," he explained. "He called it 'the land of the lost' and the people *los perdidos*, the lost ones. I don't know if it's by accident or design, but several of the particularly useful hidden passages to Monterrey have sections of land surrounding them that seems to collect them. They're Monterrey's scavengers; they'll take a vehicle apart with you in it and still be asking for food, water. The smugglers have an exchange with them; they'll have rite of passage through the area as long as they give *los perdidos* resources whenever they can. But only specific groups have the right in specific areas."

Lifting one shoulder, Boyd returned his gaze to Kassian. "The only other way to pass through is the code that references San Cristobal, Saint Christopher, the patron saint of travelers. Only *los perdidos* know the phrasing to use for safe passage and they trust very few with the words. I was extremely lucky; I found an informant who told me." His tone shifted slightly as he repeated the explanation Jorge had first given him. "When traveling through a land of lost people, one should speak of dreams and call upon Cristobal. He will have gone ahead to clear the way and if we are worthy, if we are not calling upon him in vain, *los perdidos* will let us pass."

Kassian frowned slightly, rubbing his chin. "And this weapons smuggler guy; they gave him passage? I thought you said that was some other guy's territory? If that's the case why did they let him through?"

"That's why I was so surprised," Boyd said, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought. "It shouldn't have been possible. No matter the firepower or intimidation factor he had, if he was going into Santiago's domain he should have had to kill all of them to get past. If he'd given them anything to placate them they would have just taken it and more, would have swarmed over his men until the men were gone or *los perdidos* were dead. And there doesn't seem to be an end to *los perdidos*. They'll appear out of areas that you know have no access, that you know it shouldn't be possible for them to have arrived through."

He shook his head, thinking of what Jorge had said, remembering the first time he'd passed through such a place. Remembering the determination and desperation in the sunken eyes surrounding him in the gloom. "For him to be in Santiago's territory, there should have been a massacre. But I saw no evidence of any foul play; no blood on the streets that may have been left even if they'd pulled all the bodies away, no injured people. Nothing. That's why *lo más chingón* is so dangerous; he's unpredictable, he doesn't follow the rules. Somehow, he can make work what shouldn't be possible. The only way I can imagine it would have worked is if he somehow found out about the phrase for safe passage, went through individually and killed Santiago, then somehow rallied his forces and convinced *los perdidos* that he was in charge now. But even that seems strange because I was damn lucky I found someone who would tell me. It's incredibly difficult knowledge to obtain, even in the underground, even with extremely reliable connections."

"Somehow he struck me as the kind of person who most likely knows everything. He certainly seemed to know a lot about you and Vega; at least enough not to ask questions or even seem remotely surprised or curious about the situation you were in. Something about him bothered me but I can't exactly put my finger on what it is. It was a strange feeling." Kassian shrugged. "Why didn't he kill us? I fully expected him to and he certainly had the manpower to do it."

"I don't know," Boyd said honestly. "It was the second time he could have killed me and didn't." He lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Maybe he's amused enough by the

predicaments he finds me in that he's in a good enough mood to spare those around me. But to be honest, as dangerous as he is, I don't think he kills for no reason. Although being in his territory is probably reason enough."

"He is an interesting character," Kassian said. "However, I'm glad we did not have to deal with him for long." There was a pause. "Good job on handling the situation though."

Boyd's lips pulled to one side in a reserved expression and he inclined his head in acknowledgment. He didn't know how well he had really handled the situation; in truth, it was probably simply luck that *lo más chingón* had not felt like killing them.

Kassian studied him, staying quiet for a few moments before he finally cleared his throat. "Just be careful, Boyd, with who you let see that side of yourself. Some people would use your reactions against you." He didn't say specifically what he was talking about but it seemed pretty obvious that he was referring to Boyd's distress over Sin.

Boyd met his gaze for a long moment before he looked away thoughtfully. It wasn't that he'd intended for it turn out that way. Of course, if he'd been in a room with enemies he would have tried harder to act differently.

That was what he thought but truthfully, he hadn't even realized what he must have looked like. The guilt, the fear, the worry-- There were so many situations in which he never would have let it show, but it was just-- He was so afraid for Sin... He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Regardless, Kassian was right. It was one more thing he'd done wrong; one more thing he needed to work on. But at least Kassian didn't seem to be judging him on it.

"Thank you," he said after a moment, the words quiet but appreciative at least of the fact Kassian was trying to help.

They fell silent and the next few hours passed without incident.

Boyd leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, the plane seeming to tilt around him due simply to his exhaustion. His thoughts were sluggish, confused, and led him into a half-sleep that was filled with things that made no sense but somehow had his heart pounding regardless. He was startled awake by the PA buzzing and the pilot announcing that they were going in for landing. He blinked, looking around himself in confusion, and didn't feel alert enough to think clearly for a while even after they'd landed and grabbed their gear to disembark. When he and Sin had gone to Laredo, they'd taken a normal plane with regular civilians in order to keep up their cover so they'd also used a regular airport. But the return trip was by Agency plane and brought them to a small, private airport where an Agency vehicle was waiting to transport them to the Johnson's Pharmaceuticals compound. The ride was silent but more than anything it seemed it was because they were all tired, worn out.

By the time the van rolled through the gates and parked in front of the main building, Boyd felt like the bit of sleep he'd managed to catch on the plane had done him more harm than good. He felt like he couldn't think properly and being back at the Agency after most of a year away was surreal, as if it was just a fever dream and he was actually still in Monterrey, having fallen asleep on the couch and, in a few hours, Sin would be home. He followed the others into the building without really looking around or paying attention; instead, he was slowly thinking about what he would do next. He would go to the medical wing to verify Sin made it back alright, then he would wait until Sin was stable enough that he felt like he could leave for a bit, and then he'd go home to sleep until he woke up on his own, regardless of how long that would take. Or maybe he could stop by Ryan's and crash there for a bit.

However, as soon as they were inside the complex a guard immediately approached the group and informed them that Kassian and his crew were to report to Conference Room 2A for debriefing with General Stephen and Boyd was to follow the guard to Conference Room 5F for the same. Boyd looked at him then nodded tiredly; it made sense, as they were on different teams. Even so, he wished Carhart would just give him the chance to check on Sin first but no doubt he was wondering what the hell

had happened. The debriefing would hopefully not take too long and after that he could just follow his original plan.

He shifted but before he could take a step away from the others, Kassian suddenly reached out and grabbed his arm. Boyd turned in surprise, his gaze dropping to the hand on his arm before he looked up at Kassian with a strange look.

Kassian just stared at him with a peculiar expression on his face, one that was incredibly hard to decipher. He opened his mouth to say something but then he stopped, eyes flicking around before he finally focused on Boyd again. "Good luck." He squeezed Boyd's arm and then released it before turning around and striding off in the direction his team had gone.

Boyd watched Kassian go before he just shook his head to himself and followed the guard. They said nothing to each other as they passed through the building, walking up the main set of stairs before they made it to the main bank of elevators. He idly watched the guard hit the button for the fifth floor and they didn't even look at each other on the way up; Boyd stared blankly at the buttons while the guard watched the door as if someone may break through even in transit. At their stop, he quietly followed the guard to the right down a long hallway. He hadn't spent much time on the fifth floor; it primarily housed conference rooms and some offices for people who did clerical work for the Agency.

The guard led him down several turns until they arrived at a heavy wooden door, marked simply with gold letters reading '5F.' He opened the door and stood to the side, waiting for Boyd to enter.

Boyd glanced at him as he walked past, wondering why the guard felt the need to open the door as if he were incapable of doing so himself, but the guard's expression was unreadable. Boyd was already considering what he was going to say to Carhart when he turned and saw the room for the first time.

Connors and Vivienne sat at the long conference table, twin gazes fixed solely on him.

He froze, the words dying in his throat as he glanced around quickly; partially as an automatic response to look for exits and partially to see if he was in the wrong room, as if maybe Carhart was there to bring him somewhere else. But there was no one else in the room and they were both focused on him as he stared with slightly widened eyes back. The door shut firmly behind him; for some reason that made his heart pound, especially when he noted their expressions. Connors was regarding him with a cold, flat look while all he could tell of his mother was that she was incredibly displeased.

"Sit down, Boyd," Connors said coolly, giving nothing away in his tone. Looking quickly between them, Boyd hesitated briefly before he followed the order. The last thing he expected was to walk into a room with just Connors and Vivienne. Along with everything else that had been happening, his mind was reeling as he tried to understand what this meant.

Connors folded his hands in front of him neatly and continued to look directly into Boyd's eyes. "You're here to be debriefed. I am sure you expected to breeze in here and deal with General Carhart but I'm afraid, due to the nature of this... *incident*, and the damage that has been caused, I, we, will be dealing with you directly." He paused and leaned back in his chair, never dropping his gaze. "We are aware that the mission was an abominable failure and, in detail, you will explain why that is."

Boyd glanced at his mother again although her expression gave nothing away. He returned his attention to Connors and tried to get his mind to work well enough to formulate a response. The shock of seeing them had scattered his thoughts at first but now the adrenaline was back, giving him a bit of energy to work with, sharpening his senses enough for him to concentrate on the moment.

"Well, sir," Boyd said carefully, "The preparations went well and there were no troubles with our covers. I observed messengers from various preliminary Janus groups from across the world, including Sector 62, and the Janus representatives appeared to be recruiters primarily interested in explaining the propaganda of the cause. I learned that Janus is starting to work on building support in neutral countries as well; they are looking into Greece first and afterwards may intend to go for most of Europe, and later

South America. At the moment, they are currently interested in Northeast Europe, specifically Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, and they are having troubles with Dǐ Zhì. However, as time passed I did not observe any of the listed targets nor any leaders from the represented sectors. It appeared as though the convention was an orientation for newly accepted groups with only lower level messengers attending. We waited until the speakers were well into the main speech, which was propaganda and did not mention future plans, before we concluded that the specified targets would not be appearing. At that point, we proceeded with the plan as ordered."

"I see." Connors narrowed his eyes slightly and for the first time, the displeasure truly showed in his face. "So what you are telling me is that the information you so... diligently worked for to obtain from Thierry was, in fact, false."

Boyd was silent for a moment but did not look away from Connors' eyes. "Yes, sir."

"And on top of that, you were seen," Connors said flatly.

"With a rather incriminating description," Vivienne added coolly. Boyd looked over at her and she met his gaze with unreadable blue eyes like ice. "With the sole information being a white male with light-colored hair, you can imagine that they naturally assumed it may have something to do with the United States, given Monterrey's proximity to the border. The tentative partnership we have had with the Mexican government is currently exceedingly strained; they are highly suspicious, distrustful of what we say, and there are any number of innocent foreigners who have been detained and interrogated, with little to no mercy."

She favored him with an extremely unimpressed look. "This is not to mention the reaction of their home countries. The governments are angry, highly suspicious, and quite intent on discovering who was behind the fiasco that resulted in their citizens being terrorized in Mexico. Due to your inability to properly flee the scene and blend in, dozens of people have been brutally harmed, who had nothing to do with the convention center or your incompetence. And we have nothing to show for any of it."

Somehow, by the firm way she stated that and the look she gave him, Boyd knew she was expecting a response. But he didn't know what to say. He couldn't deny what she said and any explanations he would try to give would fall flat. Beyond that, the idea that completely innocent people were hurt while the Mexican government searched for him didn't make him feel any better. He just stared at her before finally saying quietly, "I'm... sorry." He saw her eyes flash but anything he could think to add was only more incriminating so he stayed silent.

"So if one were to summarize the chain of events so far, one would conclude that you, without discussion, questions or any investigative work whatsoever, provided services to an informant and received for us a disc which proceeded to lead us on what was essentially a very expensive and time-consuming wild goose chase. Had we not followed the information that you provided us with, we would have never used so many resources and taken such risks in a country that we previously had good relations with, to murder a bunch of low-ranking operatives from low-ranking Janus cells. In addition to this phenomenal waste of time, your complete lack of awareness and stealth has led several countries on an international witch hunt to figure out which agency was responsible for the mess that has been made in Monterrey. And all you have as an explanation is that you are... sorry." Connors leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowing. "Have I left anything out?"

Boyd didn't think it was a very fair assessment of what had happened with Thierry; they'd only had a limited amount of time and Carhart had been adamant that it was extremely important that Thierry remained pleased with them because the information could change so much. He had done the best he could in the situation; what he'd thought was the right thing. It wasn't that he hadn't considered the situation at all or that it had been his first choice, it was just what he'd concluded to be the quickest, most efficient way to finish the mission. He didn't bring it up, though, because Connors likely wouldn't believe anything he said in the first place and any explanation he'd give regarding Thierry would probably somehow make it all sound worse anyway. And it was a moot point. The absolute truth of it was, the information was bad. People died

because of it. Innocents were severely harmed. He couldn't argue his case against that evidence; the truth was, he'd seriously fucked up.

"...No, sir," Boyd said quietly, finally, making himself keep eye contact.

"Oh but I have," Connors corrected, voice growing colder if that were at all possible. "Let's not forget the loss of Agent Vega."

Boyd's heart clenched at the words, the casual phrasing of the 'loss' of Sin, but he stayed silent, not knowing what Connors wanted to hear.

"How precisely did Agent Vega get captured?" The question was spoken more like an accusation and the expression on Connor's face only emphasized it. "What was your plan and, once again, why did it go wrong?"

The weight of Connors' displeasure was intense, and for the first time he understood why no one seemed to stand up to him, why even his mother would sit silently at his side in this situation. Even without raising his voice, he made Boyd feel as though he were very small, as though his words could eclipse him and find all his faults without ever having to grow louder than a speaking tone. In that way, he and Vivienne were comparable in that their anger and displeasure could make a person feel insignificant, imperfect, inherently flawed. He couldn't quite comprehend, in retrospect, how he'd managed to yell at Connors not even a year ago, insulting him through the doorway any number of ways. It wasn't that he'd never consider doing the same again in a similar situation or that he would do it differently if he could go back to the time, but at that moment with Connors staring at him in accusatory, frigid displeasure, disobeying or angering him further was about the last thing on his mind.

He gathered his thoughts and answered in a respectful, even voice. "I don't know exactly how it happened, sir. We had a main plan with a contingency in the event we would be unable to enact the first. In order to properly cut off any exit points for the Janus cells, we had to split up as we detonated the bombs. We used short range radios to communicate our status. We'd intended to meet immediately at a designated point

and go into hiding together until we could leave Monterrey. However..." Boyd couldn't help hesitating briefly as he tried to figure out how to word the next part.

He didn't want to explain this, because it implicated them both. He didn't know what Sin's status was, he was hoping to God that Connors was using incredibly poor phrasing and that it wasn't what it sounded like, that Sin wasn't dead after all. But as much as he wanted to keep believing, he couldn't forget the way he'd looked, he couldn't forget the blood and the obvious trauma, and how hard it had been for Kassian to revive him. Sin... could be dead. After all that, he could be dead. Boyd couldn't think about that at the moment, though; not with Connors and his mother scrutinizing him. On the other hand, even if Sin was... gone, Boyd somehow wanted to still protect him. Even if he'd been furious with Sin for his decision to stop to get Jessica, he didn't want Connors or his mother to know about the incident, he didn't want Sin in any way to get in trouble for stopping when technically, according to their training, he should not have. But he couldn't lie and he couldn't hide it.

"On the way out," Boyd said, "Agent Vega reported a delay. He'd... found a wounded civilian that he was going to assist. I had already left the building and was on my way to hiding. I instructed him to desist; the authorities were coming and I felt it was too dangerous. But he felt he had the time so he... paused to help. I was too far away and there were too many people around the building. I did not feel I could return without jeopardizing both of our positions, so we decided to switch to the contingency plan. We were to observe radio silence and meet at a designated point two weeks later. The length of wait was chosen to give time for the immediate search to die down enough that we felt it would lessen the chance of our meeting being discovered. We were to rendezvous three days after the time I received word from Agent Trovosky that his team was en route. It was... the first time I'd learned of what had occurred."

Connors stared at Boyd silently for a long moment before asking, "And who was this wounded civilian?"

Boyd carefully kept any vestiges of dislike or disgust out of his reaction when he thought about Jessica. "His employer from the beginning of the mission; she knew him

as Jason Alvarez. She happened to be at the convention center and was wounded during the detonations."

"I see." Connors continued to stare at him with the same expression on his face. "And whose decision was it to switch to this contingency plan upon his decision to assist her?"

"It was mine, sir," Boyd said.

Vivienne's eyes narrowed at the words and Boyd carefully didn't look at her. She hadn't looked away from him once; even as Connors spoke, he could feel her cold stare pinpointed on him as if she were examining his soul for something and was not very pleased with what she found.

"And what was Agent Vega's response to your decision?" Connors asked in the same cool tone.

He could still remember Sin's frustrated yell that he wouldn't leave her, he wouldn't be the one to kill her. And the furiously snapped '*Fuck you*' when Boyd refused to help. "He... was angry, sir."

"I see." Connors unfolded his hands and began tapping his fingers against the heavy, glass conference table. "Tell me Agent Beaulieu, what is your job here?"

Boyd's fingers twitched in his lap but his expression didn't change. "To... To be a Field Agent, sir."

Connors eyebrows shot up. "Oh really? Because I was under the impression that you were hired first and foremost to be Agent Vega's partner and to ensure that he does not do the idiotic things that he is prone to do because of his specific peculiarities. Along with that job description obviously comes the job of being a Field Agent, but that is not why we hired you. If we wanted to hire a new Field Agent we wouldn't have hired a scrawny child with no fighting skills or experience. We hired you because you were the most compatible match with Agent Vega. Because you seemed like the best fit and because at the time I was under the impression that you had a shred of intelligence and

would manage, if he didn't kill you, to keep him in line because you did not fear him or feel the need to control him." His fingers continued to tap the glass. "Did you somehow misunderstand?"

"I..." Boyd could feel Vivienne's stare intensify and he couldn't help flicking his gaze over to her. There was something foreboding in her expression, almost like a warning, as if regardless of what he said he would just be digging his own grave. Strangely, he almost got the impression that the look was not aimed in anger at him, though; it was almost as if she was warning him silently. But he could not fully understand why that would be the case and the intensity of the expression confused him, made something in him want to hide from that look, from Connors' words, from the entire situation. The adrenaline was keeping him going now but he could tell that later, when he was away from all the dissecting stares and stretches of displeased silence, he was going to crash. But for the moment, he concentrated on keeping his expression and voice even, his breathing unhurried. He met Connors' eyes again and said, "No, sir."

"And were you not also informed that despite the common belief that Agent Vega is a murderer of women and children, he actually has a weakness for innocents, especially innocent females? Were you not aware of the fact that he has strayed from mission parameters on more than one occasion because of this preoccupation and subsequently endangered his own life, the success of the mission and also got himself put on the fourth after an incident in the city limits?" Connors expression did not change, his fingers continued their rhythmic tapping. "If you were not warned of this behavior during your training, I would like you to inform me of this so that I may punish your trainers accordingly. Although I am very aware of the fact that one, Ryan Freedman, has access to private files and has most likely shown them to you, so I do not think your knowledge on this subject can be particularly small."

Boyd could feel his heart beating faster. "No, I... was informed, sir."

"So then please, Agent Beaulieu, enlighten me as to why you were possessed to inform Agent Vega that you no longer wished to follow the original plan and meet after his escape. Is it not possible that he could have met you elsewhere in the city or that

you could have waited at your position briefly to see if he really would be hindered? According to you he was not pleased with your decision so there must have been a way to follow through. Or was he completely irrational and so because of his instability you decided it was better to save yourself and completely ignore your job description by leaving him there? Or perhaps there was another motive behind your reasoning." Connors raised an eyebrow and waited for a response.

For a moment, Boyd could only stare at Connors, trying to keep the sickening jolt of surprise out of his expression. It was... such a ridiculously simple solution, yet somehow... In the fury of the moment, in the stupidity that had taken over his mind, it hadn't even occurred to him--

He could have waited.

Rather than just assuming that Jessica would slow Sin down monumentally, that she inherently complicated matters so entirely that it would ruin all their plans, he could have just fucking waited a few minutes. For someone who was accustomed to dissecting every aspect of a plan, creating contingencies for every part and sometimes even back up plans for the contingencies, he couldn't believe that such a simple solution had honestly not even occurred to him. But the fire had been hot at his back, the resounding explosions of the bombs still vibrating through his bones, the screams of people surrounding him and the anger that had been building for months, unresolved, surrounding Jessica, surrounding anyone who threatened... Who threatened his standing with Sin, which he did anyway by his monumentally stupid decision.

At the same time, if they'd tried to create a third plan so last minute... It could have been too confusing, too risky. The reason Boyd had always intended for Plan A to be immediate or not at all was because too much time gave the authorities leeway to find them, to discover one of them before the other could arrive, or would allow their enemies to follow one of them to the hiding spot. He'd been so focused on the idea that Sin's slight change in his plan would mean Boyd would have to either go back to meet up with him or result in them meeting in another place in order to account for wherever

Sin was taking Jessica, that he hadn't even thought about just going to Calle Treinta as planned and waiting. Even a few minutes.

The chaos of the moment had made it too hectic, the jealousy had made him illogical. He'd stopped thinking like an Agent and had reacted like a jilted lover. If he'd been thinking clearly, he would have just waited a few minutes at Calle Treinta, not long enough for anyone to find him. When Sin had said he was stopping to get Jessica, he should have suggested that plan and given a time period he would leave by before he attempted to check back with Sin to verify their move to Plan B. If he'd done that, he would have known immediately something was wrong. If he'd done that, Sin wouldn't have...

He felt something go ice cold inside him. He was... He was such a fucking idiot...

In the brief silence of his revelation, he felt their twin gazes intensify on him, the scrutiny a constant pressure mixing with his exhaustion, with the shakiness inside of too much adrenaline and not enough sleep, and the fact it seemed every moment that passed he realized even more how much of a fucking idiot he was, how much he'd screwed up. He swallowed, trying not to let Connors' constant, astute questions dig too deep into him. "I--" he started to say, but Connors' words would not quite leave his mind. Better to save himself, leaving Sin there. He hadn't thought that, he'd just-- He'd been so angry, so stupidly angry... It hadn't... Between the two of them, he wouldn't have consciously chosen to save himself and yet that was exactly what he'd done.

"The situation was intense, sir," he said finally, trying to explain what had been going through his mind without making it into an excuse. The memory of the moment when he'd run away was in his thoughts; the sound of the static increasing, the disbelief in Sin's voice. He tried to ignore it but it was strong, vivid; despite that, his tone remained carefully calm, respectful. "I made a decision based upon my training and my understanding of the circumstances. We had the two plans already decided upon; in the chaos of the situation, to attempt to introduce a third scenario did not seem a good choice. We did not have much time and there was the very real possibility that any attempts to change the plan would result in miscommunication that could have led to

neither of us understanding what was expected, possible endangerment of both of our locations, and ultimately a larger failure. Given the circumstances, and considering that the contingency plan had been created specifically for the type of situation we found ourselves in, it made the most sense to wait the two weeks. I made a decision I thought was right, sir. It appears that it was a poor one after all, but at the time it seemed the most logical, sir."

"'A poor one'," Connors repeated and his eyebrows rose once again as he flipped over a file in front of him. "I am willing to go out on a limb and assume that Agent Vega was apprehended in two possible ways. He was mentally unstable and not thinking straight or he was caught off guard somehow and outnumbered. Although I am not excusing his decision, since I am not one to excuse any unnecessary action the man takes, it is entirely possible that he would not have been captured had you been there as his partner." He tapped the file. "But you were not and now we have a crippled Agent who is most likely brain dead. Would you like me to read you the extent of his injuries?"

Boyd felt his throat go dry. The guilt of abandoning Sin rose again, a strong current of an emotion that moved through his body like his blood. 'As his partner.' The words reminded him of the conversation he'd had with Sin regarding his first partners, the people who left or used him, the people who hadn't treated him like a human being. The people who should have been there as an equal, a partner, but who weren't. Connors was right; Boyd had been hired for a single purpose and he'd betrayed that purpose, betrayed Sin and caused him a staggering amount of injuries, torture and agony simply because he hadn't felt like going back. Because he hadn't wanted to see Sin anywhere near Jessica. Because he'd been too fucking stupid to think of waiting. The knowledge that he could have destroyed Sin's life, that he put him in a position to be murdered only to be revived and probably never really live again, overwhelmed him so completely that it silenced any words that may have surfaced.

His gaze turned heavy and dropped. He wanted to say no; he didn't want to hear it, he didn't want to know about any of it in detail because it would just haunt him relentlessly. His imagination would put images and sounds to the words and he would

obsess upon it, go repeatedly over his understanding of what had happened to Sin because in a large way, it was his fault. Because he should have been there to stop it. Because even if Janus had overpowered them both, at least Boyd would have known he'd tried, at least he would not have run away, leaving Sin to protect himself and a wounded civilian with no hope of backup in sight. But he didn't think Connors would take too kindly to him saying he didn't want to hear, and truthfully he felt like he didn't really have the right to avoid it since it was his fault. Sin certainly would never be able to ignore what happened so why should Boyd be able to? Feeling his stomach clench, he stared at his lap and stayed silent.

Connors took his silence as an assent, although he would have read the file regardless. "Apparently Janus had the mistaken idea that they could extract information from him with what appears to be medieval-style torture. However, what Janus does not know is that Agent Vega can withstand physical torture; his weakness is mental torture." The tone in which Connors said it clearly implied that he and others at the Agency were the only ones who could control Sin because they knew his weaknesses and because of that they were the only ones who had total power over him. It was almost smug, as if to say Sin was their tool alone, a special toy that could only be operated with directions they had. "They seemed to have used a method called stretching, a lovely technique developed in the Middle Ages by the Europeans, in which the victim's limbs are pulled away from the body, causing excruciating pain, dislocated body parts and destroyed tendons and ligaments." Connors did not look away from Boyd's closed off expression, even though he seemed to be reciting whatever lay in the pages of the report.

"In addition to that, he has a number of third degree burns which appear to have been made with a torch-like device, dozens of broken bones throughout his body, severe internal bleeding, an extensive loss of blood due to the various twin incisions that were made on his body most likely to ensure that he would bleed to death after they left him to die, a blood infection, massive head trauma and swelling to his brain." Connors continued to tap his fingers against the file. "I will be frank with you and tell you that the damage done to his limbs is easily reparable with reconstructive surgery however I am not sure it is even worth it to try. The damage done to his head, the fever

caused by the blood infection, all make the possibility of him remaining in a coma or emerging with a severe case of brain damage extremely probable. There is also the possibility that it will have caused his mental condition to worsen or any number of unfortunate scenarios. Until we determine whether or not that will be the case, I do not see the need to waste more resources on an Agent who is most likely unsalvageable. It is because of this that the medical staff was informed not to attempt resuscitation if he flat-lines again."

Boyd's eyes snapped up to Connors, a flash of surprise and alarm not hidden quite quick enough before he was able to smooth his expression again. "But-- Sir," he said, unable to keep a hint of urgency out of his tone, "he's an extremely valuable resource to the Agency and he's already made it through at least two flat-lines; with those odds, it seems probable he could pull through again."

"What is the point if he is not functional?" Connors countered coldly, speaking of Sin as though he were a computer that was no longer up to par with his needs.

Vivienne's stare seemed to intensify on Boyd but her expression did not change, nor did she say anything. He barely noticed her in his alarm at the idea of what Connors was suggesting.

"If he can live through that torture, flat-lining, and a coma, how do you know he won't have the fortitude to become 'functional' again?" Boyd insisted, hating that he was having to talk about Sin as if he was simply a machine or tool, but he believed it was the best way to get his point across to Connors. "You won't know until that point, sir, and in the meantime if you give up on him too early then you don't have a suitable replacement. You probably won't ever have another Agent that is quite like him. For... unique resources, isn't it worth it to try a little longer?"

Connors said nothing for a long moment and then, in the same flat tone, he asked, "Is your sexual relationship with Agent Vega adding to your motivation to plea for his life?"

Vivienne shifted, just a shade of movement but it was enough that it caught Boyd's attention. He didn't look over, though, nor pay heed to the fact that in his peripheral vision he could tell her expression had changed slightly. Instead, he stared at Connors, inwardly shocked as he wondered if he'd heard correctly. "My-- What?"

"Because one would assume," Connors continued as though Boyd had not asked a question, "that if that were the case, you would have put more effort into playing your role as partner."

"Sir, I don't know what you're talking about," Boyd said after a moment, keeping his expression and tone even. He couldn't figure out why the hell Connors would say that, why he would *know* that. He could only assume it was one of a number of choices; Connors was hazarding a guess and was hoping to catch him in some trap, someone from Kassian's team had somehow managed to send a note ahead regarding how he'd been acting, or the Agency had been spying on them in Monterrey after all. Of the three choices, he thought it most likely that Connors was just expanding on his theory from when he'd saved Sin from the box, that there was something happening between them. "It is simply that, as you've pointed out, this result is largely due to my decisions, so I feel responsible. Despite my inexcusable lapse in my duties in Monterrey, my job is still to be Agent Vega's partner. I feel that his usefulness should not be given up on too quickly, as well as the fact that he is a valuable resource for the Agency."

Connors flicked his hand dismissively. "I am done speaking with you. Officer Brians will escort you to the next stage of debriefing." There was a pause and then he added coolly. "Happy birthday, by the way."

Boyd stared at him in surprise for a moment, reeling from the entire conversation, the abrupt dismissal, and the random comment at the end. In everything that had occurred, he'd forgotten that it was his birthday, not that it mattered. He hesitated just briefly and finally glanced at his mother.

Her expression was extremely disapproving but there was something about it that was off; she seemed angry, but for some reason he didn't think it was solely

focused on him. She was probably angry that Connors had made such a comment about a sexual relationship with Sin, that her family was in any way being linked to something she disapproved of, but even so that didn't seem quite right. It was almost as if... she was angry with Connors himself, for some other reason. He couldn't even fathom what was going on between the two of them and he realized that in his surprise he'd stayed seated just long enough for Connors to give him a flat look as if wondering why he was still there.

"Ah-- Yes, sir," he said finally, feeling off balance and confused, and stood to head toward the door.

Brians, the guard, was waiting for him outside and surveyed him seriously before turning and walking purposefully down the hall. Boyd automatically followed him, trying to comprehend everything that had happened, trying not to think about what Connors had said, about how such a stupid mistake on his part could snowball so quickly into something so horrendous, and he was especially trying not to put images to the description of the torture.

They hadn't even made it to the next hallway when he heard his mother suddenly say, "Boyd."

He stopped in surprise and turned, thinking for a moment he could not possibly have heard that because it implied his mother, for probably the first time in his life, had come after him following a dismissal. But it was true; she stood just outside the closed door to 5F and, watching him with an utterly unreadable expression, she strode toward them. Brians stepped to the side but when she came and stopped in front of Boyd, she flicked a cool gaze at him and said curtly, "I will have a word with the child alone."

The words were ominous and made Boyd want to step away from her; was she actually so angry with him that she followed him out, that she felt the need to say more to him after everything else already said? He knew he was a fuck-up, he knew he'd abandoned his job position, he knew he'd made serious mistakes and he knew he had no proper excuses. What else could she possibly want to hear from him?

Brians nodded and stepped down the hall, watching Boyd closely but keeping enough distance that he was not intruding upon their privacy.

Vivienne looked at Brians with approval then returned her ice blue eyes to Boyd, who stared at her in growing paranoia. She studied him for a moment, almost as if he were a bug beneath a microscope, before she raised her eyebrows coolly. "In this profession, it is imperative that you learn your lessons thoroughly the first time; that you do not make the same mistake twice. I would have assumed you would understand this, yet I am apparently mistaken."

"Mother, I--" Boyd started to say, hoping to appease her quickly before she could add anything more to his overtaxed mind, before she could make it impossible for him to feel like he could properly function at all. But she raised one hand in warning and that was all it took for the words to die in his throat. She gave him a scrutinizing look, as if deciding whether she needed to impress upon him with words that she was not interested in his response at the moment or if he would stay quiet. When he said nothing, she nodded once in curt approval.

"Your ability to quickly adapt to new situations does not, apparently, cross over any longer to adapting current reactions to lessons learned in the past." Her eyes narrowed slightly, seeming to cut through his defenses to study the core of him. Her voice was cold, her expression otherwise unreadable though it remained intense. "Do you not recall the fiasco in Canada? You should understand fully by now that recklessness results in failure, that you do not have the luxury to be observed in any suspicious circumstances on any of your missions, and that it infuriates me and endangers every employee here when your actions jeopardize the secrecy of this organization. Do you find it enjoyable to do so or are you simply that incapable of learning?"

He stayed silent a moment, wondering at first if it was a rhetorical question, but she only quirked one eyebrow and he fought the urge to unconsciously cross his arms over his stomach in the face of her displeasure. "I... I don't..." He didn't know what to say; nothing would be acceptable. She was furious with him and she had good reason

to be; he didn't know why she felt the need to follow him to say any of this, why she hadn't just let him get to the next debriefing and get it over with so he could go to Sin and then go home.

"Let me answer it for you, since you are so ineloquent at the moment," she said, her expression intensifying. "I do not believe it to be either. You are perfectly capable of learning from past mistakes and you have never been the type to enjoy jeopardizing the safety of others. You remain the same child who avoided confrontations at school, who refused nearly all contact with other children and who, in essence, hid from anything that frightened you by ignoring it. Yet you are also the same person who learned quicker than any of your peers."

She ignored Boyd's surprised look and raised her eyebrows. "Therefore, I find it appalling and inconceivable that you would continually make the same mistakes. There is absolutely no need for us to be having this conversation at the moment. There is no reason whatsoever that you should have failed so abominably, and if you ever attempt to ignore the situation that you put others in due to your mistakes, you are doing them an immense disservice, avoiding your responsibility, and are completely unworthy of the status you have found yourself in. Do you understand?"

He couldn't quite understand what was happening; she was angry with him, and yet... "I-- Yes, Mother," he said quietly and she stared at him for a very long moment, her gaze so intense he felt like it was burning through him.

The silence between them stretched until Boyd thought that maybe she was actually silently dismissing him. He hesitated, but he really wanted to just go check on Sin already and the more time he spent before the next debriefing just meant he would have to wait longer. Almost as if she understood his thoughts, Vivienne narrowed her eyes pointedly.

"Boyd," she said, and somehow despite the coolness of her tone, it almost seemed less remote than usual. "The purpose of learning your lessons thoroughly the

first time is for everyone's safety." She stared at him hard. "Including your own, despite any ineptitude you may unnecessarily show."

Surprised, Boyd stared at her, but before he could formulate a response she looked away from him abruptly and said with calm coolness, "I have been delayed from my work long enough." She didn't give him the chance to react before she strode away, giving Brians a pointed look to express that she was finished.

Boyd watched her go in a mixture of surprise and confusion, then glanced over when Brians appeared at his side again. Without a single word exchanged, Brians started walking while Boyd, glancing once more toward his mother, trailed behind. He was so immersed in his thoughts that he wasn't paying much attention to his surroundings.

What had that all been about with his mother? He was so confused; since when did she go out of her way to follow him, to talk to him like that? He knew she was furious about what happened in Monterrey, yet she didn't take the chance to lecture him as icily as he would have expected. If anything, it seemed her displeasure was spread to more than just him. He had no idea what was going on with that and every conclusion he came to seemed as confusing as the last. The only thing he could figure was that Connors had probably taken it upon himself to make comments to her as he did the first time about Boyd sleeping with Thierry. It infuriated her as it had the first time and now she was as angry with Boyd for messing up again and Connors for rubbing it in her face. So she felt the need to inform him that he needed to start learning his lessons best the first time. That must have been what was happening there.

Brians made a noise ahead of him and he blinked, looked at him and realized he was so deep in thought that he'd almost missed a turn. Without his expression changing at all, he pivoted and started following Brians once more. He didn't know where this second level of debriefing would occur but no doubt it would probably include someone from Carhart's team or else someone from the undercover division. He'd heard that they sometimes sent people who had spent long periods of time in undercover missions over to one of the psychiatrists; it was an added precaution, to be certain the person could

handle whatever they'd been through and that they were fully back in their real life rather than still stuck in parts of their persona.

While he walked, he couldn't help thinking about Connors' words, the description of what Sin had been through. It made him feel sick to his stomach, made his heart actually hurt and the regret to rise within him. He couldn't even imagine being through that, he couldn't-- He didn't want to think about it but he couldn't help it. He'd known something horrendous had been done to Sin but he hadn't thought it was that. Now that he knew specifics he couldn't help remembering reading about that torture in school; he could recall the drawings in their books and the way he'd read the accounts without really feeling anything. At the time it had all seemed so irrelevant and he couldn't have cared less what people went through centuries ago. Now when he remembered the pictures, he placed Sin there instead, and his imagination resumed the ghostly images and sounds from before; only this time it was with more vivid details.

Brians led him on a winding route through the building, finally stopping just outside a room down the end of a hallway Boyd didn't recognize. Boyd glanced at him, checking if it was their destination, while Brians inserted a code into a keypad next to the door. Boyd wasn't able to see what the code was and he was still pensive and distracted enough that he didn't bother to really try. Instead, he looked around the hallway, trying to place it in his mind to the areas he'd observed in Johnson's Pharmaceuticals. He was positive this was not an area he'd investigated yet, which meant it was probably one of the corner halls of one of the lesser-used floors, yet for some reason he thought he'd seen it before. He heard the door open behind him and Brians moved aside to let him through.

Still looking out the hallway, Boyd stepped into the room at the same time as he finally turned to look at it, noting that it seemed small and the lights were out.

A stinging pain suddenly centered on his arm and was so abrupt that it caught him completely off-guard. Boyd had no idea what was happening but he automatically tried to jerk away with a startled, "What--!"

Brians grabbed him from behind and held him still despite his struggling, his arms locked in a similar manner that Archer had held him before except this time he seemed to be holding something to his arm. But Brians wasn't as strong as Archer and after his initial reaction of surprised struggling, Boyd was able to think clearly enough to go still and use his feet to kick at Brians' legs. The sudden dead weight combined with attacking his legs was enough to throw Brians' center of gravity off slightly; when Boyd abruptly jerked and the adrenaline raced through his system, he was able to break his hold and yank himself away, feeling something rip at his arm. Brians watched him, unperturbed, as he stumbled, caught himself, and automatically reached up toward his arm which was aching in pain.

He barely had seconds after he'd pulled away to note Brians had a needle in his hand before the man stepped back through the doorway. Boyd's mind raced furiously, calculating whether he'd be able to get past him to the relatively safety of the hallway, whether he even wanted to try. Brians was far larger and stronger than he was but he was probably also slower; there was a chance that if he ran for it, if he distracted the man somehow or caught him off-guard or even just used the advantage of his smaller body to wriggle his way out of his hold, he would be able to escape. Brians held a needle, though; even if he didn't immediately feel any effects, it was likely he'd just been drugged somehow and he didn't know how long it would take to affect him, so he wasn't even positive he would make it far.

Even so, he automatically started to run toward the door, mind already several steps ahead of the present as he tried to plan his escape but in the brief seconds as the door closed and he could have dove, could have fought his way through and tried his best to break Brians' hold on him, he hesitated.

He had to acknowledge that he was already in deep trouble, that Connors and his mother were furious with him, that Connors had told him he was heading to the second debriefing, that he'd been instructed to follow Brians. That he didn't actually have anywhere to go, that he wasn't even positive where he was in the facility and although he knew he'd be able to find his way out, he didn't know how long it would

take. That for all that he wanted to run to the med wing to check on Sin, he also knew he was exhausted, that the tiredness and lack of proper food, water or sleep for the last two weeks was bound to slow him down, make him more confused, cause him to make more poor decisions.

If he ran now, he'd be running from Connors' direct orders and although he had stood up to him once, he didn't know what would happen if he tried again. And even though it had nothing at all to do with Boyd as to whether or not Connors would decide to revive Sin if he did flat-line once more, there was still some part of him that twisted in paranoia; what if his arguments for keeping Sin alive had somehow, in the back of Connors' mind, started to convince him? What if by acting so recklessly defiant right now, Boyd would anger Connors enough that it would negate the argument?

So he slowed as he reached the door, as it slid shut in front of Brians' face, and he placed his palms against it, his head tilting toward the ground as a wave of weariness rolled over him. Even supported by the wall he wavered on his feet, and he concentrated all his efforts on stepping back and studying the door just in case so he would know how to escape later if it came to that. But the door was encased in the wall; it slid shut with no hinges and no doorknob on this side. There wasn't even a keypad for him to access and as he studied the door, he realized there would be no way for him to get out. His heartbeat increased at the thought, but he still didn't know why he was there, he still didn't know what was happening.

He turned, leaning against the wall as he looked around the room. It was too dark to really see anything, but then the lights suddenly flipped on. He winced, closing his eyes from the sudden onslaught as afterimages of bright purple circles burned into his retina. Another wave of dizziness slowly rose around him, submerging him as he brought one hand to his forehead as if to steady his head. The dizziness didn't entirely fade, but after a moment he was able to open his eyes without the disorientation being quite so strong, and he squinted as he looked around the room. It was painted entirely white from floor to ceiling with no decorations at all save a metal table in the center and

a few small fixtures scattered strategically across the tops of the walls. He looked around quickly for any sign of anyone else but he was alone.

He started to walk across the room, intending to get a better look around, at least to see the table better despite the fact that his eyes still hadn't quite adjusted to the brightness of the light. He headed toward the table and between one blink and the next, he realized someone was lying there. The room fuzzed white on the edges of his vision and he shook his head, thinking at first he was just seeing things, but the person was still there and as he came closer he realized with a jolt it was Sin.

"Si--" His eyes widened and he stumbled over his own feet trying to get there faster, wondering what the hell was happening, why he hadn't noticed him before. Had he been there all along and he hadn't been able to tell because it was too dark, because the light was too sudden and too bright? He almost fell against the table as he came upon it and now he could see it was Sin, he was lying there with his head tilted back lifelessly, his body as damaged as it had been in the basement and when Boyd dropped his hand to the table to catch himself, he felt warm blood sliding beneath his palms--

"Hello Boyd," a voice boomed suddenly, causing him to jerk his head up as he wildly looked around. No one was there and it took him a second to realize that it had to have come from a speaker of some kind. He did not recognize the voice and there was nothing particularly striking about it to give him a clue as to who the speaker may be; it was male, somewhat flat, monotone, and closely resembled the way announcers in advertisements sounded. "We have never formally met, but then, we've never had reason to," the voice continued smoothly. "My name is Shane Dourman, an employee of Johnson's Pharmaceuticals on the Fourth Floor Interrogation and Detainment Facility."

At the words, Boyd's eyes widened and he felt his heart jump. He looked back down at the table, some distant, confused part of him automatically thinking that the Agency had already punished Sin because he had stopped to help Jessica and now they were coming for him--

The table was empty, a dull silver that shone in the light, but the whites of the walls shifted in his peripheral vision, almost like pictures that pixelated abruptly and turned darker, less clear. For a moment, he thought he was back in the abandoned clinic in Monterrey, standing next to an empty table with only Sin's blood surrounding him to tell the story of what had happened. But when he squeezed his eyes shut then opened them again, the room re-solidified around him; white, stark. Empty.

He looked up at the ceiling again and the room rotated; disorientation rising steadily until for a moment he didn't know what was happening, he didn't even know if he'd actually heard the voice earlier, but at that thought he remembered the words and he shook his head again, placing all his weight on the table.

Fourth. He was on...

His mind was working in confusing ways, strange connections being made while other parts, things he thought were probably very logical, left gaping holes of confusion. The hallway... That's why he'd remembered it, from that video, long ago. When Sin was being transported and he'd attacked the generals... And his mother's parting words, suddenly talking about his recklessness, his safety, things she'd never bothered bringing up before but this time-- Had she actually been trying to warn him? Trying to say he needed to be careful because he was headed to--

The idea of being there frightened him, not knowing what was coming, only knowing it was a place to fear, a place even Sin never wanted to go--

Connors sent him there. Connors sent him but could he be too surprised? Sin had been sent to Fourth several times, this was the way the Agency worked. A person fucked up and they were punished. He'd just... He'd never had to come here and somehow, he'd never thought about himself being sent here. Maybe he'd thought he would never fuck up so much that they'd bring him to Fourth, but... Sin lying bleeding in the box and he'd looked dead, he'd looked dead, he remembered how terrified he'd been and what were they going to do to him, if they sent Sin to the box, then what would the equivalent be for him?

"The drugs will take full effect soon," Shane said calmly. "Once they do, you will be restrained by the guards."

The lights dimmed and Boyd looked around, his heart automatically pounding as the disorientation grew. Shane's words washed over him but he didn't quite comprehend them, couldn't quite understand why his heart was racing even while his mind still tried to slowly interpret what had been said. He could hear a distant whirring noise, like a fan in a machine, and a soft click. Spots of light appeared on the walls one after another, surrounding him until they shone brightly like headlights in the dark. He found himself moving away from the table, turning in a circle as he backed up and the spots of light just emphasized the darker parts between, made it seem hazier, the white fuzzing until--

He thought he heard movement behind him and he turned around suddenly, saw *lo más chingón* sauntering toward him, his form silhouetted starkly by the trucks behind him. Boyd stared at him in surprise, shook his head once to clear his mind, but *Chingón* was still there, walking closer as he seemed to be surveying the area. "Goodness. Lose your toy already, *maricone?*" he asked in his usual low drawl, a hint of mocking in his tone.

"Not... a toy," Boyd muttered, but he sounded a little confused and as he squinted through the light at *Chingón*, he saw his form waver and start to shift, to get a little shorter, a little stockier.

Connors' voice asked flatly, "Or did you just throw it away because you broke it? Was it too much work for you to bother to fix? Did you feel it was better to abandon it altogether?"

"I see no reason to keep something that has broken," Vivienne's voice said coolly from no particular direction. "It is simply a waste of space."

"What--?" Boyd said, squeezing his eyes shut and shaking his head again. "What's happen...?"

He wavered on his feet, stumbled and almost fell, caught himself only with a hand on the table and even just the feel of it gave him a strong sense of déjà vu. Fear was eating away at him now, starting at the edges of his perception until it slid into his blood and moved within him freely, completely. He tried to think clearly, tried to understand what was happening, but every time he tried to make any sort of connection it was as if the tide came in and washed it all away, powerful waves sucking his understanding out to sea where it was lost, tossed in the currents and absolutely gone and he couldn't... He tried to think but he couldn't and it frightened him and he needed to make it stop--

His eyes opened but it was just the room again, bright lights against the walls, a soft clicking but even that seemed a step away from reality, as if nothing was truly real anymore, everything was slowing being eaten by dreams that stayed even while he was awake, that stained his perception and made it impossible to understand what was really there--

"Until then, I have something I want to share with you," Shane said calmly, reasonably, his voice filling the room.

The lights on the wall glowed with an especially vivid, unearthly light that seemed to grow until it eclipsed everything around him. He stared at it, feeling like there was something moving just on the other side, ghostly voices that could almost be heard and then--

Something dark caught his attention, a flash of movement against one wall and he turned toward it. There was something large, a picture displayed across the entire wall and for a moment he was so disoriented that he couldn't even comprehend what it was. Shades of light and dark spread across the wall in a confusing jumble until something in him clicked, something understood he was seeing a body--

His heart lurched and he didn't even hear his strangled intake of breath when he understood what it was, the second he realized-- An autopsy picture focusing on Lou's head and shoulders was spread across the entire wall. Lou was lying against a metal

table, his head tilted back and eyes wide open, blank and glazed. His mouth was open, showing where a few front teeth were missing or broken-- *It'll make it easier for him to give head, they'd laughed, Boyd had tried to get to him but he couldn't make it, he couldn't get away--*

"What?" Boyd didn't even hear his voice, the frightened, lost word, didn't even realize his eyes had widened in horror--

Meat peeled away in chunks at his throat; a stab wound nearly to the spine -- *Now you'll keep your mouth shut, won't you? --* slicing straight through the larynx -- *blood had flowed out, his mouth was moving, he'd tried to say something but the words wouldn't come --*

"Wha-- No," Boyd whispered in rising alarm, his heartbeat jolting faster, making the blood rush through his body so quickly he almost felt dizzy, almost felt--

-- overlaid by a gash so deep across that it cut straight through -- *Say goodbye --* his throat was ripped open from Jared's knife, the grotesque wound clearly visible now that the blood was gone -- *I want you to remember this forever --*

Shaking, his hand was shaking against the floor and when had he fallen to his knees, when had he lost his balance? Lou's face, too large for him to look away and he was dead, he was dead, the blood was gone now so he could see clearly every wound and he still remembered the spray of blood-- "Oh God--"

The soft whirring and another click, another flash of black that he shouldn't have looked at but his mind was not working correctly and he did anyway--

Incisions neatly made across a chest he'd once touched -- *fucking stop it, Boyd, that tickles, I'm serious --* and the skin was pulled back, pale pink beneath the layer of skin and muscles and beneath were Lou's organs in perfect view, his ribs cracked and cut straight through -- *Next time pick a fuckbuddy --*

"--no, Jesus fucking--"

-- *who can actually back up his fucking mouth* -- into his heart, the wound a gaping hole --

"Christ--!"

Soft whirring and a click and he told himself not to look, he tried not to, but the room spun around him alarmingly and he meant to just slouch forward, meant to bring his hands to his head to make the world make sense again but when he opened his eyes he was staring at the wall.

He couldn't control anything correctly, tried to look toward the table, to pull himself up, maybe to get away from the image-- But when he opened his eyes (when had he closed them again?) he saw the floor. Close, tilted at an odd angle, the bright white blurring closer to his vision and it wasn't until he saw the picture at an angle on the distant wall that he realized he'd fallen on his side. He tried to push himself back up, tried to turn away from the wall with the new picture, but his body wouldn't listen--

A shot of Lou's overall body was vividly colored against the white, the picture taken before they'd pulled his skin up. A stab wound to the heart -- *the hilt had been the only thing he could see after Jared slammed the knife into him* -- and three scattered across the stomach --

"No!" he cried out desperately, "Stop it, *please!*"

"I'm afraid that is not possible, Boyd. You must be shown the error--" Another flash, another image, but this time it was of Sin. "--of your ways. The way your actions and lack of actions harm the ones you care most about. In the past you lacked the skills to save the one you loved but in the present you have the skills and still failed to act."

With the blood cleared away, the wounds were especially visible. Sin was lying on his back, arms at his sides, naked so the extent of his injuries could be seen --

"Oh God," Boyd groaned helplessly, tears gathering in his eyes as he tried to look away but couldn't get his head to shift, couldn't even seem to make his eyes stay closed --

Burn marks and lacerations covered him, looking deep and agonizing, scattered across his body mercilessly but the worst part was his arms -- *fingers ghosting up Boyd's thigh, a gentle touch despite how strong he was* -- and legs, the obvious damage from the stretching resulting in the familiar form of his limbs being lost, twisted -- *the woman in the picture had her head thrown back, she looked like she was screaming but Boyd just flipped the page, saw on the next page a man and he was screaming too, his face was twisted in agony, it morphed and looked like* -- Sin's arms and legs were broken, he could see the bone showing through the deep, dual incisions -- *Harriet leaned forward, the needle moving in and out steadily as Boyd struggled to get back there, Kassian's expression as he tried to revive Sin and Harriet's voice, "Kassian, he's dead. Just st--"*

"No!" Boyd yelled, tears blurring the picture as he tried to force his body to move but couldn't, the room was a fuzzy mess around him but somehow the pictures were entirely in focus, somehow everything on them was perfectly visible --

--Sin's body was pale and lifeless beneath the bruises, the chest and stomach Boyd had run his hands along so many times -- *Don't leave me like this, Sin, let me be with you, please* -- now nearly unrecognizable beneath the deep shades of black and purple -- *Do you like me touching you?* -- that were overcoming him, even his face, making it hard to see -- *his expression was strange; raw and beautiful and there were so many emotions that he couldn't pick even a single one out* -- the exact wounds, but it was clear he'd been through hell, clear that he'd suffered -- *Why?* -- *Because I trust you... because we're partners* -- and the lifeless slump of his body made him look dead - *- If this gets you caught* --

"Fuck-- No--" Boyd barely heard his voice twisting desperately, a step away from reality and mingling with the voices and memories he could feel too well --

-- *you fucking deserve it* --

"No," he shouted, fear and pain mingling into a plea. "Please, oh God, I won't do it again, I promise, just-- let me go, please--"

"I'm afraid that is not possible at the present time," Shane said calmly. His senses were skewed, some taking longer to translate in his mind before others. He heard the door opening at the same time he realized there were feet in front of his eyes. He told himself to fight them, to break free and sprint out the open door but all he could do was stare blearily at the hallway -- it seemed so distant, miles away, not just the few feet he'd easily walked earlier but now there was no chance he'd make it -- hands grabbed his arms and pulled him up -- the room nearly turned on end, *white on white on white* with the photos in vivid, grotesque color spinning around him and then he was standing but they were holding him and if they let go he'd fall to the ground. He was halfway across the room and he looked to his sides -- every time he blinked it was so slow, it was like an eternity between one image and the next -- there were four guards in a circle around him, holding him tightly between them as they brought him across the room--

The table was getting closer and only then did he actually look at it fully, only then did he see the heavy manacles welded into metal and he realized what they intended --

They-- Manacles--

*--down, they were going to hold him--*

Absolute, blind panic took over, the kind he had only felt once before in his life. Adrenaline slammed through his system while unadulterated terror filled him; he could barely grasp the rest of the room, could barely understand the images shining against the walls around him, all that he saw, all that he understood were the restraints--

"No!" he shouted, the panic making it into his voice and wide, terrified eyes.

The darker part of him that rose up when he was held down overcame him; the part that prowled in the back of his mind with the crazed chaos of the way it had been once, when the darkness had been shadows that had leeches inside and stained him irrevocably from the soul outward--

There was no thought anymore to his movements, absolutely nothing logical or rational or even aware; he twisted and screamed and struggled violently without any regard whatsoever for even his own safety or health, all he had was the single thought-- *get away, get away, before he couldn't move, before--* Distantly, his toes brushed the ground as they dragged him closer, but all he could see were the manacles growing closer, clearer, and-- *dark eyes watching in the dim light, calm and emotionless, silence descending around him and trying to choke him as he screamed--* he could feel his mind quell and shudder in fear--

Somewhere within, he found voice to groan-- "No, no, please--"

Cold metal pressed against his back and he felt his heart jackhammer, a violent thump that made his chest ache straight through his ribs, resounding through his entire body, and caused his lungs to freeze for one terrifying moment. He didn't remember them setting him down, he didn't remember--

"Oh-- Oh God--"

His head fell to the side and he saw one wrist already encased in the thick metal -- *it would be impossible to get out of, just like* -- his entire body was quaking from the inside out, bone deep horror making it to the skin --

"Fuck-- Fuck, no! *Please--!*"

A guard leaned over his face and distantly, in another realm, Boyd noticed the ceiling jolting slightly -- was it an earthquake or -- no, the guard just tightened something, made his entire body shift -- and he could barely breathe through the terror constricting his lungs. He was facing the ceiling but he didn't remember his head turning, he just remembered --

--*being caught--*

The guards moved around him calmly, his head rolled over of its own accord and he saw them head toward the door, leaving him alone--

-- *He couldn't move* --

His heart was trying to rip its way free of his ribs, a constant pounding that made his lungs stop, made his throat go dry and he didn't even realize he was screaming words still--

-- *No, no, this wasn't happening, he had to get away, he couldn't--*

-- *He couldn't fucking move* --

"Oh God, oh fucking God, *please, no!*"

Someone turned the lights down further, it was getting too dark to see -- the ceiling the walls the pictures shining against them and where had the guards gone how long were they missing? -- buzzing filling his ears, muffling sounds -- like cotton *like water and he was falling under, drowning and he couldn't get back up-- he tried to flail his limbs but the currents snatched at him, twisted his body and threw him around like a toy like slamming into the floor because he hadn't expected to get yanked back by his arm even though he should have and a gun was held to his eyes* -- He couldn't see at all, it was perfectly dark but he could hear, becoming his sole focus--

"As the drugs work through your system, you will briefly fall unconscious." A calm voice, surrounding him.

The lights were out, or -- no, it was his eyes, they were closed but he couldn't open them again --"But I'm afraid we are not finished yet, Boyd. When you awake, I have a video I'd like to show you."

The buzzing grew, took away control and sensation of his entire body, his limbs-- dragged him down where white static hummed around him and darkness ebbed and surged like memories come to reclaim the living, ghosts among the dead-- and steadily, inevitably, even thought disappeared.

Unable to support the effort any longer, the world crumpled in on itself and went black.

## Chapter 40

*I can't do it.*

Beep.

*She's here because of m— I'm not supposed to ca— Leave her. I can't.*

Beep. Beep.

*LEAVE HER.*

His hand twitched, fingers clenching and unclenching unconsciously.

*If I leave her... the explosion will kill her.*

*You're not supposed to care.*

*I can't.*

Beep. Beep. Beep.

The steady beeping began to pick up slightly in tempo.

*He'd been running for ten minutes while carrying her limp form but even from that distance, the dark streets were illuminated by the flames that shot up from the convention center. He'd studied the maps enough to be familiar with every alley, every side street and every road that avoided main intersections. When he finally paused, it was in the deserted warehouse district near the waterfront.*

*The alley was small and wedged between two long abandoned factories; he kicked a door in and dropped the girl on the floor unceremoniously. She stirred, mumbled something, but he was out the door again before she opened her eyes. Staying in a warehouse for two weeks was not part of the plan but first he had to make sure he didn't have a tail.*

*He ripped the microphone out of his ear and tossed it and the now useless radio into the river. They'd lost range long ago and he could deal with his partner later.*

*Boyd...*

*'If this gets you caught you fucking deserve it.'*

*Anger.*

He twitched again and this time, his teeth grit although his eyes still did not open.

*Scouting took nearly an hour; it would have been faster to go directly to Boyd, he could have dropped off the girl in a public park on the way. But only one of the routes he would take to a safe house appeared clear of emergency vehicles and cops. But first he would go back. He would leave the girl somewhere with more possibility of her actually being found.*

The straps dug into him, rubbed against his skin; chafed his wrists.

The beeping continued to grow faster.

*"Jason—"*

*He hadn't counted on her being awake.*

*"What are you do—What hap--?"*

*"You were hurt. There was a fire."*

*"But you—I thought I saw..."*

*"You didn't see anything."*

*Her face was badly bruised, dried blood clinging to a ghastly cut on her cheek. She looked scared. Of him. "Please just tell me what's happening."*

*Did she see something? What did she hear? His eyes narrowed slightly and the gun felt especially cold against the skin of his back. "We need to go."*

*"I'm fine! Just tell me—"*

*"I need to go."*

*The sound of footsteps. At least a dozen men.*

*A low exhale of breath; he grimaced.*

*His head snapped towards the door and then he looked at her with a deadly expression on his face.*

*Her eyes widened, the fear was more prominent now, she backed up. "My uncle—I called him. I was scared. I told him—I didn't know it was you and I sai—"*

*Idiot.*

*The door was kicked in easily—he'd already broken it. Men filed in pointing guns, a tall man entered after them and called out to Jessica.*

*Hale Clemons. The director of the JKS. The link to Janus. Her uncle.*

*A low grunt.*

*The leather straps creaked as his hands unconsciously wrenched against them.*

*Betrayal. Kill her.*

*Hesitation.*

*"Drop your weapons!"*

*He stared at them blankly. How did they know he had a weapon?*

*She stared at him guiltily.*

*Betrayal.*

*“Tío, I was wrong, I know him, he’s my—” A desperate plea, panic, she stared at him wide eyed, confused. Their eyes met and he could see the apology bleeding out of her.*

*Jessica.*

*The muscles in his jaw clenched. His hands twitched again. His heartbeat increased.*

*“Put your fucking weapons down or we’ll do this the hard way.”*

*“But he saved me! What the hell are you talking about! There were explosions and he sav—”*

*“You said a guy in a ski mask grabbed you-- Who the fuck do you think planted the explosives?” Uncle Hale had orders from Janus.*

*Capture. Interrogation.*

*He spread his arms before slowly, very slowly, removing the gun at his back. It felt heavier than usual. Colder than usual. He knelt down, eyes on the enemy.*

*She stared at him in confusion—Was he really... But it was Jaso— He couldn’t... The thoughts were obvious; the emotions clear across her face. “I—I must have... I must have misunderstood, maybe it wasn’t like I saw—I got hit on the hea—”*

*The Browning dropped to the floor, their eyes followed it.*

*They didn’t notice the Ruger.*

*His eyebrows drew together; he muttered something, his hands jerked at the straps with more force.*

*She screamed.*

*He killed four men with headshots before anyone had a chance to react.*

*He disappeared into the shadows.*

*Chaos. Shouting.*

*“FIND HIM!”*

*A glint of steel in the shadows. She screamed. Her uncle—*

*“NO!”*

*He pulled the trigger twice in quick succession... but she got in the way.*

*Uncle Hale landed on his side with a grunt.*

*Jessica got two bullets in the head, two millimeters apart.*

*“Jes—”*

*--sica?*

*Strong hands yanked at the straps; the beeping picked up wildly.*

*Shock.*

*I didn't mean to—She was innoc—*

*Monster. Killer. Murderer.*

*Frozen. Distraction. Darkness. Capture.*

Pale green eyes snapped open and he was instantly assaulted with bright lights, white walls. He winced, narrowing his eyes as he flicked them around quickly, trying to figure out where he was, what was happening.

He couldn't move his head; it was held in some kind of brace and as he looked down, he realized that the rest of his body was also strapped down to a flat, thin bed. Leather straps reinforced by steel kept his arms and legs locked into place an—

*“We’re going to do this the old fashioned way,” The man drawled, thin fingers reaching out to caress his face as something clamped onto his arm, twisting and stretching as agonizing pain scorched through him, as ligaments tore.*

*His teeth grit, eyes narrowed, heart pounding in his chest but he wouldn't give them the satisfaction.*

*“This is only the start,” The voice promised softly. “That tough façade won't last forever.”*

His eyes opened wider and he yanked at the straps, eyes frantically scanning the room in confusion. This wasn't the place—it'd smelled of rotting corpses, of mildew and disease—this place looked like a psych ward or a sterilized hospital room. Had they moved him? And why could he suddenly move his leg—

*He could feel bones snapping, tendons ripping through the dazed fog and when something slammed against his legs, his arms, crushing, breaking—he finally screamed.*

This was wrong. Everything was wrong. He shouldn't be able to move. His arms, legs—he shouldn't be able to move. Why did everything feel so heavy? Where was the pain?

Was it all a dream?

His breathing became labored as he yanked at the straps with increasing violence, the heart monitor beeping loudly and erratically as the steel on the bed began to whine and squeal in protest of his movements. He grunted with the effort, sweat breaking out on his face and body as he strained against the straps, causing the skin at his wrists to rip and blood to pool on the stark white sheets.

The heart monitor only seemed to get louder and he knew he didn't have much time. The steel abruptly twisted, bent, and the leather straps popped open, freeing one bloody hand. He panted with exhaustion, staring in confusion at the broken steel but not focusing on it as he reached up with one hand to fumble with the buckles that kept his head locked into place.

Once released, he yanked his second arm free and sat up partially to undo the straps at his ankles. Although he was shirtless and barefoot, thin white pants covered his legs and once again his eyes scanned the room in confusion. It was small and white; the only thing sitting in it was the bed and the IV stand which appeared to be attached to the rail. There was a mirror that stretched across one entire wall and he stared at himself in confusion.

His entire body had been cleaned of the layer of dried blood that had previously covered it; it seemed that someone had washed him thoroughly. His hair had been shaved off and replaced by a buzz cut. The gaping wounds that had decorated his body were sewn shut neatly, the bruises completely faded. The few pounds he'd managed to gain in Monterrey had apparently melted off during the weeks that he'd been detained and despite the fact that every limb felt unfamiliar and was difficult to lift, he was actually skinnier.

...What the fuck?

How long had he been here? How long had it been since he'd been captured? Since he'd made that weak, idiotic decision? Where the hell was he? Had they moved him to a new facility? Had they figured out another method of interrogation? Was this some new game they were going to play with him now?

What had happened to Boyd? Had he escaped the city when Sin never showed up or had he gone to search, used the GPS, gotten captured as well?

He ripped the IVs out of his wrist causing blood to pool on his skin, yanked the wires off of his chest and swung his legs over the side of the bed, getting to his feet. And once again... he was confused. How was this possible? Why could he walk? His

legs had been completely unusable, broken and unset... Had they operated on him? But why would they do that? Tendon reconstruction was a lot of trouble to go through for a prisoner.

He started to move forward, to take a step, but before he could move his head spun dangerously and vertigo hit him like a brick wall. He shouted in confusion, clutching his head as searing pain shot through it and doubled over as nausea began to overwhelm all of his senses. He sank to his knees, still clutching his head, and squinted at the door as he began to hear sounds behind it.

Fuck.

He tried to force himself to move, to get up, but as awareness and the fog of unconsciousness started to recede, he realized that his entire body felt foreign. His limbs felt strange, heavy and despite the fact that he could barely see straight as searing pain and a high pitched whine seemed to echo between his ears, he felt stronger.

He reached up and clutched the side of the bed, pulling himself to his feet unsteadily as he wavered and his eyes rolled in his head. He tried to ignore the pain, the dizziness, the confusion that threatened to completely consume him, and focused on the door. On the handle that was slowly turning, on the muffled argument that he could hear on the other side.

“—go in! He’s awake and—”

“He’s secured, you idiot. Calm down.”

“No way, do you know what that guy is capable o—”

Sin’s eyes narrowed and he started forward but it ended in a stumble, in him losing his balance once again as he struggled to get used to the strange way his body felt. Another violent wave of nausea overtook him and he crumpled to his knees with a frustrated groan that he couldn’t reign in.

What was wrong with him?

He had to get up. He had to move. He had to find Boyd. He had to—

The pain in his head intensified and this time he couldn't help but scream. The same high-pitched sound bounced around the sides of his already throbbing brain and he squeezed his eyes shut, wondering if anyone else could hear it but him. He was vaguely aware of the door opening, of people rushing in, but as he shook his head wildly, covering his ears with his hands, he couldn't even bring himself to look up.

"Damnit, I knew this would happen," someone was saying in mild annoyance.

"What's happening?" another unfamiliar voice asked.

Sin squinted up at them and scooted backwards clumsily, unable to see anything but white blurs through his tearing eyes.

There was a frustrated sigh as someone gave the order to sedate him.

"No!" he shouted desperately. "Don—"

But then the edges of his vision began to dim and blur, his body felt even heavier, as if his bones were made out of lead. He tried in vain to get up, to escape, but mere seconds later everything went black.

===

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Has he been stabilized?" a voice asked quietly.

"Yes. He threw everything off by ripping it out so suddenly. He has to be brought down slowly. It should be fine now," a second voice responded.

Silence. Steady beeping.

His eyes slid open briefly and he saw a tall middle aged man with strange colored eyes, indigo eyes that nearly looked purple, gazing down at him thoughtfully. "How do you think he broke the restraints like that? What does that mean?" a new voice asked, this one younger than the first two.

There was another brief silence and then the second voice replied, "It means..."

The world went dark again.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

===

*"I like to touch you."*

*He gasped softly, eyes rolling in his head at the feel of hands on his body, sliding down his hard chest, flat stomach, dull fingernails scraping along his thighs as they teased the skin at his crotch.*

*"Do you want me to stop?" the voice was low, deep, and thick with lust.*

*He shook his head desperately, hands clenching in the bed sheets that still smelled like sex, sweat, musk... like the night before. "Don't."*

*The hands gripped him and slid up again, fingers digging in harder, hard enough to cause pain, as the man straddled him and gazed down from behind a curtain of blond hair.*

*Boyd...*

*"Do you trust me?"*

*His eyes slid open and he stared up at Boyd through a haze of passion. "Yes."*

*Boyd's lips curled up into a smirk. "Good."*

*Then the knife abruptly plunged into his chest.*

==

Sin's eyes snapped open and once again, he was assaulted with bright lights and stark white walls. He lay completely still and tried to catch his breath as he panted harshly, as his heart pounded in his chest, as he tried to figure out if that had been a dream or a memory.

He didn't really know which was which anymore.

Sin closed his eyes again and took several deep breaths as he tried to gather his wits, as he tried to get past the disorientating confusion that wracked his brain. He tried to figure out what was real, what was fantasy, what he'd made up in a haze of drug induced unconsciousness and what had actually started this chain of events.

As he tried to figure out what it all had to do with Boyd and more importantly, where he was.

Images flipped through his mind like a slideshow on fast forward and his eyebrows drew together as he tried to make sense of the confusing jumble of memories that overwhelmed his brain. Everything shone like glass fragments in the sunlight, reflecting blinding light at him, causing him to flinch away before they shattered and turned into something new. For a moment he couldn't distinguish memories from his childhood with memories from his life as an Agent and he swallowed hard, Adam's apple bobbing violently, as he tried to weed through them and make sense of it all.

After years of repression, of confusion, of remembering things that were more than a little fuzzy around the edges, suddenly his memories took on a vivid clarity that he wasn't sure he preferred.

As everything whirled through his brain like a bizarre, avant-garde movie, he made conscious selections as to which memory he wanted to watch in which context and then suddenly... it all snapped into place.

Monterrey. The mission. Boyd. The girl. The Solar Convention Center. Janus.

Once again, slightly slanted green eyes opened but this time there was no confusion in them, no glassy uncertainty or dazed disorientation. He remembered everything.

His eyes snapped down to the restraints and this time he yanked his hands free effortlessly, the cuffs still dangling around his wrists oddly as he once again undid the head brace and the ankle restraints that trapped him against the stiff bed. He sat up slowly, less nauseated than he'd been the first time although there was still a dull ache in the back of his head, and rubbed at his wrists as he looked around the room.

It appeared to be the same room although they'd obviously gotten new restraints. The wires were once again attached to his chest with electrodes but he noted the fact that he was no longer hooked up to the IV. He ripped the electrodes off and tossed the wires to the side before swinging his legs over the side of the bed and focused on the door, on the faint conversation he could hear on the other side of it.

“—tests and send the results to Dr. Fredrick right away.”

“Will he... ..erative?”

“We'll see.”

“—but there's always sedation.”

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and he hopped off the bed, bare feet moving silently over the cold linoleum floor. He watched as the door handle turned and quickly moved to the right side of the door, pinning himself to the wall as the door swung open and partially concealed him from sight.

A woman in her early thirties entered the room with a clipboard in hand. She stopped just inside the doorway and stared at the bed in confusion before spinning around to survey the room. “What the he—”

Before she could finish the sentence, Sin grabbed her violently and pinned her back to his chest, dragging her backwards towards the mirror as she cried out in

surprise. Her colleague rushed into the room, a young looking man also clad in a white lab coat, and stared at them in alarm. "Don't hurt her!"

Sin wrapped one of his hands around her throat and narrowed his eyes at the other man. "Do anything stupid and I'll crush her throat."

"Frank, shoot him," The woman snapped at the younger guy. Despite the tension in her shoulders and the obvious fear in her voice, she managed to speak and hold herself in a relatively calm manner.

"B-but..." Frank stammered and fumbled with the buttons of his lab coat, attempting to extract the gun that apparently lay hidden beneath.

Sin stared at the man incredulously, not knowing if he was amused or disgusted with his behavior. "I guarantee you that this will not end well if you pull a weapon on me," He said in a low, warning voice. Frank froze and stared at him with a somewhat surprised expression on his face. "Just tell me what I want to know and I won't hurt either of you."

Frank stared at him doubtfully and the woman made a skeptical noise, but Frank nodded hesitantly. "Okay..."

Sin tightened his grip on the woman and she gasped. "Where the hell am I? Where's Clemons?"

Frank blinked at him in relative confusion. "Where's... what?"

"Hale Clemons," Sin repeated, tone impatient as his fingers tightened around the woman's throat enough to make her whimper softly. "Where the fuck is he, where the fuck am I and who is Dr. Frederick?"

There was another confused silence and this time it was the woman who spoke up in a hoarse, strained tone. "H-how do you know... Where did you hear Frederick's name?"

“Through the door.”

Another pause and this time Frank and the woman appeared to exchange glances. “This room is sound proof.”

“Obviously it’s fucking not so stop fucking around and tell me what the fuck I want to know or I’ll rip your throat out,” he snarled, eyes narrowing dangerously.

“But I don’t know what you’re talking about! Who—Clemons? I don’t know and Dr. Frederick is *your* doctor, the doctor in charge of your case,” Frank blurted out in an almost whine.

“Oh for God’s sake, Frank. He doesn’t know where the hell he is,” the woman said impatiently. “He *has* been in a coma, you know. You’re back, Agent Vega. Is it that hard to figure out?”

This time it was Sin’s turn to blink in confusion and he stared. “What?” His eyes once again flicked around the room in search of some sign that they were telling the truth, that he was no longer with Janus and finally his gaze fell on the right side of Frank’s lab coat. The maroon Johnson’s Pharmaceuticals logo was a stark contrast to the white cotton.

Green eyes rose and he stared at Frank blankly although he did not let the woman go. “Where’s Boyd?”

“Who?”

“Boyd Beaulieu, you fucking moron. Where is he?” Sin dragged the woman closer to the door, simultaneously shoving Frank out of the way, not really knowing what the hell he was planning to do because his mind was spinning.

He’d been in a coma. He was back at the Agency.

He thought he’d had everything figured out but once again there were huge black holes in his memory, once again he didn’t know what the fuck was going on and the

pounding in his head was getting worse—the disorienting confusion was once again making him feel dizzy. The last thing he remembered was a malnourished looking man with square rimmed glasses slicing into his body as his blood slowly bled out onto the filthy floor. The last thing he remembered was the door closing slowly and Clemons staring at him with a look of pure hatred just before it slammed shut.

“My partner. Where is he?” he said from between grit teeth, trying to calm himself even though impatience was making his temper get hotter, slowly spinning out of control in the dark way that hadn’t been an issue for months... since before the mission.

“I haven’t seen him since you’ve been back!” The woman blurted out, real terror making it into her voice as Sin’s expression grew visibly darker, as his hands tightened around her throat in a way that meant impending death. “They said that he isn’t coming back!”

Something went still in Sin for a long moment as he tried to figure out what that meant. As all of the possible implications ran through his mind, his temper finally got the best of him. Without warning he spun the woman around and shoved her so hard that she literally went flying across the room, slamming into the wall and collapsing onto the floor in an unconscious heap.

He turned on Frank, who’d frozen in terror, and stalked towards him. Frank automatically backed away but Sin swung out, crushing his fist into the younger man’s face and causing him to also fall backwards and slide down the wall. Sin yanked his lab coat open, popping the buttons in the process, and grabbed the standard issue handgun that he wore. He tucked it into the waistband of the plain, white pants and grabbed Frank’s set of keys as an afterthought before he slipped out the door, shutting it quietly behind him.

He ignored the rising nausea, the way his head pounded and the soft humming that wouldn’t seem to leave his ears, forcing himself to sprint down the hallway and towards the staircase. He’d been to the medical unit often in his career as an Agent but

this particular wing did not look familiar at all. It seemed particularly quiet and deserted but for the moment that worked in his favor.

He passed several doors on his way down the hall but no sounds came from any of them and the entire floor, with the exception of the two doctors he'd just assaulted, seemed deserted. He was almost to the exit when he encountered a glass door that appeared to lead to an office. He skidded to a stop and looked inside cautiously, noting that once again no one was inside although that seemed to be a recent development judging by the files scattered across the desk and the way the lamps still burned.

The keycard on Frank's ring was the standard issue Agency card that unlocked any door that Frank had specific access to. When Sin swiped it in the office door and the little light turned green, he could only assume that this was the man's office or at least an office he frequented. The office was fairly small and seemed slightly unorganized but Sin didn't really have interest in snooping around at the moment. He looked around in search of a shirt or jacket of some kind, anything that would make him stick out less than running around bare chested would and spied a black hoody on the back of the desk chair. It seemed that shoes would have to wait.

He grabbed the sweater and started to make his exit when a file on the desk with his name on it caught his attention. He paused, not really knowing if he cared enough to look inside but not able to stop himself from flipping it open. His pounding head and blurry vision proved reading the tiny text to be extremely difficult but as he flipped through the pages he gathered that they had in fact performed extensive reconstructive surgery on his body, which explained his sudden mobility. There were other confusing things in the files about proteomes and somatic cells that he generally did not understand and the throbbing in his brain prevented him from even making an effort to do so.

Sin closed the file and exited the office before continuing his way down the hall. He bypassed the elevator bank and slipped into the staircase exit, which automatically locked from the inside once it closed. He found that bizarre; he'd never seen anything like it in the medical units since people often rushed in and out of there at all times of

the day. However when he glanced out the window he saw that he wasn't even in the main building; he appeared to be in one of the smaller, squat buildings that was unnamed and typically unused by the general populace of the compound.

Once again, he found this odd, but he supposed they'd wanted to keep him away from the general population in the other areas. It wasn't too surprising when he put it into that context; they'd most likely been unsure of how he'd act upon emergence from the coma.

His bare feet padded against the concrete stairs and oddly enough, not once did any staff members appear. He got to the third floor when another violent wave of vertigo overtook him and he nearly fell face-forward down the flight of stairs. He caught the railing just in time and leaned against the wall, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to ignore the way his head was spinning. The pounding in his head was the only thing holding him up although he'd expected to have more problems with his limbs. Despite the odd feeling of unfamiliarity, the feeling that he wasn't used to his own body, there were no lingering effects from the abuse he'd taken and it caused him to stop, to wonder, to doubt his own memories. Had everything happened as he'd thought it had?

With trembling hands, Sin forced himself to stand and ignored the dark spots that danced before his vision. He needed to get out. He needed to find Boyd. He needed to get to someone who would know where Boyd was. That was all that mattered at the moment; he could puzzle over his strange condition after that. But first he had to figure out how to even get out of the fucking building without being dragged back to his room.

He made his way to the ground floor and as he glanced through the small window in the door, he saw that there wasn't even a receptionist desk in the lobby. If it could even be called a lobby. The room was completely empty save for some kiosks of unknown use and it had a North and South exit, both of which were most likely guarded at all times. The Agency guards were not typically very bright but he doubted they were stupid enough to just let him waltz by without questions.

Irritation and impatience burned through him as he figured out an alternate plan and found himself running back up the stairs, all thirteen floors, as he headed for the roof. Despite the fact that every building on the compound had a different purpose, the schematics of each was generally the same. He assumed that like the other buildings, this one had rooftop access which was granted by the keycard and he was right. He got onto the roof without further incident and slunk low, noting that it was dark outside which made it easier for him to blend with the shadows. He made his way to the far side of the roof, closest to one of the large overhanging trees and climbed over the edge as he contemplated the distance between the ledge and the nearest branch.

It was a huge oak tree and the leaves would provide him ample cov— Leaves? Hadn't it been fucking November when they'd infiltrated the convention center? Sin stared at the tree in confusion and for some reason he began to wonder if he'd imagined the whole assignment in Monterrey. Maybe he'd been injured some other way and that had been nothing more than an extended dream.

The thought disturbed him and he made the leap to the branch without further consideration. His head swam but he ignored it and caught the branch before climbing down the tree with surprising spryness. He jumped down the remaining distance and crouched in the shadows as he tried to figure out who he could trust on the complex; as he wondered who would even tell him the truth.

He began moving on autopilot, feet taking him wherever his mind had apparently directed them to go, and he found himself taking a meandering, alternate route that took him out of view of the main buildings and patrolling guards. He wound up in front of one of the nicer residential buildings which had two guards posted in front of it just like all the others. However in this case, one of the guards had apparently abandoned his post to talk to a female staff member on the other side of the building and the second guard stood there calling out to him in annoyance.

He doubted the man would just let him wander into the building without a lot of questions which, given the mood Sin was in, would probably result in him breaking the

guard's nose and he didn't want to make more trouble for himself until he found out what he needed to know.

So he waited. Lurked was probably a more appropriate word, as he crouched barefoot and half dressed in the shadows, waiting for someone to make a move. Finally after ten minutes of watching uncomfortably as his shift partner bullshitted, the second guard left his post and stalked around the building to break up the grope-fest. Sin moved fast, faster than seemed possible considering his disorientation, and was inside the building before the guard even reached his partner.

He once again bypassed the elevators in the building and his bare feet pounded up the stairs two at a time as he ran up to the top floor. When he finally arrived at his destination he was sweating and dizzier than he'd been before, as he leaned heavily on the wall for support. His heart was racing, his head spinning, and he felt like he was going to be violently sick. He pushed it all out of his mind and knocked on the door once, twice, and the third time his fist just slid down the door with a strange, dragging sound as he nearly lost his balance and fell over.

He braced his hands on the sides of the door, squeezing his eyes shut and keeping his head tilted down as he tried to catch his breath. The dark spots that drifted across his eyes were getting worse and he didn't know if he'd be able to stay on his feet for much longer. It was embarrassing feeling this weak but at the same time, he didn't really think it had anything to do with his actual strength so much as it had to do with the aching in his head.

For a long moment nothing happened and he just stood there panting harshly but then the door swung open and Carhart stared at him incredulously. "Wha--Hsi--what?"

"Wh--" The sentence ended up being lost in a fit of violent coughing and Sin leaned heavily against the wall as he squinted at the General. "Where's Boyd?" he grit out finally.

Carhart continued to stare at him in disbelief, not seeming in a rush to answer the question. Sin growled impatiently and fumbled with the gun that was stashed at the

small of his back but the end result was extremely unimpressive as he finally did lose his balance and wound up falling forward clumsily. His vision dimmed and his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He was vaguely aware of strong arms catching him, lifting him up, and even though he wanted to protest, everything went darker and he slipped into unconsciousness once again.

==

The smell of food and the sound of a softly spoken conversation woke him up.

"--sorry but something came up, Morgan."

He opened one eye slowly, preparing for another assault of white fluorescent lights but was relieved to only see the soft glow of a lamp. He opened his other eye and stared blankly at the ceiling as he once again tried to remember where he was and what the hell had happened to bring him there. He was laying on something soft and comfortable and he vaguely realized that it was a bed. And there were pillows.

"I know, but what do you want me to do? I said something came up. You know how it is."

Who the fuck was Morgan?

He dragged his eyes slowly away from the ceiling and took in his surroundings; from the large bed and the furniture, he gathered that he was in a bedroom. There were pictures on a desk but his eyes wouldn't focus enough for him to figure out who was in them although he did note that there was a gun and a clip next to the lamp. The room was immaculate but not Spartan; it looked lived in, comfortable, but everything obviously had a place and was put in it.

"Listen, I don't have time for this. I said sorry, I don't know what else you want me to say."

Carhart.

Sin made a face and slowly pulled himself into a sitting position as he tried to figure out why he was in a bedroom that apparently belonged to Carhart.

His eyebrows drew together and he slowly got to his feet, ignoring the spinning and the nausea that wouldn't leave as he stumbled to the door. There was a hallway and the hallway had hardwood floors which eventually turned into soft carpet as he entered the living room. He stared at it blankly for a moment, taking in the overstuffed couches, stereo and wide screen television, discreet decorations and the overwhelming neatness of the room. There was a stack of magazines on a coffee table, which appeared to be old copies of Guns N' Ammo and American Rifleman, and he had no doubt that they were most likely put in order by date and issue number. The room itself was painted beige, although the majority of the furniture was dark earthy colors and it was far larger and nicer than his apartment was.

"Feel any better?"

Sin nearly jumped out of his skin, which was irritating as all hell, and glared up at Carhart who had apparently been watching him from the archway that led to the kitchen area.

"What are you doing here?" He demanded, staring at Carhart strangely. He'd never seen the man in anything other than his usual fatigues; it was rather odd to see him shirtless and barefoot in baggy faded jeans. His hair was uncombed, spiky and he was leaning against the archway in a casual manner that was completely unlike the usual ramrod straight way he held himself.

Carhart raised an eyebrow at him and almost seemed amused by the question. "Well, I live here."

"Oh." His eyebrows drew together once again and he stared at the room in confusion. "Well who the fuck is Morgan?"

"A woman."

Sin went back to glaring at Carhart, incredibly annoyed by the amused expression on his face and the complete lack of decent answers that he was receiving. "What woman? What the hell is going on?"

"A woman who was going to be coming over tonight if you hadn't suddenly crashed the party," Carhart said slowly, amusement leaving his expression as concern replaced it. He took a step towards Sin, who automatically took a step back, and stopped. "You came over here, Hsin. Remember? You showed up at my door and passed out."

"Don't talk to me like I'm fucking stupid," Sin muttered as he rubbed the back of his head and tried to remember why he was here.

"You swear a lot more than you used to," Carhart noted mildly.

"Well what do you expect? You had me pretending to be a fucking id--" He stopped in mid-sentence and once again, everything came flooding back. The assignment. Monterrey. Jason Alvarez. The convention center. "Where's Boyd?"

Carhart considered him for a long moment, hazel eyes studying him calmly before he shook his head. "I'm not answering that until you stop looking like you're about to fall on your face."

An annoyed hiss and Sin once again reached for the gun but it was no longer there. He aimed an accusing glare at Carhart instead.

"How are you going to get answers if you shoot me?"

"I wasn't going to shoot you," Sin snapped. "I was going to--"

"Menace me?" Once again, the other man seemed amused.

"Just te--" Before he could finish the sentence, an overwhelming wave of nausea overcame him and he scrambled over to the waste basket that sat next to the coffee table and began vomiting into it violently. The only thing that came up was liquid and

acid before it eventually turned to painful dry heaves. After what seemed like an eternity, he pushed himself away from the garbage and collapsed onto the carpet before rolling onto his back. He panted harshly, squeezing his eyes shut as he willed himself to stop being so fucking weak. He needed to find Boyd. He needed to remember what had happened. He needed--

"Please, just tell me where he is," He said hoarsely, hating how pathetic he sounded but not able to stop it.

After a moment, he heard the sound of feet walking around the apartment before Carhart crouched down next to him. "Sit up, if you can."

Sin opened his eyes and stared at Carhart, hating the concerned look the man was aiming at him, but deciding not to say anything about it. He slowly pulled himself up and eagerly drank the glass of water that Carhart pressed into his hand.

"Before we have that conversation, I have some questions of my own," Carhart told him calmly.

Frustration welled up inside of him and Sin barely stopped himself from punching the man in the face. "I don't-- Just fucking tell me, is he alive? Did he escape? Did any of that shit even happen? Was there a mission in Monterrey or was it all some fucking dream I had while I was in a coma?"

Once again, intense hazel eyes regarded him calmly before Carhart inclined his head. "I see." He stood up and held out a hand, pulling Sin to his feet easily. "For now I will reassure you that he did escape Monterrey and as far as I know, he is still alive. However I refuse to tell you anything more until you look stronger and I get some explanations of my own. You're not the only one who has been in the dark for the past six months."

Relief flooded through him at the knowledge that Boyd had escaped but it was quickly replaced by confusion, astonishment. "Six months?" Sin stared at him incredulously. That would explain the leaves on the trees. "Why--"

"You had severe head trauma, or so I was told," Carhart replied as he wandered back into the kitchen and resumed his cooking. There were two large pots on the stove and the smell of the food made Sin's stomach growl violently. "Connors did not see fit to inform me of the true extent of your injuries however he did tell me that if you were to flat-line once again, nothing would be done to revive you. For the past several months I'd come to the conclusion that you had died or that you were brain damaged, because that is what I was led to believe." He glanced at Sin out of the corner of his eye, a strange expression on his face, and began dishing out two rather large bowls of what appeared to be rice and stew.

The bowls were set down at a table in the kitchen and Sin sat down, eating ravenously and at an alarming speed. Carhart watched with an almost endeared expression on his face and when Sin finished his own bowl, Carhart pushed the second one towards him.

"Eat as much as you want but don't force yourself or it will make you sick."

With a distracted nod, Sin worked on making the contents of the second bowl disappear as quickly as possible. It felt good to have solid food in his stomach after what had most likely been months of a liquid diet from his IV. After a few minutes he pushed the empty bowl away and sat up straight again, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. He noticed the half-smile on Carhart's face and waved him off.

"Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"Good." He slouched down in the chair, feeling almost uncomfortably full, and stretched his legs out in front of him as he stared at the General silently. It was more than a little odd to be sitting in the man's kitchen, eating his apparently delicious home cooked food and seeing him behave so casually. For years he'd only ever encountered Carhart in a professional setting but now as he regarded the handsome man in front of him, it was hard to equate this with the General that annoyed him so much sometimes.

"So this Morgan-- you were gonna get fucked tonight or what?"

Carhart blinked at him once, twice and his eyebrows shot up. "Wow."

Sin smirked. "Just curious if you make her call you general in bed."

"Where did you suddenly develop this... sense of humor?" Carhart asked, not bothering to dignify the question with an answer even though the side of his mouth twitched in amusement.

A one shouldered shrug. "Working in a bar."

There was another stretch of silence as Carhart stared at him in surprise. "Well. That wasn't the kind of employment I'd expected you to find." He tried to picture Sin-- alarming, brooding, easily set off Sin-- working in a bar, and the mental image ended in a bloodbath every way he looked at it. He shook his head slowly, eyebrows drawn slightly together.

"Just so we're clear, I think you should know that other than the fact that the mission failed, I was given no details about anything that occurred at any time in Monterrey. Connors was not pleased by the way things turned out, he blamed Jeffrey and me for acting on faulty information, and the both of us were actually suspended without pay for two weeks because of it. Because he deemed this whole thing to be the failure of our entire department, he didn't go out of his way to give me the details of anything that had happened although Ryan attempted to piece together bits from his sources, which was difficult considering his state."

The general sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his muscular chest. "Like I said, I assure you that as far as I've been told, Boyd is alive. I will tell you details about what happened upon your and his return to the compound but not until you give me an account of all that happened from the time you entered Monterrey until you returned. But before we begin that-- do you feel any better?"

Sin shrugged, not really understanding why Carhart kept speaking of Boyd in such a vague manner, and nodded. "I suppose."

"You're lucky I didn't call the medical staff. You looked on the verge of death when you arrived." Carhart cocked his head to the side and observed Sin critically. "You don't look as pale, at least."

"I--" Sin broke off with a scowl. "I don't need the medical staff. I just felt... odd. Off balance. Probably from the reconstructive surgery on my legs."

"Recons--" Carhart broke off and frowned, leaning forward across the table. "I understand that the assignment was a failure because of faulty information but that is all Connors deigned to inform me. That the convention was not more than a rookie orientation and that no one of note, none of the reasons you were there, had actually been present. I feel... responsible for that. I feel responsible for the entire mission if I'm frank, but there are still holes in the information I was given. I know you may not be feeling up to it at the moment Hsin, but I really need for you to tell me in detail everything that happened from the time you entered Monterrey. Especially how and why you were obtained."

Sin rubbed the back of his head again and his eyes flicked down at the table as memories once again flitted across his brain. "How much..." He'd never been one for debriefing and he honestly wasn't in the mood for it at the moment but he knew it was the only way Carhart would tell him anything about Boyd. "What do you want to know?"

"Just start from the top," Carhart said, obviously eager to finally learn anything about the operation.

Sin nodded and shifted slightly before finally looking up with a blank, unreadable expression on his face. "We entered Monterrey and everything went according to the plan. I obtained employment at a night club named Lunar owned by a woman named Jessica Ramirez and continued to work there until the end of August when I went about seeking employment for the convention. Nothing of note happened during those months until we both got the suspicion that we were being watched. However it turned out to be nothing more than a smuggler that Boyd was investigating who was making sure that we were not going to get too far involved in his business."

Carhart's eyebrows rose slightly. "A smuggler? There are plenty of smugglers across the border, why was Boyd investigating him thoroughly enough for the man to take notice?"

Sin shrugged. "He had the suspicion that the man was a weapons smuggler with ties to Janus. It turned out that he was in fact a powerful weapons smuggler, the most powerful according to one of Boyd's informants, but that he did not sell to any specific group and he really had no allegiances to any faction as far as we know. After he came to the conclusion that we were no threat, we were left alone and I no longer got the suspicion that we were being followed."

There was a brief silence as Carhart watched him. "Someone followed you undetected?"

Sin's eyebrow twitched and he made a face. "Obviously."

"Well, that is interesting enough right there. What was the name of his group? He may be someone we may want to look into later in case he does get involved with Janus one day. At the rate they're going I wouldn't be surprised if they got every underground crook under their thumb."

Another shrug. "All I know is, he called himself *Lo más chingón* and he apparently has a very strange sense of humor. Boyd probably has more information on him, as he was the one investigating." Sin looked around the kitchen with a slight frown. "I want a cigarette."

This time the pause was longer and Carhart stared at him blankly for several long moments. "I see." He looked away briefly, cleared his throat and then looked back. "And smoking was a part of your cover. You don't need to do it anymore."

Sin made a face. "Whatever. Anyway the gist of it is, nothing happened that stood out for the majority of the assignment. In fact everything appeared to be going smoothly until the actual evening of the Exposition. That was when we realized that no one on the list of targets was present and so, for lack of any guidance on what to do in

that situation, we chose to carry out the second part of the plan and proceeded to detonate the explosives."

The distracted expression on Carhart's face disappeared and his brow furrowed. "And everything before that evening was fine? Your cover-- the hiring process. Everything went on without any flags going up? No one acted as though they suspected you of anything? I suppose what I'm getting at is, are there any indications that your cover was blown and that the Janus leaders on the list decided not to show at the last minute because they knew their plan was compromised?"

Sin opened his mouth to deny that but he hesitated and thought back carefully. That had been something he really hadn't thought of and it was a very real possibility but as he wracked his brain, he realized that there really had been nothing to indicate such a turn of events. "Unless *Lo más chingón* really was a Janus operative and somehow figured out who Boyd was and what he was really up to in Monterrey, no. And that scenario itself is doubtful. Boyd would have alerted me and you from that moment on had he the suspicion that anything like that was the case."

Carhart nodded and made an irritated sound at the back of his throat. "So what it really does come down to then, is that Thierry gave us shit information."

"It appears that way." He'd always known he should have shot Thierry back when he had the chance.

"So you went on with the second stage understandably and what happened from there? How did you get captured?"

"I--" Sin broke off and his eyes once again dropped to the tabletop. He stared at the gravy covered spoon that sat next to his bowl and tapped his fingers against the table in a gesture that could either signify nervousness or irritation. "We had a disagreement." His eyes flicked up briefly to meet Carhart's intense blue ones before dropping again. He cleared his throat. "There was a civilian. My old boss, Jessica Ramirez. She had told me in advance that she had a part in planning the Exposition but I had not intended to actually see her there. We spoke briefly earlier in the evening and I

thought I wouldn't see her again after that but after the bombs began to detonate as I was escaping out of the southeast wing of the center, I encountered her injured and unconscious near the exits." He hesitated and looked up at Carhart, discomfort evident in his expression.

Carhart raised one eyebrow at Sin and didn't seem at all surprised at what he was hearing-- he seemed to know exactly what was going to be said next. "So you helped her get out." There was no condemnation in his tone, nothing vaguely chastising.

"I-- Yes. The plan had been for Boyd and I to meet at a designated spot several blocks from the convention center after the explosions went off unless we had a tail or our positions were compromised. In that case we had an alternate plan to go into hiding separately and meet up two weeks later or longer, whenever our positions were secure as to not draw attention to the other. I thought-- I had planned, to grab the girl, dump her somewhere on my way to meet Boyd and then continue on my way since she was unconscious anyway but when I told Boyd that I was taking her with me, he became angry and told me to leave her."

That earned him a somewhat surprised stare. "Why would he get angry over that?"

Sin shrugged, still not looking up. "I have no idea. I became angry at his refusal to listen to me because..." He trailed off for a moment and his eyes narrowed. "Had I left her there, the explosives I was about to set off would have killed her without question. And she was a civilian. And I wasn't going to do that. There was no point. It wouldn't have hindered my escape or the mission and she was right in front of me. I would have been unnecessarily killing an innocent person, someone completely uninvolved with my mission. I would have done the same for any civilian, not just her."

"I know you would have," Carhart replied quietly. There was a pause, as if he wanted to know more but didn't want to push very hard. "What happened next?"

"Anyway he got angry that I wouldn't leave her and said that we should just forget plan A and go straight to plan B, meeting in two weeks."

*'If this gets you caught you fucking deserve it.'* His hands balled into fists and a flash of anger, of pain, went through him. He clenched his jaw slightly, ignoring the feelings, and moved on.

"So I took the girl and went in an alternate direction. The route I was going to take to Boyd was clear but routes leading to alternate safe houses were all blocked by incoming emergency vehicles and I had to take an unplanned route towards the waterfront in order to escape notice. I left the girl in a warehouse while I scouted out an alternate route to one of the places we'd decided on in case of Plan B-- it took longer than expected but after I located some good directions, I returned to the warehouse in order to move the civilian outdoors so that help would be more likely to stumble upon her."

He swallowed hard, memories flashing through his mind. "I--" He stopped. "It was stupid. I suppose... I should have listened to Boyd but I just couldn't fucking leave her there." He looked up at Carhart, uncharacteristically expressive, the distress in his face quite clear.

"You don't have to explain to me, Hsin. I think after all this time, I know how your mind works. And I can't say it's not something I wouldn't have done had I been in the same place. Even indirectly killing a civilian, especially when it seems easily preventable, is not something I have ever or would ever do if I can go about my assignment another way. It would be even more difficult when it is a civilian that you are acquainted with." Carhart's tone was genuine, reassuring, even though he was clearly surprised that Sin almost seemed to be looking to him for... approval. "What happened when you returned?"

Sin frowned. "Well, it turned out that she wasn't just a civilian. Although she was unwitting and ignorant of the connection, the uncle who'd gotten her the job at the Exposition turned out to be Hale Clemons, the director of the center and the Janus contact. She... I suppose at some point while I was carrying her, she'd briefly regained consciousness and saw me in a ski mask. When I left, she woke up frightened and confused and called her uncle to come pick her up. She must have mentioned that she

thought she'd been kidnapped or something because he appeared with backup, no doubt Janus operatives, and they knew or at least suspected, that I was the one involved. I was out numbered but I took four out quickly, it should have been no problem, I could have easily taken them out but..." His hands clenched tighter, knuckles turning white as he tried not to remember the way her blood had splattered across the cold concrete floor, the way she'd fallen lifelessly, beautiful eyes staring blankly at him, expression frozen in horrified guilt--- He shuddered slightly and forced the memory out of his mind. He would deal with it later. He would... he would take that on later. "I shot at Clemons but Jessica got in the way. So she died anyway."

There was another long silence and Carhart didn't think he needed to hear how the story ended to figure out what happened next.

"I froze. I... fucked up. And they got me." The words were spoken without emotion and once again, he didn't look up. "The next two weeks are confusing; a blur. I regained consciousness in a van but I was heavily drugged and could not escape. They did a scan on me in the van and realized that there was a tracker implanted in me. They took me to an unknown location, I wasn't alert enough to see where, but it appeared to be an old clinic and they proceeded to surgically remove the tracker. I can't..." He paused, reflecting on the incident. "I don't know what happened after that. I remember feeling weak and eventually... nothing."

Carhart nodded but didn't say anything, not wanting to interrupt.

"Anyway, after that I only remember flashes of the interrogation. They tortured me for information but I would not give any up. They used various methods; burned me with a butane torch, broke my limbs and destroyed tendons in the process and so on. Clemons seemed especially vindictive, not at all interested in information but in vengeance because I'd killed his niece. I can't blame him for that, I suppose but eventually they grew tired of my refusal to speak and after some time all I remember is Clemons telling me I would have a slow, painful death but I'm not sure that even happened."

Sin frowned slightly. "Everything from that time seems distorted and I'm not sure what was reality but that is the last thing I remember before today. The door closing on his face and that I was still strapped down." After a moment, he shrugged.

"That's all I can tell you." He'd recounted the entire thing in a matter-of-fact tone as though the actual memories involving the torture did not bother him in the least; it wasn't really surprising though. Physical abuse had never been something that moved him.

It took a moment for Carhart to reply and even when he did, he didn't really seem to know how to properly respond to the things that Sin had said.

"We first caught wind of the fact that there was a problem when initial reports following the bombings included the description of a suspect; a description that matched Boyd's cover."

Sin's eyebrows rose in surprise but he didn't interrupt as Carhart continued.

"A woman living in the hi-rise opposite the center happened to look out and see Boyd leaving the wing which obtained the most damage. She reported it as seeing a survivor but the authorities jumped on the information and immediately said this person was a suspect. Mexican authorities began to obtain any Caucasian males in the city for questioning and kept any foreigners without visas for intense interrogation. This of course resulted in many innocent tourists and visitors being unfairly held and their countries of origin began to do their own investigations as to who the terrorists were. America, as always in these times, was the prime suspect for many although there has been no proof to support that theory."

Sin frowned. "I'm sure Vivienne and Connors loved that shit." "Heh." Carhart crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head. "Yeah, loved it so much that Connors immediately began pointing fingers at anyone in the vicinity but that was even before we found out that no one on the hit list was actually hit. However it wasn't until hours later when your tracker reported that you were dead that we realized something had gone very wrong."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "Dead?"

"You probably momentarily flat-lined during the procedure to remove your tracker as it was destroyed soon after. Despite the fact that I insisted we contact Boyd immediately and figure out what the hell was going on, Connors said no and that if there was still a chance that the mission had been successful and that Boyd was maintaining his cover and following your plan, there was no reason to interfere since we aren't in the habit of bailing Agents out of trouble in any other scenario so early in an assignment. I was pissed and my response is probably what prompted him to exclude me from making any further decisions on the matter."

"I see." Sin continued to frown slightly, wondering how Boyd had managed to remain out of the hands of the authorities during that time.

"However over a week passed and no contact was made and Boyd continued to wander around the city according to his tracker, so Connors began to suspect that either he was unable to contact us with details on Janus because his cover was in jeopardy or that he had for one reason or another, decided not to return to the Agency. Whatever the case was, finally Connors decided to send in a team led by Kassian Trovosky to obtain Boyd and search the location of your last known position in order to figure out whether or not it was a Janus base. I'm not sure what happened between the time they arrived and the time they returned and I was generally left out of discussion after that."

"That still doesn't explain where he is now," Sin said impatiently. "What happened and why in the hell do you keep being so damn vague when I ask? Just tell me already and be done with it."

"Because I don't know the details Hsin but... I do know part of it. So try not to lose control of your temper when I say what I'm about to say. I know it is difficult to hear but at the same time, I cannot truly say that it surprised me and it should not surprise you either. You know how things work here." Carhart gazed at him steadily, giving nothing away in his expression.

Green and hazel eyes locked and Sin didn't respond for a moment. But then his gaze slid away and he studied the wall, a blankness taking over his expression even as the slow burn of anger and frustration spread through him. "They needed a scapegoat."

Carhart inclined his head. "And Boyd was that scapegoat. Connors blamed everything on him; from the fact that he was the one to obtain the disc to his decision to split up and your capture. And he was punished for it."

Sin nodded shortly, giving nothing away or at least trying not to, even as he grit his teeth. "How long?"

Carhart shook his head. "I'm not sure. I wasn't allowed to debrief him or speak with him before or after. I believe anywhere from two to three weeks though."

He knew how Connors worked; he knew how Shane worked. They weren't big on physical torture of their own Agents; they liked their punishment to have a more lasting mental effect, something that would paralyze them with fear at the mere idea of being subjected to it. As he stared at the wall, eyes slightly narrowed, his mind automatically went back to that evening, Boyd's birthday, and the video of Louis.

"I see." Sin released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in a slow exhale. "Is that it?"

"No." Carhart paused briefly before continuing. "Once again, the details are not known to me, but the last I heard he is no longer with the Agency. Whether it was by his own choice or by Connors' is unclear."

Sin's gaze snapped over to Carhart and his brows drew together. "What?"

The other man spread his arms helplessly. "That's all I was told."

"You haven't even tried to contact him?" Sin demanded, the confusion and irritation in his expression growing. "I don't fucking understand this-- how can he no longer be with the Agency? They don't just fire people or let them walk away."

"I know, but that is what I was told. That either by his choice or by Connors', he is no longer with us and that he is now at his home or whatever location he returned to, under extensive twenty-four hour surveillance, which will remain to be the case for as long as it's necessary I suppose." Carhart shrugged. "And I did not contact him because I supposed if he wanted to be contacted, he would make it known, which he has not. Ryan wanted to make an attempt as far as I know but Boyd no longer has his Agency phone and Ryan is too ill to travel on his own."

"Well I'm not." Sin pushed his chair back and stood up so suddenly that his head swam and he momentarily faltered.

Carhart looked at him doubtfully. "Uh huh."

Sin glared at him and grit his teeth in frustration. "I'm fine."

He'd been away too long; it disgusted him how he was so unable to hide his weakness from the other man. He forced himself to stand up straight, to stride towards the bedroom as if nothing was wrong with him, as though his head wasn't spinning just from standing upright, and began opening drawers in the General's dresser. He pulled out a pair of jeans and changed into them, leaving the flimsy white pants on the floor. They were too big for him and slid down his hips but he ignored that and grabbed a pair of tennis shoes. They were only a little tight so he tied the laces and stood up before heading over to the desk.

As he started to grab the gun, his eyes once again lifted to the framed photographs that sat on the desk. There was one that appeared to be some kind of family portrait which included two older men in military garb, a woman, several children and a young, teenaged version of Carhart standing at the side with a wide smile on his face. They were in a backyard of some kind, or a park, and in the background he could make out a banner that proclaimed 'Happy Veteran's Day!'.

The next photograph was of a pretty young blond haired woman holding an infant baby, gazing at the camera with a tired looking smile on her face. It wasn't hard to figure out that she was Carhart's deceased wife and the baby had been his child, both killed during the bombings that had rocked the country. Sin shook his head and started to move away as

he grabbed the gun and re-inserted the clip but before he stepped entirely away, a small photograph stuck in the corner of the mirror caught his attention.

It was slightly crumpled although a vain attempt had been made at smoothing it out again, but that wasn't what struck him about it. It was the green eyes, the short black hair, the big cocky grin and the features that looked so much like his own. It was a picture of Emilio looking a little younger than Sin was now, one muscular arm thrown around a younger Carhart's shoulders even though his partner didn't look nearly as enthusiastic as he did. One of Carhart's eyebrows was raised slightly and despite his almost exasperated expression, the corner of his mouth was lifted in a small smile. They didn't look more than early twenties, probably from the time when they were partnered together almost exclusively, and judging from their bullet proof vests and weapons, it seemed they'd just returned from an assignment or were going on one.

It was hard to say whether the picture had been taken before Emilio had rescued him from China or afterwards but he could only assume that it was around that time. Not for the first time did it strike him how young his father must have been when he'd been conceived but that line of thought just led to thoughts about his mother and he didn't need that at the moment. Sin stared at it for longer than was necessary feeling more than a little disturbed by the image but before he allowed it to fully get to him, before the memories could bubble up entirely to the surface, he was going back out into the living room as he shoved his weapon into the back of his pants.

"Please, help yourself," Carhart said dryly as he eyed Sin, not seeming at all surprised at what he was seeing. It only proved his point that Sin would have left immediately had he told him from the beginning. "Do I get those back?" he asked, pointing at the shoes.

"Ask the med-crew when they eventually drag me off and take all of my clothes," Sin replied as he headed for the door. He had no doubts that that would be the case as soon as they figured out where he was and where he was going.

That was replied to with a grunt of agreement and Carhart followed him. "How are you going to get off the compound?"

Sin looked over his shoulder at the General and raised his eyebrows. "I have my ways." He started to run off but for some reason he stopped, paused and turned once again to look at Carhart who was leaning against the door and watching him quietly. "Thanks."

The General stared at him in surprise, not really appearing to know how to reply to that sudden statement. His lips parted as though he wanted to say something but he hesitated for a brief moment, looking directly into Sin's intense green eyes. "It's... good to have you back."

The corners of Sin's mouth turned up in a humorless smirk and he shrugged one shoulder. "I guess we'll see about that, won't we?"

Carhart shook his head, narrowing his eyes slightly. "No matter what happens in the future, I'm glad you're okay. More than you realize, Hsin. So take care of yourself. Good luck."

Sin looked at him for a long moment before finally turning to go.

## Chapter 41

During Sin's teenage years, he'd thought about escaping the Agency. In the process of researching how to follow through on that, he'd discovered there were hidden tunnels beneath the compound. Newer blueprints of the compound omitted their existence and not very many people seemed to know of their existence. In a case like this, it worked to Sin's advantage.

There were hatches in the basements of several buildings that led to the tunnels. During the various times he'd sneaked off the compound, he'd used the one in the basement of an unused lab building to gain access to it. It was actually one of the only things about the Agency's security that he'd consider to be a breach; wiring leading to the tunnels had been destroyed during the bombings and proper surveillance had never been fully installed again afterwards. He didn't know if it was laziness or the assumption that no one remembered their existence that prevented the heads of the Agency from fully securing them, but at the moment he didn't care since it suited his interests well enough for it to remain that way.

He moved through the pitch blackness of the tunnel quickly, quietly, listening for anything out of place even as his eyes scanned the darkness. He imagined there had once been a lighting system set up but also due to the wiring, it no longer worked. Despite that, he could see surprisingly well in the gloom, even if that only meant making out the faint forms of rodents in the dark. It was strange but it seemed like the darkness helped him to focus, helped him to regain his bearings, and he wondered if they'd had to do surgery on his eyes for some reason, if that had possibly been the problem when he'd first woken up. Whatever the case was, he was slowly regaining his strength and he knew that the meal Carhart had provided him with was a large part of this renewed sense of energy.

As he moved, the information that Carhart had given him began to ring in his ears.

Six months.

He couldn't believe he'd been out for six months. More than that, he couldn't imagine what Boyd had been doing during that time.

How had he reacted to the mental torture of the Fourth and the calm cruelty of Shane? If they really had used the video of Lou's death, had it shattered him and turned him back into the emotionless void he'd been before or had he broken down completely? What had he done during those months after his release? Had it been his choice to leave? Had he convinced his mother to let him go? But... why would he do that? Why would he want to leave the place he claimed that tied him to the only people he felt close to, felt loyalty towards?

Logically Sin knew that a simple answer to that was that of course he would want to leave after being subjected to the Fourth, of course he would never want to return. But as angry as it made him that they'd possibly put Boyd through that hell... it was hard for Sin to think in those black and white terms.

To him, the Fourth was a natural part of the Agency, to him, it was something that had to be accepted because it was always an option, always a possibility if a person fucked up badly enough. Boyd knew that. He had to. So why... Why would he leave the place that tied him to Sin? That allowed them to connect; to communicate. To just... be together?

Maybe he was angry, maybe he blamed Sin for being punished, maybe...

He shook his head sharply. He had too many questions and concerns. His brain was whirring quickly, going at an impossible speed and he couldn't quite keep up with his own thoughts.

He just needed to talk to Boyd.

As doubt seeped into his brain, he stopped caring about caution or stealth, and his feet began to splash noisily in the shallow water that coated the ground as he ran through the tunnel at an alarming speed. It seemed to go on forever and for a disturbing moment the confusion and disorientation returned. It seemed that the darkness had

swallowed him up, that the tunnel had become a never ending maze and that he would never find his way out.

He would never find Boyd, never knew what had become of him, never find out if he still...

But then he saw the faint reflection of moonlight bouncing off water in the distance and he knew he was almost to the end.

The tunnel grew increasingly narrow and as the brightness of the moonlight intensified, the tunnel finally hit a solid wall. The only indication that there was a way out on this end was a ladder leading up towards what appeared to be a manhole cover, a black round disc faintly visible against the ceiling with pale moonlight streaming through the holes. He climbed the tall ladder quickly, not for the first time wondering just how far underground these tunnels were dug. When he finally reached the top he felt around the cover and twisted it before he pushing it up. He pulled himself through the rather tight space and out of the tunnel as he looked around the familiar scenery.

The exit led to an enclosed area under an overpass in Silver Lake Park; a park which had once been one of the most beautiful spots in the city but now was rumored to be a barren wasteland where greenery refused to grow. Although the place was blocked off by fences and signs that warned of radiation, the beginnings of blossoms on the trees told Sin another story. He wondered if that had never been anything more than a ruse manufactured by the government to keep this area closed off from the general public. He didn't doubt that the entire area had been contaminated at one point. But it was too convenient that this particular park was off limits considering it housed the secret escape route for the Agency.

He moved through the park swiftly, feet becoming thoroughly soaked by the winding stream, and found his way to the unofficial exit. It was nothing more than a space in the barred fence that was a few inches too wide, but he squeezed through it and found himself in the city. He got a sense of déjà vu as he once again took this route to Boyd's house unannounced and uninvited; anxiety clawing at him the entire time he

made his way there. And even though he was running with an almost inhuman speed, even though buildings and people went by him in a blur, somehow it still didn't seem fast enough.

When he finally reached Boyd's block, it almost struck him as much as it had the first time around. In a city that had fallen apart and drifted into a collection of ghettos following the war, a neighborhood like this was a rarity. Large houses with manicured lawns stood proudly, cars parked in driveways proved that families still lived there, people still thrived there. Now in the spring, the trees that lined the streets were full of leaves and it seemed like one of those picturesque places that he'd briefly seen in pictures.

He made his way to the pale tan-colored house third in from the right. As he walked into the front yard, it was painfully obvious to him that there were agents watching him. He paused briefly and looked in the general direction the stares seemed to be coming from with a challenging raise of his eyebrows. Hopefully they knew better than to fuck with him unless they waited for backup.

He turned back to the house, taking in the fact that Boyd's car sat in the driveway looking dirty and untouched, as if it hadn't been driven in months. The house itself looked still, uninhabited, but despite that most of the curtains were open. The lights were all off and he couldn't hear or detect any movement inside. Weeds and overgrown grass dominated the front yard, standing out dramatically against the rest of the neighborhood, while the backyard was impossible to see beyond the tall wooden privacy fence.

Although Sin had only been there once before, it hadn't looked like this. At the time, the house had been as perfectly composed as the rest on the block. Now it felt neglected in a manner that seemed unlikely for someone to actually be living there. Sin frowned and moved silently through the grass, making his way to the front door as he knelt down and picked the lock. It was as easy as it had been the first time around and when he slipped into the dark interior of the home, he reminded himself to give Boyd a stern talking to about the total lack of security in his house.

It was completely dark inside. The only light that made it in was the faint glow of the streetlights through the open windows. Maybe it was because he'd been there before, but Sin could see better in the gloom than he would have expected. He glanced only briefly around, not really bothering to study the house but looking anyway just to be certain Boyd wasn't there.

The living room had several large, open windows, affording him enough light to know at a glance that the room was empty. He noticed that a few of the cushions on the couch were moved out of place, the low-lying table nearby was at an angle as if it had been hit and a few of the pictures on the shelves near the television were knocked over. As he passed the kitchen he saw that it also looked relatively unused although a few dishes were in the sink, seeming as though they'd been there for a long time. The kettle was sitting at an odd angle at the back of the stove and only one of the chairs at the table was pulled out.

He didn't see or feel any sign of life in the house. The only indication that Boyd may be there was the car sitting in the driveway. Even so, Sin's heart began to beat faster as he walked silently over the carpet and made his way to the room he'd assumed had been Boyd's the first time he'd come to the house.

The door stood open and although there were no sounds coming from inside, as Sin moved closer he knew that Boyd was there. His eyes focused on Boyd's familiar figure even before he stepped in the doorway.

For some reason, he was momentarily struck speechless by the sight. He'd known that it'd been six months but still, he remembered Boyd as he had been the three days before the convention; red-haired and handsome, healthy and tanned. But now... he didn't know if Boyd was awake or not but as he lay motionless on the bed, Sin couldn't help noticing the changes. He was paler and thinner. Dark circles lined his eyes and his hair was pale blond but mixed with a dark brown.

He tried to speak, tried to think of something to say, but for some reason all he could do was stare.

There was a long, drawn out moment before Boyd seemed to notice he was there. His eyes slid open slowly, just enough for light to glint off them. When his head turned and their eyes met, he only watched Sin dully with an unchanging expression. He didn't even bother to move. Sin's eyebrows drew together and he moved closer, mouth curving down into a frown when Boyd didn't say a word.

At first Boyd just stared at him blankly, as if waiting for him to say or do something, but when they only ended up watching each other, he let out a weary sigh and covered his eyes with one arm. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice quiet and a little hoarse. Resigned.

Sin froze for a moment, expression changing to one of disbelief. He didn't stop until he was right next to the bed. "What do you mean what do I want?"

"What do you think I mean," Boyd mumbled, barely a hint of voice, as if he could hardly bother to speak aloud.

Disbelief morphed into incredulous irritation and Sin's eyes narrowed as he stared at him. The anxiety that had been building inside him, the doubts that had run through his mind, all came crashing down on him and his stomach twisted.

"What's your problem?" he demanded sharply, grabbing the front of Boyd's shirt and jerking him so that he was forced to look up.

Boyd's eyes snapped open in shock and for a moment he only stared at Sin, his heartbeat quickening enough that Sin could feel it against his knuckles. This time when he was silent it seemed as though he was too surprised to speak.

He searched Sin's expression in a mixture of disbelief and confusion, saying in a tone that seemed lost, "What..? You're--"

His bewildered gaze traveled up to Sin's hair, to the buzz cut he'd never had before. His eyebrows drew down as he reached up. The second his fingers brushed Sin's hair, his eyes widened and he jerked his hand away.

He met Sin's eyes with a mixture of so many emotions that it was difficult to read any of them except fear and disbelief. "You're real?"

The scowl melted slightly and Sin let go of him and stood up straight, staring down at Boyd in like concern. "Of course I'm real."

For a moment Boyd seemed too astounded to do anything except push himself up on his elbows and stare, his lips parting. He searched every bit of Sin's face and body intently, as if searching desperately for something that, judging by his expression, he didn't see. His honey brown eyes were charged with an emotion that seemed too difficult to decipher. But almost immediately, he snapped his gaze to the window and his expression closed off.

He pushed himself up to sit in a slouch, running one slightly shaking hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes, then looked at Sin. "Why are you here?" he asked, his tone quiet.

"Wh--" Sin stopped and shook his head slowly, green eyes darkened by the shadows in the room as he stared down at Boyd. "Why wouldn't I be here?"

"You're not--" Boyd almost seemed frustrated briefly before even that much emotion disappeared and he fell silent, studying him for a moment. When he spoke, his tone was reasonable but close to the remote quality of when they first met. "Because there's no reason for you to be here. I don't know how you're still alive, or what they told you, but... I am no longer with the Agency. I am no longer your partner."

Sin's lips parted and his eyebrows drew together. Something inside him began to freeze over as his hands tightened into fists at his side. He didn't hide the confusion in his face. He didn't hide the fact that he didn't understand.

"Why are you saying that to me?" he asked finally.

"I haven't been with the Agency for months, Sin," Boyd said tonelessly, either not noticing Sin's confusion or not reacting to it. "I can't imagine you left the compound with permission so you're likely just endangering yourself by being here. It's... good to see

you're alive, but there's no reason for you to stay. You should go back before they come for you."

Sin's eyes narrowed again, brow furrowing even deeper and he shook his head slightly. Why was he being this way? Why was he talking to him like...

"So since you're not with the Agency anymore, there's no need to see me," he said flatly.

Boyd watched him for a moment. His face was like a mask that Sin couldn't read at all. "Go back," he repeated. "I've seen you, you've seen me. There's no other reason for you to be here. You're just wasting your time."

Ice seemed to seep through Sin's veins, continuing to freeze his insides, his defensive walls desperately trying to rebuild even as he felt something crack and shatter within him. He dropped his eyes, unable to meet Boyd's emotionless stare anymore.

He focused on the carpet, not really seeing it as memories flashed through his mind once again. But he didn't want to remember any of that. He didn't want to remember them together in Monterrey or Boyd smiling at him. He didn't want to remember falling asleep next to Boyd, confiding in him, wanting him, being so fucking open with him...

He closed his eyes, gritting his teeth.

Maybe he'd imagined it all. Maybe it hadn't been real. Maybe it was some fucking extended coma-induced dream that had seemed so real, so fucking real he'd actually thought that for a few months he'd really been alive.

"Why are you being this way?"

"Because I want to be," Boyd said, something almost like anger intensifying his tone and making it turn cool. "Why are you still standing there? Do you not understand English anymore? I told you to leave. I don't want you here, I don't want you to ever come back. Go to the Agency, forget about me, forget about this place. I want you to

leave. Or are you just going to stand there until they come looking for you?" The last comment came out almost derisive, as if Sin was a child too incompetent to find his own way home.

Sin opened his eyes but he didn't look up and this time his face slowly drained of emotion until it was perfectly blank. The anger he would have normally felt, the indignation, the need to lash out, seemed like something far away. Something he'd never felt before seemed to be taking the place of those needs. A pain he couldn't quite describe wound its way from the pit of his stomach to his chest and settled there. Every other feeling gave way to emptiness; a void where he had fleeting memories of pleasure.

"Are you sure?" he asked in the same quiet tone, still not looking up.

Boyd was silent for a moment. Just as Sin was about to wonder if there was a chance, Boyd's voice said quietly but firmly, "You need to go."

There was a brief silence, a tension that stretched between them, and then Sin finally looked up at him.

"Fine," he said with a finality that almost gave away his intentions.

He suddenly moved his hand to his back in a blur of motion. The moonlight glinted off steel and the familiar cocking of a gun seemed loud in the otherwise silent room. Sin didn't drop his eyes as he lifted the gun and without hesitation turned it gun on himself. Full lips parted as his finger found the trigger. He saw Boyd's eyes widen and face pale.

He threw himself at Sin, all his weight slamming into him. He shoved Sin's hand to the side violently just as the gun went off, the bullet missing Sin and the crack of the gunshot loud in their ears. Sin crashed onto his back on the floor and Boyd fell on top of him, clutching the gun and Sin's hand painfully, keeping it aimed safely off to the side.

He breathed heavily and stared at him with an expression that was wild with a mixture of alarm, desperation, and something that almost seemed incredulous. At first he seemed too shocked to be able to say much other than, "What are you-- *Why..?*"

Sin's eyes were closed, face expressionless even as his mouth set into a thin line. He didn't move, didn't respond for several long moments. Although his hand remained slack, his fingers twitched around the gun.

"It's what I want," he said flatly.

Boyd stared at Sin as if he was still trying to comprehend the situation, but the answer he received only served to increase the emotions already present. He had both hands on Sin's hand and the gun, his fingers tightening against Sin. He shook his head, alarm and frustration intermingling in his expression and voice.

"No, you can't want that," Boyd said, although his tone made it sound as though he was trying to convince himself. "Why would you want that?"

There was no response for a moment but then Sin opened his eyes and locked gazes with Boyd. He opened his mouth to answer but his lips trembled slightly, eyebrows drawing together. He abruptly turned his face away from Boyd, masking his expression in the shadows.

"What do I have to live for if I go back to the way everything was before?" His hand twitched again as fought the urge to lift the gun. He never finished the motion; he couldn't do it with Boyd so close to him and the weapon.

Boyd's eyebrows twisted up and his eyes were intense on Sin. He parted his mouth as if he was going to say something, his expression wavering before he looked down abruptly.

"Give me the gun," he demanded, yanking on the weapon.

Sin didn't let go and Boyd just pulled harder, trying to pry Sin's fingers away while keeping it safely aimed away from the both of them. They struggled over it but the

moment Sin realized Boyd wasn't going to give up, he relaxed his hand. He didn't want to unintentionally injure Boyd with their hands scrabbling so close to the trigger.

Within seconds, Boyd had pulled the gun away, released the magazine and tossed it one way before he threw the empty gun in another. He stared after where the gun had skittered across the floor and hit the wall, his eyes narrowed, expression dark. He sat back, almost straddling Sin; the tension in his body was obvious from the way he held himself but at the same time he seemed to be shaking slightly, his chest moving quickly from exertion.

"Sin, you can't--" he started, then shut his mouth. "There has to be something for you to live for. You always found reasons before."

"Something to live for?" Sin asked, incredulity and outrage moving through him. "What the *fuck* did I ever have to live for, Boyd? Being at the mercy of Connors and Vivienne and everyone else in that place? Being forced to kill decent people? Being locked in a box and an apartment full of cameras which is just a bigger fucking version of that box where I couldn't sleep or do anything but sit in a corner and wait for the next day to start so it can be the same shit all over again?"

He scoffed in disgust, glaring up at Boyd. "Or maybe you meant the fact that every person that looked my way treated me like a fucking animal that needed to be controlled? And I had nothing else so I didn't know there was anything else. So I just went along thinking that was the way shit was and that was the way it would always be. That that was the way it was supposed to be, because that's what they told me for my entire life."

Boyd leaned back further, his expression turning pained. "Sin..."

"What do you want me to do? I'm not--" Sin broke off abruptly and grit his teeth, swallowing hard as he tried to look away. He tried not to let Boyd see the way he was starting to lose all shreds of control, but he couldn't.

Emotions overwhelmed him. The complete disbelief that after everything, after he'd gone so far down a path he'd never been on for Boyd-- with Boyd-- he was being discarded.

It made his chest tighten, his throat close up and suddenly everything looked blurry.

"I don't want to go back to the way I fucking was. I don't want to go back to being alone and having to be nothing but a weapon. I don't want to pretend that I don't--" He stopped again and realized with a vague sense of humiliation that he was about to display the ultimate form of human weakness.

"I can't do it without you," he grit out. "I won't."

Boyd's eyebrows drew up in the center and his lips parted. His eyes were intense on Sin's face and they seemed to glint faintly in the light. His hand started to rise but then his fingers twitched, curled in on themselves, and his hand dropped to his thigh. He looked away, his eyebrows drawing down and expression somewhat closing off.

"Sin, it can't be that way anymore. You have to forget me."

The words made something in Sin snap and suddenly he was on his feet. He grabbed Boyd by the neck, dragging him up and slamming him against the wall with a force that caused the ceiling light to shake. Uncontrollable anger coursed through him, feeding an old need for violence that hadn't surfaced in such a long time that it seemed like that dark part of him was hissing with a phantom voice. Telling him to hurt, to destroy the being that was causing him these startling, unbridled feelings. The person that was threatening the thin thread of sanity that had thickened and stabilized over the past year.

For a moment he wanted to listen. For a moment he wanted nothing more than to pound his fist into Boyd's face until he realized why that was such a fucking stupid, hurtful thing to say-- until he realized how selfish he was being, how fucking, how incredibly--

A growl of frustration escaped him and his hands tightened violently. Boyd's eyes met Sin's and his hands jerked as if he was about to bring them up but he didn't move them. He didn't touch Sin or resist.

"Then why did you *do* this to me?" Sin shouted, eyes flashing with the kind of black fury that usually led to something wilder, something more out of control. He was breathing hard, not even trying to hide the fact that he was crying, not even trying to mask the frustration and hurt as his fingers dug into Boyd. "Why did you fuck my head up and fucking make me believe it was okay to act like-- to fucking feel like a normal human if you were just going to drop me when things got too fucking hard for you to handle? Why did you lie to me?" His voice wavered and he looked down abruptly, at last making some vain effort to hide the shameful tears that tracked down his cheeks even as he continued to pin Boyd against the wall. "I wish I could hate you. God, I wish I could fucking kill you for doing this to me. Why couldn't you just leave me alone if it was going to be this way?"

Boyd couldn't seem to respond at first; he stared at the tears and, after a moment, brought his hands up to shakily curl around Sin's wrists. His own eyes seemed to shine in the dim light. "I didn't lie to you."

Sin jerked his hands away from Boyd's touch and released him abruptly, letting the other man drop to his feet where he slumped against the wall. Sin turned his back on his partner, his former partner, and covered his face with his hands. He tried to regain his composure; tried to get himself under control.

"You did," he said after several long moments of tense silence. After he'd finally regained complete control over himself and had quieted the phantom and anger. "You said you wouldn't give up and you have."

"I didn't give up," Boyd said quietly. "Not on you." Sin remained faced away from him and even though he dropped his hands, he continued to stare at the floor blankly. He didn't even know how to respond when everything that was happening seemed to point to the contrary.

"Then what do you call this?" Sin stopped and shook his head. "Don't play this game with me again. Don't act like I should know what you're thinking when your actions and words are saying something entirely fucking different."

At first Boyd didn't say anything. He stepped forward and stopped right behind Sin, lifting one hand to hover over his shoulder, hesitating a moment before he touched him. Sin tensed and Boyd withdrew his hand immediately, remaining quiet before he released a short burst of breath.

"Sin-- I can hardly believe you're here. After months of hearing nothing, I knew you had to be dead. I thought even if you weren't, you would hate me." There was a pause, heavy with unspoken words. "But you're alive and that's incredible. And it's even more reason why you shouldn't be here. They're watching; they'll know you're here. You're not safe. They can't have let you off compound so the very fact you're here is a risk not worth taking. I swear I don't mean to hurt you, it's just... There's no point to this. It's better for you to go."

Sin opened his eyes but he didn't turn around, still didn't look at Boyd. He just stood there for a moment before finally moving to sit on the edge of the bed, leaning his elbows on his knees so that he could put his head in his hands. He had a throbbing headache and it was becoming difficult to see straight. The edges of his vision were dimming and spots danced before his eyes, making it impossible to focus entirely. He rubbed his temples idly, trying to gather his thoughts, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do now and not coming up with a very good answer.

"I can't even..." He trailed off for a moment and winced, gritting his teeth as the pain intensified. "I honestly have no idea what you're talking about, Boyd. Why are you even saying this? I don't understand what any of this has to do with anything. Who cares if they're watching? You think I'm afraid of that? Just tell me why you think I should stay away from you, why it's 'better for me.'"

Boyd hesitated and then knelt in front of Sin. He rested his hands on either side of his thighs although he still did not touch him. His honey brown eyes searched Sin's

expression intently, as if looking for something. Sin didn't know what he was looking for but whatever it was, he must have found it because he said suddenly, sincerely:

"I'm sorry." It seemed as though he hadn't quite meant to say that aloud, but once the words were in the open he couldn't help explaining. "I'm such a--" His eyes glinted and he stopped, dropping his eyes to stare at Sin's knees before he tried again. "Sin, I know it was all my fault, I know I fucked up. I don't know how to tell you how sorry I am, how much I regret it. I swear to you I didn't mean what I said, that you actually deserved that--"

His fingers dug into the covers at the thought and he tilted his head down further. Sin didn't speak, didn't respond, and so he continued. "And I'm so sorry for abandoning you, for fucking with your trust like I did. For letting that happen when I was in the same city. I should have been there for you but I wasn't. I can never make it up to you."

He stopped, his eyes narrowing slightly. "That's why you need to leave me behind now. All I ever do is hurt you. And when something happens, I'm never there to help you, just like I wasn't with Lou. I'm only ever going to make it worse. You're better off without me."

Sin continued to sit on the edge of the bed with his face turned away and when he finally moved his hands, he just stared down at the comforter. "Why would you ever think any of that was your fault?" he finally asked slowly, voice still quiet even if it wasn't as listless.

"Because I left you behind when I never should have," Boyd said in frustration. "There were so many things I could have done but I was too afraid to lose you-- too damn stupid to think properly with the idea that you would choose anyone else over me, even when that wasn't even happening." His fingers turned into fists against the cover. "My judgment was affected and just because it was Jessica, just because I was jealous, I did something horrible and ended up betraying you. And because of that, because I wasn't there as your partner like I should have been, you were tortured in a way you never should have lived through."

Sin finally sat up straight and looked over at Boyd, eyebrows drawn together with confusion and surprise. "*That's* why you acted that way? Because you were jealous?" he demanded. "Are you serious?"

Boyd fell silent for a moment. "Yes."

Sin shook his head, totally mystified. "So if it'd been anybody else you wouldn't have acted that way?"

"I don't know." Boyd paused then let out a breath. "Probably not. I would have been... thinking more clearly."

"You just--" Sin had to stop himself and once again look away.

The information didn't mollify the anger that he'd felt about Boyd's reaction; if anything, it only made it worse. He'd basically told Sin to do the thing that he'd scorned Connor for doing; killing an innocent person for his own personal reasons and gain.

Sin took a deep breath and tried to control the anger that was building inside him once again. He closed his eyes, trying to ignore it but as soon as he did the image of Jessica's blank, staring eyes assaulted him. His hands curled into fists and he swallowed convulsively, eyes snapping open because he just didn't want to see anymore; it was too much. "Do you know who you sounded like?"

"The Agency," Boyd said quietly after a moment.

"You sounded like Connors," Sin corrected him flatly, still not looking over. Even so, he could tell Boyd stiffened at the name. "You sounded just like Connors whenever he slides a file across his desk with a name in it, when he tells me to do his dirty work and take out some random person who hasn't really done anything wrong just because they're complicating his agenda."

Boyd drew away, sitting back on his heels and dropping his hands into his lap. He didn't seem to know what to say to that at first. It was a few seconds before he said softly, "I'm sorry."

"Just forget it. I don't even know why you would be jealous of her. She was never a replacement for you." He paused, and shook his head. "I didn't come here for this. It doesn't matter anymore."

And he hadn't. But it'd made him so angry before and hearing Boyd's reasoning just exacerbated it, made him want to tell him exactly how it made him feel. It wasn't even really about Jessica. It was about Boyd telling him he was human, telling him he shouldn't have to be anyone's tool, puppet, and then completely going back on those words when it came down to what was in his own best interest.

"I was upset because you told me to kill the woman but I never once blamed you for what ended up happening. It wasn't your fault. No one could have known how things wound up. When I woke up I wasn't angry about that. I was fucking worried because I had no idea what ever ended up happening to you or if you even escaped okay."

"I was fine," Boyd said, his tone somewhat bitter. "I escaped. It would have been pathetic if I left you there and got caught anyway. And after--" There was a slight catch in his words, as if he almost said something else, but then he continued. "I returned to the Agency, I've been here. So there's nothing to worry about."

Sin glanced at Boyd again. "Well apparently there is still something to worry about. Things are just a different kind of fucked up now. I just don't know what you expect me to do now. I don't know what you want from me because what you're telling me to do is not going to happen."

Boyd let out a long breath and brought one hand up to rub wearily at his eyes. "Sin, all I want is for you to be safe and happy. But you have to look at our history. I'm poison for you. I hurt people because of you-- I hurt *you* because of you. I can't be trusted. I fuck up so much; I make such resounding mistakes that destroy everything around me." He shook his head once, sharply. "I make one irrational decision and suddenly you're fucking dying in the back of the van. I watched you stop breathing. I watched them struggle to bring you back."

His eyes glinted but his expression seemed charged, his eyebrows lowering. "I'm a goddamn menace to you, Sin. You may have managed to live this time but I can't trust it will ever happen again. I'm afraid of the decisions I may make around you and the consequences they may have. I could be the death of you someday and I don't know if I can risk that."

"You can't risk that?" Sin's eyes narrowed into a glare and for a moment he was so aggravated that he didn't even realize that Boyd was saying he'd apparently flat lined more than once. "It's not just your decision. It's my life, and you're trying to make fucking decisions for me."

"I'm trying to protect you," Boyd insisted. "Sin, you died. You fucking died and they almost couldn't revive you. How am I supposed to forget that or the part I played in it?"

"Well I think that's fucking *bullshit*," Sin snapped angrily. "I think you coming to this decision just because you're afraid is fucking cowardly and selfish. So what, I almost died, guess what-- that's my goddamn job!"

He broke off abruptly, shaking with barely concealed anger and looked away, breath coming fast once again. It took several long moments to regain his composure but when he did he spoke with the same flat tone he'd used previously. "Just forget it. I'm not going to sit here and beg you. I'll give you what you want if you want it that bad."

There was no immediate response and Sin silently picked up the gun from where it had been thrown. He grabbed the magazine which had fallen closer to Boyd and ignored how tense the other man seemed as he stared silently at the floor. Shoving the clip back in the gun, Sin held it at his side as he walked out of the bedroom with a sense of finality.

"Wait."

But Sin didn't stop even though he heard hurried footsteps as Boyd ran after him.

Boyd sounded alarmed as he said, "Sin! Wait, please-- Please don't go!"

He didn't know if it was something in Boyd's tone, the slight hint of pleading and desperation, but whatever it was it made him pause in mid-step.

Sin felt Boyd's forehead rest against his back. Boyd didn't speak right away and they fell silent. When Sin made no effort to say anything or pull away, Boyd said quietly, "Thank you for waiting."

Sin stayed still. His body was tense and yet he couldn't make himself take another step; not with Boyd's warmth pressed against him. "Why are you doing this now?"

"Because it would have been worse if I didn't," Boyd said after a beat of hesitation.

"Worse for who?"

"For both of us," Boyd replied quietly.

"For both of us," Sin repeated in the same flat tone. "I'm doing what you told me to do and now that's not the right thing either?"

Boyd let out a low breath. "When I told you that at first, it was different," he said, his tone relatively reasonable despite how confusing his words were for Sin. "I didn't intend for it to turn out like this, for you to think that I never cared, that I could just drop you or forget you and move on as if nothing changed. I don't know what's right anymore, I just--" He shook his head, a sense of frustration in his tone. "I just know *this* isn't right. If I never saw you again and this was how we parted, then it's wrong."

"Then what's right, Boyd? I don't understand what you want me to do. I don't understand what you want from me anymore. Just--" Sin broke off for a moment. "Don't stand here and do this if you're just going to tell me the same shit again."

Boyd's hands twitched on Sin's shoulders and he drew in a breath. "I've changed too. Being around you changed everything for me. Before the Agency, I may as well

have been dead. Even after I met you, before we were friends, I was just waiting for my life to end."

Still Sin said nothing and his shoulders did not relax. He stared straight ahead, face expressionless and jaw clenched tightly.

Boyd pressed his forehead harder against him. He seemed intent on explaining before Sin had the chance to leave, before he could walk out and they could possibly never see each other again. "And now things are different. I'm different. And I need you too."

Dark eyebrows drew together slightly, green eyes narrowing as Sin stared at the door. For a moment he didn't believe what he'd heard. But he replayed the words in his mind and he inhaled slowly, eyes sliding closed even though none of the tension left his body.

"Don't play with me Boyd."

"I'm not," Boyd insisted. "I swear to God I'm not. I know you have reason to believe I may be lying, or maybe you think I changed my mind too quickly. But I swear, Sin, the only thing making me push you away before was the belief that you were better off without me."

The tension in the room seemed to weigh down on Sin's shoulders. Confusion and anxiety caused Sin to pull away from Boyd and cover his face with his hands, a frustrated sound escaping his throat. "You're driving me crazy. I come to a decision and then you come and fuck it up and now I don't even know what to do or say anymore."

"What do you think you did to me?" Boyd asked rhetorically.

Broad shoulders rose in a brief shrug and Sin just scoffed quietly at the situation in general. "So what now?"

"I don't know," Boyd admitted, looking away. "I suppose it depends on what your new decision is."

"Well it was to leave like you were telling me to but it would be stupid to do that now that you're telling me not to since I never wanted to in the first place," Sin said blandly.

After a moment, Boyd asked hesitantly, "So... Are we okay then?"

"If you swear that you're not going to go back on your word and change your mind later," Sin replied, not missing a beat.

"I won't."

Sin turned finally, green eyes locking with brown and gracing the other man with a stare that seemed wary but mostly tired. His head was pounding by now and the dizziness from earlier was beginning to creep up on him again. He didn't know if the anxiety and tension had worsened his condition or if he'd been fucked the entire time and been moving purely on adrenaline. Whatever the reason, exhaustion was catching up with him.

"I don't really know what's going to happen now with the Agency. I figure I'll be sent back to medical so I don't know when I'll be able to contact you again."

"Wait," Boyd said, quickly taking a step forward when he realized Sin intended to leave. "You don't have to leave. I mean--" He stopped, then gave Sin a slightly uncertain look. "If it's alright with you, I'd like for you to stay the night."

Sin stared at him blankly for a moment and genuinely felt surprised at the request.

"That's fine with me," he said finally, looking around at the living room. "If they get antsy I'll deal with them when the time comes but I doubt they're going to do anything too dramatic considering they're in a civilian neighborhood and causing some huge standoff would draw a lot of unwanted attention. They'll more than likely just do an escort in the morning. I'm sure by now they've confirmed that neither of us is dead and if they haven't, the living room is in full view of a lot of windows so they'll figure it out when they see me sleeping."

Boyd looked over at the couch. The clean lines of the furniture stood out in the shadows and the pale light from the streetlight across the street. "I meant... for you to sleep in my room. With me. My bed is large enough and it's a lot more comfortable."

The suggestion wouldn't have been surprising hours ago, or more accurately months ago, but after everything that had been said between them in the past thirty minutes, for some reason it was. Even so, it wasn't something he was going to turn down, not when the idea of that kind of proximity was more than a little appealing.

"Okay." There was a brief pause. "If you're sure."

Boyd nodded, looking slightly relieved. "Okay." He watched Sin for a moment and then turned towards his room.

Sin trailed behind him, feeling more exhausted by the moment. He came to the conclusion that it really had been nothing more than adrenaline that had driven him for the past couple of hours. The anxiety over what had happened to Boyd had pushed him but now that the paranoia and hot anger was fading, he wasn't left with much more than fatigue.

His head was spinning and his vision dimmed at the edges, making Boyd's room seem even darker and his bed seem even more inviting. As he collapsed on Boyd's bed, he swore he was seeing spots. He was barely aware of Boyd pulling the curtains closed. By the time Boyd had crawled up on to the bed beside him, he was already asleep.

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Sin was dead asleep until he felt his shoulder shake and heard Boyd's voice telling him to wake up. His eyes snapped open and his body tensed. "Is it late?"

"It's just past seven," Boyd replied quietly, as if it would alert the agents outside to the fact they were awake if he spoke any louder. "I haven't heard anything but I just woke recently." Somehow, his hand didn't quite make it away from Sin's shoulder.

Sin groaned and brought his hand up to his head, wincing slightly. The pain wasn't entirely gone but he felt far more alert and prepared to deal with the Agency than he had the night before. "I should go soon. I'd rather leave before they come and physically try to remove me."

Boyd studied Sin and for a moment it looked as though he was about to say something but instead he just nodded and sat up fully, looking at the curtains as if he could see through them to what the agents were doing. "That's probably best," he agreed, though something about his expression seemed a little reluctant. "That way it doesn't give Connors or my mother time to give the order, if they haven't already."

Despite his comment about leaving, Sin didn't get up and instead stared up at Boyd with his hand still resting against his forehead.

"What did he say to you at your debriefing?" he asked suddenly.

Boyd watched Sin for a moment and then shook his head with slightly narrowed eyes and a faint frown. "Basically that I'm a failure on all accounts. I was hired to be your partner, if I'd done my job none of this would have happened, I fucked Thierry and got faulty Intel and then caused an international incident..." He paused. "And that my sexual relationship with you must have influenced my decision to insist they didn't let you die."

Sin stared at him blankly for a moment before speaking. "How does he know we have a sexual relationship?"

"I suspect he was expanding on his belief from earlier," Boyd said, looking over at Sin again, "when he saw the surveillance video of before you were sent to the box. But I can't be certain."

"I see." Sin wondered if he'd be 'neutered' now. His hand unconsciously dropped to his crotch as if suddenly paranoid that something had been done to him to make it... unworkable. "Well he's a fucking moron anyway. What did Vivienne say?"

"That was the strange part, actually." Boyd drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully. "She was understandably angry that I was seen, but she seemed equally displeased with Connors. After he dismissed me, she followed me out of the room to speak with me. She's never done that before. She kept saying I needed to learn my lessons more thoroughly but that it was for my safety as well as others." He paused, seeming confused as he added, "It seems so unlike her, but... I think she was trying to warn me of where I was headed."

"Maybe she was. Maybe she knew it was bullshit."

Boyd shook his head. "Was it?" he asked rhetorically although his tone was a little dark. "If you take into account everything I've done, even back to when I broke you off the fourth, and also how many people were hurt because of me in Mexico..." He shook his head. "I'm probably lucky that's all I got. I'm probably lucky they let me off the floor at all."

Sin shook his head but didn't say anything more on the topic, not wanting to get on another debate about what was Boyd's fault and what he deserved or didn't deserve because of it. "And whose decision was it for you to no longer be an agent?"

"I don't know. Probably Connors'." Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly although his tone remained calm. "All I know is I returned home to find my termination letter waiting for me. And agents watching me. At least, I thought so. It took me awhile to decide that was true."

A slight frown crossed Sin's face and he sat up finally. "Something about that seems off. There has to be more to this 'termination' than meets the eye. I've never heard of an actual field agent ever resigning or being fired. Anytime anyone has left service before, it usually led to them being permanently silenced because of the risk it would be to have someone wandering around who knew so much about an organization that isn't even supposed to exist. I don't even think your mother's influence would change that."

Boyd considered that. "I don't know what happened, then. I don't see why they wouldn't follow normal procedures just to be safe. It's not as though killing me would've made much of an impact on the Agency as a whole and that way they would've been covered."

Sin's shoulders lifted in a shrug. "I have no idea. This all just seems really strange in general. I guess we won't know for sure until... I don't know. Until someone really tells us what the hell the deal is."

They fell silent for a few moments; Boyd didn't have an answer to that and Sin didn't have anything else to ask. He had no intentions of questioning Boyd about what had gone on during his time with Shane. It was unnecessary and most likely not something Boyd would want to talk about any time soon, if ever.

Boyd studied Sin and seemed to hesitate, as if wondering if he should ask or not, but then he said, "I've been wondering... How did they manage to catch you?"

Sin's eyes dropped and he stared at the black sheets uncomfortably. He'd been anticipating the question and even though he'd explained it without hesitation to Carhart. After Boyd's admission that his attitude towards Jessica had been over his own personal dislike, over jealousy, something in him held him back from telling the whole story. He didn't want Boyd to know that she'd died anyway, that he'd ultimately been the one to pull the trigger even if it'd been an accident. Just one look, one comment, one hint that Boyd was pleased by the knowledge would make that same anger build inside of him again. It was something that he wanted to avoid. It was something about Boyd that he didn't even want to acknowledge.

"I'd ultimately planned to drop her off in a park on the way to meeting you but all routes to safe houses were pretty much blocked by emergency people so I had to take a different way that I hadn't previously scouted. I dropped her off briefly in a deserted area, scouted, came back with the intentions of moving her somewhere more public since she'd still been unconscious when I left but she'd already woken up by the time I returned. She'd called her uncle to pick her up and he turned out to be Hale Clemons,

even though she was obviously unaware that he had ties with Janus. She seemed to have no real idea what was going on. Long story short, they managed to overpower me and knock me out."

Boyd slid his eyes closed and tilted his head down; although he didn't say anything at first, judging by his expression, it was along the lines of what he'd expected to hear. He shook his head once and said quietly, "Even if she knew he was tied to Janus, there was no reason she wouldn't call; she didn't know you were an agent. But... Hale Clemons? I wouldn't have expected her to have any connection with him. His background check didn't reveal her relation to him and any time I tried to get any information about him, no one like her was mentioned."

"Yeah. I'm assuming they aren't related by blood. She called him her uncle but that doesn't necessarily mean they're legally or closely related. He may be nothing more than a close family friend. Who knows." He shrugged again and continued to study the sheets. "That's pretty much the long and short of it. Mostly everything after that is vague, I just remember bits and pieces of interrogation. I don't recall much honestly until I woke up yesterday in one of the compound's medical facilities. I wasn't even aware that I'd been brought back to the Agency."

"I could see that; you were in terrible shape," Boyd said somberly. He shook his head as if to stop thinking about that. "How did you get here, then?"

Sin glanced up at Boyd again. "I... left. Knocked out a couple of doctors and escaped the facility, pretty much. At that point I had no idea what was going on or whether or not you'd even made it back okay so I went to Carhart and got a few answers although for the most part, Connors had him in the dark as well." He stood up finally, glancing at the window. "I should probably get out of here."

Boyd looked to the window as well even though nothing could be seen through the curtains. He nodded a little distractedly, then stood. "If... Well, I know you won't. But if you happen to get off the compound and you need anything... I'll be here."

The corners of Sin's mouth turned down a bit and he pushed Boyd lightly, almost playfully. For a moment there was a feeling of old familiarity, the motion bringing to mind the things that had passed between them more than a year ago when they'd first started to become accustomed to each other's company.

"After all the shit I just went through trying to convince you not to ditch me, do you really think I'll let them keep me away?"

Boyd looked caught off guard, but then he smiled slightly. "No, I suppose not."

"Alright then."

They didn't exchange words after that and Boyd trailed behind him quietly as Sin strode towards the door. In the light of the morning with the pale, almost ghostly rays of sunshine straining to break through the ashes, it was hard to believe that the events that had taken place the night before in the darkened shadows of the house had actually occurred.

Even so, as they made their way to the front door to part ways for what could be the last time in a long time, neither of them mentioned what had taken place. There was something close to awkwardness between them, a hesitation and uncertainty that hadn't been there six months ago. That was unsurprising given the circumstances. Despite the fact that the majority of their relationship had started in Lexington, at the Agency, they'd never been that close there. Sin hadn't really considered how their interaction would be affected upon their return and he suspected Boyd hadn't either.

The fact that agents were watching their every move didn't help matters. That, combined with the uncomfortable embarrassment that shadowed the outpouring of feelings the night before, made for a very quiet farewell.

## Chapter 42

Boyd had spent months too tired or depressed to get out of his bed to do little more than wander around the house or eat whatever small amount of food he could bother with at the time. Earlier his dreams and nightmares had been so vivid that they'd spread into the days. He still didn't know which parts he had and had not hallucinated, which parts were only dreams and which reality. But that could not have sustained itself forever; with enough time, even his imagination had lost all sense of color or intensity during the day and instead he'd fallen into an all-encompassing state of apathy. After long enough, it had seemed like he would have nothing else to look forward to; that the days spent in a half-slumbering state were just carbon copied and repeated indefinitely. So when Sin had suddenly appeared one night alive and relatively well, it was with a sense of confused shock that Boyd had responded, and even long after he'd disappeared, he had found himself glancing quickly at the door as if wondering if that had really happened or thinking maybe, somehow, Sin was coming back sooner than either had expected.

Sometimes it was almost like it hadn't happened. But even if the bullet hole was not there, he could recall too clearly the feel of those tense, broad shoulders beneath his hands, the smell that wasn't quite right surrounding him as he'd buried his face in Sin's hoody. But thinking so much about that started to bring back other thoughts, too. When he'd first returned from the Agency he'd found himself snapping awake from the midst of nightmares and the images would follow into reality. When his hands got caught under the sheets or he buried them under the pillow, his heart would jolt and he'd throw himself awake, terrified that he was still being held down, that he was still in that room with those pictures and those words surrounding him. The image of Lou being slaughtered pasted on the ceiling above him and his screams mixing with the screams of himself when he was younger, when he'd lost everything; even, temporarily, his sanity and sense of self. When he'd first been released from fourth, he'd had terrible dreams of Sin; of his death, of his dying, of watching the results of the torture bloom across his body and the echoing crack of bones dislocating and breaking under the onslaught of Janus' disregard for his life. And the entire time Sin would watch him,

unforgiving and unrelenting, demanding without words why Boyd had let them do that to him.

Previously, he'd just let it happen; he'd believed every condemning word he could hear whispered in the dark, in his mind, and he'd turned it upon himself. But with the possibility of Sin still being alive, and, most of all, not blaming him for what had happened even if Boyd still couldn't understand why, he was trying to change that mindset. Now, he tried to turn the thoughts in other directions. When he started thinking about JKS and everything that had gone wrong there, he tried instead to think about the times before that; the way Sin looked when he smirked and the sound of that first startled laugh. When he dreamed in slow motion of finding Sin in the basement, of the flickering lights and the blood like paint splashed around the room, when he jerked awake and the shadows were like heavy poison around him, he'd breathe as steadily as he could and try to think instead of Sin's words that he hadn't blamed Boyd for any of that.

Even so, the days stretched endlessly before him. He still felt somehow confined to his house despite the fact that he could technically leave if he so chose. But he had nowhere to go. He wasn't about to try to visit Johnson's Pharmaceuticals for several reasons, the main of which was that he no longer worked there and, if the possibly-imagined Sin was correct, then it was an anomaly that he was still alive so pushing it would probably result in his death.

It was while he was in a similar state of thought while blankly staring at his comforter that he heard a knock at his front door. Boyd stilled, his heart rate automatically increasing, and he turned his attention solely to listen for the sound again, thinking for a moment he had imagined it. A few seconds passed and then, once more, the steady and deep rapping of someone calmly knocking on the door. Boyd walked to the front door feeling a mixture of paranoia, caution, and hope. When he paused in front of it, he hesitated before looking out the peephole just as he started to hear the knocking again, more insistent this time.

Some part of him must have wished it was Sin, returning as he'd said he would, because he felt an inexplicable sense of disappointment when he saw the blank-faced man standing on the other side. Not that it made sense but hope and desire rarely followed a logical path, as he felt was a definite case-in-point for him whenever Sin was involved. Just as the fourth knock was resounding across the wood, Boyd opened the door and warily looked outside, brown eyes squinting against the light. The man was nondescript; dark hair, dark eyes, a forgettable face, nothing particularly noticeable about his clothing, and it was for those reasons alone Boyd knew this was one of the agents that had been tailing him. He didn't say anything, just watched the man silently with an automatic sense of foreboding.

The agent nodded curtly at him then stood to attention, his hands held behind his back smartly. Despite the pose, Boyd knew fully well that he was not compromised; he would easily be able to react to any attack Boyd may have planned. "You've been summoned," he stated calmly.

Surprise and fear mixed as Boyd said, "What?"

When the agent didn't bother replying, obviously knowing it had been an automatic and meaningless question, Boyd looked around them quickly, searching for any other agents. He didn't see anyone else except the SUV, which had moved so it was directly across the street, its sides shining deep black and windows glinting in a manner that made it impossible to see inside.

"Why?" Boyd tried again, returning his attention to the agent.

"Orders," the agent said simply and Boyd shook his head once in a vague sense of annoyance.

"No. Why am I being summoned?"

The agent raised his eyebrows and said, "I just get the orders and carry them out. It's best if you come with me now."

Although he didn't say anything further, Boyd wouldn't have been surprised if the second half of those orders were to bring him in by force if he didn't comply. So, with one last quick glance around, Boyd said, "Just one moment, then," and grabbed the keys to the house so he could lock the door on his way out as he followed the agent to the SUV.

The ride to the Agency was uneventful and silent; Boyd spent the time staring out the window and felt a sense of déjà vu from when he'd been passing through Monterrey in a similar van. When they reached Johnson's Pharmaceuticals, Boyd stared at the massive skyscraper with an increased sense of foreboding; the building rose into the air in a manner that was far more intimidating to him in that moment than it ever had before. He didn't know exactly why he felt that way, but it was there and the feeling clawed at him from deep in his stomach. Although he kept the anxiety from showing in his expression, it didn't make it any less real for him.

After a moment the van stopped and when neither agent moved, Boyd glanced at them and stepped out of the vehicle, shutting the door behind him and peering at the compound through the gates. He expected the other two to get out as well but they stayed inside. The first agent rolled down his window and said, "General Carhart is waiting in briefing room 7-D. You are to see him immediately."

Boyd stared at the man in a sense of confusion and disbelief. "What-- Briefing?" The agent didn't bother to respond; he simply gave him a look that stated he had best follow the orders as well, and the two drove off. Boyd stared after the van as it turned around the corner and, after a moment, he looked distractedly back at the guards who stood stone-faced, one watching him while the other scanned the surroundings. Boyd walked up to the gate, not knowing exactly how this was supposed to work because they had confiscated his agency cards and cell phone after releasing him but the guards just nodded at him and let him in. They probably had been alerted to his visit beforehand and were given authorization to let him through.

Walking through the compound was bizarre and rather unnerving; he felt more vulnerable at that moment than he had even during the previous winter when rumors

had run rampant. The paranoia he'd been feeling at home would not quite go away and heightened his senses in a manner that made the situation worse. He felt like everyone was watching him but when he glanced around, very few actually were. He kept his posture and expression calm and intent in order to hide any sense of insecurity he was feeling, but there was still a part of him that was afraid. It was possible that this was as much a "briefing" as the second stage of the "debriefing" had been what he'd expected the last time he'd been on the compound.

However, he found himself going the same route he'd always gone to the room where his unit had met, and very little happened along the way. The conference table was there as always, with the same projector resting near Carhart and the same seats around the table. Carhart looked exactly as he always had, as if no time at all had passed and when he looked over at Boyd, it was with the same expression he'd always given him. Sin was sitting there, his expression bored, but his posture somehow led Boyd to believe that he was impatient although he looked over at Boyd when he entered. His hair was cut short the way Boyd last remembered and he was wearing his usual clothing; an old t-shirt and over-sized black cargo pants.

Jeffrey sat in his usual spot, pouring over a stack of papers with his briefcase at his side with his hair and clothing as immaculate as always. He flicked a glance Boyd's way and something about it seemed less dismissive; more aware than it had been in the past. Owen was there looking awake for once with a large, steaming cup of coffee resting near his hand, though his clothing was as disheveled as always. But to Boyd's disappointment Ryan was missing; he'd really been hoping to see him.

Not saying anything, Boyd simply walked around the table and took his usual seat at Sin's side, feeling that this entire situation was very strange, almost as if he had to be dreaming it even if he knew he wasn't.

The silence stretched uncomfortably and finally Sin's gaze dragged from Boyd's face and focused on Carhart as his fingers tapped against the table impatiently. "Are we going to sit here and jerk off or are you going to get to the point of this little gathering?"

Carhart's eyebrows rose and his hazel eyes observed Sin for a moment before he folded his hands in front of him neatly. "The point is an assignment, of course."

Boyd gave Carhart a confused look. "Wait... I was terminated, so if this is really a briefing, I don't understand why I was summoned here."

The General's calm gaze moved to him and although there was nothing terribly telling in his expression, the slight tilt of his head and the almost too casual way he shrugged his broad shoulders, gave away the fact that he was obviously pleased with what he was about to say. "Termination at Johnson's Pharmaceuticals is only official when an employee is officially terminated." The comment was both vague and telling at once and he continued. "Thus the reason why you were never removed from the system."

Boyd stared at him. "But I received a termination letter that also stated my codes had been wiped from the system. What was that then, if not termination? Unofficial extended leave without pay? Why wouldn't they just say so if that was the case?"

"I imagine that their decisions about what they choose and refuse to disclose are for very specific, intentional reasons." Carhart held eye contact for a brief moment before repeating meaningfully. "And like I said, termination is only official when employees are officially terminated."

"I understand what you mean," Boyd said, shaking his head. "I just meant," he started to say, then stopped. Specific, intentional reasons. It was Connors' idea to 'terminate' him, he had little doubt of that judging by his mother's reactions. If she had been the one in charge, she would have been upfront about it and would have informed him that he was suspended which was in essence what had occurred. He suspected that leading him to believe he'd been fired was also Connors' idea and perhaps the reason was simply to mess with his mind for an extended period of time. If he'd known he was just suspended it would have been different; he would not have had the feeling that his access to everyone he knew or cared about was unequivocally severed. He would not have lost all hope so completely, possibly. It made him wonder about

Connors' wording, that being a field agent went along with being Sin's partner. If Sin had died, would they have brought him back or would they have killed him at that point?

"Never mind. So... Now I'm just being brought back to start in missions again?"

Sin's eyes went from Boyd to Carhart and then back again. His eyebrows were drawn together slightly but other than that, his face was unreadable. He didn't say anything and it was Carhart who spoke again. "Correct."

"I've been gone for an extended period of time, though," Boyd pointed out. "What if I'm not agent material anymore? Or if I don't want to return?"

This time Sin sat up straight and he sent Boyd a glare so dark that everyone else in the room picked up on it, looking at him before their gazes returned to Boyd. But once again, he didn't say anything, even as his green eyes narrowed dangerously.

"The first question was stupid and the second was ignorant, so I am going to ignore both," Carhart replied flatly.

Boyd looked at Sin with a slight shake of his head, then turned to Carhart. "I didn't say that was the case, I was just curious. I suppose I wondered how obvious and quick the termination would be." More than anything, it was simply that they were such obvious questions to him that he felt they needed to be asked aloud, even if he wasn't serious about them. He noticed Jeffrey giving him a half irritated, half incredulous look but he ignored him. "I apologize for the interruption. You were talking about this mission?"

Appearing mollified by the explanation, Carhart nodded briefly before typing something on the keyboard in front of him. After a brief moment an image was projected before them of what appeared to be a neatly typed memo. It was brief and written in what appeared to be a foreign language of some kind, which was doubtful, or a code, which was more likely. It was on stationary although the header was not in view and was signed in what appeared to be ink, with the initials TB.

"Immediately following the aftermath of the Monterrey debacle, a search was put out for Thierry to be brought in for interrogation," Carhart said it calmly but something in his tone implied that the interrogation would hardly be a pleasant affair. "It was he who provided the faulty information and with little to go on other than that, he is suspected of either having done so unwittingly or because he finally chose a side and deliberately lured us into a trap."

Boyd looked at the memo, recognizing the handwriting as the same that had been on the note Thierry had left him with the disc.

"For months his trail was cold and unsurprisingly, it appears that Thierry used his resources and contacts to go deep into hiding. It was assumed that this was an admission of his guilt and that he was indeed hiding from us but several weeks ago it came to our attention that we weren't the only organization searching for him. Details as usual were difficult to obtain, we are dealing with a man who has perfected the art of hiding his tracks and who has managed to maintain relationships with many of the most dangerous organizations in the world for years, so it wasn't entirely clear who exactly the other organization was or why they wanted him. Investigations haven't turned up much on that matter; however, a week ago a contact of Thierry's who has also proved to be a source to Owen in the past, sent out a major distress signal and sent Owen an electronic copy of this memorandum. A note which, according to the contact, was left with strict orders from Thierry only to be opened if there was radio silence between he and his men for more than seven days. It was locked away, hidden, heavily coded and the second set of orders stated that it was only to be sent to us." Carhart nodded briefly at Jeff.

"In essence, the note gives three regions where he believes he would be held in the event he goes missing," Jeff explained. "The basic regions were listed as New Zealand, Northeast Mexico, and Ireland. Given that Thierry has ties to Janus, two out of those three regions are in Janus territory, and the Monterrey mission was so recent which includes ties to northeast Mexico, it seems that Janus may have been the other organization that was after him."

"I checked into New Zealand," Owen offered, surprisingly alert to the topic of conversation. He paused to take a large drink of his coffee, then grimaced and set it down. When he looked back up, the red in his eyes was obvious, as if he hadn't been getting much sleep lately. Then again, given Owen's typical state, even a normal amount may not seem enough for him. "There hasn't been anything suspicious going down recently in New Zealand, which doesn't really mean much since they could just be hiding it secret agent style. But, since Mexico seems to be the place where all the big kids hang out, we figured that was a good starting place. Also, Ryan was checking around and between us we heard that there are places in both New Zealand *and* northeast Mexico that have facilities where it's theorized they may perform interrogations or hold prisoners. But neither of us know exact locations."

Boyd's eyebrows drew down and he leaned forward, thinking that through. "Wait, northeast Mexico? You can't mean Monterrey? It's true that Janus may have a connection to the Mexican authorities, and I don't know what has happened since I was there, but I can't think of many places outside of the areas in the city that Kassian's group and I already checked that would work for keeping Thierry. The type of facility they would need that would be used on a regular basis for interrogations and wouldn't be as... haphazardly adapted as the ones we saw, simply doesn't exist to my knowledge in Monterrey. And the black market groups were still growing in strength by the time I left so I would imagine they have an even stronger presence and further control of any such areas by now."

Sin seemed largely unimpressed with the entire conversation; he had relaxed into his seat again and he was waiting with something approaching impatience. Boyd could feel his gaze on him, but he only glanced over a few times; his mind was working with the information they were giving him and his usual need to solve the puzzle was making it so he didn't want to distract himself with staring at his partner who, for the longest time, he never thought he'd see again.

"Yeah, pretty much what we thought, except, you know, without the details that make yours make more sense," Owen said. "I was kind of going by gut instinct and just

the way Janus works. They're like lightning; don't hit the same place twice. Except when they do, which I think is only because it would be too obvious for the culture they're in or they get confused. Which is bad when you have a big terror organization like them, losing... Where was I going with this?" Owen looked at the others in confusion.

Jeff scoffed. "Why don't you try including a shot of intelligence in that coffee?"

"No, they only had espresso," Owen said, looking at him strangely. Jeff gave him a look that stated he thought he was an idiot, but somehow that seemed to jog Owen's memory. "Oh, outside of Monterrey, right? I mean it's not like it has to be specifically in that city. But we don't have any addresses at all, not in New Zealand even less in northeast Mexico. It's all pretty vague right now." He wiggled his fingers in a mysterious way.

"But most of northeast Mexico is desert," Boyd pointed out. "Well, there are plenty of towns in the surrounding areas and some large cities, but Monterrey..." He trailed off, thinking. When he had been in Monterrey, he had studied the city intently but he'd also done some research on the surrounding area. During some of the particularly intense days, when the heat had been too strong to wander around outside and Sin had been at work so he hadn't had anyone to distract him, he'd stopped by the libraries to research bits of Mexico's history, the culture, the language, and especially the current state of affairs. It had been helpful to gain a better understanding of where Monterrey fit in with the country, and it had also provided him with random information he otherwise would not have received. Even so, he couldn't think offhand of any place in particular that would make more sense than any other place would, and without knowing what specifically Janus would look for in the sort of place to house an interrogation center, it was nearly impossible to narrow down the choices. So he tried to think of other things; not that which he had read, but what he'd been told, what he had heard. For a moment that led him nowhere, but then something caught his attention.

"Wait," he said suddenly, sitting up straight. "Laguna de Sánchez. That's southeast of Monterrey, somewhere between Santiago and Allende, but I don't know much else about it. *Lo más chingón* warned me about that place specifically, though. He

said," his eyebrows drew down as he tried to remember the wording, "that the people there would not be fond of the company I kept."

Carhart sat up and looked at Boyd with interest but didn't immediately say anything even though he leaned forward slightly as his eyes narrowed.

Sin, on the other hand, looked mildly confused by the information and raised an eyebrow at Boyd inquisitively. "I'm assuming this happened while I was down for the count," he said, mouthing twisting slightly in disappointment that he'd missed yet another opportunity to confront the smuggler.

Boyd met Sin's gaze and nodded slightly, still marveling at the fact that Sin was really there sitting next to him, speaking to him and that his green eyes were as clear and alert as ever; that there were no signs of any lasting damage despite how dire the situation had been. Thinking of that conversation with *chingón* automatically put him in mind of what Sin's state had been at the time. "He stopped us on our way out of the city," he said simply.

"Who is this person? Why would we even care what he said?" Jeff asked before anyone else could speak.

Boyd turned his attention to Jeff. "He's the leader of the most dangerous and successful smuggling group that I know of in Monterrey. There are very few people who are on his level or would dare challenge him." He looked at Sin again; for some reason, because Sin knew of the man, he felt the need to explain to him further. "I was trying to avoid any of his territory but in the month since I'd had good Intel, he'd taken over jurisdiction of the tunnel we escaped through."

"Why would he warn you about a possible Janus base?" Carhart demanded suddenly but despite the intensity of his tone, he didn't seem skeptical of the information, just intrigued. "What exactly happened when you encountered him during the escape?"

"Well," Boyd said, gaze lingering briefly on Sin before returning his attention to Carhart. "We were all extremely distracted when we were stopped by *lo más chingón* and his men. I'd met him earlier in the assignment so when I recognized his mark, I attempted to negotiate. He called his men off, spoke to me for a bit about nothing in particular, looked in the van and spoke to several of the team members. He seemed... relatively amused by the entire situation until I attempted to stop him from looking into the van. He wasn't really being serious about anything but it was clear he knew we weren't simple civilians due to the riot gear everyone was wearing, and Sin's condition. I'm not certain why he warned me; any number of reasons are possible but it could have been related to the fact that I didn't seem particularly intimidated by him, that he'd seen me before and wanted to see what I'd do with the information, or maybe I just amused him. I have no idea when it comes to him."

Carhart's eyes didn't leave his face for several moments but when his gaze finally dropped, he switched back to the previous topic abruptly. "*Laguna de Sánchez*," He muttered thoughtfully, with a perfect Spanish accent. "Even if this information seems shady at the moment it's still a lead and the only one we have. I know Mexico is Ryan's forte but do we know anything about this area? It doesn't have to be specifically regarding Janus or suspicious activity."

Sin cleared his throat and looked at Boyd out of the corner of his eye before focusing on Carhart. "My former employer mentioned it in passing at some point. I wasn't really paying attention to what she was saying but she claimed it was a tourist spot because of its location near a national park and apparently she has family with property out there."

"Family?" Boyd echoed, looking at Sin a little more intently than he had before. "Close family?"

One shoulder rose in a shrug. "I guess. I have no idea. She seemed to have a huge family and apparently she kept in close contact with all of them so I don't know who's considered close and who's not, even if they're just extended or not really related by blood."

"Like Hale Clemons, right? Janus extraordinaire and her 'uncle'?" Owen asked, taking another drink of his coffee and grimacing again. He pushed it away too abruptly and it was only with Boyd snapping a hand out to stop it that it didn't spill onto all of Jeff's papers.

Jeff gave Owen a disgusted look. "Stop drinking that if you have such issues acting like an adult. Although you have a point. Hale Clemons was her extended family which is why she never appeared on his initial background checks."

Owen nodded, giving Boyd a grateful look for the coffee, then he turned to Carhart with his eyebrows raised. "But family property plus uncle plus Janus plus Laguna adds up to 100% suspicious. I think we should look into it. That's more coincidence in one area than I have in New Zealand."

"What I don't understand is why they are moving like this now," Boyd said, thinking aloud. "If the entire mission was a set up, then who were they trying to catch? I'd assumed it was the Agency since they caught Sin. But even after that was all over, they captured Thierry as well. And even if Hale Clemons was the Janus contact in the area, he can't be the only one. Why would he bother involving himself further in the matter?"

"He's probably taking it personally that information Thierry gave out led to Jessica dying," Jeff said offhandedly.

Boyd's gaze snapped to Jeff in surprise. "What?" He looked over at Sin, though he didn't seem to be asking him specifically when he asked, "Jessica died?"

Sin said nothing, expression unchanging and it was Carhart who wound up answering. "She was caught in the crossfire of gunfire before Sin was captured."

Boyd looked between the two of them. "I see."

"So we have a new theory to explore," Carhart said finally. "One that hadn't even been on the table before this briefing. We now have to take the possibility that Thierry provided the faulty information to us unwittingly more seriously, an idea that could

possibly save his life in the end if it can be proven. If it turns out that he really is being held by Janus on Clemons' property, things will go more in his favor if he can be recovered alive. However before I even think to put any of this information in front of the Marshal, we need to do extensive research on the region. Owen, you can collaborate with Ryan as much as you can to find out what he already knows so that you can find out the things we need to know. Finding out whether or not Clemons owns property in that area will be the easiest part and that won't be enough to prove anything. Dig up any information you can find, anything suspicious about the property or movements in that area by Janus."

"I can do that," Owen said with a nod. He reached for his coffee again but Jeff gave him an irritated look and pulled it away before he could touch it. Owen made a mildly disgruntled face before he turned to Carhart blankly. "Uh... What was...? Oh. Right, I'll work on that right after we scramble."

"Good." Carhart glanced around the table. "If no one has any further questions and comments, we will reconvene as soon as we have more information on the topic. Boyd, see Ms. Green in HR to get your access card back and Jeff, meet me in my office in twenty minutes."

Jeff nodded and began gathering his papers, placing them very neatly and in a specific order in his briefcase. Owen was the first one to get up and leave, although he was far less fastidious about it; the coffee cup almost fell as he manhandled the door open and he could be heard quietly mumbling to himself as he headed down the hallway. Jeff made a face and snapped his briefcase closed a little more firmly than was necessary, only a few seconds behind him.

Boyd glanced at Sin, then moved to leave but before he could even fully stand, Carhart said, "Wait a second." Boyd looked at him curiously but settled back into the chair and waited for him to continue. "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes, actually," Boyd said after a moment. He'd been wondering about this through the meeting but there hadn't been a good place to ask. "Where is Ryan? It's not like him to miss a briefing."

The General observed him for a brief moment before responding. "He's indisposed at the moment, much to his displeasure, but hopefully he will join us next time."

Carhart didn't seem concerned that Sin appeared to be waiting for Boyd and when he seemed certain that Boyd had no further questions, he finally spoke. "I was wondering if you have any more information on this *Chingón* character that you can share with me. As I told Sin when I first debriefed him, I'm interested in gathering more information on he and his group just in case Janus does try to utilize him in the future, especially if he's stationed near what could be a base of their operations." He paused and sat back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "Was there anything of note that you remember? Anything that stood out or can be looked into more?"

"If you are referring to anything out of the ordinary, everything about him stands out," Boyd said honestly. "He seems difficult to predict as well." He thought about it a moment. "He is adept at hiding and trailing; there were several times I felt someone watching me in Monterrey, yet I could never specify who or where it was originating from until he told me that it was him. He speaks Spanish fluently but his accent sounded different than the natives'. When he speaks English, his accent is American though I can't place from where except to say he doesn't have a Southern accent. He's also quite strong and fast. He is feared by many of the natives. He also managed to take over that tunnel apparently effortlessly when it was implausible that it would occur without bloodshed among *los perdidos*, the people guarding the area. Ah... There are any number of things I could think of. I'm not certain what you'd like to know?"

The General thought for a moment and reached up to rub his jaw. "Were you able to see any distinguishing marks on his person?"

"He always covered himself; I could never see his features. It's a well-known part of his persona and no one has ever seen what he really looks like so I can't even give you details from rumors." Boyd leaned back in the chair, thinking. "Although I can tell you he is about my height but more muscular and stronger than me. He has a tattoo entirely covering his right forearm, but between the fact that he was silhouetted by the headlights at the time and it was otherwise very dark in the tunnel, I couldn't see any details. I just recall thinking that it was strange. Ah... He wore something silver around his neck when I saw him the first time; it may have been a necklace of some sort. The first time I met him he was wearing all black but the second time he was in a flashier outfit; rings, tall boots, a hat and a scarf. He also walks with a swagger."

Carhart stared at Boyd blankly for a long moment before asking his next question. "And this seal you mentioned earlier? The one which you recognized?"

"All his crates and vehicles have '4FF' painted in yellow," Boyd explained. "Though I have no idea what that means. It may just be the name of his group; no one ever gave it a name except to refer to them as *chingón's* people."

The statement was met with a long stretch of silence as Carhart continued to stare at him with the same strange expression on his face. It was only when Sin shifted impatiently and threw him an irritable glare that the General finally pushed his chair back and stood up. "I see. If anything, perhaps I will be able to dig up information about that phrase or anyone who has been known for using it." He collected his files, looking distracted, and nodded at the two of them. "Thank you for the information, Boyd. Without the things you told us today, we would still be without a lead and without any indication as to where to begin our search. I look forward to working with the both of you again after such a long absence and I will speak to you in a few days."

Although he didn't seem insincere about the things he said, the words were spoken in an almost automatic manner, as if he was too preoccupied to give them his full attention. He nodded at them shortly and exited the room, leaving Sin and Boyd to stare after him.

After a moment, Sin finally looked at Boyd again and shoved his hands into his pockets with a glare. "What was all of that not wanting to come back bullshit about?"

"I didn't mean that I didn't want to; I was just curious what the answer would be." Boyd said, looking at him thoughtfully as he stood. "It occurred to me that Connors probably intentionally made me believe I was fired rather than on leave so I had even less reason to retain any sense of hope. It also made me wonder what they would have done to me had you died; would they have officially terminated me at that point as my position was no longer valid or would they have made me into a typical field agent? So I suppose I was simply curious how immediate or severe the response would be in other terms, such as had I walked out or refused to return. Since I had no intentions of actually doing so, I decided to ask about it instead."

Sin stared at him suspiciously for a long moment before his shoulders relaxed slightly, although he didn't look away. "Well. Good."

Boyd smiled at him slightly, something almost ironic in his expression. "After all that work I went through trying to convince you not to leave, did you really think I'd just walk away?"

Sin's mouth quirked up into a slight smirk and he shook his head, heading towards the door. "No, I guess not." His posture seemed far more relaxed than it had during the entire briefing and he seemed in no rush to discuss anything to do with it. "Seems weird being here now."

"It does," Boyd agreed, walking with him as they went down the hall. He noticed the collar was on Sin's neck once again and his eyes narrowed slightly; although he wasn't surprised that they'd taken the opportunity to replace it, he still didn't like seeing it again. It made him wonder if, along with his access card and phone, he would find a new remote waiting for him as part of what they termed to be the necessities for his position. He wanted to ask how Sin was, what had happened during those few weeks when they hadn't seen each other, but he was very aware of the fact that there were cameras across the facility that were probably being monitored by the guards who

would be able to overhear any conversation they had. The conference rooms didn't have surveillance or else they would never be able to have confidential briefings but it was different in public areas.

So instead he said, "For a while, I honestly didn't believe I would ever step foot in here again."

Sin glanced down at him, his gaze lingering for a long moment. "Hard to say if being back is good or not when you take certain things into consideration," he muttered as they went to the elevator to go downstairs.

There was silence as they did so, both of them fully aware of the stationary camera that hovered in the corner of the elevator, and Sin shifted, looking irritated as he ran a hand over his short hair. When they reached the ground floor and stepped out of the elevator, he ignored the crowd of people who stood there waiting at the elevator bank and the looks they graced him with. A few people immediately backed away as he passed them but he didn't look at them twice. "Are you going to administration?"

"At some point," Boyd said, briefly distracted by a woman who was very obviously alarmed by Sin; she nearly dropped all her papers and turned immediately to walk back the way she had come. "Why? Where are you headed?"

Another lingering look and Sin shrugged casually. "Nowhere in particular. Back to the apartment."

Boyd considered that a moment, wondering if the cameras had been replaced. "Did anything change while we were gone?"

"Not that I'm aware, which is surprising." They exited the main lobby and stepped out into the courtyard. The spring air was cool, slightly moist and once again Sin stood there in the chill totally under-dressed although as usual he didn't appear fazed.

"Nevertheless, good to hear," Boyd said, pausing when he noticed Sin had stopped walking and was watching him. He just stared back for a moment, studying his expression and the way the muted sunlight made his eyes seem especially green,

before it occurred to him that he had just intended to follow Sin to his apartment and hadn't even thought to ask if that would be alright. He slipped his hands in the pockets of his trench coat, feeling a little awkward as he asked, "Ah... I don't exactly have a reason to go home, so would it be alright if I accompanied you?"

That earned him another long stare before Sin nodded as he began to walk. "Okay."

Boyd nodded and fell into step beside him. The wind gusted, ruffling Sin's clothing and pushing Boyd's hair into his eyes. He looked around the courtyard, feeling like this was his first chance in over a year to actually see the place. The last several times he'd passed through the compound, he'd had been so pensive about other topics that he'd barely noticed his surroundings.

Now, he saw the pale blue shades of the clouds stretched thin high over their heads with the sun peeking through in pale shafts of light. The windows in the buildings around them glinted, rendering the rooms beyond them impossible to see. As he took in the people around them in the courtyard, he realized that everyone seemed to be in a rush or at least, that they wanted to appear like they were. Everyone had a sense of urgency in their stride and an intensity in their expressions that almost seemed forced. At first he'd assumed that it was only a handful of people possibly concerned about something work related, but as he looked around he realized that everyone was giving off the same vibe, everyone seemed equally stressed.

Despite that, the fresh air felt wonderful to Boyd; even if it was a little cool, he still felt more awake than he had been in a long time. That made him wonder exactly what month it was. He didn't have a cell phone to tell him, he hadn't had the energy or inclination to touch his father's computer, and any calendars that had been in his house were quite outdated. He knew he had been gone for months, but that was something he could tell by the weather alone; it had been winter when they'd returned from Monterrey and now it was obviously spring. He still didn't know exactly how long it had been since he'd lost touch with the rest of the world.

"What month is it?" he asked it almost absently, looking up at the trees as the leaves rustled pleasantly in another gust of wind. Sin raised an eyebrow at him as they walked in the direction of his building. "You sound like me when I emerged from the coma. It's early May."

"Hmm." Boyd studied the trees, the leaves colored in healthy shades of green and the sky seen beyond through the spaces in the foliage. He may not have been in a literal coma like Sin but in a way it did feel as though he'd been comatose. At that moment, Sin probably knew more about what had happened in the last several months than he did, which was strange to think about. He didn't care to dwell on the thought; not while he was walking next to Sin with the wind cool but pleasant as it shifted his trench coat against his legs. "It felt like longer."

Sin grunted noncommittally and glanced at Boyd again before they continued the rest of the walk in relative silence. They gained their fair share of long, curious looks from quite a few people as they went but that wasn't really a surprise. Despite the secrecy that the Agency was shrouded in, things had a tendency to get around and even if most people didn't know the truth of what had actually gone on during the year and a half that they'd been gone. However as they got closer to the building, the guards that were usually stationed in that area seemed less shocked by the sight of Sin than the general populace seemed to be.

When they reached the front of the building, two guards were stationed at the door as usual and Officer Daniels, the guard usually stationed at Sin's apartment door, was standing on the steps apparently taking a smoke break. He glanced at the two of them, blinking at Boyd in surprise, while Sin tilted his head in silent greeting and asked, "Mind if I bum one?"

The two guards at the door stared down at him oddly but Daniels didn't seem put off by the question; in fact it seemed that this was probably a typical exchange between the two. He held the pack out to Sin and said, "Keep it. I get them easier than you can, dude."

Sin pocketed the pack, Lucky Strikes according to the logo, and leaned close to Daniels for a light. Once again, Daniels didn't seem disturbed by the movement and he continued to lounge against the railing, looking at Sin idly as he lit one cigarette off the other and effectively invaded all of the guards' personal space. After a moment, Sin leaned back and inhaled deeply, seeming for all the world like a nicotine addict. "Good looking out."

"Anytime." Daniels gave him a half grin and glanced over at Boyd. "Long time no see."

It was a little surprising to see Sin acting in a manner that Boyd had previously thought of as more indicative of Jason than Sin. The fact that he was still smoking, the casual way he interacted, even to an extent the way he spoke, were all different from the way he remembered him interacting with anyone in the Agency. It put Boyd at a loss as to how to respond immediately, but he ultimately inclined his head toward Daniels.

"I see you're still assigned here," he said, and that made him wonder what had occurred while they were away on assignment and before his own return. "Were you transferred back when Sin started living in the apartment again?"

"Yup," the guard drawled with a half grin. "I was one of the few who didn't mind the job so they had no problems assigning it to me again. Which is fine; it's pretty easy work considering all he does is steal my smokes these days."

"That could be expensive, though," Boyd said mildly.

A casual shrug and a slightly wider grin. "It's okay. I get them cheap anyhow."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "How's that?"

Daniels shrugged again and winked at them. "That's for me to know and you to wonder about."

"Okay, enough of you," Sin said with a dismissive wave and shook his head as he turned head up the steps and into the building.

Boyd watched Sin as he walked away, feeling rather mystified by his behavior, then glanced at Daniels. He nodded at him in farewell and Daniels returned the gesture. It didn't take long for Boyd to catch up to Sin; he followed him as they walked up the stairs, neither saying anything although it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Boyd couldn't help watching Sin for a few seconds in the enclosed staircase; the scent of cigarette smoke trailed behind him the way he remembered from Monterrey, the casual grace with which he moved. He didn't want to look away; he wanted to study every aspect of his body and expression, to memorize the breadth of his shoulders and the way he could see his muscles moving beneath his shirt, but he knew that there were cameras even in the stairwell so he was careful to look away and act natural.

It didn't take them long to reach Sin's floor; a single guard was standing outside the apartment looking bored. He straightened his back when he saw the two of them, and while he did give Boyd a strange look, he didn't bother to say anything as they approached. Boyd didn't recognize the guard and guessed that he must have been someone new that had to be transferred over to replace the guards who, unlike Daniels, had opted not to return to their previous positions. Even so, he'd obviously been briefed on Boyd's existence or it was alright for Sin to have guests because he didn't challenge them or even ask who he was.

Sin unlocked the door and walked inside with Boyd not far behind him, stepping to the side to look around the apartment as Sin shut the door behind them. It was almost surreal; the apartment looked exactly the way Boyd remembered it from over a year prior. Once more, it made it seem as though no time had passed and nothing had changed even though so much actually had. He didn't notice any cameras in his cursory glance around the apartment and looked over at Sin as he said, "It's just as I remember it."

Sin didn't respond at first; he took a long drag of his cigarette, green eyes never leaving Boyd's face. After a pause, he abruptly stubbed it out on the wall and pulled Boyd further into the apartment. "There's a couple of changes."

"Is that so?" Boyd shrugged off his trench coat, tossing it over one of the chairs in the kitchen. "Where?" His only answer was to be pulled further into the apartment. Sin didn't stop until they were in the bathroom, and didn't say anything until he'd shut the door. Boyd's eyebrows drew together. "I don't see anything different."

Sin smirked and closed the space between them in one stride before he pinned Boyd's back against the sink, hands wrapping around the edges of the counter as he did so. "The difference," he said slowly, voice low as his eyes narrowed. "Is that this room is free of any hidden cameras, and furthest from the door. And now I can put that to use." His eyebrows rose slightly and he leaned forward, not giving Boyd the opportunity to speak, before he crushed their lips together in a kiss that was almost rough in its intensity.

That surprised Boyd enough that he took a second to respond, but when he did he automatically deepened the kiss, one hand moving to the base of Sin's neck to pull him closer and the other falling to his back. The familiarity of the taste and feel of Sin was strange after so long without him, but it was something he'd missed immensely and didn't want to let go of now that it was here again. One strong hand released the edge of the counter and slid down, cupping Boyd's ass and gripping it hard as Sin pinned their lower bodies together. He grunted softly against Boyd's mouth and rocked his hips forward, lips moving feverishly as if he couldn't get enough of Boyd, as if he wanted to taste and feel as much of him as he could before someone, somehow, made him stop. All thoughts fled both of their minds and neither of them spoke; for several long moments the only sounds in the room were low panting, wet lips and tongues colliding and fabric brushing against fabric as they began to grind against each other faster, harder, until their hips were practically pounding together in an effort to get more friction.

The sounds they made occasionally grew louder, mostly on Boyd's part when he briefly forgot to be quiet. After a while he pulled away, breathing heavily and giving Sin an intense look with half-closed eyes before he jerked him even closer by the waistband of his pants. He leaned in to suck on Sin's earlobe and unbuttoned Sin's pants. He started to unzip them with one hand while his other slid beneath, then smirked against

Sin's skin when he realized he wasn't wearing any underwear. Long pale fingers slid over Sin's bare ass and Boyd's breathing picked up when his own black jeans were abruptly yanked down. The brass button popped off and went skittering across the tiled floor as Sin shoved him back against the counter so that he was sitting on it. He leaned back on the heels of his hands and kicked off his jeans impatiently as Sin ripped open a drawer in the counter and fumbled around with the first aid supplies inside until he found a small jar of Vaseline.

Lust, excitement, and impatience overwhelmed Boyd; he hadn't thought about sex in so long that it should have been strange or awkward but instead every touch, every gasp or exhalation of pleasure was completely natural, like no time had passed between the present and the last time they'd been together. When impossibly strong hands gripped him roughly or held him tight, he didn't freeze or panic, he had no flashbacks of the fourth or Shane or his phobia. He wanted Sin; he wanted to be able to touch him whichever way he wanted and without having to fear repercussion, he wanted to feel this kind of hot, intense passion, the type that made his thoughts hazy and body sensitized so that every doubt was temporarily blocked out.

"Oh fuck," Sin groaned quietly, green eyes rolling back in his head and Boyd's mind centered on that deep, sexy voice. His fingers wrapped around Sin's erection, smoothing Vaseline over it generously, hurriedly, and he continued stroking it for longer than was necessary, ignoring his own throbbing dick as he focused intently on the look on Sin's face. His need for more led to impatience and he lifted one leg up on the counter, pinning his knee against his chest as he spread his other leg and leaned back further, his upper back resting against the broken cabinet. It was uncomfortable but he didn't particularly care at that moment, not when he could see Sin watching him hungrily as he positioned himself.

Boyd threw his head back, eyes squeezed closed temporarily and teeth gritting at the sharp pain that accompanied penetration. But the pain became pleasure as Sin shoved into him over and over, the cabinet rattling behind him occasionally as particularly hard thrusts shook the contents within. Boyd braced himself with one hand

against the counter and slid the other along Sin's skin, finding places to clutch painfully as the pleasure increased until he was slamming himself against Sin violently, desperately, forgetting to be silent as his mouth hung open and loud moans and half gasps escaped into the air. The acoustics of the bathroom made his moans seem louder, to the point that Sin covered Boyd's mouth with one of his hands to smother the sounds. Boyd's eyes narrowed at being quieted, his mind mostly lost in the intensity of the moment, and he sunk his teeth into his hand, not letting go. Sin didn't even flinch, too lost in the feel of the tight, hot muscles encasing his cock. Their movements were hurried, frenzied and Boyd dropped his away from Sin to begin clumsily jerking his own erection just as Sin got more frantic.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, oh *fuck* yes," Sin hissed quietly, urgently, and by the time he came and slumped forward, Boyd was practically screaming against his hand as he orgasmed as well. They collapsed against each other, panting harshly, remaining that way for a bit. Sin didn't bother to immediately move his hand and when Boyd had enough presence of mind, he ran his tongue along the skin, tasting Sin's sweat. After a moment, Sin put his hand on the counter beside Boyd but he didn't pull away yet while Boyd drank in the sight of his darkened green eyes and swollen lips. He felt another emotion swell within him, something that accompanied the lust and desire but was not quite the same thing, and didn't resist the urge to pull him in for another few quick, heated kisses. Sin was like an addiction he couldn't give up and for another few moments, they lazily reacquainted themselves with the taste of each other's mouth.

Eventually, Boyd broke the kiss by dropping his head back against the mirror and nearly closed his eyes, ignoring the discomfort of his position for a moment as he just slumped and tried to catch his breath. Finally, Sin stood up straight and pulled up his pants as he gazed down at Boyd blearily.

Boyd could hardly pay attention to anything other than the satiated feel of his body, but he felt the stare centered on him and he smirked slowly, one hand resting idly on his bare stomach where his shirt had moved up at some point. He opened his eyes halfway and studied Sin with dark eyes, looking tousled, well-fucked and relaxed. He

didn't want to forget any of this, just in case things changed again or something happened to take away his ability to get this close to Sin. He committed Sin's expression to memory, along with the feeling of Sin pounding into him and even feel of the strong hand muffling his voice before he'd bit him.

"You covered my mouth," he murmured, his tone nearly a reproach although he didn't seem angry.

"I almost didn't," Sin said with a raised eyebrow. The corner of his mouth twitched up. "Almost decided to give these idiots what they've been wanting and put on a show." He leaned against the bathroom door and dropped his hand to his crotch in an almost protective gesture. "But everything seems to be in working order so I don't want to push my luck."

"Hmm. I didn't realize our sex life was in such high demand," Boyd said lazily, trying to get himself to bother to move. As uncomfortable as the position was, he was still feeling relaxed enough that he didn't feel like exerting any extra effort at the moment. The rest of what Sin said filtered through his mind belatedly and he finally gathered the energy to slide off the counter. "Are you implying that I was your test ride?"

Sin finally opened the door. "I could have tested it out in another way if that was the case," he said with a snort, making a crude hand gesture near his crotch with a smirk. "But I wasn't really thinking about it too much until today."

"I must just have that effect on you," Boyd said with a smug smile, leaning against the counter. "Although in the interest of avoiding awkward conversations with your guards, it may be best to go to my house more often. Assuming I will no longer be monitored, it's quite a bit more private there. Otherwise, despite my best intentions, I make no promises regarding noise levels. Which, incidentally, is your fault."

Sin shrugged in mock innocence and finally exited the small room, heading across the apartment to the kitchen so that he could light a cigarette from one of the stove burners. He waited until Boyd wandered closer to him before speaking as he inhaled deeply and eyed the blond man for a moment. "That'd be great except I'm still

not allowed to go wandering off all by my lonesome," he said but despite the calm tone, there was a definite undercurrent of bitterness in his voice. "That's why I couldn't see you for the past three weeks. That and I was being monitored in the medical facility for most of the time."

"Unfortunately, I assumed that would be the case," Boyd said quietly, so his voice wouldn't possibly carry to the other side of the front door. "You were allowed to leave with me before, though. I would suspect it's the same now unless they no longer trust me enough to vouch for you."

"I'm not sure what's going to happen now. Seems like things have changed since we've been gone. Someone's putting a lot of pressure on Connors and his way of dealing with it is running this place like Hitler. He's gotten rid of a lot of people for making mistakes. It's come to the point where I'm surprised everyone in our department is still breathing after his attempt at blaming that situation on us but I supposed we are difficult to replace and he's decided to focus his wrath on Thierry."

Sin leaned against the counter and watched Boyd, his previous easy going attitude turning into a far more serious one. One long finger tapped against the collar on his neck absently. "But he did make it pretty clear that if I ever 'let myself fall into such a state' again, he'll personally remove me from life support."

Boyd's gaze lingered in displeasure on the collar. "I see he hasn't lost any of his charm since I last interacted with him."

Sin shrugged. "I know that above everyone is a higher power and that he definitely answers to someone, just like Vivienne ultimately does. The way I took this information was that it isn't our unit or our failure that led him to become that way; it was something that was building before we even set foot in the convention center, the entire time we were gone. Although if you want to be technical about it, Janus is after the American government in general and of all the groups and things the Agency deals with, they are the ones everyone most wants gone. They're this generation of politician's focus, the terrorist organization that must be stopped at all cost, even if they're not

necessarily terrorists so much as insurgents although the government uses their earlier actions to give them the label."

There was a long pause as Sin fished out the crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes and brought one to his lips. "They're very well known by the people and even the most liberal of the left wing are against them, or at least they are publicly. Defeating them has become propaganda for every politician hoping to get into office. We're not even the only unit that deals with them. There's an undercover unit with people trying to get in on the inside, there's a unit specifically for intelligence gathering... we're involved in something that's a big deal to a lot of people. So when Connors told whoever that we had a chance to decapitate their organization and then that fell through, I imagine he heard some shit about it; although now I suppose he knows that it wasn't our fault, and he still essentially needs us at least until he replaces us if he wants to get shit done, that's probably why he's so frantic to find Thierry. Not only is Thierry too much of a wild card to have on the loose if he is working with Janus, but we can get a lot of information out of him regarding not only Janus, but every other rebel organization he's involved with which would be useful to many other units in this agency." Another brief pause. "I kind of feel sorry for the bastard if we do find him."

"I don't know what I think of Thierry," Boyd said, thinking about the brief time he'd been in contact with the man. "I barely know him and certainly did not spend enough time around him to truly understand how he works. He seemed sincere, yet his very life depended on the ability to appear so to everyone regardless of his true nature. It does make me wonder what really happened and what he will say if we find him, though if Connors thinks finding Thierry will solve many of his problems, I doubt that's the case."

Boyd paused, not knowing what he felt about that. If Thierry had betrayed them, he would have less sympathy for him than if he hadn't. On the other hand, he had seen what Janus did to those it was displeased with and he couldn't tell if he would ever wish that on Thierry regardless of what choice he had made. The only reason he wasn't certain where his sympathies lay was the fact that if Thierry had purposefully given them

bad information, then in a way he also shared responsibility for what had happened to Sin.

"Maybe. But he's had Owen and Ryan harassing every contact to find him."

"I see," Boyd said. Then mention of Ryan reminded him of his earlier question. "Have you seen Ryan? I was surprised he wasn't at the meeting."

"No, but I've had no reason to yet."

"Is he working on something special?" Boyd pressed, wondering what exactly had indisposed him. "Owen was missing from a few meetings at one point as well; is that a typical cycle of their position?"

"I have no idea." Sin lit his cigarette, not seeming very concerned. "Why don't you just go see for yourself."

"I will, I just thought you may know," Boyd said with a shrug. "I'll probably ask him after I stop by HR."

Sin didn't say anything and Boyd fell silent, watching him for a moment before he thought to check his watch. It was still several hours until the administrative levels with Human Resources closed but he had no idea how long it would take to get his ID card and phone. Theoretically, it was something that should just take a few minutes where he'd just have to pick them up, verify he was clear in the system, and leave, but it was exactly because of that simplicity that it would probably turn out to take hours; bureaucracy tended to complicate matters unnecessarily.

Boyd pushed himself away from the counter. "I should go. I'll be around the compound, though, and if they've changed my cell number I'll give you the new one if you need to contact me for some reason."

Sin nodded, watching Boyd with a long, lingering gaze as he got ready to leave. It looked like he wanted to say something, but stopped as they got closer to the door. With an irritated glance at the door, or more accurately the guards on the other side of

the door, Sin just ran his fingers lightly over the side of Boyd's face. In response, Boyd caught his hand and briefly pressed his lips against it. They looked at each other for another long stretch before Boyd flashed a slight smile and turned to go.

It didn't take him long to make it to HR but it turned out to be good that he'd allowed so much time; in the end, he had to wait around for half an hour and even when he could speak to Susan Green, it was another hour and a half before everything was settled and he was able to leave. It turned out he had the same cell number as before, which was convenient. He headed towards Complex C and used his newly returned ID card to get inside the building. He didn't recognize the guard at the entrance but he hadn't been to Ryan's in a while so that was nothing strange.

As he headed toward Ryan's apartment, he wondered what he could possibly be working on that would have caused him to miss the meeting. Although Boyd assumed he was probably researching Thierry's whereabouts, it must have been very difficult information to procure if Ryan was missing meetings for it. As far as that went, what had Owen been working on previously that had caused him to disappear as well? Then again, each of them was in charge of researching and keeping tabs on the rebel groups in half the world, which was a formidable job for anyone.

It wouldn't be surprising if they temporarily got sidetracked by other things, even if Janus was now their main focus while the unit was active. Boyd stopped in front of the door labeled 15H and hesitated. He very much wanted to see Ryan but he wondered if he would be disturbing him in the middle of something important. On the other hand, if Ryan knew he'd returned to the complex after over a year and hadn't bothered to stop by, he'd probably think that Boyd didn't care about him and that would hurt his feelings more than being interrupted in the middle of research. That made the decision for him and he knocked loudly on the door, making sure he was standing in view of the eye hole so Ryan could see who it was.

More than a full minute passed without an answer and after a moment of debating leaving and trying another day, Boyd knocked again. This time there was a muffled call through the door followed by a brief fit of coughing and after a while the

door swung open. Boyd was greeted to the sight of a very disheveled looking Ryan who appeared to have just rolled out of bed. His clothing was rumpled and his unruly black hair stuck out all over the place but the most shocking thing was his actual pallor and emaciated form. It looked like he hadn't been outside in weeks, months maybe, and the pastiness of his skin screamed illness; even his lips looked pale. Dark circles shadowed his eyes and his sweater hung off him alarmingly; he'd always been thin but now he looked barely more than skin and bones. But despite this, his mouth widened into a huge smile and his eyes lit up as he focused on Boyd. It didn't take him long to launch himself at the other man and when he wrapped his thin arms around Boyd, he was shocked at how fragile Ryan felt in his arms.

"You're really back!"

The shock of Ryan's appearance briefly made Boyd forget anything he'd meant to say, so he just reacted physically rather than speaking. He automatically hugged him back but didn't dare tighten his arms too strong around him for fear of hurting him. Of course he knew Ryan had an illness, but he hadn't been prepared for the sight or feel of his friend. Concern and worry settled in an uncomfortable knot in his stomach and he wondered how he had grown so much more ill during the time he'd been away.

Ryan didn't pull away from him immediately and Boyd couldn't help holding him a little closer despite himself; Ryan still had the ability to comfort him simply by his presence and he realized at that moment exactly how much he had missed him. He wanted to ask him if he was alright, why he looked especially sick, but he didn't think it would be appropriate to bring up in the doorway where anyone could hear down the hall, so instead he said, "I'm sorry if I woke you; I wanted to see you and let you know that I'm here and I'll be around again."

"Don't apologize," Ryan said quickly, finally pulling away. He grinned up at Boyd before backing up and waving him into the apartment. "I've missed you so much. I know that sounds gay but seriously, I did."

As Boyd stepped into the apartment he saw that it was as unorganized as ever but now the presence of a very large and very hi-tech humidifier and air filter were hooked up in the living room. The entire apartment, at least what he could see of it, seemed to be sealed airtight. He looked around the apartment briefly before refocusing on Ryan. "I missed you too," he said honestly. As happy as he was to see Ryan, the pallor of his skin seemed starker inside the apartment, to the point that he couldn't wait any longer to ask. "Ryan... Are you alright?"

Ryan stiffened visibly, shoulders tensing but he continued to smile and waved the question off. "Yeah, you know how it is. I'm always crappy after the winter months. It sucks that you have to see me like this though. Embarrassing."

"I'm happy to see you regardless of how healthy you seem, and I'm not trying to be rude, it's just..." Boyd brought a hand up without thinking and touched Ryan's cheek, noting that his temperature felt relatively normal. His eyebrows drew down in thought. "I don't recall it being quite like this after last winter. Does it go in cycles across the years as well or have you just been too stressed with work?"

"Who knows," the smaller man responded vaguely. "It comes, it goes, it's bad, it's good. I'll never really know what causes it to behave so erratically unless there's suddenly some ground breaking discovery in the study of the disease. It's not too bad, really. It means I get to do my work in my pajamas and e-mail the heads instead of going in for meetings." He plopped down on one of the sofas in the living room and shoved a stack of comic books and magazine off the neighboring cushion. "How are you? How's everything? Tell me everything."

"I'm alright." Boyd sat down next to him, still studying him despite Ryan's words. He looked briefly around the apartment again, trying to reacquaint himself with the idea of just being around someone he could easily talk to again. Having the ability to be around Sin and Ryan helped to relieve some sense of tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. He'd primarily intended to stop by to check on Ryan and hadn't thought about how Ryan would probably have many questions for him as well. It took him a moment to gather his thoughts.

Finally, he looked back at him and said, "I suppose everything is fine right now although to be honest, I'm still a little off-balance being back at the Agency after so long. It seemed surreal when I first walked in and now the routine is returning to me." He paused, running a hand through his hair to get the choppy brown and blond out of his eyes. "As for anything else... I don't know where to start."

Ryan rested his chin against his palm and gazed at Boyd silently for a moment. His lips parted briefly before he sealed them again, seeming to be unsure of what to ask or what to say. Boyd wasn't sure exactly what Ryan knew about what had happened when he'd returned but when Ryan finally spoke, he was relieved that his punishment or meeting with Connors didn't come up. Instead Ryan's wide eyes grew rounder as if he'd suddenly remembered something and he leaned forward. "How was nearly a year of living with Hsin?"

"Ah." That was a logical question, but in a way, an awkward one to answer honestly. "That was... interesting at first, but overall it was good," he said, trying to determine the best wording, his tone relaxed and calm. "Neither of us was accustomed to the heat and, at least for me, being attracted to him but in such close quarters made it difficult at first." He leaned back, having forgotten how comfortable Ryan's sofa was. "Eventually, it got better. I probably should have listened to you earlier, though; you were right that the attraction was on both sides."

Ryan's dark eyebrows shot up and for a moment he seemed stunned into silence but then his lips stretched into a wide grin. "I knew something would happen! Well I was pretty sure anyway. I should have bet someone but I had no one to bet. ...Wait. Something *did* happen, didn't it? It wasn't just some mutual confession that was quickly ignored? Man, he *did* actually say it didn't he? You didn't just figure it out on your own and then never mention it?"

"It was initially more action than confession but, no, it wasn't ignored," Boyd said, thinking about the first time Sin and he had fooled around. "I think if the same catalysts had occurred here it may not have turned out as it did, but we were far away from anyone watching us and it made it easier to just do what we wanted. We've had sex

several times since then so the physical attraction became pretty obvious. Although it's not exactly information we plan to advertise so it's best if no one else knows."

"Wow. I'm impressed. Seriously." Ryan stared at him in amazement. "Wow." A brief moment passed and he shook his head slowly. "Someday I'll be able to think of something more clever than that to say but at the moment I'm freakin' floored. I mean-- so are you two... I don't know. Wow."

Boyd raised an eyebrow, amused by the reaction. "Is it really that impressive? I suppose it's been awhile since I've seen you so it seems more normal to me."

Ryan shrugged and scratched the back of his head. "Well I mean... he's just so... I don't know. I always had the feeling he was interested in you but now that I think of it, I can't really picture him... not being all... Sin-like. I dunno." He shook his head and smiled again. "Wow that's a hot mental image now that I've conjured it up."

That made Boyd laugh briefly; that was another reason he'd missed Ryan, just by being himself he somehow managed to relax him enough that natural reactions of laughter or amusement were more likely to surface. "Well, I won't lie and say the mental image is probably wrong. His personality became far more relaxed after the time spent there, though, and remnants of that change remain. You may experience some of it when you next see him."

Ryan nodded but his expression grew slightly more serious. "So does that mean he's really okay? I mean they made it sound like he'd never wake up, I was really unsure when suddenly I was told that he was around again."

Boyd's expression darkened and he dropped his gaze to his hands. "I know. I didn't believe it either, even when I saw and spoke to him. I couldn't understand how he was fine, but somehow he seems to be." He paused a moment then looked back up at Ryan. "It's beyond me," he admitted. "I honestly believed he was dead or would be brain damaged. I doubt there's anyone else who would have somehow managed to make it through that and even have a full recovery. I can't imagine I would have."

The other man snorted. "I can't even survive a cool breeze. I'm sure if anyone ever tries to torture me for interrogation my body would give up as soon as the idea was brought to attention."

Boyd shrugged, falling silent as he studied the couch. He didn't particularly want to discuss at length the subject of torture, not after what he'd seen of Sin or even, as much as he tried not to think about it, what he himself had been through; so he didn't know what to say to that. Instead, he looked around the apartment, noting that there seemed to be more piles of paper and perfectly posed figurines than he recalled. It made it seem as though Ryan had been staying in his apartment more often than usual, which made Boyd wonder exactly how long he'd been as ill as he was. He looked back at Ryan and asked, "So what have you been doing lately? Anything interesting?"

"Eh, nothing much," Ryan said, once again in the same vague manner. "Work as usual, there were a couple of big assignments that sucked up months of my life. Oh, and I had a brief romance but it's not much to talk about."

"A romance?" Boyd asked with a raised eyebrow. "Now I'm curious. Is it the same person you were talking about before?"

"Who?" Ryan's eyebrows drew together and he frowned slightly before he seemed to remember. "Oh no, not that guy. Someone else. He's a field op; cute, athletic, friendly, closeted gay. I don't think you know him."

Boyd nodded. "Why was it brief, if you don't mind my asking?"

Ryan shrugged and stood up suddenly, looking around the room before trailing over to his desk as though he were searching for something. "I don't know. I just told him I didn't want to see him anymore. I guess I didn't feel like getting involved," He replied after a moment, not looking at Boyd as he shoved aside a stack of folders and pulled his glasses from beneath. "It was no big deal. It was just something to do I guess. It's probably better for him anyway, I'm kind of a drag."

Boyd watched him. "Ryan, you are the last person I would characterize as 'a drag,' but you have to do what you feel is best for you. Did those assignments have anything to do with meeting him. Or were you briefly suspended like Carhart and Jeffrey were?"

"Nope, me and Owen didn't really get any of the backlash to be honest so we carried on business as usual, even while Carhart and Jeff were out. I mean no matter what's going on with Janus I always have the other groups to keep tabs on; they put me in a couple of other units for two assignments which happens from time to time. Before this unit was created I was moved around pretty frequently. It was pretty busy for a while; I had one assignment that was totally unrelated to rebel factions entirely so that was kind of new and exciting. I had a lot of fun stuff to research; barely slept for a week because I was so into it." Ryan pushed his glasses up his nose and sat on the edge of his desk. "That's actually why I met that guy. I went on a late night coffee run and he was in the cafeteria just getting back from an assignment."

"What's his name?" Boyd asked in interest, trying to get a grasp on who this man was that had caught Ryan's attention. "What unit is he in?" "His name is Andrew. He works with Willis a lot, I'm not sure who else. We didn't really talk too much about work stuff because he isn't supposed to talk about most of his assignments even though I probably know more about it than he does generally."

"Damian Willis? I've heard of him in passing; his unit deals with terrorists, doesn't it?" Boyd considered what Ryan had said about him being athletic. "Andrew must be on one of the apprehension teams, then?"

Ryan nodded and a small, amused grin crept up onto his face. "Yeah. He gets all like, I don't know, noble about his job. Like he's saving the world by taking down these bad people and that makes him a superhero or something. It's cute in a way but after awhile I wanted to gag."

Boyd smirked in amusement. That made sense if he couldn't speak about his job; in truth, none of the units really discussed what they were doing with the others, as far

as he could tell. It was a general matter of secrecy that encompassed the very nature of being in the Agency. He wouldn't be surprised if even the administrative assistants and clerical workers didn't discuss amongst themselves the information they dealt with on the computers or filing systems. "How much does he know about what you do, then?"

"I just told him I was a geek," Ryan replied, as proud as ever of his self-proclaimed title. "That I'm research and development for the Insurgency units. He seemed to think like, it dealt with kind of the same stuff as he does and I tried to tell him without telling him that mostly we just smack down the people who don't like our government and not the people who just like to destroy stuff because they're crazy."

That response was not one Boyd would have expected from before; Ryan had always seemed very positive toward the Agency and with that viewpoint he never really spoke of the rebels like Janus that way before. Boyd nodded. "Yes, his position could be considered a little more glamorized. Did you go off the compound with him?"

The grin melted off Ryan's pale face again and he looked away, tugging at the frayed end up his sweater. "No, that's why I said I'm a drag. He's all... I don't know. Outgoing and stuff."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Ryan, stop calling yourself a drag. You're not. Whether or not you leave the compound doesn't really matter, since I'm sure you were more interested in seeing him and you could do that anywhere. I was simply curious if you two had been anywhere I knew of but it doesn't matter."

"I guess," He replied quietly with a shrug and for a moment they fell into silence. There was something about Ryan's expression and body language that screamed depression; a melancholy in his dark blue eyes that made Boyd think that something had definitely happened to change his friend in the past year. But if Ryan wasn't ready to talk about it, he wasn't going to push.

Ryan looked up finally and completely changed the topic. "Are you happy to be back at all?"

The question caught Boyd mildly off-guard and he opened his mouth to automatically respond but then stopped and actually thought about the answer. He looked away. *Was he happy to be back?*

"I don't know," he said honestly, absently studying a nearby pile of papers that looked ready to fall. The only thing holding it up appeared to be a little black robot model with some sort of bat wings and scythe. "I don't know if 'happy' is really the correct word for it; so much has happened that I feel like I'm still adjusting. And for a period of time I wouldn't have imagined I could ever feel anything like happiness again." He fell silent briefly, brooding, then looked over at Ryan with a sincere expression. "But at least I can say that I'm pleased to see you. And I was pleased to see Sin and that he was better. It's a relief in both your cases, actually."

Ryan seemed to study him for a moment, eyes slightly narrowed behind his glasses as his lips pursed. "If... you could have just stayed away and like, still seen me and Sin, would you have been happy?"

"I think..." Boyd imagined that but it only seemed appealing if it was a scenario in which Ryan and Sin were as free to wander around as he was, if the people watching him had disappeared, and possibly even if the three of them were somewhere removed and relaxed like Monterrey. "No, I don't think so. Not unless we were all somewhere we could just... do what we wanted or at least we had some sense of equality. If you two were here and I stayed at my house between visits, I think it would just make it worse. I would feel... uninvolved and unable to do anything. Impotent, I suppose. At least now I have some sense of equality; I know I have some control over the situation and I have something to do with myself. Whatever the Agency is or is not to me, it does provide me with a chance to problem solve and improvise, and it keeps me near the people who are important." He tilted his head, making eye contact with Ryan. "But if it was a choice between the three of us in a place like Monterrey and unconnected to anything, and the three of here in our present situation, I would choose Monterrey."

Ryan answered with a solemn nod and for a moment it seemed as though he were choosing his words, or at least his next question, carefully. "It seems like... I don't know. Was it really that different there? What was it like-- just being that free?"

"The largest difference wasn't for me but for Sin," Boyd said contemplatively, remembering how it had been in Monterrey. "He could walk through a crowd without anyone caring or giving him a second glance; people spoke to him without being predisposed to fear or hate him. He had friends, he could joke, he could laugh. People invited him places and were honestly disappointed if he didn't come and when he quit his job. It was a place where he could just be normal and he wasn't used to that. I think... it gave him an opportunity to relax in a way he's never experienced before in his life. And for me, it also provided a sense of anonymity. Here..."

The changes between Monterrey and the Agency were really quite dramatic if he thought about it enough; there were so many things that had been different over there that weren't replicated over here. Considering that transition made Harriet's unimpressed expression and snide comments flash briefly through his mind; the implication that he was simply his mother's son, that he was only there due to her words and he didn't deserve to be. That he was basically a failure. Boyd sighed, shaking his head once. "They see me as someone receiving special treatment and in that way I'm just a Beaulieu and not really Boyd. And for those who don't like Sin or my mother... I'm more accessible and less intimidating to take it out on. There are some who don't care about any of that and that's fine, but for the others..."

Boyd shrugged. "I hadn't had many troubles with that for awhile before we left but I think it's probably something that will always be in the back of their minds. I suppose I hadn't realized until we were away from this environment how much that was wearing on me. But I suppose it doesn't necessarily have to be only on the compound in which that feeling exists; when I'm here, her presence is somehow larger to me, even at home where she is not likely to appear any time soon. In Mexico, she may as well have not existed. It's not that I brood upon the fact that she's my mother or I expect her to suddenly appear and start chastising me, but it's true that she's rarely seemed pleased

with me. So in its own way, I suppose even if everyone at the Agency suddenly stopped caring that I'm a Beaulieu, or that I'm gay, there would be the potential of her presence dampening my spirits slightly. Or perhaps what's really occurring is that I had so many fewer responsibilities there, although it wasn't as though I was doing nothing, that it seemed like a vacation. And, naturally, I wouldn't want to give that up." He paused, then smiled wryly and added on a lighter note, "Besides, it was a hell of a lot easier to fuck Sin over there than it will be here. That alone made it worth it."

Ryan had listened to Boyd with an earnest, intrigued expression for the entire time he spoke but at the last moment he abruptly burst into almost startled laughter. "Man... I'm really, I know it sounds dumb or stupid considering you're both back here where everything sucks for you guys and like... everything that happened when you came back..." He trailed off for a moment but shook his head. "But I'm glad you had the chance to be there and be happy and like... get to get that close to each other. I don't know any people who needed someone to be close to them as much as you two did, even if neither of you wanted to admit it. I'm happy you were happy for at least the majority of the time you were gone... I'd wonder a lot about what you were doing. If you were okay, how you were getting along..."

He stood up and moved over to the couch again, seeming to be over his brief discomfort or whatever it was that he'd been feeling. He paused for a moment, toying with his sleeve again before speaking. "Did Hsin really change that much? What's he like when you're... you know, alone?"

Boyd smiled at him slightly for his words, for being someone who was honestly pleased that they'd been pleased. For caring about Sin and him that much. "I think he did," he said with a nod, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "They're all changes that would be normal for anyone but for him seem significant, I suppose." He paused as he tried to figure out how best to explain it to Ryan. The first thing that came to mind was sleeping; not when they were having sex but just the simple act of sleeping in the same bed. He pulled one of his legs up on the couch and leaned back in a slouch, resting an idle arm over his tilted knee.

"For instance, I remember watching him on the cameras and he never seemed to sleep, or when he did he was curled up. In our earlier missions, sometimes he would have nightmares and if I touched him he would react violently before he realized that he knew me and I wasn't an enemy. But even then he wouldn't necessarily relax entirely. By the time we left Monterrey, that didn't seem to be the case. But as for what he's like around me compared to what he's like around others, I couldn't say; I only know my own interactions. And as far as that goes, I suppose it's mostly that he's relaxed and will do things like smile or laugh. Or will talk in sentences that consist of more than sarcasm and a few words, which seems to be the case in the mission briefings and debriefings."

"Maybe you shouldn't have told me that," Ryan said with a wry smile. "Now I'll be hurt if he still acts that way towards me. Well, not really... I guess I always like, just wanted to, you know, I don't know... I always wanted to get along better with him or at least, I wanted him to not think I'm an enemy or a moron or someone he can't trust. But if not, I'll still be happy that at least with you he's that way. I just wish he could also trust the few other people that care about him too." His almost delicate fingers continued to toy with the hem of his shirt. "Y'know... Zachary was really... Well. I can't really explain it. He's such a hard ass. But he was really messed up for awhile."

"I don't think he thinks of you as an enemy," Boyd said, not wanting Ryan to think Sin hated him. "But, Carhart... How was he messed up?" Ryan shrugged. "Right after he found out that Sin was, well that he was assumed to be dead and that they had no intentions of doing an S&R, he pretty much hit the roof. Honestly I'm not sure if he would have been suspended if it hadn't been for his reaction, like the way he blew up at Jacob. Apparently he went on a total rant pretty much castigating Jacob for everything he's ever done to Hsin, how all he does is use him until there's nothing left and so on... But then after we found out that the entire thing went down wrong, that the mission information had been bad, Jacob really let him have it and told him that the reason Sin was dead was because Zachary sent him off on an assignment with faulty Intel and if he has anyone to blame, he should blame himself. I found that part out later after Zachary finally came back to work but while he was on suspension... I don't know. He just totally withdrew. No one heard from him at all-- none of his friends, I tried to get in contact with

him hoping he had information about the two of you but it was like he just fell off the face of the Earth. I went to his apartment once towards the end because I began to get worried and he just looked... I don't know. I can't describe it. He just looked strange. But then as usual he came back to work and let himself be consumed by it and since then he's been his usual hard ass self but the whole time Sin was in that coma, I don't know, you could tell he felt this immense guilt over it."

Boyd could understand very well at least a portion of what Carhart had felt during that time. "Connors told me essentially the same thing; it was my fault that it all happened. I was the one who received the faulty information from Thierry, I was the one who made the decision that caused Sin to be in the situation he was in. I was the one who left him alone."

Ryan's eyebrows drew together slightly and his thin lips parted as though he were going to say something more but before the words could leave his mouth, what sounded like the tune from an old Nintendo game began playing loudly and he scowled, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. With an apologetic look thrown at Boyd, Ryan murmured soft responses into the phone with none of his usual enthusiasm or friendliness and when he hung up, his mouth sank at the corners. "Well, so much for working strictly from home. I have a progress meeting in an hour."

"That sounds exciting," Boyd said mildly. He didn't particularly think Ryan should be running around in the condition he seemed to be in, but on the other hand he couldn't say he minded the interruption. Despite the fact he mentioned what Connors had told him, he could tell from Ryan's expression that he'd wanted to ask details about how it had happened and he didn't really want to talk about it; not yet.

"Not really," Ryan said sourly, disappointment written all over his features. He stood up, shoulders slumping as he brushed his bangs out of his eyes. "Will you come by again?" He asked hopefully.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Of course I will," he said, standing up as well. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

Some of the traces of his impending bad mood seemed to disappear slightly and Ryan smiled slightly. "Good."

Boyd studied him then suddenly reached out to ruffle Ryan's hair. "Don't look so serious," he said with a small smile, lightly teasing. "People will begin to mistake you for me and that would be terrible."

Ryan smiled but it lacked his usual enthusiasm. "I think it'd take more than that for them to think I'm you."

"Hmm." Boyd studied him seriously. "You're right," he deadpanned after a moment. "You'd probably have to dye your hair. And then you'd have to deal with blond jokes. Not to mention you would suddenly find yourself the unfortunate son of Vivienne Beaulieu."

The R&D agent chuckled softly and though he still looked more serious and somber than Boyd had ever seen him, at least he appeared to be in a slightly better mood.

"I should go anyway. I have a few things to do today yet and I'd like to finish sooner rather than later."

"Okay," Ryan said, seeming slightly mollified as he walked partially across his apartment to see Boyd out. "I'll see you around, then."

"You will," Boyd agreed firmly and half smiled at him briefly before he turned and walked down the hallway, hearing the door shut and lock behind him.

## Chapter 43

The ticking of the second hand on the clock seemed louder than a jack hammer in the silent room, even with the thunderstorm booming behind the bulletproof glass like horror movie ambiance. The same black clouds that had haunted the sky for several weeks made it seem as though it were closer to midnight than noon, with only lightning to illuminate it every so often. The rain never seemed to stop and although it was pretty miserable weather after the first week, it did provide for filler conversation.

"I heard it's flooding in Bedford," Dr. Slate said suddenly, her voice cutting into the silence awkwardly.

"That's nice."

Auburn eyebrows rose and she tilted her head to the side. "That's a poor neighborhood these days. A lot of people lost their homes. Some people would feel sympathy."

"Some people would."

Thin fingers folded together and the petite woman shifted in her chair as her brown eyes gazed at him intently. "Are you ready to speak now, Agent Vega?"

Sin shrugged one shoulder languidly and stared back unflinchingly. "Depends on the conversation. While I am willing to trade meaningless comments about the weather because I feel a slight mote of pity for people who feel the need to fill silences with idle chatter, I am unwilling to discuss my assignment with you."

Dr. Slate's mouth twitched slightly and it was difficult to tell if she was amused or annoyed by his bluntness; he was going to place his bets on annoyed. "I was given clearance to discuss everything in your case file, Agent Vega. If that's what you're worried about."

"It's not."

She frowned fully this time, frustration evident in the tense way she held herself. She was young, probably newly licensed and probably very annoyed that one of her first cases was with Sin, the Monster and the notorious psychiatrist terrorist. “Then what’s the problem?”

Another shrug and he didn’t drop his eyes, knowing the steady, rapt stare was intimidating the poor girl. “You’ve read my case file, yes?” Why did all of these sessions start with this line of questioning?

“Of course,” She replied, appearing offended at the suggestion that she would take him on unprepared.

“Then you will most likely find that I have already been diagnosed with paranoia, antisocial personality, schizophrenia, bipolar, DID... pretty much everything in your little shrink manual. So it’s already established that I am believed to be mentally ill, they just don’t know which specific illness I allegedly have because no one can agree on it, so the fact that I’m being sent to you just because I had a little torture/interrogation session makes no sense to me. Do you know the amount of physical abuse I’ve endured in my life? Do you think this will have affected my mental health any more than any other incident? Do you really think even if you were to write down that I am ‘mentally unfit,’ they’d stop sending me on assignments?”

He quirked an eyebrow but didn’t give her time to respond. “No. Just like all of the other times. So this is a fruitless effort on your part and it’s rather annoying for me to have to sit here. No offense, you’re a lovely girl, but if I have to stare at you any longer and wait for this session to end, I’ll probably do something regrettable.”

“Agent Vega, are you threatening me?” She seemed more than a little alarmed.

“Of course not.” He smirked at her. “But the fact that you jumped to that conclusion shows that you have some biased, preconceived notion about me.”

Dr. Slate’s lips parted, eyebrows drawing together and she shook her head. “No, not a—“

“Nowhere did I imply that I would hurt you. You jumped to that conclusion on your own and because of these opinions you obviously have about me, opinions that are already colored due to outside information that has nothing to do with our interaction, I am afraid that I will have to request a new doctor.” He stood up, pushing his chair back.

“Agent Vega that’s highly unnecess—“

“I’m disappointed in you, Dr. Slate.” And with that being said, he turned around and headed out of her office, ignoring her red face and protests. Highly pleased with himself and his escape from the next forty minutes of sitting there, Sin headed out into the reception area and towards the elevator bank.

There was another meeting in a couple of hours and he was more than a little anxious about it. Not only did it provide him with an excuse to see Boyd, something that had been difficult considering their constant surveillance and his inability to leave the grounds, but he had to admit that he really did want to know more about Thierry and his involvement with their failed mission.

Sin shoved his hands in the pockets of his hooded sweater and distracted himself with thoughts of the previous meeting. It wasn’t until he heard a sigh of annoyance did he realize that someone was also waiting for the down elevator and when he looked over, he saw that it was Ann.

She looked as professional and impeccable as always, dark blonde hair twisted in a knot at the back of her neck and curvaceous figure complimented by the black dress she wore. She was the exact opposite of her twin in every way and the hostile look that she was currently aiming at him made the sentiment all the more apparent; Lydia had always looked at him with a strange, sick desperation in her eyes that had made even him uncomfortable.

“It’s you,” Ann said flatly, bristling. “Wonderful.”

He opened his mouth to say something sarcastic, hurtful but then for some reason her narrowed hazel gaze made him stiffen and grow cold. For some reason it

made him think of an identical pair of eyes that had stared at him in terror, and it suddenly felt like all of the air had just been sucked out of the room.

Sin stared at her blankly, silently, and as a horrifying train of repressed memories flew through his mind, an overwhelming sense of guilt came crashing down on his shoulders like a four hundred pound barbell and it was all he could not to just turn around and walk away. Because he couldn't look at her; not when his mind was choosing this moment to show him what he'd done to her sister.

So the moment stretched awkwardly and finally he controlled his thoughts, his sudden paralysis and averted his gaze abruptly. "Sorry." It came out in a low mutter and he stared straight ahead at the metal doors, at their distorted reflections, and tried to ignore the way her eyes remained trained on him. He didn't know if he was apologizing because he'd hurt her twin or because she had to be in his presence but he suspected it was for both.

Ann seemed confused at first, surprised, and even slightly curious but she only crossed her arms over her chest and arched an eyebrow at him. "I thought you were dead or brain damaged or useless or something."

He shrugged, still staring at the elevator, saying nothing.

There was another brief silence and to his frustration, she wouldn't turn away. "So they've decided to throw away another psychiatrist by sticking them with you? Have any grand plots as to how you're going to turn this one into a catatonic basket case or do you come up with that stuff on the spur of a moment?"

Her tone was anything but serious and if anything, it seemed to him that she was just trying to see if she could get him to react in some way; it usually didn't take much. But her words didn't give her the reaction she'd expected and his back stiffened, hands tightening into fists and he grit his teeth together, trying to ignore the---

*"I just wanted to hel—Please do—God, don't!"*

Sin's green eyes snapped shut abruptly as he tried to block out the phantom voice, tried to block out what he was seeing and it was only when the elevator suddenly dinged, did he open his eyes, effectively pushing everything to the back of his mind where it belonged.

"Just go," he said flatly. "I'll wait for another one."

He still didn't look in her direction but she nodded shortly, seemed mildly intrigued by his reactions and continued to stare directly into his face until the doors closed between them. Once she was gone, he deflated and took a deep, shaky breath, jamming his thumb against the down button again as he chastised himself vehemently for showing such outward displays of distress.

But he couldn't help it and it wasn't the first time it'd happened since he'd emerged. Ever since that evening when he'd opened his eyes, flashbacks constantly assaulted him out of the blue, haunted his dreams, and although he'd tried to make himself accustomed to it over the weeks, it was still startling. Everything was still choppy and in brief, slightly incoherent fragments and he was thankful for that; some things were better left in the dark parts of his brain and the Lydia incident was one of them. He'd always felt guilt over what had happened but just then... it'd been more powerful than ever and having her twin stand there and stare at him had only made it worse.

The elevator arrived, shaking him out of his reverie, and he tried to ignore his racing heart and the way his forehead had broken out with a cold sweat. His previous amusement had faded entirely and he walked silently, stiffly, to the conference room after getting out of the elevator on the seventh floor.

He was more than a little early but at the moment, he didn't care. He needed to get himself together before the meeting and sometimes being alone in his apartment only made the situation worse.

So he sat and waited and tried not to think about the things his mind wanted him to think about and thought about his current situation instead. He wondered about Boyd, about their partnership, about Connors and his apparently increasing tyrannical attitude,

about Thierry and mostly he wondered if they were just meeting or if it was a briefing. If it was just discussion to get what they knew on the table so someone else could go after Thierry or if they were being sent on the assignment themselves. Even though it'd been several days since that first meeting, things were still up in the air and he really had no idea what was going to happen anymore.

Sin let himself be consumed by those thoughts, those questions, and soon all memories of Lydia were faded and gone, and before he knew it the door opened and Boyd was entering the room. His eyes swept over the slight blond man and he nodded in greeting.

"You're early."

"Not as early as you," Boyd said, raising an eyebrow. "Although I confess I stopped by your apartment first. When I didn't see you, I decided I may as well lie in wait for the meeting." He smirked faintly as he passed behind Sin and dropped into the chair next to him, setting his messenger bag on the table. "Are you that excited about the meeting that you came even earlier than I did or were you just bored?"

"I had to do this mandatory psych evaluation and I got out of it earlier than expected," Sin replied with a smirk, deciding not to make some innuendo about being excited. "I had nothing better to do but come here and count the moments until this rendezvous could occur."

"Let me guess," Boyd said in amusement. "You passed with flying colors so they let you out early for good behavior?"

"More like I intimidated the hell out of the poor child and then convinced her that she was being unprofessional and that I could not possibly go on with her as my doctor." Sin shrugged. "I resent having to do those things at all. It's standard procedure for anyone who's been captured and tortured to make sure they aren't permanently mind fucked and can still work, but when it comes to me they always ignore it regardless."

"I would imagine that would result in a new psychiatrist being assigned? If you want to avoid indefinitely being stuck in those sessions, wouldn't it be easier to tell your new psychiatrist everything she wanted to hear so she would quickly mark you off as appropriately rehabilitated?" Boyd asked, flipping open his bag and digging through the contents for something.

"Because that will never happen and the entire process offends me. It's not like I'll ever get someone who doesn't already have some ridiculous idea about The Monster," he replied dryly.

"Hmm." Boyd seemed to consider that, pausing in searching through his bag to look over with a smirk. "You realize that psychology was one of my main interests in school. Maybe I should get a degree and volunteer for the job. I could give you a clean bill of mental health in no time."

"Do it." Sin watched Boyd's hands idly. "We can fu--"

Before he could finish his sentence, the door opened and a harried looking Carhart entered. His brow was furrowed, mouth set in a thin line and he barely even seemed to notice that they were sitting there until he yanked his chair back and dropped his folder down on the table.

"You're early," He said curtly.

"The Agency's amusement park was closed down so I came here instead," Boyd said mildly, finally locating what he'd been looking for. He pulled out a small Carlos V chocolate bar and dropped it on the table in front of Sin.

Carhart gave him a thoroughly unamused look, one that didn't even remotely lighten as he watched Sin tear open the candy bar and eat it in three large bites. "Why are you encouraging his poor diet?"

Boyd shrugged. "I forced plenty of vegetables and meat on him in Mexico. I happened to see that bar and knew he liked it in particular, though, so I just brought it as a gift. You'll notice I did not buy a large bar. I'll bring apples and beef jerky from now

on if it helps, though." There was nothing sarcastic in his tone but he did find Carhart's curtness and displeasure with something so small to be a little odd and that much could be discerned in his voice.

"No eating allowed in the conference room." Carhart sat down and opened his folder, glancing up at them briefly before looking down again. "And no smoking, Vega."

Sin rolled his eyes and sucked chocolate off his thumb, gesturing towards the unlit cigarette that had been sitting on the table for the better part of the last hour. "*Cojelo suave*, boss man, it's not even lit. We all know you're in charge, no need to start waving your dick around."

The comment earned him a mildly startled look and the irritated expression cracked slightly. Carhart shook his head, hazel eyes moving to Boyd's face again. "Who told him how to speak that way?"

"Not me," Boyd said, giving him an innocent look. "Likely he learned it at the night club."

"I love how you people act like I never knew how to swear before going on that assignment," Sin said mildly, feeling rather insulted by the idea. What did Carhart think he was? An impressionable child? "I'll have you know I was quite fluent at it before."

The General raised an eyebrow. "I'll just make a note to prohibit you from getting covers at any other night establishments when you two are on future assignments."

Sin sat up at that, jumping on the comment like a cat attacking a mouse. "So we are going on future assignments together then." It was more of a statement than a question and his tone almost seemed to dare Carhart to say otherwise. But before Carhart could answer, once again the door opened and both Jeffrey and Owen filed in at the same time. It didn't seem to be a coincidence, as they appeared to be in the middle of a conversation that dwindled as soon as they took their respective places at the table.

Boyd gave Carhart a more alert look. "When will we start doing those again?" he asked Carhart, not really paying attention to Jeffrey or Owen.

"Immediately," the older man replied calmly. "That's why we're here "The information you gave us checked out. It turns out that Laguna de Sánchez is in fact an area that warranted more than a little looking into. There is a large plantation style mansion, privately owned by none other than Hale Clemons, out in that region," Carhart informed them, nodding as he spoke.

"We sent out feelers and more than one source in that region has reported a lot of activity there in the past month. There is an excessive amount of security around the place; armed guards, dogs, and so on. The property has been the source of numerous complaints over the years by people reporting suspicious activity to the police. It's located near a tourist attraction so gunshots, screams and threats made to passerby who wander too close weren't taken kindly by the people. However it seems that the police never took action, which leads us to believe that Janus or at least Clemons, must have ties with the authorities."

"Yeah, which is pretty strange, right? Ryan and I both once in a while see this sort of thing in connection to Janus; you know, across the countries," Owen said, looking a little more alert than usual but not as awake as he had been at the previous meeting. His hair was a mess and there were dark circles under his eyes, as if he'd once again not been getting enough sleep. He trailed off briefly, staring blankly at them then suddenly looking around for something that he seemed to have misplaced.

The mention of Ryan and the pause caused Boyd to glance briefly at the door, as if seeing if he was going to arrive, but he didn't and Boyd returned his attention to Owen. Although it was a little worrisome, he didn't spend much time thinking about it. It was probably better for Ryan to stay away as long as he needed, especially in bad weather, so that he could rest. But at that moment he needed to keep his attention on the mission; he didn't know much about Laguna de Sánchez other than its location and the vague comment by Lo Más Chingón, and he needed to learn as much as he could if they were headed there.

Owen frowned to himself, rubbed his eyes tiredly, then pushed a few pieces of paper around until he found a particular one he seemed to be looking for. He leaned back in his chair, kicking his legs out in front of him, and continued as if there hadn't been an interruption, "Places built like fortresses out in the boonies, crazy protection on otherwise unimportant structures, rumors about strange things going on, and so on." He waved one hand "I mean, some of it's cultural so you can't take it all seriously. Wealthy people in Mexico have guards and big houses and that sort of shit too, but this is different."

He tilted the sheet of paper so he could glance over it quickly then nodded, as if confirming some facts for himself. "Right. So then we saw that Clemons always had the security but it wasn't so hardcore until a few years ago. Around the same time some people started complaining that there were some loud noises coming from the property, not like screams or anything but just the sound of people doing things like construction, and then one person for some reason was mad that there were a lot of shipments going into the gates constantly. Clemons isn't stupid; he said he was adding on to his house, which isn't a strange thing to happen, and the cops never did anything about it. But adding that to the rest of the info makes me think that was when they started fitting it to be something more than just a mansion. Ryan and I both think they probably bring people there who go against them or try to leave Janus, and they interrogate and hold them; there's probably cells and reinforced rooms somewhere on the property. We don't exactly have proof that Thierry Beauvais is for certain there, but we think that's the best place to look."

"So then we're going?" Sin asked, as impatient as always to get to the point.

"Yes." Carhart sat back in his chair and glanced down briefly, extracting two pages from his folder and pushing them across the table at the two agents.

"Immediately. You'll find the pertinent information there; once you study it and the maps of the area, you'll be leaving right away. We've already lost a lot of time and for all we know, Thierry may already be dead, but even if that proves to be the case, this is the

first time we have a real lead from solid information about the location of a Janus safe house."

Sin was silent for a moment, not even glancing down at the paper as he continued to stare directly at Carhart. "Are we to bring back anyone other than Thierry if it turns out he's dead already?"

The General regarded him closely for a moment before inclining his head slightly. "You're to bring back anything with information on the organization; if possible, a human hostage would be acceptable, but your main goal is Thierry."

Boyd glanced between the two of them but his expression didn't change. "Are we flying? And if so, where do we land and how are we supposed to return? Do we have a time frame we need to work with?"

"You'll be flown into Mexico and dropped off inside the border. You'll have to acquire a vehicle and find your way to the destination, remaining as inconspicuous as possible. The helicopter will be waiting for you approximately twenty-four hours later," Carhart informed him. "The information is all there, as well as coordinates to each location. Unfortunately you will be the first to actually get close to the property so you will have to use your best judgment regarding a plan to infiltrate and escape."

Boyd pulled his folder closer, flipping through it quickly to make sure he didn't have any other questions. Everything seemed to be in order so he closed it and looked up to nod at Carhart.

"Wait, I have a last minute addition," Owen said, then stared at them all blankly in confusion before suddenly looking down at his pile of papers. When whatever he wanted did not prove to be on top of the pile, his eyebrows drew down and he started rifling through his papers again, causing a mess that resulted in Jeffrey raising an eyebrow at him.

"You lost them already?" Jeff asked, slightly derisively.

"No, they're just hiding out of view," Owen said without bothering to look up, though he did start moving things around faster as he tried to hurry. "Time out, I'll find them."

Jeffrey shook his head to himself in disgust then looked over at Sin and Boyd with his eyebrows raised. "Judging by the wording on the distress signal, I would guess that by the time it got to the point of needing to release it, Thierry expected something dire to be happening. We don't know what you'll find there but I doubt they've been treating him to wine and caviar so you should probably at least bring a med kit. Other than giving an idea of the regions to find him, the memo was pretty vague so I don't have much further informa--"

"Eureka!" Everyone looked over at Owen at how sudden and loud he was, but he didn't seem to notice that anyone was paying attention to him. They waited a moment for him to pull out whatever he was looking for, but it became clear almost immediately that he hadn't stopped his search; he was still moving papers around with an intent expression.

Jeff gave him a strange look then finished with a sense of confusion, "--tion..." When Owen still didn't do anything but push papers around, he looked irritated. "Owen, what the hell are you doing?"

"What?" Owen looked over at him curiously.

"Did you find them or not?" Jeff demanded.

"No," Owen said blankly, "they're still almost-found."

"Then why the hell did you yell 'eureka' and interrupt me?" Judging by his tone and expression, Jeff was more annoyed by the interruption than anything.

"Because I thought it might fool them," Owen said, giving him a strange look. "You know? Some people believe you can will things to be by believing them and that sort of thing? Life affected by the mind? Imagining success and then reaching it?" He

raised his eyebrows. "It's like how beauty's in the eye of the beholder; maybe lost stuff is found in the eye of the loser."

Jeffrey snorted and looked down at his own perfectly arranged, perfectly organized piles of paper in which he could easily extract any single sheet he wanted within seconds while Owen couldn't even find one without help. "'Loser' is right," he said under his breath.

"What are you looking for anyway?" Boyd asked, staring at the mess of paper Owen had created in front of him.

"These things. Map things." Owen waved a hand as if it were too difficult to explain with words. "Blueprints except it's more like they're white with blue ink and a streak of yellow because the printer was rebelling..." He drew his eyebrows down then his eyes lit up and he leaned over to dig through his bag quickly and pull out a few sheets of paper.

"Aha! See," he demanded triumphantly to Jeffrey, brandishing the papers he'd been looking for. "Once I imagined them and thought of finding them they were easy to find."

"No," Jeff said slowly as if he thought Owen was an idiot. "Once you retraced your steps in your mind you remembered you put them in a different place than where you were looking. Then you stopped being an idiot and looked in the right area."

"You're wrong," Owen said dismissively, and appeared to forget about the entire conversation the moment he turned toward Boyd and Sin again. "Here are the blueprints for Clemons' house." Owen slid them across the table and watched as they each looked down at them.

Boyd picked up the blueprints and studied them carefully but Sin didn't seem too interested, which wasn't unusual.

"It took a while to find them... I just thought maybe they'd be there and Ryan agreed and then we looked. Anyway, they're several years old; they were attached to an

approved work order Hale Clemons had to get for that construction I mentioned. They should be what the place looked like before the construction because of course the contractors are the ones who'd have the blueprints for whatever they did and I doubt he hired anyone legit because we couldn't find anything. The blueprints also aren't complete because some of the files were corrupted, plus we don't even know how many floors there are so who knows how many files could be missing. It's not a lot to go off but maybe it'll help some."

"I think it will," Boyd said, feeling pleased to have any sense of blueprints or floor plans to go off, even if they were outdated. He didn't like going into places without knowing the layout and, if possible, every nook and cranny so he not only knew where he could hide but also where others could be hiding to ambush him. He looked up and smiled slightly at Owen. "Thank you."

For some reason that caught Owen off guard and he gave Boyd a slightly embarrassed look. "Oh. You're welcome."

Jeffrey started placing his papers back into his briefcase; it was unclear why he had unloaded them in the first place as he hadn't had much to add to the meeting, but it was probably a combination of force of habit and the fact that he liked to see perfectly stacked piles of white paper against the dark brown wood of the table.

"I have another meeting I need to be at in fifteen minutes. Are we finished?" he asked Carhart the question curiously but curtly.

"Yes." Carhart looked at Boyd and Sin again as Jeff and Owen filed out of the room, neither of them taking their time. Jeff was in a hurry to get to his next meeting and Owen seemed in a hurry to go back to sleep. When the door shut behind them, Carhart spoke again.

"You leave in two hours; if you have any questions, I'll be in my office. You've been given clearance to get any supplies you think you may need."

Sin nodded shortly and pushed his chair back but before he could stand, Carhart grabbed his forearm suddenly. Sin raised an eyebrow in inquiry although the expression on his face wasn't as hostile or threatening as it would have been a year ago.

"Yes?"

Carhart frowned slightly and released Sin's arm, eyes flicking over to Boyd almost self-consciously before he sat back in his chair and fidgeted with his folder. "Just..." he trailed off for a moment and cleared his throat. "Be careful. Both of you."

Sin's mouth twisted in a sardonic smirk. "I'm going to start thinking you care in a minute, General."

Carhart shook his head with a grunt and stood abruptly. "You should have started thinking that a long time ago, Vega."

With that being said, he turned and walked out of the room before either man had a chance to reply. They exchanged glances and Sin blinked. "What the hell was that about?"

"Well," Boyd started after a moment. "Consider what happened last time you went to Mexico. He's probably afraid the same thing will happen this time, too. We weren't even near an actual Janus building before and this time we're headed straight for what could be their interrogation center of the area. You could..." He narrowed his eyes. "Well. We'll both be there this time, so... it shouldn't end the same."

Sin watched him quietly for a moment, not missing Boyd's expression and serious tone. "We'll be fine," he said, in a manner he hoped was reassuring. "There were extenuating circumstances last time. I was distracted; it was my own fault I got captured because I allowed myself to become distracted." There was a pause. "Although."

His tone caused Boyd look over warily. "Although what?"

A shrug as though Sin were mentally dismissing what had come to mind but he continued anyway. "Clemons has a vendetta against me so I'm sure if he knows I'm still alive and well enough to raid his mansion, he'll try to do everything in his power to make sure I die for real this time. But that'd probably be the case regardless, unless he's fond of home invasion; I just thought you should know ahead of time so that there are no surprises when we get there."

"Why should that be?" Boyd asked, trying to place this new information in the context of what he already knew. "It sounded like if he had a vendetta against anyone, it would have been Thierry. Jeff said his information led to what happened," he said slowly. "and it sounds like you were just in the area anyway. Do you really think he'd remember you in particular or even recognize you after so long?"

"It was my fault Jessica was involved at all," Sin corrected calmly. "He knew that - he saw me there with her, it was me they were in a gun fight with when she died and it was him who personally oversaw my interrogation to make sure it was as painful as possible. I think it was his idea to leave me there to bleed to death. I remember him saying as much before I blacked out."

At first Boyd seemed surprised to hear that Hale Clemons had been that personally involved, but it was quickly overrun by a dark flash of anger. "So he was there," he said, tone enigmatic.

Sin nodded, watching his partner closely. "Yeah. I just thought you should know ahead of time that he already has it out for me."

"I see. Thank you," Boyd said, the anger gone from his eyes although the emotion had done anything but vanished. "While we're on the topic, I should warn you that from what I recall of the area, I believe we'll have to drive in the vicinity of Monterrey to get to Laguna de Sánchez. I don't know what the status of the security is like for travelers bypassing the city; I would imagine we will be fine but it's something I intend to look into. If it's anything like it was when I was hiding out or when we left, then we will have to be very careful."

"I figured as much. And even if the heat is off with the local police being so obvious about their search and so indiscriminate about who they picked up and labeled a terrorist, I'm sure there are still agencies down there searching as well as head hunters who want to make a buck off the incident." Sin frowned slightly and ran a hand over his short hair, still not used to it. "But since we're essentially sneaking into the country and not even bothering with security clearance at this point, you're right, we'll have to be really careful because we don't have paperwork backing us up this time." He was silent a moment as he studied Boyd, getting the feeling that there was something more the blond man wanted to say. "Is there anything else I should know before we head out?"

Boyd hesitated but then said in a matter-of-fact tone, "Yes. If I'm entirely honest, I'm not certain sending us on this mission is a good idea. Or reinstating me fully as an Agent so soon. Perhaps especially the fact that I will be your partner again."

A hot flash of irritation shot through Sin and he sat up straight, eyes narrowing. "What the hell is it now, Boyd? Why not?"

"It's not because I don't want to be around you," Boyd said in the manner he typically conveyed information for briefings, seeming unperturbed by Sin's reaction. He glanced briefly at the door to be certain it was closed. They actually had better privacy in the conference room than they would anywhere else in the Agency, even Sin's apartment since they didn't know for certain that there weren't any bugs or cameras.

"If anything, it's for the opposite reason. There wasn't a need to bring it up before if I was going to be a civilian or even if I became an agent in another area. But if we're going to return to our previous partnership, then before we go on this mission I think you should know that I love you."

There was a brief stretch of silence in which Sin just stared at Boyd blankly, not responding because for a moment he wasn't sure how exactly he was supposed to reply to that. The concept of 'love' was as foreign to him as the concepts of friendship and intimacy had been; it was just another thing that he'd never been involved with, never

experienced and certainly never had said to him. He knew what the word meant, he knew people said it about things or people that they had a strong positive regard towards, but he didn't really know what one was supposed to think or feel that would lead to them essentially saying this word.

However he knew it was a good thing if Boyd was telling him this and it left him in a state of confusion as to why this would be a complication to their situation. "Why would that be a negative factor to our partnership?" he asked, eyebrows drawing together and looking genuinely baffled.

"It could affect my judgment," Boyd said seriously, then paused to consider that and shook his head. "No, it likely *will* affect my judgment. For instance, what if you get hurt and I have to make a decision between helping you and finishing the mission? I would find it incredibly difficult to focus on my job with you hurt in front of me, but what if in that scenario I would be helping you most by finishing the mission? What if I get too distracted worrying about you and actually make the matter worse? Which is not to mention the fact that in this scenario I'm not completing the mission either, so I would accomplish nothing except failure. Or..."

Kassian's warning to be careful who he let see his feelings echoed in his mind, followed by a sudden flash of Shane's calm voice asking why those he cared about kept getting hurt around him. Boyd's expression darkened briefly and he looked away. "Or I could endanger us both by getting too concerned and letting my feelings be seen somehow. It could be used against us. Against you. It's a liability that shouldn't exist. But I can't help feeling the way I do and I don't see it changing any time soon. So, I'm questioning whether it would be best if I just wasn't your partner at all."

Sin opened his mouth to voice his automatic disagreement but he closed it again, pausing to truly let the words sink in. He'd wanted to tell Boyd that once again he was being over-paranoid, taking too much on his shoulders, but at the same time when Boyd was saying it that way it did somewhat make sense that he was concerned. However, the scenario Boyd was describing would put Sin in an equally difficult position if their

positions were reversed and it was Boyd who was seriously injured, so he didn't see why Boyd would be any more of a threat to the partnership than he would be.

"Well you don't know that for certain, so there's no point making any sudden decisions now," Sin said impatiently. "The fact that you actually care about my wellbeing only makes you a better partner in my point of view, because I know I can trust you to watch my back and I can keep both eyes on the enemy. Why don't we see how this mission plays out before we decide it will definitely end tragically?"

Boyd lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "It's not as though I was going to abandon the mission at the last minute anyway despite my concerns; that would just put you in an even worse position. I just wanted you to be aware of the situation before we arrived so you would know why I may react the way I do if something goes wrong. We'll see what happens; you're right that there is the possibility it will work out decently." He didn't sound very convinced of the idea and he paused, then gave Sin a very serious look.

"But I'm telling you right now that if it seems as though this partnership is going to be dangerous for you, then I am going to have to seriously consider what sort of solution there could be and how to go about achieving it. I won't let myself be responsible for something happening to you just because I developed feelings for you. If need be, I will talk to Carhart about it to see what sort of options we have. I'm telling you that also ahead of time so you won't be surprised if it comes to that, but I'll let you know before I go to him. Because we're currently partners it *is* your decision, too, to an extent; of course, if it's serious enough I may just ignore your opinion."

Sin rubbed the back of his head with his hand as he stared at Boyd in silent dismay for a moment. He wanted to argue his point some more but he decided there really wasn't much of a point with Boyd being so stubborn about it. In all honesty, he really didn't have a valid point of reason until they went on a mission together and the whole theory was proved wrong. So instead he just shrugged finally and gave Boyd a mildly exasperated look.

"Whatever you say. I obviously have more faith in you than you do in yourself, so we'll just see what happens."

Boyd gave him a scrutinizing look but after a moment he seemed satisfied by Sin's expression and he just nodded, mollified. "We should get ready soon. Do you need anything in particular? I'm about to make a few stops after this."

"Not much. Weapons. I lost my guns in Monterrey," His tone of voice made it obvious that he wasn't pleased about that. He'd been fond of his weapons; for the longest time they'd been the only things he could count on. "Some explosives would be nice," he added after a moment. "Low grade of course, don't want to draw too much attention or the authorities might get themselves involved. And smoke grenades. Or tear gas, for crowd control. And a bungee cord. And a glass cutter."

Sin tapped a finger against his mouth, noting that his list had suddenly become very long. For all that he'd enjoyed the almost dreamlike haze that had drifted through that summer in Monterrey, he had to admit that there was something about getting ready for a mission that had always appealed to him. "Maybe I'll just go take a tour of the supply room."

"I was going to head there first then stop by the medic unit," Boyd replied. "We could go together."

Sin nodded but as soon as Boyd started to get up, he leaned forward and wrapped one hand around the other man's wrist. Boyd looked down in mild surprise and for a moment Sin didn't speak, just staring up into the depths of his partner's honey brown eyes. "Are you sure you're fine? With doing this, with being back..."

A mildly uncomfortable expression crossed Boyd's face and for a moment he wanted to look away but he didn't; he kept eye contact with Sin and said honestly, "I don't know. For part of me, this is the last thing I want to do. But I don't have anywhere else to be, and it's better if I'm here than if I'm alone. I would have preferred that the first mission had nothing to do with Mexico, though." He paused and then smiled slightly. "Besides, doing this and being back means I'm around you. And since I'd prefer that

above anything else, I think it works out in the end. I just don't want anything to go wrong."

A shadow of a smile ghosted across Sin's face but it was gone before Boyd was even sure he'd seen it. He pursed his lips and stared at Boyd silently before finally loosening his grip. "I just wanted to tell you before we go..." He trailed off for a moment, eyes narrowing slightly, picking his words carefully. "I don't know what's going to happen in Mexico but I'm more concerned with what's going to happen when we come back, once this whole Thierry and Monterrey fiasco is finally cleared up for good. I don't- - I can't say for certain, it's just a feeling I have mostly but--"

Sin stopped short again, gaze breaking away to flick around the room as if paranoid that somehow they were being overheard. "Things are different here now. Connors is different now. I don't know what's going to happen with you, with both of us, once he finally finds suitable replacements who are entirely brainwashed. Maybe even before that, maybe as soon as we have all of the JKS loose ends tied up. But I want you to know that it's the same for me-- if it comes between you and an assignment, loyalty to this place and their orders, I'd pick you with no hesitation."

Boyd was mildly startled by the statement. "Thank you," he said quietly. "It seems that everyone's behavior has been affected by Connors since we left, even Ryan. Until we have more information though, we won't be able to know exactly what is going to happen. For now, all we can do is concentrate on recovering Thierry and take things one step at a time."

Sin nodded in agreement and after a moment of them looking at each other, he headed toward the door with Boyd not far behind him. Together, they left to prepare for the mission, their first in a while and possibly their last depending on what happened when they returned.

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Despite whatever feelings the owner of the property may have inspired in Boyd and Sin, it would be difficult not to admit that the place was amazing.

There was the mansion itself and an additional building which was actually larger and appeared to be intended for entertaining purposes. Both structures were built on the side of and on top of a hill, which gave the impression that they had a layered architecture on the interior. The actual design was impressive and it seemed that the buildings had been specially designed to wrap around the hill. The actual buildings took up well over an acre of land by themselves, with the pool, gazebo and garages consuming an additional twenty thousand square feet. The outer land was well manicured and landscaped but considering the fact that it was located close to several recreational and tourist locations, it was no wonder why the forceful nature of the compound's guards had inspired several complaints.

Tall gates and trees surrounded Hale Clemons' property, making it difficult to see inside but that did little to hide the intimidating air that the guards exuded to passersby. The security was almost as tight as the security at the JKS, if not tighter considering the fact that it was only a tenth of the size of the property the convention center was sprawled upon. That weighed in with the amount of watchdogs which roamed the five acre lot made it an extremely annoying place to infiltrate and subtlety had never been Sin's specialty.

If he could have his way about it he'd much rather go in with guns blazing and peripheral bombs going off but he knew that in this situation it would never work. The likely outcome of that scenario would be them getting overpowered and overwhelmed far too quickly and that Janus would most likely kill Thierry, if he was still alive, before they could extract him.

So with that in mind, he clung to the ledge of a window in the south side of the guest house as they'd come to call it, and used his glass cutter to slice a small hole into it noiselessly. For all of the manpower that Clemons had on the property, they'd figured out earlier on in their surveillance that there weren't very many bells and whistles as far as an actual security system. They had two theories regarding that knowledge; the first being that the presence of so many armed men gave Clemons a large sense of security that outweighed the presence of technology and the second being that he hadn't

wanted to bring strangers into his property to install such an extensive system which would secure the entire property without having to expose anything he may be trying to hide.

There were, however, several cameras around the outer gates but they'd managed to avoid those easily enough; the real trick would be getting in without being seen and getting out with Thierry without being killed by the guards.

He slid his hand into the hole and felt around until he found a latch for the window. He'd been pleasantly surprised to find that not all of the windows in the building were fixed as they'd previously thought from preliminary casings of the grounds. Many of them were operable and that provided them with a more convenient way of sneaking in. It'd taken him longer to find an access area than Boyd had at the main house, most likely because the purpose of the guest home was to be attractive and not to be functional, and thus many of the picture windows were immobile.

Sin pushed the window up quietly, pulled his hand out of the hole and slipped into the building. He'd picked a location that had appeared to be in a shadowed corner behind a column and while that was helpful because he immediately ducked down and out of anyone's range of vision, as soon as he peered around and at the layout of the building he realized that any prior knowledge of the blueprints no longer existed in his brain.

Idly touching the transmitter he muttered a soft 'what the fuck' to Boyd and made a face at the design. He was on what appeared to be the second floor balcony that overlooked the entire ground floor, or at least the ridiculously large foyer area. The entire space was extravagant right down to the serpentine design of the winding staircase; the balcony area wound around in a circle which overlooked the bottom floor and the enormous chandelier that dangled from the ceiling.

He wasn't even sure if foyer was an apt description of what he could see at the bottom; the entrance area and what appeared to be an entertainment or some kind of show room for instruments and artwork was spread out below. There were several

doors which he imagined branched out to other wings of the large house but he had no idea where they went and as much as he racked his brain for what Boyd had tried to tell him to study; he could remember none of it.

"What exactly am I looking for again?"

"The northeast rooms that we discussed; the ones that seemed to possibly lead to an extra wing." Boyd's voice came across sounding long-suffering and mildly annoyed. "I don't know why I even bother showing you blueprints or telling you repeatedly what to look for, you never pay attention. Where are you now? I can tell you where to go."

Sin rolled his eyes and made a face even though Boyd couldn't see him. "I don't need you to tell me where to go," he muttered in a stage whisper. "I asked a question, you answered, the end." He rested on the balls of his feet and looked around the column again. "Besides," he added in a droll voice. "Not like you're even *sure* it's that area. You're just assuming it *might* be."

"Of course I'm not certain," Boyd replied after a moment, his voice quiet. "If I was, I wouldn't be looking in another building as well, and one would have to wonder why I have exact information on our enemy's complex. That area just seemed the most suspicious in the guest house."

"No unnecessary noise on the radio," Sin said as a response and stopped transmitting, smirking to himself. It was fun to annoy Boyd on assignments. He could just picture the irritated look in his eyes now, glaring into space while indignantly wondering why his partner was such a failure of an agent but Sin didn't mind. He'd been taught by his father to be a killer, not an agent, and even then his father had never been one for following rules.

With that in mind, he studied the layout below him and tried to figure out the best way of getting to where he needed to be without being noticed. Considering the fact that it was just one large open space, he was left with very little options.

There were not as many guards inside as there were on the outside, at least not in the area below him. However, he did see a man standing just outside the glass doors that led to the pool area towards the northern end of the space and through an arch that led to a kitchen area, another man standing near a set of double doors in the northeast corner of that particular room. He was watching a soccer game on a plasma television although the sound appeared to be off. He didn't seem particularly concerned with his surroundings and it gave the impression that he'd probably been doing the same job, probably since the JKS had gone down, for months and that so little that had happened that he doubted anything ever would. He was tall, appeared to be Caucasian and wearing casual clothing although he was making no attempt at hiding the fact that he was armed.

Considering the fact that those doors were the only ones being guarded on that floor, it was easy to assume that that was the area he was looking for but something about it seemed too easy. It was in the correct area though and it was a better shot than searching every other part of the building so it still seemed like the best bet. He half stood, half crouched and moved quietly across the balcony, eyes scanning everything below him as he listened for any sign of doors opening or closing around him. For the most part he heard nothing except for the distant rumble of thunder from an incoming storm; the house seemed silent, empty, and that made sense since Clemons' only guest at the moment was most likely Thierry.

Sin waited until he was above the guard and hopped onto the serpentine railing, walking along it and following the slight curve in the design so that he was directly above and slightly behind where the man was standing. Without hesitating, he dropped down silently behind the guard and broke his neck in two quick motions. It would have been perfect if it weren't for the coffee cup the man managed to knock over; it went skittering across the counter and even though Sin managed to catch it before it shattered to the floor, it caught the attention of the guard outside the glass door.

He froze, crouched down and used his back to keep the man upright as he hid behind the counter. From the angle the other guard was at there was no way he could

see that the man was dead, only that he was slightly leaning against the counter and appeared very intently focused on the game. Sin continued to support the man, listening intently for any sounds of the door sliding open, but when it didn't happen he peeked around and saw that the guard had turned away and was even walking slowly towards the pool, idly playing with a hand held game. Hale obviously had some stellar guys stationed here; but then again Sin doubted they saw very much action and probably expected nothing to ever happen.

He moved away, letting the dead guy drop down and looked around quickly. There was a huge walk in cabinet in the corner of the kitchen and he dragged the body towards it, pushing it inside. He searched the man's clothing and found a radio, a wallet with three nudie pictures and a key ring. Sin stuffed the items into his pocket and shut the cabinet doors behind him.

The game continued to play out on the silent television as Sin studied the double doors that the man had been guarding. They were heavy, wooden, and locked. He glanced dubiously at the lock before crouching down once again to examine the set of keys. The door opened after three tries with different keys and the click of the lock seemed to echo loudly in the quiet house. He paused, waited, and when he heard nothing he slowly pushed the door open and slipped inside. It didn't exactly lead directly to some hidden holding area, but he knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

A corridor with thick burgundy carpet and artwork with gilded frames on the walls seemed to spread out to a vast amount of rooms and passages. He tried to remember what had been on the blueprints, failed, but common sense told him that those double doors weren't the suspicious area Boyd had noted; not when they had been so close to the entrance of the building. The corridor led to passages that wound to doors leading to different parts of the mansion; it was entirely possible that this was an area that was generally left open during parties but locked when the house was empty for any other number of reasons. It was even possible that it was locked to keep the majority of the guards out to prevent theft. However it still led to the northeast and that was his target area, so he continued on his way.

The entire layout of the ground floor appeared to be designed specifically for guest activities, which likely meant that the rooms on the second floor were likely spare bedrooms and rest areas. Most areas were empty and seemed as though they'd been untouched for quite some time; it didn't even seem as though cleaning people had been present recently if one went by the light layer of dust which covered statues and other furniture. Not all of the doors in the corridor were locked or even closed; arched doorways led to large lounge areas, game and entertainment rooms, a home theater and more than one bathroom that was most likely intended for the large number of guests that were usually on scene at a time. However as he moved closer to the northeast corner of the house, he realized that there were more closed doors the farther away he got from what had appeared to be the hub of activity.

His feet moved silently across the carpet as he crouched down, moving in the darkened shadows of the wall and being incredibly thankful that they'd planned this for the middle of the night. The entire house was built around aesthetics and he had no doubts that the windows would flood every hallway and room with light during the day, leaving him with very little cover of darkness. Even now he had to be wary of the occasional flash of lightning that illuminated the hallway as the rain finally began to fall.

He paused briefly before turning a corner and tried to figure out where he should go, which room he should investigate, and knew that even if he had paid attention to the blueprints they wouldn't even be helpful at this point since they hadn't really narrowed it down to any specific room and construction had likely changed the architecture dramatically to conceal whatever it was Hale was hiding. Whatever he was looking for had to be somewhere in this area though; he was as far northeast as he could get so one of these rooms had to lead somewhere or else he was likely not in the right building at all and it would be up to Boyd.

But before he could move toward any particular area, there was the sound of a door opening and voices speaking. He pressed himself against the wall, partially in the nook under the window and narrowed his eyes as he waited for them to either pass or

go somewhere else. Neither happened and they stood around the corner, talking in low tones.

"--two weeks now," One voice was saying in mild irritation.

"It's not as easy as you'd think. We're not the only ones who know how to hide and cover our tracks. Things take time and this is a sensitive situation. Do you know how useful he could be? Things could change a lot," A woman replied shortly, seeming annoyed with the man's lack of grasp on the situation.

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly as he let that comment absorb; could Thierry have really sold them out? Was Janus going on a lead from him to find out more about the Agency? He stayed in the shadows as they began walking again, intending to be silent and listen for any clues as to where he should go but just as they passed his hiding place, the radio he'd swiped from the soccer watching guard crackled to life and a man's voice demanded for someone named Peters to copy. The pair in the hallway froze, looked around in confusion and Sin made a face at the situation. So much for stealth.

"What the fuc--" The man exclaimed, startled by the noise.

"Don't fucking *move*!" The woman shouted, yanking her gun out and pointing it in Sin's general direction. "Identify yourself, *now*!"

He had two choices. Pull a Boyd and pretend to be a guard so that he could avoid confrontation and go about his business without trouble or he could get rid of them both and possibly cause more problems for them later. However at the moment the possibility of the first choice didn't even cross his mind and he reacted automatically, springing forward to grab the woman's throat with one hand and her wrist with the other, twisting it violently until it cracked and she released the gun as he simultaneously sent a booted foot crashing into the man's groin.

The man doubled over with a groan but didn't go down, instead reaching for a knife that was strapped to his thigh. He slashed at Sin clumsily, still slightly thrown off from the pain he was in but was disarmed almost immediately, even as Sin continued to

pin the woman to the wall by her throat. "Hands up or I'll break her neck," Sin said calmly, keeping the knife to the man's Adam's apple. It'd be easier to shoot them both but he was still trying to go for half assed stealth and an attempt at negotiation would work more in that favor.

The man grimaced and put his hands up, glaring up at him briefly before moving his gaze quickly to the woman. They seemed to be communicating with each other silently, making it appear as though they knew each other fairly well. "What are you doing here?" He asked finally, voice slightly pained. "Who are you and how did you get in?"

Sin ignored their questions and asked one of his own. "Where's your prisoner?"

The woman scoffed, voice strained as he tightened his grip. "We would rather die than talk."

The pride in her tone at that declaration matched the Janus mentality perfectly. Before he could respond in any way, she suddenly twisted in his grasp and brought her knee up in an attempt to disable him in the same way he'd disabled her partner. The other man spun away from the knife and took off running down the hall just as Sin stumbled from the contact. She dove for the gun again when his grip loosened but he dropped to the floor and swept her legs from beneath her just as he whipped the knife at her partner. It sailed through the air with deadly precision and the force of the throw sent it plunging into the back of his head just as he lifted his own radio to alert everyone else. The man dropped to the floor before he could send a message and Sin's eyes narrowed at the woman in disgust right before he crushed her windpipe.

He stood up, feeling mildly annoyed by the situation and looked around quickly for a place to hide their bodies. The hall was mostly dark as much of the house was and so he settled for dragging them back around the corridor and into a darkened corner, partially hidden beneath the long floor length curtains. A quick frisk of their bodies turned up another key ring, this one including a keycard. He frowned at them for a moment before shaking his head in irritation. He didn't know if he was annoyed because

his attempt at negotiation had failed or if he was annoyed at their ridiculous almost fanatical religious devotion to Janus. When he refused to talk it was more because he was protecting people, not an ideology, and even then he knew if he did talk they'd kill him anyway. He had no respect for anyone with such blind sensibilities.

The hiding space was poor at best and he knew it was only a matter of time before their bodies were found and his presence discovered so he moved quickly towards the direction they had come. There were two doors in the corridor they'd emerged from and he tried them both but they were locked; one with a key and the other requiring a card. He knew full well that there could be any number of bad things on the other side but he didn't really have the patience to sit around trying to plan a better way of going about it, so he stared at each door for a long moment before deciding that the one with that required a card was more likely the one where anything of note would be hidden.

The stolen card worked and the door emitted a soft beep before clicking and allowing him to enter. He flung the door open quickly, ducked to the side and immediately had his guns in hand to take out anything that appeared to be mildly threatening. But all he found was an empty room with a dome shaped ceiling and shelves upon shelves of books. The room was extremely quiet but he still slipped into the shadows as he slunk silently throughout the room. It was neither small nor large and it didn't appear to be anything special; but if that was the case, why would it require a keycard to get in?

His eyes narrowed slightly as he did a full lap of the room and found nothing but it was that which made him even more suspicious. There was a small lamp turned on in the corner of the room but it was still cast largely in shadow, so he used that to his advantage and looked around closer, searching for false walls or anything hidden. Once again he found nothing and had almost decided to give up entirely but on a final search of the room, something about the floor caught his attention.

The floor was made of marble tile and when the moonlight hit it, there was a slight shine. However one tile in particular didn't have that shine and upon close

inspection, he realized that if he actually tread on it without attempting to move silently, his boot made a slightly hollow sound. It didn't take long to figure out that that section of the flooring was false and it took even less time to open it. The opening led to a steep staircase that led down to a sub level of the building that hadn't been on the blueprints. It wasn't surprising; it had even been one of the scenarios they'd discussed since it was built on top of a hill and the possibility of Clemons building the house into the hill had made a lot of sense. However it hadn't been a scenario that either of them was looking forward to.

Finding a separate wing was a lot less daunting then finding a staircase that led down into the unknown and as he descended, it occurred to him that he had no cover, no backup and no idea what lay below. And even as that realization set in, he realized he didn't fear it... it just made him excited. "Target area possibly in sight," he muttered, transmitting to Boyd once again. "Will verify shortly."

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The halls were empty and dark as Boyd passed through them, stopping at each corner to listen closely for any movement or sign of life. Regardless of the amount of money and power Clemons had, he still had to abide by certain rules; keeping the entire complex lit inside and out at all times, for instance, would have maxed out the amount of power reserves probably available in the area and also would have likely been far too expensive even for a man of his caliber. It was possible he would have been able to access that much electricity in the city but his location made it too difficult. That worked out for Boyd, really, since it meant there were more hallways with little to no lighting, and more shadows to hide in to avoid security.

The majority of the guards were congregated outside patrolling the grounds. So far, the guards had all been a variety of ages and ethnicities, which worked in his favor if he wanted to, but judging by the interactions he'd overseen and overheard, they seemed to know each other pretty well which would make it far more difficult to pretend he was one of them. At least they wore casual clothing, allowing him to blend in if he ever happened to be briefly overseen in a hallway. It was probably lucky that Sin had

contacted him before he got too far into the complex, where it was quieter and he wouldn't have felt as comfortable responding. He still couldn't believe he'd asked about what he was supposed to be looking for in the guest house; did the man never listen to anything Boyd told him in preparation for missions? Sometimes he swore Sin did that just to annoy him.

From what he'd been able to tell from the blueprints Owen had provided them, there were several places that could have been candidates for suspicious activity. It was difficult to tell for certain, since time had passed since the blueprints were created and all manner of construction had occurred since then. Even if common sense had not told him so, Boyd could tell that much just from memory of the specs; he'd already run into a few places where rooms appeared to have been expanded or merged. He took note of anything that seemed especially different but for the most part he dismissed the discrepancies as they were in areas that didn't make sense for Clemons to have built an interrogation center to house people like Thierry.

The lightning illuminated the halls and doorways around him, casting into relief the pale cream walls, the expensive paintings, and the occasional tapestry. Rain pounded against the window panes and the few skylights that were dotted across the building. He would have preferred to navigate the inner hallways where there was no chance of being seen from outside, but the main house was relatively well constructed and the only way to access the area he wanted to explore was to travel the outer hallways. It was probably built that way for exactly this purpose, to force intruders to expose their position, and he took care to keep hidden, move cautiously but quickly, and do his best to avoid any chances of being detected.

He was nearly to the main access to the wing he wanted to explore when he heard a quiet footstep down a hall at an intersection ahead of him. He stopped immediately and crouched against the wall, hidden by the shadows and a nearby table. He could hear the guard getting closer to the intersection; he nearly entered the hallway Boyd was in when a soft sound of white noise came presumably from a radio the guard had. The guard paused at the entrance to the hallway, just out of view, and Boyd

crouched down further by the table, noting that it had a few lower shelves filled with decorations which served to provide him further coverage. He glanced over them quickly, noting that a glass figurine on the lowest shelf nearest him would work as a weapon if he needed it. He adjusted his gloves and slid his hand by the figurine, barely breathing as he heard the guard say lazily into the radio, "Yeah?"

Static answered the man's question at first, then a younger man's voice could be heard asking, "Hey Darren. Anything exciting?"

The guard, Darren, made a soft noise to himself then walked into the hallway Boyd was hiding in and idly glanced up and down the hall. He paused there but didn't seem to notice Boyd several feet away from him, and luckily no lightning flashed to show his position. Finally, Darren turned and said in disappointment into the radio, "No." He started to walk back down the hallway he'd come from while the other man replied over the radio, "Same here," and they started a short, quiet conversation about how nothing ever happened. Boyd could hear the sound of the radio getting quieter as Darren walked away but he still waited in the shadows for a few seconds longer, not wanting to risk getting caught if it turned out the guard had noticed him and was trying to deceive him into moving into the open. He could hear the guard turning down another hallway and the sound of his footsteps and radio faded. He waited another moment then stayed crouched as he peered around the corner. Darren was long gone and he took that opportunity to quickly continue on his way.

The house was almost eerie in the scattered light from the thunderstorm outside. As he moved silently through the hallways, the thunder rattled the windows and made it harder to hear if anyone was around him. Construction had changed much of what he remembered from the prints but he was able to navigate away from the windows, away from the lightning, and reach the muffled darkness of the inner hallways. Due to that, he had to be extra careful as he wound his way deeper into the wing, stopping every few hallways to think of the blueprints and consider where he was in relation to where he wanted to go.

He only saw one other guard as he walked and she had been far enough away that she hadn't noticed him before she passed into another hallway. In a way, it was quite lucky that the mansion had been built the way it had, because the number of sprawling hallways and large rooms provided so much space for guards to patrol that Boyd was able to slip through places they weren't watching.

It took him longer than he'd wanted to arrive at the first place he wanted to look into. The hallway was dark and empty, and the room that had seemed to have some sort of suspicious excess space appeared to be a normal guest room without anything that particularly stood out. The area that may have contained some sort of extra space for a secret passage turned out to just have an especially large walk-in closet. It was possible something less innocuous had taken that space before, but as he quickly but thoroughly searched the room and the rooms surrounding it, he didn't find anything out of ordinary. When they remodeled the complex, that must have been one of the areas that was affected. Without wasting another second, he moved on to his next target.

The second area he checked had pretty much the same result; two rooms had been joined and whatever had attracted his attention in the blueprints was no longer relevant. He barely spent any time there and moved toward the next, paying close attention along the way for any guards or other areas that seemed suspicious. He slid his way through the shadows, pausing any time he thought he heard movement. Following the route in his mind led him through a dark hallway filled with empty, silent rooms seen through open doorways. He glanced in them as he passed; partially to verify no one was in there, and partially an automatic tendency to check for weapons in the area. They appeared to be a series of sitting rooms and studies that were primarily empty, with some heavy, comfortable furniture in the corners. He had a few items with him but as usual they were the sorts of things that could be overlooked or would be used as a last resort.

He was halfway down the hallway when he heard the sound of quiet footsteps at the intersection ahead of him. He had just enough time to throw himself into the nearest room, where he moved around and crouched between the open door and the wall. He

kept himself far enough away from the wall that he would not be seen through the space between the door and door frame, although from his angle he could see a small slit of the hallway between the hinges. The hall was about as dark as the room was so it wasn't likely that he'd be noticed but he wasn't going to take chances.

The steady footsteps drew closer and he could see a beam of light appear in the bit of the hallway he could see. The light moved fluidly along the ground, then jerked up across the opposite wall of the hallway, dipping into the room there where he could see a heavy couch with expensive-looking fabric. The light then shifted along the floor and turned toward Boyd's room just as he could hear the guard coming upon him. He stayed very still and held his breath, listening intently for even the vaguest indication that the guard was going to stop there, that the guard knew he was in there, that he would have to fight.

The gait of the footsteps sounded familiar; he was fairly certain this was the same woman who he'd almost run into before. It seemed to take entirely too long for her to pass and each second that dragged by made Boyd think even faster; the room was too dark to make out anything but as the light flashed across the wall he noticed a small decorative statue on a far table he would be able to use as a blunt force weapon if he needed to, and if he could reach it in time. But the guard didn't pause, she just let the light flick across the room and moved on. They probably never expected anyone to actually make it through the tight security outside so the guards inside didn't seem to spend too much time being paranoid, such as actually checking behind doors. Boyd waited until a few seconds after he heard her turn a corner before he let his breath out quietly and wasted no time in continuing on his way.

It didn't take him long to reach his next destination, which was a wing of the house that appeared to be primarily for entertainment. At first, Boyd couldn't see through the shadows well enough to fully grasp the way the wing was set up, but flickering of light caught his attention in one room and he paused, approached silently and peered in to see if a guard was inside. There was no one in the room, but he did discover a large aquarium that nearly took up the length of one wall. Exotic fish swam

within, their scales brilliantly colored, their bodies and fins differing lengths and sizes. It was rather peaceful watching them move around so languidly, so he could see why Clemons had installed lighting around the tank to illuminate it even in the dark. The light cast shadows of the fish and water's movements across the room, washing up the walls and casting faint light even across the ceiling.

That was the reason he first noticed the unusual ceiling in that wing and walked into other rooms along the way to investigate. The ceiling had been constructed to be aesthetically pleasing but have little in the way of privacy; down the length of the corridor, large wooden beams passed over the tops of the walls dividing each room. It created a continuity between the rooms which was rather appealing, but also took away much of the privacy and made every sound more likely to be heard in other rooms. The wooden beams did not seem to hold any structural value; they seemed to be there only for aesthetics. The ceiling itself was scalloped and arced over the beams, leaving a few feet of space between the wood and the ceiling all the way down the hallway.

As a result, a person could conceivably get onto a wooden beam in one room and crawl over every other room down the hallway on that side, provided they were small enough to fit in the gap. Yet this wing had no reason for privacy as far as the layman would be able to tell; music rooms, sitting rooms, small art showings and libraries seemed to dominate the area and, somehow, having those wooden beams crossing overhead made everything seem that much more connected on a level more than the literal sense that they were. It encouraged a person to spend their time enjoying each room and then moving on to the next, following the path the wooden beams mirrored. In the play of light from places like the aquarium, the shadows of the beams spread across the scalloped ceiling and created a beautiful pattern that made the entire room seem interesting; from the wooden floors and Persian rugs to the design stretched overhead.

Boyd continued down the hall, keeping mental track of where he was in relation to the blueprints, and stopped in the room he remembered as being suspicious. This room turned out to be a small art gallery with Impressionist paintings displayed across

the walls; Boyd knew enough about art from his classes to recognize replicas of Monet and Renoir as he passed them. Most of Clemons' rooms were decorated with art, the man seemed to have a genuine love for it, and this was one of two rooms dedicated to it that he'd come across; there was nothing seemingly unique or suspicious about the room itself and if he hadn't had access to the blueprints, he likely would have passed it by.

He looked around the room to see if he could detect anything that had changed since the blueprints had been created. He checked for anything such as faint cracks or some sort of indication that there was a hidden passage or access to another area. He remembered from the blueprints that the area where the numbers didn't seem to add up was in the southwest corner of the room, so when nothing stood out to him elsewhere, he looked there more intently while still listening closely for any sign that a guard was coming down the hall. It would be difficult to hide in the room if someone appeared; there was no door in the archway to the hall and the only furniture was a heavy-looking, tall-backed couch in the northeastern corner which was probably used by Clemons and his family members to sit and view the art.

Nothing stood out to him despite how hard he looked, so he stepped back a moment and went around the room again, noting that there was a small portion that was slightly discolored on the northern wall, but it was almost entirely hidden by a painting of a woman with a green umbrella, standing in a grassy field with the cloudy blue sky and a small boy shown behind her. Something about it seemed too obvious to him, though, which led him to believe that it was some sort of trap for a person who would suspect the room for whatever reason but did not have knowledge from the blueprints. The same thing was probably done in several other rooms across the complex, leading to traps or dead ends. Even if he wasn't certain there was anything in that room and he knew that construction could have cut off the possible access in the southwest corner, his instincts told him there was something there, that he just needed to search harder.

He scrutinized the southwest corner again, checking the ground as well as the walls, and still saw nothing that stood out to him. Even so, the numbers seemed off to

him; he'd been counting his steps around the room, and this wall seemed to be moved in even further than he'd expected from the blueprints. If he was right, the entrance was there but wasn't accessible directly through the wall or floor or even some sort of lever that would trigger a hidden opening. Which meant he just had to do this the hard way.

He looked up at the ceiling with the same polished wooden beams spread above the walls. This time, however, he paid more attention to the fact that the beams did not extend past the western wall; all the north, south and eastern walls were short enough that the beams passed over them and left a gap between the beams and the ceiling. However, the western wall had no beams; it simply extended to the ceiling the way walls normally would and cut off any access from this room to whatever was on the other side. Now that he thought of it, that had been the case in the other rooms along this side of the hallway, yet the rooms along the eastern side of the hallway had beams extending across both sides. That verified to him that what he wanted to access was on the other side of the western wall.

With that in mind, he headed directly toward the tall couch. It was far too large and heavy for him even attempt to move so instead he carefully crawled onto the back of it, balancing with one hand extended toward the nearest wall to catch himself if he needed to. He looked up at the beams, which still seemed to extend far too high above him even if he tried to jump. For a moment, he wished that he possessed far more prowess and strength like Sin, who would have probably been able to jump straight up to the beams from the floor without any help at all. Of course, Sin also had the advantage of being several inches taller.

Boyd's eyes narrowed as he considered the gap between him and the nearest beam, then he looked at the northeastern corner thoughtfully. This was the only corner with no art displayed in it; presumably because the couch would impede the view and the designer did not wish to make anyone seated feel uncomfortable, as though they would need to crane their necks to view all the art. He looked back across the room, noting how it was empty other than the art along the wall. Quietly, he climbed off the couch and checked up and down the hallway briefly to ensure he didn't hear or see

anyone coming. He was probably going to make a little bit of noise here but he couldn't help it since he didn't have any rope.

He backed across the room until he was nearly to the southwestern corner, then ran as quickly and silently as he could toward the northeastern corner. He jumped onto the couch, then the couch's back, and jumped up with one foot against the eastern wall followed by the other against the northern wall, one hand against the wall as if for support while he stretched the other above him. He jumped as far upward as he could at an angle and threw both his hands up toward the beam, just barely catching it before he would otherwise have fallen to the ground.

For a moment he just dangled there, eyes narrowed as he tried to get a better hold on the beams even as his gloves made it feel unnervingly as if his hands were slipping. In the end, he managed to get himself close enough to one wall to partially walk up it until he was finally able to pull himself on top of the wooden beam. He rested there a moment, heart pounding and mildly out of breath, and found that with that height he had a very good view of the other rooms surrounding him except for the fact that it was too dark to be able to tell much. However, he didn't see any movement in the hallway or other rooms that implied someone was there, and he didn't think he'd made much noise so he hoped it wouldn't sound an alarm. A quick glance down to the room also showed that, as far as he could tell in that dim lighting, he thankfully hadn't left any telltale marks on the wall.

Satisfied, he crawled across the beam until he reached the southwest wall, where he was able to see that the beam did in fact pass over the wall into a small dark space rather than the next room. The shadows were deeper in that small room than they had been in the room behind him, which was likely due to the fact that the only light that could make it into there was any ambient light that made it above the wall. He peered down into the area and although couldn't see or hear anything, he knew it was empty.

Boyd paused a moment to listen again for any other sounds behind him but there were no guards making the rounds, no one to hear or see him. He was just reaching

into his pocket when the transmitter in his ear made a soft sound and Sin's voice breathed, "Target area possibly in sight. Will verify shortly." Boyd paused, studying the room below him; even if Sin found where Thierry was, he still felt there was something to look into here so he didn't intend to stop. He didn't reply at first because he felt that any sound, even a whisper, that was so close to the ceiling would be more likely to echo into all the surrounding rooms. It would be better to wait until he was in a less uncertain position.

He pulled a black hand-held device out of his pocket that was a combination flashlight and hidden trap detector. It had a series of buttons and switches that he pressed in order to gain a quick idea of the layout and any possible obstacles with regular light and any traps by using a thin but wide red beam and a pale, quickly-dissipating mist. He noted a black fuse box was attached to the far wall and what appeared to be a hidden door on the western wall. Satisfied that there did not appear to be any alarms or traps in the room, he hung from the beam into the small room and dropped with a roll to the wooden floor. He couldn't help making a soft noise as his weight hit the floor and he immediately pressed himself against the wall beside the door he'd noticed earlier, ready to attack anyone who may come through searching for the origin of the sound.

He heard no movement on the other side and no one came to investigate, so he used the device to look more closely around the room with the light. The room was empty and small, just a few feet wide but spanning the length of the room he'd just come from. It was dark but not dank, and although it did not look as though it saw much use, there were no cobwebs which led him to believe that this space had to be accessed on a regular basis, even if it was not very frequently.

"I think I found something too," Boyd responded quietly to Sin, partially as acknowledgment for the previous transmission and partially just to alert him.

The black box he'd noted earlier drew his attention before anything else so he walked over and studied it more closely for a few seconds. It appeared to be a fuse box of some sort with flip switches that weren't labeled properly but he suspected had

something to do with whatever was hidden on the other side of the door. Although in other contexts the box would have been helpful, at that moment it was irrelevant to him; their ideal outcome was to get in, get Thierry, and leave without ever being noticed. Flipping random switches would only draw attention not only to the fact that there was an intruder, but also to his exact location since he doubted they had other fuse boxes scattered around with access to the same systems.

He shut the box quietly and turned toward the wall with the hidden door, feeling along the edges and searching for any other traps. He crouched down and peered at the bottom, seeing the slightest slit of light peering from beneath. That was equally good and bad for his situation; if it had been dark on the other side, he wouldn't have dared to use his flashlight along the edges of the door to search for a way to open it because the light would probably have bled to the other side and made his presence obvious. On the other hand, if there was light on the other side it also meant that if he entered the space on the other side he would be more likely to be seen or caught.

It took a few moments of intense scrutiny, but Boyd ultimately noticed that there was a slight line in one section of the wall next to the door. Once he knew where to look, it didn't take him long to figure out that there was a panel there that he was able to access by a combination of pressing on one side of it and prying on another. The panel came open with a soft noise of protest and he paused again, listening intently for any indication anyone was in the vicinity, but he didn't hear anything. It revealed a number pad that required a password to open the door. He used the light at different angles and was able to see that all of the numbers except for 3, 6 and 7 were covered with a thin layer of dust.

It was clear that the password involved those numbers but he had no idea how many digits it was or what combination to use. He also had no idea whether there was a computer program monitoring the pad and if it would be alerted if he inputted the incorrect password or even if, should he guess correctly, it would alert the program that the door had been opened with it. Any of those cases would result in an alert going out and he didn't want to deal with that, especially not if Sin was close to finding Thierry.

The last thing they needed was for Sin to make his way silently all the way to their destination and for Boyd to trip an alarm; as ironic as that would be, it wouldn't help their mission at all. Besides, Sin wasn't even certain he knew where Thierry was and Boyd didn't know what was on the other side of the door. He could walk right into the wing that held Thierry and it would turn out Sin found something else; there was just no way to tell.

He stepped back from the door and frowned to himself, trying to think this through. The door appeared to be the sort that slid into the wall, so there was no way he could just break the hinges or somehow pry the door open so he would have to work on the password.

He'd brought a simple decoding box with him in case he needed it for this type of situation, but the problem was that it functioned by telling the user how many digits the password had and then inputting random numbers and letters in until it found the correct code. In some situations, that was perfectly fine; a person would have the time and ability to let it try some wrong answers before it found the correct one. But Boyd had no way of telling the decoder that only those three numbers needed to be used and he was fairly certain its first attempted code would include more than 3, 6 and 7. If the decoder inadvertently tripped an alarm, he'd be right back to the scenarios he was trying to avoid. Really, this electrical room was designed quite well to trap intruders; even though there were no hidden alarms within the room itself, if a person used the fuse box or used the wrong code, they would probably alert the building to their presence and have no way of getting out unless the person had some way of reaching the beams from the floor.

He suspected this was the back entrance to the hidden wing or whatever was on the other side of that western wall; there was no way Clemons went to all this trouble every time he wanted to enter the area. They probably couldn't reroute the circuits in the electrical room in order to cut off any excess access to the hidden area; so, instead, they'd made it as inconvenient and difficult as possible. Clemons had probably never expected anyone to pay attention to the dimensions of the other public rooms and

compare them, then deduce that there was a small, secret room pressed between that art gallery and the sitting room on the other side. At least the fact that the electrical room was so awkward to access implied to him that if he'd just wandered around longer he may have found an easier way into the hidden area, which also meant he should conceivably have an easier time of getting out rather than having to come back through here.

Boyd decided to use a combination of guesswork and the decoder to figure out the password. He pulled out the decoder and quietly hooked it up to the system, letting it run just long enough to flash that the password was seven digits; he stopped the device before it could attempt to try any codes. Using that bit of information, he studied the three numbers he knew it had to be and tried to approach this from a different angle.

What did he know of Hale Clemons? Judging by the lavishness of the complex, he seemed to have immense pride, a sense of arrogance, expensive taste, and he was paranoid enough to make the secret areas difficult to access, but daring enough to keep them intermixed with the public, open spaces. At the same time, he seemed to utilize misleading clues as traps.

What that told Boyd was that he also was a man of subtlety who knew that human nature was to dismiss minor inconsistencies in anything that seemed familiar while at the same time searching for the simplest, easiest solution elsewhere. He also knew Hale Clemons was the sort of person who took his job seriously and, Boyd's eyes narrowed darkly, who held grudges and had the capacity for cruelty and revenge necessary to ensure that Sin was tortured the way he had been.

That also meant he took very seriously the safety of at least Jessica and, presumably, those he cared for or was close to. Of course, added to all of this, Janus would be very important to the man and he was probably just like the other followers of the organization. If that was the case, Janus would be his driving force, the center of his identity, an organization he took pride in belonging to. He was probably also fairly cocky because he had a high enough rank to be in charge of JKS as well as the fact that his property appeared to house the local interrogation center and safe house, which also

meant he was trusted to be in contact with defectors, prisoners, and the sort of secrets only those people could betray.

The numbers on the pad caught his attention again and he thought through all the information he'd learned about Janus, about its people, and especially that which he'd overheard or had been told to him when he'd been posing as Kadin Reed. There were a few key phrases and words that seemed to be at the center of the Janus philosophy, but perhaps the most central... He thought of the number of letters it contained, then a cell phone pad and the numbers which were associated with each letter, then raised an eyebrow. Surely it wasn't that simple...

He didn't have time to stand there forever though, and he supposed that if this did raise an alert, at least everyone would come toward his position rather than Sin's. Even so, it would be quite the coincidence if it was not directly connected that a central idea of Janus also happened to be the correct number of digits and used only those three letters on a phone pad. Without wasting another second, he input 3733366 into the keypad, spelling out 'freedom.' At first nothing happened and his heart thundered in his chest while his mind raced, planning escape routes and distractions that would hopefully give Sin the time to keep looking for Thierry, trying to decide how he would manage to make it up to the wooden beams before he was surrounded. But then a faint green light flashed to the right and the door made a shifting noise before it slowly started to open.

Boyd closed the panel and stood to the side of the wall, ready to attack anyone who may come through the opening, but all that entered the small room he was in was the light from the area beyond. He held his breath and peered quickly around the side but he didn't see anything but an empty office room, nor did he note anything that looked like surveillance cameras. He pulled back into the small room for a moment then moved quickly into the office and immediately found cover behind a nearby low-lying chair while he searched the room intently for any movement or sound. He was alone and the only other door he saw in the room was firmly shut; there were no windows so

no one outside of the room would be able to tell he was in there unless someone came in.

Letting his breath out quietly, he looked back at the door he'd entered through and noticed a small ornament on the wall that, upon closer inspection, he concluded was actually a button for the hidden door. He didn't know if the opening and closing of the door would be monitored by any programs in the complex but he didn't think it would be good to leave it open. It didn't really work as an escape route because he wouldn't be able to jump high enough to reach the wooden beams and if someone walked abruptly into the room, he would be less likely to be found if he hid and everything appeared to be untouched. He pressed the decoration inward and the door slid quietly closed; once shut it was almost impossible to tell that it was there at all.

Looking around the room more closely, he saw that it appeared to be a regular office with nothing glaringly secretive about it. He suspected if he had the time to tear the place apart he would find plenty of interesting things, but that would make it too obvious that someone had been there and he didn't know how much time he had. So, he went toward the most likely form of compact information: the personal computer sitting on the desk. It was already on, although it appeared to be in standby mode. There was no password but that only appeared to be because whoever had last accessed the computer had forgotten to log off.

He quickly checked the files located on the desktop but nothing seemed particularly important so he investigated further and saw that there were multiple drives; C, D and E. Boyd narrowed his eyes, then glanced toward both doors to make certain there was no movement before removing a small object that was hidden along the inside of his belt buckle. He'd found the belt and buckle in the supply room at the Agency; it was designed to hide one of four small objects that he'd had the chance to choose between. Although the lock picking kit would have been helpful, he'd ultimately decided that information would be more useful for him so he'd opted for a compact, 200 GB jump drive. It didn't take him long to hook the jump drive up to the computer through the nearest USB port and to start copying the C drive.

While the computer struggled to copy the information over, Boyd moved quickly through the D and E drives, searching for anything that stood out to him, anything that seemed like it would contain important information. He wished this sort of thing would go faster; the progress bar seemed to be moving incredibly slowly and he was hyper-aware of the rest of the room. The fact that he could easily be walked in on, that his only real escape route was out the door he hadn't searched yet, and that once he left through that door he wouldn't even know where he was in context of the rest of the building as this section hadn't appeared on the blueprints, left him on edge.

Despite the difficulty of the situation he was in, there wasn't much he could do about it except save as much information as he could and hope not to get caught. He would figure out the rest of it as he went. Even so, just to be sure, he left the computer copying while he silently approached the main door to the room and listened intently for any sound. He didn't want to open the door in case the movement would attract attention from anyone he couldn't hear, but as far as he could tell it was silent on the other side. He returned to the computer and watched the progress bar with a paranoid sense of impatience; it was further than it had been before but still seemed to him to be moving entirely too slowly. As he waited he studied the room intently, noting where all the potential hiding places were (the side of the bookcase, in a corner behind the love seat, beneath the desk) and if anything could be used as a weapon.

Time was skewed to him; the knowledge that he was temporarily tied to the room as he waited for the files to copy made it seem as though everything was taking longer than it should. In truth, it was probably only a handful of minutes before the C drive finally copied over; he immediately started copying the D drive, which seemed to him to have the most likelihood to hold any important information. While that copied he began quickly searching the room, opening drawers and searching through a few of the books for anything that stood out to him. Everything he touched, he made sure to put back in the same position he'd discovered it.

As he flipped through one book with a collection of philosophical essays, a sheet of folded paper slipped out that he caught before it hit the floor. Before he could open it,

he heard footsteps approaching the other side of the door. He shoved the book back on the shelf and moved quickly to the computer, detaching the portable hard drive in the middle of the operation. A window popped up saying the file path was lost and he barely had time to close out of that and other windows he'd opened before he heard a key sliding into the door. The love seat was closest to him so within seconds he'd jumped behind it and crouched in the corner, barely daring to breathe. Luckily the fabric extended to the floor, which gave him further coverage, but it also meant he couldn't see anything at all in the rest of the room.

The door opened silently and a single person entered the room and he didn't dare move; the paper was lying on his chest, partially against the back of the seat, and he didn't want it to crinkle and give away his position. But the person who'd entered was very quiet; even the footsteps were faint and even though he heard items being moved on the desk, it was with the care of someone who was used to being in dangerous situations and made little noise by nature.

He couldn't tell at first what the person was doing, but he did hear a low, annoyed sigh. The mouse clicked a few times, emitting a soft sliding noise as it moved across the mousepad. Keys clacked at a varying pace, as if the person was writing something quickly as the thoughts came to mind, paused to think, then resumed the flow once more. He listened intently for any sign that they had any idea that the space had been recently occupied but nothing happened, so he assumed he hadn't left anything out of place.

A few long moments passed as the person continued to type and Boyd became entirely too aware of how awkward his position was and how much his knee was starting to ache. What was he supposed to do if the person remained there for an extended period of time? He couldn't exactly crouch there for hours while Sin ran around trying to find Thierry; they weren't even positive that the area Sin had discovered was the correct one so it could still be up to him. And it would only be a matter of time before something happened to give him away. If it lasted too long, he would just have to try to catch the person off guard and knock them out before they could raise an alarm;

but without knowing anything about the person's body build, height, or strength, a surprise attack could prove to be difficult to pull off properly.

"I can't believe this," a woman's voice muttered at length. The clicking of the mouse became a little more pronounced and when she typed she hit the keys harder than was necessary. Boyd tensed, wondering if she'd noticed something after all, and prepared to react quickly when he heard her abruptly push the computer chair back. The chair squeaked in protest; he suspected she'd leaned backwards as far as the chair back would allow.

"Why does he never fucking--?" she started to ask herself heatedly then cut herself off. "This is such bullshit."

He heard her stand suddenly, the pull of cloth against cloth and the clatter of her chair as it rolled back and hit the wall. The mouse clicked again in angry staccato followed by the humming of a computer that was powering down. She grabbed a few things off the desk, judging by the sound of objects sliding across wood, and then fell silent. If the mood it sounded she was in was anything to go by, he would have expected her to storm out of the room; instead, she seemed to pause in the center of the room.

At first he couldn't tell why, but then he heard the faintest buzzing noise and realized her phone was ringing. She made a soft noise of impatience and muttered to herself, "Finally," in a manner that led Boyd to believe she'd been waiting for this call. She flipped it on and the volume was set high enough that he heard a male voice on the other end ask, "Lynn?"

"Yeah," she said. Boyd couldn't hear the other voice again except as a muffled group of syllables; he suspected she had the phone against her ear now and previously he'd heard it only because it had been in transit from wherever she'd been keeping it. Her side of the conversation told him nothing except that she was not pleased; all she said was "yes," "no," and "of course not."

She was quiet for a few seconds as the other person spoke, then she said testily, "That'll take at least half an hour." The person on the other end sounded a little more intent, at least as far as Boyd could tell judging by the quickness and length of the reply. She was quiet a moment after the person finished talking. Then she said with a hint of disapproval, "Fine. But I would really like to talk to you about this later." The other person said something short and she didn't reply. She was on the phone for less than a minute before he heard it flip closed.

He didn't know who she was or what her position was, but he could tell enough about the room to realize that it was the sort of office that would only have access to the higher ranked people. Because of that, he wanted to get an idea of what she looked like; at the very least, he would probably need to describe her later in the debriefing in case it turned out her presence was significant. For that reason alone, he very carefully set the paper to the side and silently peeked around the corner of the love seat. He would have preferred to use a mirror but he didn't have one; instead, he kept his head low to the ground and looked around the edge that seemed to be furthest from her.

Past the desk, he could see that Lynn appeared to be in her thirties, with long, utterly straight sandy blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail that ended halfway down her back. She was standing in the middle of the room with her back mostly toward him and she was breathing very deliberately; he could imagine her counting to ten in her mind as she attempted to calm herself from whatever was angering her.

She straightened suddenly, her expression annoyed but determined from the little he could see. She drew in a deep breath then let it out slowly, her hands curling and uncurling into fists at her side. Her jaw set and she whispered simply, "Okay," before she strode purposefully out of the office. As the door fell shut behind her, he heard an immediate click that implied to him the door automatically shut when closed. That wasn't very promising; if he needed to return to this room to escape, then how would he get in without propping it open somehow and making it obvious someone had been there?

He had no idea what she was irritated with but he wasn't about to analyze it right then. Instead, he waited long enough to hear her footsteps fully before he let his breath out and relaxed against the love seat with his eyes sliding briefly closed. That had been close. He didn't take much time to rest though; he closed the jump drive and clipped it back into the inside of the belt buckle. He folded the paper up and slid that down the side of his sock where it would be less likely to be found if he was searched.

There was no point in even trying to download anything further from the computer; it would take more time to turn it on again and he was sure it was password protected. He just had to hope that he had enough information with what he'd managed to get before the woman arrived.

## Chapter 44

Boyd moved to the door of the hidden office, waiting a moment to make sure he didn't hear anything on the other side; only when he verified the silence did he open the door silently and glance out. The door opened into a hallway much like the others he'd been wandering through, but it was less glamorous which strengthened his belief that this was a hidden wing that could only be accessed by probably one or two ways and was not open to the general public or guests.

He glanced up and down the corridor but no one was around and he didn't know how long it would take for more guards to appear so he didn't want to spend too much time just standing there. He slipped into the hallway, letting the door fall shut with a quiet click behind him and went in the direction that seemed most likely to eventually lead to an exit. He hadn't heard anything from Sin again so he wasn't certain if the place he'd found had in fact held Thierry; as he passed through the hallways he watched for any places that seemed suspicious or that may have further information he could bring back to the Agency.

With that in mind, when he found a staircase that headed down, he figured it couldn't hurt to check out. He hadn't heard or seen any other guards, but half the hallways in this wing seemed to be well-lit as opposed to the rest of the complex that had seemed shrouded in darkness which put him in a far more vulnerable position. On the other hand he was hoping he could pass himself off as a recruit guard just long enough to get away. If that didn't work, he didn't have any troubles improvising.

The next floor down appeared to have the same type of hallway. The rooms that he passed were all shut so he couldn't see what was inside without rattling the doorknobs, which was not a very intelligent idea. He passed through a variety of hallways without finding anything of interest or any doors that were open. He didn't hear anyone in the vicinity so he turned the corner and was halfway down the corridor when the scuffing of boots against the floor ahead of him caused him to freeze and look for some sort of cover.

There wasn't even a single table in the hallway, though, and when he tried the nearest doors he found them to be locked. His heartbeat increased and he moved quickly to find somewhere to hide. The footsteps were just about to the corner when he finally found a room that was unlocked and he ducked into it quickly. He barely noted that it was dark inside the room and he listened intently through the door as the footsteps slowly approached his hiding place and, seeming to take longer than was necessary, finally passed by.

Some of the tension that had built inside him released; he listened through the door to verify the coast was clear and was just about to reach for the doorknob when the lights in the room suddenly flipped on. He automatically crouched and started to turn but before he could fully react, a heavy hand dropped onto his shoulder and held him still. He froze and didn't struggle or attempt to get away immediately; he was already in a suspicious enough position and if he wanted to blend in or have some sort of believable story, then fighting would only take away much of his credibility. It would be better to gauge the situation and try an excuse first; if that didn't work, he could always resort to violence.

"Identify yourself," a voice commanded behind him; deep, resounding, and somehow familiar. He looked over immediately and found himself confronted by a solidly built, lightly tanned man whose presence resembled that of a bear. He was glowering down with sharp brown eyes while behind him a woman with light brown skin and deep black hair glared.

They seemed familiar to him but just before he placed where he knew them from, the woman's eyes widened as her expression changed from anger to surprise then immediately to deeper suspicion.

"Reed?" she demanded, walking closer with eyes narrowing as she studied him more closely. His heart leaped at the name, at the idea that someone recognized him, and he studied her closer. Her hair was held back in a messy bunch at the back of her neck and her sleeves were three-quarter-length, showing scars from what appeared to

be a terrible burn that appeared to start under her shirt and extended down her left arm, disappearing beneath a black leather glove at her wrist.

He remembered abruptly who they were; Dana and Rick, two Janus agents who had been a part of the security team at the hotel during the days prior to the convention. When Boyd had been wandering around as Kadin Reed, he'd run into them several times and had even spent the first afternoon with the two playing cards while they'd waited for the rest of the representatives to arrive. They had been placed there to ensure the safety of the representatives before the convention and he hadn't seen them since he'd entered JKS. He didn't remember her burn scar from before; it must have been something that had occurred since they'd last seen each other, likely even in JKS itself when the bombs had exploded and fire had raged in the building.

This put him in a difficult position; if they hadn't known who he was, he could have made up any number of stories but since they recognized him as Kadin Reed, he'd have to be especially careful. He already didn't look the way "Kadin Reed" had at JKS; his hair was mostly blond now, his eyes the natural brown, and that alone cast further suspicion on who he was and what he was doing there. After all, Kadin Reed's natural hair color was red, his eyes blue; what the hell would he have changed both if not for suspicious reasons? Added to that, if he didn't act like Kadin, it would make it even more obvious that the Kadin they'd known had not been who he'd claimed.

That would negatively implicate 53 as possibly having sent a spy to the JKS, which would put the lives of everyone in 53 in danger of Janus' revenge. At the same time it would compromise the Agency's contact to Janus through them. Beyond that, any doubts that he was not actually Kadin Reed could potentially implicate the Agency, or make it more obvious that someone from an entity like the Agency was attempting to infiltrate the compound. That could have been because he'd taken out the real Kadin Reed and was pretending to impersonate him, which could also implicate 53 if Janus felt they were not strong enough to be in their regime, or that Kadin Reed had all along been a lie.

Since they knew him as Kadin even without the correct hair and eye color and after half a year's absence, they obviously weren't fooled by superficial changes. It actually surprised him that they recognized him, considering it had been so long ago that they'd met. He looked different now, and they'd only been around each other for a few days. The fact that they were such keen observers did not bode well for his chances at getting away from this smoothly either, but that just meant he had to put more effort into this.

"Dana," Boyd said after a moment, smiling at her lopsidedly like Kadin. He was trying to remember all the nuances of that man, the way he'd held himself, the intonation of his voice, and he found that it was all coming back to him more easily and quickly than he would have expected.

He flicked his gaze up to Rick, who was staring down at him with an expression that was reserved but seemed displeased. He also had to be careful to say the sorts of things Kadin would say, even if he knew it would not necessarily be best for the situation. "Rick... It's been ages. How've you been?"

"Kadin Reed," Dana said slowly, walking around him while Rick's hand tightened painfully on his shoulder. Closer, he could see the burn extended partially up the left side of her neck as well as it wound its way up from beneath her shirt. and that she didn't seem to be moving her left arm very much. He felt her fingers trailing along his hair until she arrived in front of him again and she smiled pleasantly.

Rick suddenly slammed Boyd back against the wall so violently that he hit his head and didn't have a chance to react; he hadn't expected the large man to be so quick. Dana was immediately in his face, her good right arm pressing against his windpipe firm enough to be a definite threat but not quite hard enough yet to choke him. "I oughtta gut you right now you worthless sack of shit," she hissed furiously.

Boyd stared at her with wide eyes. "D-Dana?"

That only caused her eyes to narrow further, her lip lifting in a sneer. "I should rip out your intestines and choke you with them. How would you like that, traitor?"

She pushed so hard against his throat at the last hissed word that he couldn't breathe; he tried to press himself against the wall to get away from her but that did nothing. He let his eyes widen further as he made a choking sound to show what she was doing; she only smiled at the sound, cold fury significantly darkening her eyes.

Boyd didn't struggle at first but she didn't seem ready to stop; he looked quickly at Rick, who was watching with an unreadable expression. He tensed, his vision starting to go dim on the edges as his heart pounded in automatic reaction to a threat on his life, and he knew he had to try to get away or she may not stop. He'd been nearly choked often enough or in similarly dangerous situations that he didn't necessarily feel fear at the threat but that also didn't mean he couldn't be killed by something as stupid as this if he didn't react quickly enough.

He kicked at her suddenly but she only pressed the length of her body against him to limit his movements; he could feel that she was wiry, almost entirely muscle, and that although she'd barely moved her left arm she still had enough strength in her right arm and body to cause him damage. He pushed at her arm on his throat but she only grinned, an entirely cruel look, and pressed harder.

He could feel his heart beating faster in a spike of fear now as black dots started to eat away at his vision, turning the mundane room into meaningless shapes. Other senses seemed strangely heightened and slowed down; the sound of her breath harsh near his face, the smell of her sweat and something coconut, probably shampoo or lotion she'd used earlier. He tensed further and felt his heart pounding furiously in his body, quickening his blood while adrenaline slipped into his system again. He realized he would have to get serious about this if he wanted to escape; she showed no signs of yielding any time soon.

Boyd was just tensing himself to violently shove her way and attack when Rick dropped his free hand onto Dana's right shoulder and said simply, "Dana."

She didn't seem to hear him at first so Rick pushed her lightly, a gentle rock that caught her attention. She blinked, glancing at him questioningly before returning her

attention to Boyd again. His mouth was open as he tried to draw breath he his lips looked pale. She pulled away from him abruptly, stepping back and watching as he sagged against the wall and would have fallen forward if Rick's hand hadn't still been on his shoulder.

Boyd coughed roughly, his breath catching as he struggled to breathe evenly, one hand moving automatically to his throat as if to protect or console. "What the hell, Dana?" he rasped after a few moments, looking up at her from beneath his eyebrows.

Dana didn't answer at first; she just watched him distantly and seemed more interested in the way his fingers curled near his neck, his chest still heaving a little uncertainly. Her gaze slid toward Rick and she ordered, "Hold him."

Rick pulled him upright and shoved him against the wall without warning, forcing him to look at them straight on. He held him securely while Dana searched him roughly but thoroughly with her right hand. Boyd didn't move or resist, although he paid special attention as she moved around his sock and belt. Thankfully, she didn't notice the jump drive or the sheet of paper, mostly because she seemed more interested in searching for weapons.

She didn't find any weapons on him but he did have a small glass cutter, the hand held trap detector and the code breaker. She pulled the three items out of his pockets while Rick pushed him harder against the wall. Dana met Boyd's eyes with a flat look. "What are these?"

"Just some shit I've had on me for a while. Like, that one's a flashlight," Boyd said, nodding toward the small black device that did have a light on one end that was recognizable as a flashlight.

Dana raised an eyebrow, her eyes narrowed dangerously. "And you're going to try to tell me this isn't a glass cutter?" she demanded as she held it up.

"No," Boyd said, giving her a strange look. "That is. Look, what's going on?"

"Where have you been?" Rick's tone was relatively reasonable given the circumstances but it was clear he wasn't asking this idly; it was simply a softer form of a demand.

"I was around," Boyd said with a hint of irritation. "Seriously, what the fuck, guys? Why'd you call me a traitor?"

"Anyone who was in that building and didn't turn up dead or in the hospital's a traitor," Dana informed him coldly. She slipped the decoder, glass cutter and trap detector into her pockets.

"Where 'around'?" Rick insisted, watching Boyd unwaveringly with sharp eyes.

Boyd made a face at them. He wished now he'd had the chance to interact with them more at the time they'd met in the hotel. Although he'd seen them a few times, they had all been relatively short meetings except the afternoon they'd played cards. Even that had only been for a few hours and they'd been in such an informal setting that it was entirely different than these circumstances.

"Towns around Monterrey at first, mostly," Boyd answered, giving them a look that stated he was trying to work with them despite how unreasonable they were being. "I didn't know why the place went down, who was attacking us, if someone was hunting down all the reps, Janus and would-be's alike. I figured it was best to run 'till I knew what was happening." He looked at Dana, insulted. "How's that make me a traitor?"

"That makes you a traitor *and* a fucking coward," Dana said as anger overcame her features and voice. She moved right into his personal space and shoved him violently on the shoulder. "Why'd you run? Only traitors and cowards run when their comrades are burning to death behind them."

It was probably because he hadn't felt entirely ready for this mission and because he was suddenly being confronted with people from the time of the JKS mission, but for some reason the comment was enough to make him think of Jessica, of Sin stopping to help someone he knew, of the people he'd met in the center like Pat and the deaths

they'd probably endured. He couldn't help a flash of guilt crossing his eyes and he looked away, his jaw setting. "I was scared," he mumbled uncomfortably.

"Scared?" Dana demanded incredulously. She shoved him again, her teeth gritted. "You're such a fucking pussy. You were *scared*, so you ran? Don't you have any pride? Any trust in Janus? Any fucking strength in your beliefs? I nearly lost my arm because I was in there, because I stopped to help my comrade. You just *ran*." She looked at him in utter disgust. "You don't deserve Janus."

"Why are you here?" Rick demanded before Boyd could respond to her. His ever-present quiet, intense stare did not leave Boyd's face and he seemed intent on not letting a single stray comment or missing explanation pass without being addressed.

"I was..." Boyd looked between the two of them hesitantly, as if he was a little embarrassed to tell them the truth. He could tell they wouldn't let him get away with any half-assed explanations so he quickly thought of the story he could make seem most believable in this situation, trying to imagine in that bare fraction of a second all the questions that would result and how he'd be able to answer them. "I wanted to make it up to everyone."

"Make what up? To who?" Rick asked immediately.

"Everyone," Boyd said, looking uncomfortable. "My friends, the people I met, Janus... I felt bad and when I finally contacted home, they gave me such shit..."

"So you were going to relieve feelings of guilt by breaking in here?" Rick interpreted, giving him a flat look that made it obvious he didn't believe him. "Start from the beginning." His tone clearly implied that if he didn't believe the story, Boyd would regret it.

"Yeah," Dana said in a hard tone, "and while you're at it why don't you give us some bullshit reason about why you look like you're trying to be undercover and why you're sneaking around places you shouldn't even know about. I'm in the mood to be entertained."

Boyd glanced between the two again, then sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He could have just attacked them, attempted to take them both out and try to hide their bodies before he would have continued along his way. But that was too risky; Rick was quick and strong, Dana was wily. There was a very real chance that he wouldn't even be able to incapacitate them both. If that happened, they were intelligent enough to sound the alarm immediately and get out the details of what had happened, to know that he couldn't be who he'd claimed he was.

At the moment, although they both seemed extremely suspicious of him, he got the impression that they didn't doubt that he was Kadin Reed; rather, they were doubting Kadin Reed's motivations. That was something that could work in his favor; at least that way he had some sense of history with them, as brief as it had been, and he would have a better chance of manipulating the situation to a direction best for him.

He couldn't afford to lose even that tentative amount of trust they were putting in his presence. He was better off working with them and seeing how far he got by being Kadin; then, when that plan ran out of usefulness, he would change tactics to whatever made the most sense at that time. Quickly, he tried to remember everything he could about Kadin's history he'd been told and decided to embellish where necessary.

"Look," he said seriously, giving them a weary look. He hesitated again, as if he didn't feel like he needed to be telling them this, but then he spoke anyway. "I know you both probably think I'm an asshole but I swear I wasn't trying to be. We've all got shit we have to deal with and some of us are smart enough to deal with it early while others ignore it 'till they fuck themselves over, right? I'm one of those 'others.' In the second wave, my house got hit by part of one of the bombs and it all got fucked up... I was in my room so I heard it like this just... fucking concussion that flattened my clothes, made me feel like I was going deaf. My little sister was caught so I tried to get to her-- I really did, I fucking swear, but I couldn't get close enough. She... pretty much burned to death right in front of me. Screaming my name, for me to help. Wanting me to make it stop hurting."

These two were too keen for him to hope his pretend emotions would be enough to convince them. He knew his tone was believable but if his expression wasn't, he would just seem too fake. To get the right flash of anger, pain and regret, he forced himself to briefly think of Lou, of screaming desperately as he tried to reach him, as Lou was murdered right in front of him. But the memory was unexpectedly vivid, making him feel like he was suddenly drowning in it. For a moment he could practically feel the spray of blood across his face, the smell of cement beneath him, the sound of Lou's gurgling breath as he struggled to breathe through the hole in his throat.

Boyd's expression darkening considerably as he looked away, refusing to meet either of their eyes. He tried to push that and other memories away, including the ones that had become connected in his mind to Lou's death thanks to Shane's patient, relentless cruelty.

"We've been in some crazy shit in TDM but... I dunno, somehow I haven't been in a bombed building again. Not like the way it was when Kara died. So, yeah, maybe it's pathetic, yeah, maybe I was a coward, but... I seriously don't know what happened. I fucking freaked. Shit started going down around me and I just... ran." He paused, waiting for them to speak or ask further questions, but they both waited expectantly for him to continue.

Frowning, Boyd ran a tired hand across his face. "I don't remember leaving, to be honest. I guess some chick in a hi-rise saw someone matching my vague description bolting and everyone all jumped on that as the culprit." He glanced briefly up at them with a mixture of weariness and anger before he looked away, an edge making it into his voice. "Which is fucking bullshit, if you ask me. Maybe the dick head that did that shit looked like that, I dunno. But if all that chick saw was me, I wasn't doing nothing wrong but running for my fucking life.

"Anyway, next thing I know I'm hiding in some shit hole in Monterrey, the cops are going fucking nuts around me, I don't know where anyone is or what went down, and I'm scared shitless that whoever attacked JKS has some list of our names as

attendees. What if they were lying in wait to snipe any of us stupid enough to stick our heads up for air?"

They still didn't speak, appearing to be waiting for him to continue so Boyd scowled as if in thought. "I wasn't about to risk that. I got all paranoid they'd have pictures of us or some shit so I changed my appearance, snuck around and shit, made it out of Monterrey, hid awhile. Eventually, I found a way to contact Warren and the others. But they were pretty pissed at me, y'know? They knew I'd been scared and shit but they said I should've contacted Janus when I had my shit together. Since I didn't and I contacted them first, they said it made it seem like TDM sucked, like they weren't trustworthy or brave. They thought I'd compromised their chances of joining Janus."

Dana gave him a look that seemed to say, 'At least your friends are intelligent,' but she didn't seem to be as intensely angry as she had been before; now she just seemed caught somewhere between unreadable and feeling distaste. Rick, meanwhile, continued to watch him with the same unwavering, indecipherable expression.

"So," Boyd continued after a pause in which he realized they weren't going to respond or ask questions, "I tried to figure shit out. I found out about this place and I came to try to find Hale Clemons. I didn't know who to trust so it wasn't like I wanted to just go talk to anyone in Janus I may be able to find. I figured the guy who was working the convention down here couldn't be untrustworthy or Janus would've already taken him out. So I thought if I found him here, it'd mean he'd... I dunno. Be able to help." He trailed off with a light shrug.

Silence met his explanation and for a long moment, the other two only watched him as he directly returned their stares. He didn't say or do anything else, waiting instead for them to come to a conclusion, waiting to see if he'd have to try something else. He kept his expression as believable and upfront as he could and didn't waver even for a second.

Despite this, he was starting to get frustrated with the amount of time this was taking. At this point it would have been faster if he'd gone with Sin's usual method and

eliminated them both. "Look I know this all looks strange, but I'm gonna keep being paranoid as fuck 'till this all gets straightened out and I know who to trust and Janus says they're not pissed with me anymore."

"Still pissed with you?" Rick repeated, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "So you know about the list, then."

Boyd stared at the two, racking his brains for anything 'the list' could possibly mean in that context, but he had no idea. "What list?"

Dana gave him a disbelieving look then suddenly let out a brief, harsh laugh. "Wow, you're a fucking idiot."

"Hmm." Rick considered Boyd, then looked at Dana. "I suppose there's no reason he'd know if he's been so thoroughly hiding like a rat. It's mildly impressive no one caught him yet, really."

"Yeah," Dana eyed Boyd in dark amusement as she replied to Rick, "and after all that work he walks right into a trap. Brilliant."

"It's not exactly a trap," Rick said dismissively with a shrug. Even so, his grip remained steady and heavy on Boyd's shoulder, leaving no doubt that he wouldn't let go no matter what. "It's more like a reward for some and justice for the targets."

Boyd looked between the two of them with a hint of nervousness. "What're you talking about? Trap?"

"You're on Janus' shit list, cupcake," Dana said sweetly. "And we can be rewarded for bringing you in."

Boyd stared at her blankly. "What? Me as in me personally? I'm on a shit list Janus made?" How the hell could that be? That made him wonder if they really were onto him, if Janus somehow knew who he was, or if Janus just knew that he had been one of the two people to set off those bombs. None of those were scenarios he wanted to be true.

"What happened at JKS was obviously an inside job," Rick said patiently, tightening his fingers on Boyd's shoulder even further as a silent warning. "Everyone who was MIA and in the following months didn't show up at the hospital, dead, or check in, was put on a wanted list. It has the name and face of everyone who's wanted for-- shall we say-- 'questioning,' and it offers an unspecified reward for anyone who brings in one of them alive for information."

"Look, I don't know," Boyd said, eying them. That list they mentioned explained how they'd recognized him so easily after such an absence. That could be a huge problem for him; he'd have to find out how widely distributed that list was. Otherwise, he'd run the risk of being recognized as Reed at every Janus place he went. This could also pose a problem for 53; it was a good thing they'd set some contingency plans in place when Boyd had originally received his assignment. He had also spoken to Kadin about the scenarios during the week he'd spent in Hawaii.

Rick looked at him completely unsympathetically. "That's the price you pay for betraying Janus."

"You're lucky it says we get more of a reward for you alive instead of dead," Dana taunted with a smirk.

Boyd's eyes narrowed. Something about her tone put him on edge. "Yeah? You're so bloodthirsty now you'll kill for no reason?"

"No," she said, her tone demeaning. "But if it hadn't I would've killed you right away for the coward you are. Would've been a shame, though; I wouldn't have been able to hear your tragic little sob story."

Boyd glared and for the first time he jerked against Rick's grip, as if he wanted to hit her. "Fuck you, Dana," he said heatedly, knowing Kadin would not have let her get away with that comment.

Dana and Rick stared at him for a very long moment, their twin gazes intense and hard, but finally Dana looked away, seeming mildly uncomfortable. She absently

touched her left arm with her right hand and grimaced, looking pained on a level that was beyond merely physical. They were quiet for longer and then she sighed in irritation.

Her expression was absolutely unwavering and unreadable. She let the silence stretch until it was uncomfortable. Only then did she turn to Rick and jerk her head toward the door. "Come on. We'll take him to see his precious savior. Maybe Hale will feel kind enough to get him and his group back in Janus' good graces. After all," she looked Boyd over dismissively, "it's not entirely USNE7's fault they hired a coward for a rep. He seemed pretty cool to me when I first met him, too. Even beat me at a game of cards."

Rick nodded toward her, gave Boyd a serious look, then lessened his grip just enough for it to not be painful. He pushed Boyd ahead of him as they walked down the hallway; Dana in front with her left arm barely moving at her side, her stride quick and determined.

The fact that Rick and Dana didn't secure Boyd's hands, relying instead on Rick's ability to hold him still, told Boyd that despite the fact they were seriously suspicious of him, they didn't think he was a major threat. He knew they didn't believe his story and that was unsurprising; truthfully, it wasn't his story itself he was trying to convince them of indefinitely but rather that he was actually Kadin Reed.

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The building Sin was in turned out to not only have one sublevel, but three, and the lower two were once again hidden and difficult to access. The staircase he'd found ended up leading to a floor that was relatively innocuous and looked a lot like the rest of the house. It had the same architectural design, same flooring and even the same wallpaper except for the fact that it wasn't as opulent in its decorations. Although there was a hallway and multiple rooms, it was relatively small in comparison to the rest of the house, which wasn't saying much since the rest of the building was incredibly large. It made sense though; digging into the hill to create extra levels had probably cost a

fortune and making them as spread out would have only made it costlier and more time consuming. However, the size made it simultaneously easier and more obnoxious to sneak around in.

While he could cover the area in a much shorter amount of time without having to spend so much effort searching entire wings, it also made it more difficult to stay hidden and because of that he'd had no choice but to kill yet another operative immediately upon entering the area. They'd essentially run into each other as soon as he'd made it down the staircase and he'd responded instantly, slamming the heel of his hand repeatedly against the man's nose until there was nothing but a gaping hole in his face from where the cartilage had shoved up into his brain.

It had been pure luck that no one else had been in the immediate area but as he dragged the body quickly to one of the empty rooms, he realized with increasing frustration that if he had to kill anyone else there really would be nowhere to hide a body for long. As soon as someone actually found one of the poorly concealed corpses, the whole place would be on alert. It was aggravating but he really had no choice; people kept getting in his way and it was a lot simpler to just get rid of them rather than knocking them out and hoping they didn't wake up until after he found Thierry. He resented having to go through all of this trouble for the French moron anyway; knowing his luck he'd have taken all of this time and effort and the idiot had already gone and died. What a waste.

Feeling rather resentful about the entire affair, Sin had begun his search of the top floor and was rather irritated to see that the only things of note it seemed to contain were a couple of spare rooms, some offices, a conference room, what appeared to be the security center which held the monitors that were connected to the cameras on the outer walls of the estate and a bathroom. He'd just received Boyd's transmission that he'd also found something and had almost come to the conclusion that if Boyd was actually on the track to finding Thierry and all of this secretive hidden shit was just to conceal a couple of rooms then Clemons was a complete tool of a man, when he realized that something was very off.

Other than the man he'd run into after coming down the staircase, he'd nearly come into conflict with two others although he'd managed to hide from them in time to avoid it. However, the odd thing about the last pair was that they had appeared rather suddenly. The ceiling and walls did not appear to be soundproofed, as he could hear footsteps resounding above him and the idle conversation of the men sitting in the security room, but for some reason he had neither heard these people coming downstairs or seen them in any of the surrounding rooms as he'd made his initial once over. It didn't make sense.

The only thing that did make sense was that there was yet another hidden area inside of this hidden area and honestly, the conclusion caused him to become rather fed up with Clemons and this whole irritating mission. The whole estate had been one out-of-control study in paranoia after another and in his opinion it was going too far now. He felt like he was in some kind of bad haunted house or detective movie, but he was neither clever nor patient enough to be attempting to figure shit out and why couldn't people just have the balls to be sneaky and underhanded out in the open instead of going through so much trouble to hide it anyway? People were really annoying.

He'd just about decided that there was most likely just another doorway in the security room, the only area he hadn't searched yet since it was occupied, when he heard loud footsteps above him. He had just enough time to duck into the hallway, half in the darkened doorway of one of the spare rooms when an agitated looking blonde woman came storming down the staircase, shoes resounding angrily against the floor and ponytail swinging against her back like the tail of an angry cat. She strode through the main room stiffly, walked past the security room without looking twice and headed down the hallway without even noticing that she'd passed within inches of where he'd effectively blended in with the darkness of the room behind him. For a moment he'd assumed she was heading to the office to use the phone, the only thing in it that could be operated, but instead she went directly into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

Sin stared at the door blankly for a long moment, waiting for her to reemerge, but when she didn't his suspicion immediately rose. Without much hesitation he crossed the hall and opened the door to the bathroom, hoping he wasn't about to bust in on her sitting on the toilet but deciding that it was worth it to check either way. However, not only was she not on the toilet, she also wasn't anywhere in the room. He closed the door and turned slowly in a circle, noting that there wasn't anything but a toilet, a sink, a cabinet and a tall mirror.

Dark brows furrowed and he opened the cabinet only to find a bunch of towels and toiletries. The ceiling was painted white and really had no space for a hidden door or passage. It was as he stood there glaring at his reflection in the full length mirror that he realized the mirror, which so perfectly framed his entire body and was vaulted to the wall, had to be the answer. And it was.

It took more patience than he knew he possessed to figure it out, but as he felt along the sides, he found a small latch that was very well concealed. When he pulled it, the mirror swung open like a door which led to a short hallway, another doorway and yet another set of stairs that led down. It was definitely beginning to be too much for him but it was here that he realized there were two other levels to the building and it was here that his body count slowly began to rise.

As he went deeper into the building though, Sin slowly became less irritated and more anxious about the entire situation. While he knew he wasn't in an entirely enclosed area, the knowledge that he was going deeper into a hill and that he was most likely surrounded by rock and earth disturbed him more than it should have and it made his patience even thinner. The fact that the area was more populated and well-lit didn't help the situation very much since that meant he had limited places to duck into and gave him very little hope about the plan of somehow sneaking out with Thierry undetected; although he'd never really had much faith in that possibility in the first place.

So he moved quicker, scanned areas faster and to his frustration but not so much surprise, found that many doors and areas were locked. After his initial search he saw a door that obviously led to a bottom level, the third sublevel, but the door required

a password to get through and he didn't want to spend time trying to figure it out when he hadn't even thoroughly searched the entire second level yet. The floor lacked the innocuousness of the one above and although it didn't look like a torture chamber or prison, there was an institutional quality about it that reminded him of the Fourth floor of the Agency and he was sure that anyone would pick up on how intimidating and disturbing that could be. This area spread out more than the first sublevel but without a key or a way to sneak around effectively to find one without completely blowing his cover, he didn't have very many options.

What he ultimately found were two corridors which held several locked rooms and most of which appeared empty from what he could see through the small window at the top of each door. There was a third, shorter corridor but this one was guarded by three armed Janus operatives and that alone told him that he'd found what he was looking for and that there was no way things were not going to get messy. In the space between him actually coming to that conclusion and him actually starting to make his move, once again the damned radio went off.

"Back up needed in the North building! We have an intruder and a man down!" A man shouted urgently, sounding very similar to the one who'd radioed earlier.

The guards looked at each other briefly, then three sets of eyes simultaneously turned to him and things began to happen very fast. The man closest to him was the first to react and charged forward even as the other two began to reach for their weapons. But before any of them could do anything, one strong hand grabbed the man, twisted him around and Sin effectively used him as a shield as the other two began to fire. The guard went slack against him and he grabbed the man's twin Browning Hi-Powers before quickly unloading them into the two agents by the door. He could hear the distant crackle of the radio in the background but he ignored it; trying to remain undercover really wasn't an option anymore and that's all he needed to know.

Sin let the body drop, ignoring the blood that had sprayed across his face and quickly crossed over to the door to peer inside. Sure enough, what appeared to be a terrified Thierry was cowering in the corner of the barren white room. He turned away

and quickly searched the guards for the card key needed to enter just as he heard shouts and the sounds of footsteps running in his direction.

He swiped the key and opened the door, glaring at Thierry impatiently as the sounds grew closer. "Get up."

Thierry looked far different than he had over a year ago in Paris; he was skinnier, incredibly pale and his eyes had a slightly haunted quality about them that only seemed emphasized by how frightened he currently seemed. However that aside, other than a few bruises and what appeared to be a split lip, he was relatively intact.

"Wha-- Sin?" he stammered, confused. Sin made a face and grabbed Thierry by one surprisingly thin arm, dragging him out of the room but Thierry's bare feet slid in the blood that had pooled out on the floor and his blue eyes widened in horror as he tripped over the bodies that lay sprawled across the corridor. "*Putain de merde!*"

Before they could get any farther than that, the advancing operatives rounded the corner and began firing at not only Sin, but at Thierry, with no hesitation. Sin slammed his shoulder into the shocked looking French man and sent him flying back into the safety of the room as Sin threw himself backwards on the floor just in time to avoid the flurry of bullets that embedded themselves in the wall behind him. He rolled out of the way of the continuing gunfire, grabbed one of the Brownings he'd lifted from the dead guard and eliminated two of the four before he even came to a stop.

"Kill Beauvais!" One of the remaining men, a tall burly blond, shouted furiously as Sin pinned himself against a recess in the wall created by a doorway. The other agent seemed too thunderstruck by the five dead men at his feet to immediately comply and the hesitation cost him dearly as Sin sent a bullet directly between his eyes.

He aimed at the blond only to find that he was now out of bullets, but instead of wasting his own, Sin ran faster than seemed humanly possible back across the corridor, dodged bullets the man sent his way and then jumped at him with a flying tackle, landing squarely on his chest and sending the gun skittering across the hall. He

snapped the operative's neck and got to his feet, eyes immediately zeroing in on Thierry, who seemed more terrified than he had moments ago.

"Get the fuck up now," Sin snapped impatiently as the other man cowered from him in fear.

"Yo-you--" Thierry stammered, his accent seeming heavier and more difficult to understand as he became more hysterical. His hands curled into fists, fingers digging into his palms as he pinned himself against the wall. "You're going to kill me too!" he cried finally.

"If that was the plan it would have already happened. Now get your fucking ass moving, *now*," Sin snarled but once again didn't wait for Thierry to comply before he stormed into the room and dragged the other man out violently. He took off running down the hall, half dragging, half carrying Thierry as he navigated his way back the way he'd come. As more shouts echoed off the walls ahead of them, Sin sent a brief transmission to Boyd to inform him that he had Thierry and that things were about to get a lot more interesting.

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Rick pulled Boyd to an abrupt halt at the intersection of one hallway and another. Dana kept walking, not noticing or not caring that they weren't beside her anymore, and within seconds she had disappeared. Boyd looked at Rick questioningly but he was steadfastly ignored so he decided it was probably better not to ask aloud what was happening. It was likely that they didn't want to show him some sort of code or entrance or even specifically which room they were going to down the hallway, in case Clemons was not there.

He could hear a faint knock in the direction Dana disappeared, followed by a low conversation. He'd been wondering why they had just assumed Hale Clemons would be available at this time of night and, more importantly, that he would be interested in dropping everything to deal with him. He suspected that finding the people on Janus' list

was something that would result in rewards not only for those who found them but also for their supervisors, like Clemons.

It was odd; he'd gone along with Rick and Dana because it would potentially give him more information but standing there as he waited for the conversation to end, he felt a sense of uneasiness coming over him. In the context of his own health, this was idiotic. He should have just incapacitated Rick and Dana when they were alone and no one else knew about him and he should have run.

As an agent, however, it was better to gain more information, to get a good look at the person in charge, to go as far as he could until he absolutely had to back out. Standing there in the hallway at that moment with Rick's heavy hand on his shoulder, however, he was very aware of how little he knew of the overall structure of this hidden wing, of how the only way he truly knew how to escape would be nearly impossible and may be easily anticipated, and of the fact that he didn't even know how many enemies or guards there were in the area.

He was here, alone, unarmed and outnumbered, without backup except for Sin, who was across the property with his hands full trying to find Thierry. Added to that, he was waiting to see the man who had managed to take advantage of his niece's accidental death to somehow overcome Sin and subsequently torture him relentlessly.

His anxiety rose even as the thoughts strengthened his anger and hatred toward the man who was responsible, and it was with that feeling that he heard Dana call out to bring him in. Boyd felt his heart pounding harder than he would have expected as Rick silently pushed him down the hall.

At the end of the hallway there was a large wooden door that Dana stood to the side holding open; her eyes were dark and unreadable and she surveyed him silently as he was pushed past her. As he entered the room beyond, he saw that it appeared to be a combination of a library and an office. He glanced around the room as he entered, noting as many details as he could in as casual and quick a movement as possible. An

imposing wooden desk dominated the center of the room; it was well cleaned and organized, with little compartments for all the items that were spread across it.

Although he didn't have the chance to study the desk except to note there were no obvious large objects for him to use as a weapon, there were a variety of pens and paper clips laying on it. He also noticed the items that Dana had confiscated from him were piled haphazardly on the far side where he would be unable to reach them and that two chairs sat in front of the desk, presumably for visitors.

He didn't see any other obvious exits except back through the door he'd entered; there were no windows, as there hadn't been in the entire hidden wing, and although it was possible there were hidden entrances or passages into this room there was no way he'd be able to find them in the sort of situation that he would almost positively be in if he was trying to escape.

It only took him a second to glance around the room and he ultimately turned his attention to the person he was here for. A Caucasian man in his early to mid-forties sat behind the desk, watching them with an expression that was hard to read. He wore a dark suit that was obviously expensive, but that was probably the most distinguishable thing about his person. By looking at him, it was somehow difficult to imagine that he was the sort of person capable of the horrors he'd apparently put Sin through. He was of average build and height with dark curly hair and almond colored eyes. The most striking thing about him was a small scar at the corner of his bottom lip but even that was easy to miss if Boyd hadn't already known from the initial briefing photos that it was there.

More than anything, it was his innocuousness that made Boyd feel uneasy. Obviously this man was capable of great cruelty if he felt the need, Boyd had known that much going into the situation.

Rick and Dana stopped just behind Boyd as Hale continued to examine him clinically. After a moment he dropped his gaze and picked up Boyd's code cracker, turning it over idly as he nodded his head for Boyd to move closer. When he didn't move

Rick shoved him forward roughly, causing him to stumble and collide with the edge of the desk, knocking over some of the contents in the process. In the brief moment that his hands were on the wooden surface, he automatically grasped for whatever was closest to use as a weapon. The only thing he was able to discreetly grab was a small paper clip that he quickly hid between his fingers and up into his sleeve. It wasn't the best weapon in the world but if he could unbend it without them noticing, it was at least enough to blind someone if jammed into their eye.

"Bind him," Hale said calmly, his voice slightly accented and almost pleasant.

Boyd couldn't help a spike of alarm at the words; he started to move but Rick was right next to him and he was too quick and strong. Boyd had barely even shifted his weight before Rick wordlessly yanked him back by his upper arm and nearly threw him into one of the wooden chairs. Boyd hit the back of the chair with enough force that the chair rocked backward and a hiss of pain escaped him. Rick was there immediately, slapping a pair of handcuffs on one wrist and the arm of the chair before the front legs had even hit the floor again.

The feel of that cold metal against his wrist caused his mind to go blank with fear and his breath to unconsciously quicken; for a moment he couldn't even think, couldn't even consider the situation he was in. He didn't even realize it when he made a soft noise of distress. All he knew was that he was about to be held down and that he couldn't let them do it; not in a place like this, not with a person like Hale. The terror he'd felt for years of being held down had only strengthened into outright panic after his time with Shane.

He automatically struggled, jerking up nearly to a stand and hurting his own wrist as he yanked on his arm. He was able to get his feet underneath him but before he could steady himself, Dana was at his side and with more strength than expected she used the angle and momentum of her body to shove him; the back of his knees hit the chair, causing them to buckle as he started to topple backward. He threw his free hand out to steady himself and she grabbed his wrist painfully at the same time that Rick

grabbed the back of his shirt and jerked him back so hard that the cloth scrunched up, digging into his throat.

Boyd tried to yank away from them even in that awkward position but Rick shoved him toward Dana even as she shifted her weight and used the strength of her stance to add power as she twisted and bodily slammed Boyd's arm down to the chair arm. Rick pressed one rough hand against Boyd's sternum to further hold him in place while he leaned forward and, as quickly and efficiently as Archer had in the van, used another pair of handcuffs to lock Boyd's other hand to the chair.

It all happened quickly, barely a few breaths of time. Dana backed off, breathing just a little heavily but Rick stayed by Boyd's side for a moment, staring down at him intently as he waited to see if he'd have to subdue him further.

Boyd grit his teeth and closed his eyes, his head tilted down and his hands automatically curling into fists. He was breathing heavily, partially from exertion but mostly from fear, and it took effort to even be able to come back to himself. It took him a moment to come to the conclusion that he couldn't afford to show any more weaknesses or give them further ideas of what truly did scare him because then it would only be used against him.

He grabbed onto that thought and the logic of it and tried to concentrate on the mission instead of his fear. He forced his hands to loosen though he couldn't help pulling on his wrists experimentally to see how strong the wood of the chair was, to see whether there was even a hope of him somehow managing to break away. The only thing that happened was the handcuffs cinched tighter with a clicking sound as his wrists ached.

Part of him felt the pain against his wrists like a reawakening of his fear that only grew; he couldn't move, he couldn't fight back, they had his arms held down and he'd never be able to get away. Not until they were through with him anyway. They were going to hurt him, make him scream, possibly kill him-- But another part reasoned that his legs were still free and could hurt someone, that he was held to a chair but he wasn't

being held completely down against the floor or a bed, and most importantly that in the struggle they'd only had time to single-lock the handcuffs and if he was lucky they wouldn't double-lock them. He still had a chance of possibly getting away, as long as he hadn't dropped that paper clip, as long as he could work on it discreetly. As long as they didn't incapacitate him first.

Rick studied him mercilessly but apparently deemed him no longer a threat because he stepped back, waiting for further instructions.

"Do you understand why I had them do that?" Hale asked in the same tone, eyes finally turned on Boyd again as they drank in the pallor of his skin and the slight sheen of sweat that had broken out on his forehead. "I want you to know why everything that is going to happen, happens. I want you to understand how this will be."

At first Boyd didn't answer. Hale's tone was too pleasant, too even; Boyd could tell he was enjoying the situation, enjoying doing this to him, seeing him panic.

So, with more effort than he cared to admit it took, he forced himself to concentrate entirely on acting like Kadin. "You prob'ly didn't want me running away," he said finally and looked up at Hale. "I coulda run any time with Rick and Dana and I didn't, right?"

"No," Hale replied flatly. "That is not the reason." He stood and walked around the desk, leaning against the edge of it as he stared down at Boyd. "The reason for binding you is that when we begin to interrogate you, depending on the method, it will be easier for all parties involved if for the time being you are unable to move. Typically I do not handle such things in my office but I only mean this as a preliminary meeting to find out the basics before I decide that you are being uncooperative and need stronger encouragement."

Boyd stared at him. "That makes it sound like you already decided I'm uncooperative."

Hale shrugged elegantly and walked around his desk again, opening a drawer. He pulled out a file and flipped through it for a moment before extracting the sheaf of papers that he wanted and tossing it across the desk so that it was in Boyd's range of vision. It had an image of Boyd in his Kadin Reed disguise with various personal information and what seemed to be details surrounding the time he'd disappeared. Before closing the drawer, Hale pulled out what appeared to be a long, thin, razor-sharp letter opener and he raised an eyebrow as he looked at Boyd once again.

"That's because I have. From what I heard of your ridiculous story, it doesn't do anything more than insult the intelligence of those in this room and Janus as a whole." He moved closer again, this time extending his arm and gently caressing Boyd's face with the edge of the blade. "The facts on that sheet of paper are few. All we knew was that you attended the conference, were seen speaking to many people there and that when the explosions began, you disappeared and a man fitting your description was seen fleeing the convention center. What we gathered from this was that if it was you, you fled in fear because you did not know what was going on. However when months passed and we and the group you come from claimed not to have heard from you, you immediately came under suspicion. So either you're lying to us or your commander is lying to us. Which one is it?"

Boyd started to tilt his head away from the blade but Rick snapped one arm out and grabbed a chunk of his hair to hold him still. His scalp twinged sharply in pain and he allowed a wince to cross his face in the pretense of being more vulnerable than he actually felt. Although being denied one more type of movement made his heartbeat automatically quicken and it certainly didn't help that Hale had a blade anywhere near him.

He jerked his hands against the handcuffs briefly, as if he'd unconsciously tried to raise his hands and had forgotten he couldn't, although the true reason was that he needed to get the fuck out of this situation fast and without his hands free he was in trouble. He'd thought the paper clip may have been caught on the fabric inside his sleeve so he'd hoped the movement would loosen it; thankfully, when he dropped his

arms back down to the chair he was just barely able to feel the paper clip had slid down and caught between his wrist and the handcuff. He started working it into a better position for him to unbend it. He had to be extremely careful not to draw attention to his fingers which meant the process was far slower than he wanted it to be but if they discovered he had the paper clip they would take it away and with it the only chance he currently had for escape.

His mind raced as he tried to decide on an explanation. His story had to be believable enough that he could keep it going as a distraction while he worked on his handcuffs; at the same time, if he tried bullshitting them too much it would be obvious.

"I--" Boyd glanced toward Dana as if he was looking to her for help but she was watching impassively. At least that glance told him that she didn't seem to be in as good a position to see his hand as the other two. He looked back toward Hale and tried to lean away from him toward Rick as he said nervously, as if he'd been caught in a lie and was now afraid of the consequences, "I mean, I-- I may have exaggerated a little. About contacting them. But I won't be uncooperative, man-- uh, sir-- really... You don't have to bring me anywhere else."

"Mmm." The blade dug into Boyd's face deeper and blood began to pool slightly around the edge, dripping down his face. "How exactly did you exaggerate?"

Boyd automatically tried to lean away from the blade but Rick tightened his hold and dropped his other hand down to Boyd's shoulder in a silent warning. Hale's expression didn't change but he pressed the blade more firmly into Boyd's skin and dragged it down slightly to show that he was serious.

Boyd tried to ignore the blood that was starting to drip down his face and the alarmed, constricted feeling from being unable to move. "That-- That I contacted them... at all..." He could feel the paper clip starting to unbend on the first curve but it was at an awkward angle he'd have to straighten out. "I knew they'd be pissed at me for getting scared like that and... and not making things better with Janus. I didn't want them to kick

me out so I thought if I got in good with you it'd be okay. I was gonna contact them after this, I swear."

"Okay," Hale said slowly, drawing the word out as he removed the blade from Boyd's face. "Even if that was true, even if you waited until now to make a move because of how aggressive the authorities were until recently, how could you possibly know to find me here and why wouldn't have anyone informed me of your arrival once you showed up at the gates?"

"I dunno man, I really don't," Boyd babbled fervently, flicking his gaze toward the blade and then Dana as if he was afraid that Hale would cut him again or order her to hurt him if he didn't cooperate well enough. Dana was staring intently at his face, seeming as though she was scrutinizing him for any hint that he was lying. Although that was unnerving because he was lying, it was also really good because that meant the only person who could possibly be looking at his hand right then was Rick.

"I mean, it took me a long time to find it..." Since Rick was behind him, Boyd couldn't see where he was looking, so he shifted uneasily which caused Rick to push down harder. Boyd could feel Rick's glare centered on the back of his head as if he was annoyed at the constant movement but it effectively put all their attention away from his hand.

Before he could get any farther with his tale, Rick and Dana's radios crackled to life and an alarmed man's voice shouted: "Back up needed in the North building! We have an intruder and a man down!"

Hale's cool gaze snapped away from Boyd's face and for the first time the man looked visibly put off. His eyebrows drew down and his lips thinned before his glare focused on Boyd once again. His expression was frozen over and the calm indifference had morphed into genuine anger. "Find out what they're talking about," he bit out sharply. "Was it this intruder or is there another?"

Rick, whose face had hardened considerably even as his hand tightened violently on Boyd, raised his radio. "Is the intruder in your sights?" There was no

response and Boyd could feel the tension in the room grow considerably the longer it took for the man to reply. After a moment Rick scowled and repeated the question but once again there was no immediate response.

Hale growled impatiently and snatched the radio away from Rick, his eyes leaving Boyd for the moment. "One intruder is already detained; is there a second?"

Before anyone could reply Sin's voice came across in Boyd's ear: "I have Thierry and I'm moving out now."

Rick's radio buzzed with white noise for a moment then flipped back to transmission. Boyd didn't know if the man replied because he had the opportunity or because he recognized his boss' voice but it didn't take long for him to radio back a confused jumble of words. "Men down-- North Build-- intruder--" Each transmission was abruptly cut off and spoken in harried tones before nothing else was said. Hale's face darkened as he focused on the radio, giving Boyd all the distraction he needed to work more effectively on the cuffs.

"Repeat," he barked into the radio. When nothing happened he shot Rick an irritated glare. "Go over there and find out what the hell is going on. Radio me immediately."

Rick nodded curtly and was already out the door, yelling into his radio, "Jones! Did you back up North? What the hell's happening?" The door slammed shut behind him, cutting off much of the noise of his radio although Dana's was still emitting random bursts of static as Rick demanded answers over it that weren't received.

Boyd could feel the teeth of the handcuffs catching on the paper clip but it kept slipping past the catch. This was the first time he'd ever been relieved to find out Sin failed at being stealthy and had raised the alarm, but even the cover noise of the radio wasn't going to do him any good if he couldn't get out. And if he didn't escape soon, Hale looked ready to torture the truth out of him. There was no longer any reason to pretend to be Kadin; at this point he would only be making it worse for 53 by implying they'd either been too incompetent to realize they'd had a traitor in their midst or they'd

purposefully sent someone to the JKS meeting that would betray Janus. And if Janus believed Kadin Reed was that traitor, they would hunt him down, possibly even finding the real Kadin in Hawaii. This was the time for damage control.

Dana moved closer to Boyd's side and glared at him but then looked to Hale for orders. He paid her little attention though as he turned back to Boyd, looking irritated by what was going on. He'd been doubtful of Boyd from the start so it was likely that he was more irritated that one or more people had not only managed to infiltrate his property but to also kill his guards.

"I think it's time you stop playing this game," he said flatly. "But if you want to continue with your story, we can find other means of getting the truth out of you and then if you are not alone, I will do the same to your partner. It wouldn't be the first time."

Boyd stared at him a moment then completely dropped any Kadin mannerisms. He had to pause briefly working on the handcuffs because the movement of his hand would be too obvious but as soon as they were paying more attention to his words or other actions he would start again. His eyes narrowed and he said coolly, "I'm perfectly aware of what you're capable of. You already killed my partner."

Dana's eyes widened slightly at the admission and at the abrupt change in attitude but Hale almost looked pleased that the charade was finally over. "He killed my niece; I felt it was an even exchange."

"Killed her?" Boyd echoed. "He saved her."

"I suppose in a metaphorical way you could say he saved her from the evils of this world by putting a bullet in her head but I'm afraid that doesn't fly with me."

The words came out cold, unemotional, but there was no denying the anger that briefly flared in Hale's eyes as he recalled the incident. Boyd's eyes briefly widened at the knowledge that Sin had killed Jessica but he didn't have the chance to think about it at that moment.

"So what's your story now, Reed? Or should we just skip this entirely--" He nodded at Dana, who grabbed Boyd's hair and yanked his head back violently. "And get right to it?"

The blade, which had almost been forgotten during the radio exchange, swung out in an arc and cut into the white flesh at Boyd's throat. It was a painful wound, one that bled out immediately and heavily, but it was superficial and just centimeters away from his jugular, something that he doubted was an accident. Hale would kill him when he was done with him, just like he had with Sin.

Doubt and fear made his heart beat faster and he once again found himself trying to lean away from Hale. While they were focused on his face, he started discreetly working on the handcuff again, feeling his fingers begin to shake each time the damn clip slipped past the catch. He was used to working with safety pins, with a thinner tip, and part of him was really starting to fear that paper clips with their blunt end wouldn't work, that his only chance for escape was going to fail him. Without even one hand free he also wouldn't be able to radio to Sin for help; the transmitter was tiny and tucked in his ear beneath his hair and the button was too small for him to be able to touch if he tried using his shoulder. His face and throat hurt from where Rick and Hale had already gotten to him and his blood felt warm and distracting against his skin.

A spike of true fear moved through him at the knowledge that he may die here. This was different than before; other rebels he had dealt with hadn't been as astute. And even when he'd been in danger on missions, it had usually been a case where they would have just killed him; a bullet to the head and it would have been over.

"I'm not Kadin Reed," he said, keeping his eyes firmly on the blade. He could feel the paper clip slide more firmly against the catch and for a second his heart leaped as he would be successful but then it slid past again. "I killed him before he ever made it to the convention center." He could feel Dana's grip tighten convulsively in his hair at the admission but he didn't look away from Hale to see her expression.

"So the truth comes out," Hale drawled softly and the way his face turned from anger to understanding, as if realization had just dawned on him, left very little doubt that for some reason this explanation made something click in his mind. "No wonder Reed's commander claimed that all contact had ceased directly before he was set to arrive."

The fact that the explanation was a lie didn't matter; it was probably something that had already occurred to Hale or maybe even the Janus inner circle, as to who could have possibly been behind the attack. The possibility that one of the many representatives had been murdered and replaced with an enemy wasn't exactly an outlandish idea after all and Boyd was relieved that the credibility of the story wasn't questioned further. It meant Reed would have to change his identity and stay in hiding but at least 53 as a whole would be safe. Kadin's "death" had always been a possibility and a deal regarding that had already been worked out between he and the Agency long ago.

"At first we suspected it may be a traitor within our organization, possibly even from the people who were invited to the orientation but then that man showed up... that strange, stubborn man who was so very obviously a trained killer and someone very resistant to pain, and we couldn't link him to anyone in our ranks, anyone we could have ever dealt with. We wondered what group he was from, who he was with, but he wouldn't say. He was very strong; very stubborn."

Hale tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes at Boyd again. "Maybe you'll be easier to break and we'll find out exactly which group that French fuck sold us out to."

Dana jerked his head back further, making the cut on his throat throb with pain, but Boyd only narrowed his eyes. "Don't bet on it," he said firmly.

Hale's grip shifted on the letter opener but before he could do anything else a resounding blast echoed in the distance. It was muffled by the building and the room didn't shake which implied it was probably across the property, but it was followed

immediately by the sound of rapid gunfire. Hale and Dana's attention snapped toward the sound and with the distraction Boyd was able to move his fingers at a more obvious angle as he shoved the paper clip toward the catch. He felt it stick and for a moment it almost slipped past again but finally the lock clicked open, the sound drowned by the distant noise.

Several things happened nearly at once. Hale's expression tightened in anger and he looked at Dana even as she let go of Boyd's hair and stepped forward. She yanked the radio to her mouth and demanded, "Rick! Status."

Adrenaline rushed through Boyd as he twisted his wrist to get the cuff to fall open. He reacted instantly; Dana was standing near enough that with his free hand he yanked her injured arm down to slam it on the side of the chair. She was too surprised to catch herself and she dropped the radio, yelling in pain. Boyd was too quick even with one hand still cuffed to the chair; without giving her a chance to react or Hale to get closer, he shifted his hold and wrenched her arm up behind her back, forcing her down and around as he jumped up and twisted out of the way. He violently slammed her head against the seat of the chair with all his strength; a crack echoed alarmingly in the room and blood smeared across the wood. She started to go limp, her free arm going toward the floor to catch herself rather than toward him for defense, but he wasn't taking chances. He yanked her gun out of her belt and slammed his foot on the small of her back, shoving her down so abruptly that her head snapped forward and hit the floor as well. Dana lay unmoving at his feet although it was unlikely that she was actually dead.

The gun was already whipped around and trained on the space between Hale's eyes before the other man had the chance to move more than a step. Boyd stood awkwardly because of his remaining cuffed wrist but it didn't make him appear any less deadly. His expression was cold and dangerous as he ordered, "Give me the key."

Hale's eyebrow twitched and although he seemed displeased with the change in their positions, his demeanor didn't change drastically. He watched Boyd calmly, as if he were trying to decide how serious he was, and seemed to come to a conclusion after a tense moment. Muffled gunfire could still be heard somewhere outside of the building

and Hale's mouth drew down in a frown as he finally extracted a set of keys from his pocket and dangled them in front of Boyd's face.

Boyd stared at him a moment then suddenly jerked the gun down and shot Hale in the knee. Hale cried out in pain and surprise, dropping to the floor; the keys clattered to the floor but remained just out of Boyd's reach. He looked down at Hale impassively as he curled around his knee; the wound made it impossible for him to use that leg in an attempt to escape.

Dragging the chair with him to get closer, Boyd calmly set the gun down on the chair and grabbed the keys. His attention remained on Hale as he unlocked the handcuffs; when his hand was finally free he picked up the gun and aimed it at Hale again. "Who is your superior?" Boyd asked him coolly. "Where is Janus' headquarters located?"

Hale looked up at him and somehow managed to look incredulous through the pained expression on his face. "Be serious."

Boyd considered him. He had never seriously expected Hale to answer; he'd asked partially because if he didn't it would look bad in the report and partially so that when Hale refused to comply he had one more reason to shoot him again. His eyes narrowed instead. "If my partner hadn't killed your niece, would you still have tortured him to the same extent?"

Hale's expression didn't change and he seemed unmoved by the question. "Does it matter?"

"I'm asking the questions," Boyd said, his expression unreadable.

Hale thought about it for a moment; Boyd didn't know whether he was considering what the answer was or if he was just deciding whether to be truthful or not. Finally, he said point blank, "No."

Boyd's teeth gritted and for a moment he hesitated. There was a part of him that wanted to draw this out, to torture him, to make him suffer. But he couldn't.

"Fuck," he whispered and without giving himself a chance to think further he shot Hale between the eyes.

Hale's head snapped back as gore and blood sprayed out behind him and his body crumpled lifelessly to the floor. Boyd stared down at his corpse for a moment, then looked over at Dana. She was crumpled awkwardly on the floor but he could see she was still breathing. Even so, with a head wound like he'd given her it would only be a matter of time before she bled out if she didn't get help.

He moved to her side quickly and flipped her onto her back so she wouldn't suffocate in a pool of her own blood. He quickly patted her down and discovered a length of cloth in one of her many pockets. It didn't take him long to get that around her head to try to slow the bleeding; he then grabbed her gun and the items they'd confiscated from him.

He left her radio for her in case she woke up and needed to call for help.

He was out the door and down the hall in seconds; even as he sprinted, he considered what he knew of the layout of the rest of the building and what he'd seen so far of the hidden wing and made the most educated guesses he could as to where a more easily accessible exit would be. His first guess was a dead end but he luckily did not have to backtrack long before he guessed correctly. He hadn't run into anyone in the hidden wing, which led him to believe that the majority of the guards had run to the fight in the north building and if they'd heard Hale state one intruder was already detained they'd probably figured that Hale wouldn't need their help or the building was already clear.

When he finally made it outside, he was briefly shocked by the amount of water that was rushing across the ground in rivulets. It was raining so heavily that the downpour had reduced visibility enough that he couldn't see across the entire compound. The sky was pitch black and between the darkness of the night and the intensity of the rain, the lights dotted across the complex seemed dim and distant. He'd known it was raining but he hadn't realized it was this heavy.

He took a few seconds to survey the surrounding area as best he could for enemies but he didn't see anyone. The gunfire sounded louder out here, resounding cracks that blended with occasional thunder; it echoed around him, making it difficult to tell exactly where it was coming from. He ran along the perimeter of the building and veered off at one point for his first destination. He stopped quickly to grab the med kit he'd hidden deep inside some bushes when he'd first arrived; he hadn't carried it with him into Hale's house because it would have been too bulky to hide in a pocket, yet he'd brought it from the Agency because he'd assumed they would probably need it. With the med kit firmly in hand, he ran toward the nearest garage to search for a vehicle.

He nearly ran into two guards along the way but he fell back into shadows each time, letting the men run past as they headed toward the northern building.

The first garage he found was empty of vehicles and people but when he slipped into the second through a half-open back door he discovered several vehicles and a small office to the side with Darren staring anxiously and a bit angrily at his radio. Darren seemed to be waiting for further instructions or information and Boyd knew that he wanted to be over there helping the others, in the thick of probably the only excitement he'd ever experienced here. But knowing also how Dana and Rick had reacted to his name, Boyd suspected he was the sort of ally the others preferred to be out of the way when something serious was happening.

He'd probably been detailed to the garage in case any intruders came looking for an escape vehicle. But Darren didn't want to be there any more than he'd wanted to be wandering the empty halls of the building, and for that reason he once more failed to catch Boyd when he otherwise would have had the chance. With Darren so distracted and so much intermittent noise from outside, it was quite easy for Boyd to silently slip behind him and pistol whip him. Darren didn't even have the chance to turn around before he fell to the ground.

Boyd looked quickly around the office and noticed a box on the wall with keys to various cars. It made sense in a way; with so many employees coming in and going out of the property, the vehicles were likely communal instead of designated to specific

people. Boyd grabbed all the sets with keyless entry and moved out of the office and further into the garage where he could see the vehicles. He quickly used the lock/unlock buttons to determine which key belonged to which car but it took slightly longer than expected because of the noise outside. The alarm button would have been faster but it also would have made a lot more noise and would have drawn attention to the garage.

The best vehicle for their purpose seemed to be a sturdy SUV in the far corner of the garage. Boyd quickly ran to the vehicle and got inside, taking a moment to get acquainted with the set up. There was something about the SUV that didn't seem entirely normal though; the outside sound was muffled more than usual and the door had been heavier than he'd expected as he shut it, which gave the impression that it was reinforced. But the vehicle started normally, the gas tank was thankfully full, he was able to find the windshield wipers, and that was really all that mattered.

He kept the extra keys with him and threw them to the floor of the passenger side; hopefully it would drastically slow down any pursuit from vehicles in the garage at least. He found a garage door opener tucked up beneath the visor and pressed the button immediately. It took a bit of maneuvering to get the SUV out from the back of the garage and around the other vehicles, but the garage was large and set up specifically for multiple rows of vehicles so it wasn't too difficult to do. He sped out of the garage into the rain, already turning the wipers on full speed.

"I have a vehicle," Boyd transmitted to Sin. "Where are you?"

It took a moment for the reply to come but when it did, Sin sounded entirely too calm considering the ruckus he was making. "Northwest corner, behind the pool house."

Boyd spun the SUV around and sped straight across the middle of the complex, not bothering to go along the perimeter. Most of the people were already distracted and it was more important he get to Sin and Thierry immediately rather than trying to be stealthy at this point. A few guards saw him speeding past but in the chaos of the moment and the low visibility, they didn't seem to know at first whether he was an enemy or an ally, especially since he was in one of their vehicles and no alert had come

out from the garages. They largely ignored him and he was able to disappear into the rain, nearly fishtailing the SUV as he took an abrupt turn around the building next to the pool house.

It was raining so hard that the yard was a mess of slippery mud and deep puddles and the few paved paths arcing across the complex had a layer of water over them that would make it easy to hydroplane. Although the headlights barely gave him any visibility, it still cast light across the landscaping and open area behind the pool house. He couldn't see Sin or Thierry but he still slammed on the brakes and unlocked the doors.

Less than a minute passed before Sin's tall lanky figure appeared out of the shadows, sprinting towards the SUV and dragging a thoroughly soaked and barefoot Thierry behind him. They were both blood splattered and dirty but Thierry seemed to be in a state of confused shock. As soon as they were out in the open, a barrage of gunfire sliced through the sheets of rain, missing them by centimeters as they crossed the stretch of grass between the pool house and the car. Thierry seemed to be simultaneously clinging to Sin and trying not to get too close to him if that were possible but when they finally jumped in the back seat, his eyes widened in relief at the sight of Boyd. Boyd didn't know if he was genuinely happy to see him or if he was just glad that he would no longer have to be alone with Sin; judging from the rough way Sin was handling the man, it didn't seem as though they were very pleased with each other.

There was a slight pause in gunfire before it all redirected to the SUV as Boyd peeled out of the fenced pool area, ripping up the finely manicured grass in the process. Mud and water flew up everywhere, splattering against the windows and doors as he drove full speed towards the Southern end of the property. There was loud yelling outside as the operatives most likely attempted to organize themselves and as Boyd drove past the garage, he saw several men making their way inside of it. They would be in for a surprise when they found no keys to start any of the cars and thankfully that would buy them at least a few minutes to get out of the property and onto the open road.

Boyd glanced over his shoulder at the pair in the back seat and saw that Thierry was shrinking away from Sin, practically pressing himself against the door. He looked thinner and paler than when they'd last been in each other's presence and his deep blue eyes were watching both of them warily as though he expected nothing but the worst from anyone at this point. He was wearing nothing more than thin slacks and a white t-shirt, which was now darkened with mud and blood although it didn't appear to be his.

Thierry kept sneaking glances over at Sin but Sin paid him no heed. Instead he was concentrating on looking out the window and quickly reloading his weapons, one of which was a fully automatic MP5 which he'd acquired on the way up and out of the hidden area. He'd already used his two smoke grenades in the house, likely the only reason they'd escaped relatively intact, and although he had one regular grenade left he was still pretty low on ammo.

Despite this, Sin looked calm in the midst of the storm they were in and his intense green eyes flit across the scenery quickly as if he were expecting them to be attacked at any moment, which was likely the case. Like Thierry, he was also splattered with blood but Boyd didn't automatically assume that he was not injured; he knew better than to expect Sin to actually show pain in a situation like this so anything was possible.

"Status?" Boyd asked, swerving to avoid a tall group of landscaped bushes in the middle of the yard.

"Flesh wound," Sin said vaguely, sliding his window down as they barreled towards the electronic gate that led out to the road. The guard manning the gate dove out of the way and Sin leaned out the window to shoot the control box, causing the gates to slide open at what seemed to be a ridiculously slow speed. Just as they were off the driveway and out of the gates, gunfire erupted behind them once again and Boyd looked in the mirror to see another SUV and two cars pursuing them at full speed.

"Go!" Sin yelled, leaning out the window to shoot behind them.

Without hesitation, Boyd slammed his foot on the gas pedal and the SUV sped across the terrain. A windy, paved road led to Hale's land and in the downpour Boyd

didn't have much warning when a curve was coming up. He nearly missed a turn and spun the wheel quickly, causing the back of the SUV to swing to the side alarmingly as the tires briefly lost their traction due to the water but they caught again before they could hydroplane. He didn't dare take his eyes off the road to check on the two in back but Sin's gun never stopped firing, although he heard a distressed sound and a thump, as if Thierry had been thrown to the side.

Houses flashed past on either side of the road; the neighbors who had complained about Hale's place in the past would have even more reason now after the gunfire and car chase speeding in front of them so early in the morning. Sin's guns were an ear-cracking constant noise resounding in the SUV and Boyd could feel the vehicle jerking slightly every time an enemy's bullet hit it. On the other hand, the vehicle seemed to be holding up to the damage better than he would have expected which led him to believe that it really was reinforced.

They sped out of the small grouping of houses and broke free into open road; trees crowded the sides of the road in this area but Boyd knew eventually they were going to be in a sandier area where the pursuit would have the chance to move to the sides or cut them off if they weren't fast enough. Another sudden curve loomed in front of them and Boyd was just able to catch it and the following one. The edge of the SUV just cleared a tree; a few centimeters further and he would have knocked off the right side mirror.

Half of Sin's body was practically hanging out the window and as Thierry watched in horror and disbelief, Sin actually began to clamber out the window, gloved hands moving dexterously over the slick exterior as he pulled himself out of the window entirely. The vehicle was easily pushing 140 mph and Sin dangled dangerously, his body slamming into the side of the door as he gripped the storage rack on the roof with one hand and continued to shoot with the other.

Thierry's mouth dropped open and his head jerked over to stare at Boyd in alarm. *"Comment peux tu supporter d'être près de quelqu'un comme ça? Il est cinglé!"*

Boyd was concentrating so completely on driving that he could only absently translate the question as Thierry demanding to know how he could be partners with someone as crazy as Sin. But he didn't have an answer for Thierry that he could bother to formulate at that time so he didn't respond at all. His eyes flicked to the rear view mirror and back to the windshield so quickly it was almost as if he hadn't looked away from the road. Despite the fact he was going as fast as he could, one of the smaller cars was slowly gaining on them. The trees were still thick around them but in a few more minutes they would thin and the enemy would have the chance to overcome them.

As if reading Boyd's mind, Sin pulled himself onto the roof of the SUV entirely, booted feet slipping as he squinted through the rain at the car that was closer to them. He'd already figured out that like the SUV they had, the one pursuing them was also armored with bullet proof glass, but judging from the dead passenger in the two-door Nissan, that wasn't the case for the smaller passenger cars.

Bullets continued to ricochet around him, some just missing him while others grazed his body, but he ignored the pain and the force of the rain slamming into him and lifted his Ruger, trying to keep aim as the car bounced onto the open and less evenly paved road outside the town. He gripped the rack and forced himself to sit up partially as the howling wind tried to force him back down but just as the Nissan inched closer to their bumper, Sin sent two bullets through the windshield and into the driver's head.

The car swerved dangerously as the man slumped forward and actually slammed into the back of their SUV before spinning out of control and colliding with the other passenger car that had rode up on its tail. The sound of tires squealing and rubber skidding across the ground resounded through the night and both cars ended up swerving off the road in a heap, tires stuck in the thick muddy sand on the sides of the road. Sin narrowed his eyes at the SUV that continued to follow relentlessly, shoving the Ruger back in his belt as he made an attempt at leaning over to grab the MP5 from where it hung on the rack but just as he reached for it, Boyd took a sudden turn and he went flying over the right side of the roof.

He caught the rack once again to keep from entirely falling off the car and into the sand, but the speed Boyd was driving at and the momentum from the fall sent him crashing through the window, not shattering the glass as it would in a normal vehicle, but instead causing it to cave inward. His boots and legs slammed into Thierry violently, sending the French man flying against the opposite side of the car as he screamed at Boyd to, "*Ralentis!*" and to no one in particular, "*On va tous mourir!*"

Boyd tried to steady the SUV for Sin but out in the open without trees and houses to slow it, the rain had created little rivers that ran powerfully across the road. Water sprayed around them as they crashed through the water and even with the windshield wipers on high and the headlights on bright, Boyd felt like he could barely see anything. Several times he felt the steering wheel shudder as the water started to catch the tires, causing the SUV to start to shift or slide on its own with no regard to where the road was. The resounding cracks of gunfire, Sin scrabbling against the roof, and the most recent, alarming crash against the window made it incredibly difficult to hear the telltale signs of water splashing in the wheel wells as a precursor to hydroplaning.

He was trying to keep the SUV steady, continue to drive as fast as possible, retain whatever little amount of traction they had left, and watch for any sudden obstacles that seemed to loom in front of him with no warning. With so much going on, he couldn't handle Thierry screaming hysterically in the background about the speed and danger. "Thierry!" he yelled to shut him up. "*Ferme ta gueule!*"

Sin ignored the shouting and climbed back out the window, pulling himself onto the roof once again and barely missing a bullet that would have sent his brains splattering across the black fiberglass. He grabbed the MP5 and began firing at the tires of their remaining pursuer, managing to blow out one of their tires and causing the driver to momentarily lose control as the rubber went flying everywhere. The high water sprayed out around the SUV as the driver tried to regain control on the slippery road and one of the back passengers, who'd been leaning out the window to aim at Sin with difficulty through the pouring rain, tumbled out and onto the road.

Sin continued to spray the car with automatic fire with the submachine gun but unfortunately it wasn't a high enough caliber to penetrate the glass and he growled in annoyance, wondering why the fuck 9mm bullets even existed in the world anymore. He was almost out of ammo anyway and just as he tossed the MP5 off the side of the roof, a bullet tore through his thigh and he grit his teeth as pain radiated through his body.

At this rate the standoff between their two vehicles would go on forever, or until he fell off the damn car, so he decided to switch tactics and forget about guns altogether. Explosives were a lot more effective anyway.

He pulled out his remaining grenade and yanked the pin out with his teeth, narrowing his eyes at the other vehicle and hoping he didn't miscalculate and blow himself up in the process. After a few seconds he flung himself over the side of the roof, once again dangling against the door and dropped the grenade on the pavement that rushed beneath him. Without a moment's hesitation, he dove back through the window just as the other SUV drove over the grenade. It exploded at the exact time he'd wanted it to, blowing up directly under the other car.

The shockwave slammed into the back of the SUV as Boyd tried to control it, half a second before the other car's fuel tank exploded. The vehicle was instantly engulfed in a ball of flames that was so intense that even the rain didn't touch it at first. Between the momentum and the explosion lifting it off the ground, the destroyed car continued to skid along the road briefly even as parts scattered behind it. Debris flew through the air, bits of glass and pieces of the car smashing into the back of their SUV in what sounded for a moment like a brief hail storm. Something especially large crashed into the back window but the bulletproof glass kept it from breaking through; the window just caved inward.

Boyd lost control of the SUV for a moment; the deluge against the back of the vehicle had caused him to head straight into a larger standing puddle than he'd wanted and he felt it stop responding as all four tires lost traction on the road. The entire car started to slide to the right, the wind and rain buffeting them as he lost control and the strength of the water flowing across the ground started to push them off the road. Boyd

immediately eased off the accelerator and just rested his hands on the steering wheel, allowing the SUV to coast across the road as he looked around quickly for any obstacles that may be coming up, anything he would be forced to try to avoid.

He didn't want to slam on the brakes or try to wrench the steering wheel to the side because that would probably just make the car lock up or force it to skid in a manner he couldn't recover from. The terrain was wide and open around them, with little bushes and plants dotted randomly in the ground. One bush was approaching quickly on the right and he was just about to lightly pump the brakes when he felt one of the tires catch. The SUV jerked violently to the left, throwing them to the side and Thierry against the back door, but once one tire resumed friction within seconds the others had too.

He slowly accelerated and was able to move the SUV back to the road, checking a few times in his rear view mirror for any sign of pursuit. He couldn't see anyone behind them so he returned his attention to driving, and only then realized how hard his heart was pounding and how the adrenaline was rushing through his system so quickly that his hands were almost shaking.

Boyd took a moment to let out a brief breath then glanced in the rear view mirror at Sin quickly. "Are you okay?" he asked, his voice sounding calmer than he felt.

Sin, who'd yanked off a strip of cloth from his shirt to use as a tourniquet, wrapped it around his bleeding thigh tightly and nodded shortly. "Nothing serious. Sorry about the fireworks, by the way. But once I got down into the holding area, there really wasn't any real way to avoid people anymore and they seemed pretty determined to kill him before they let me escape with him."

Sin's gaze flicked over to Thierry and Sin's mouth twisted slightly in an irritated scowl. Even knowing that, Thierry had still reacted as though Sin were mowing down innocent people every time he'd shot someone. It had made their escape even more difficult and him even more disgusted with the other man. Despite the fact that Thierry

kept company and did business with some of the most dangerous players in the world, it seemed he was anything but used to seeing people die right in front of him.

Thierry refused to look at him and instead stared gloomily out the window as he rubbed his arms with his hands and shuddered violently. His curly brown hair was plastered against the sides of his gaunt face and after a moment he chanced a look over at Boyd. His expression was strange and it was hard to tell exactly what he was thinking or feeling at the moment but after a while he just shivered again, from the cold or the memories of what he'd just seen Boyd didn't know, but finally he said softly, "*C'est un monstre.*"

Sin's eyes narrowed, picking up on the sentiment even if he didn't know exactly what it meant, but he didn't say anything. He just shook his head and began going about the process of once again reloading his guns. As nonchalant as he wanted to appear, there was no hiding the stiffness in his posture and the tension in his jaw as he glared down at his Ruger, making sure it wasn't clogged by the water.

Boyd noticed the tension and returned his attention to the road. "Thierry," he said evenly, "I realize this must be an alarming time for you but don't forget that he just saved your life, risking his in the process. If you're going to insult him, at least do it in English so he knows what you're saying. I'm not going to translate everything and I won't respond to you in French. Sin," he flicked his gaze toward him in the rear view mirror, "the fact that you were spotted and the explosions that resulted actually helped me. So... Thank you."

Sin gave a one shouldered shrug and didn't reply verbally, although he did glance up to meet Boyd's eyes in the mirror. After a moment his mouth twitched up into a half smile but it quickly disappeared and he once again focused on his weapons. Thierry didn't say anything else and he returned his gaze to the window and the scenery that was rushing passed as Boyd drove to the designated pick up spot.

The silence that permeated the vehicle made the ride seem to go by slowly despite the fact that Boyd was going as fast as he dared in the weather conditions.

Without the high-speed car chase, he didn't have to take any more risks could cause him to lose control of the vehicle. However it didn't stop Boyd from remaining tense as he wondered if Janus would send out additional pursuit vehicles. He continued to look behind them for a long time but no one came after them.

It was entirely possible that he'd completely lost them in the winding route he took through the terrain but it was also likely that they'd discovered Hale's body and were waiting for a higher authority to tell them what to do. He actually hoped the latter was the case; as long as someone checked on Hale, Dana would be found as well. He was counting on that for multiple reasons, the main of which was for her to spread the story that Kadin Reed had never existed as they knew him.

Nothing eventful happened for the rest of the ride and Thierry remained resolutely silent, his face grave as he seemed to resign himself to a fate within the Agency that would most likely be no better than it was with Janus. He shrunk in on himself as time went on and he seemed a shell of the confident man that he'd been in Paris all of those months ago. He remained that way for the majority of the ride but suddenly he looked up at Boyd and cleared his throat slightly.

"I didn't betray you." His voice was weak, strained, but he said it firmly as though he wouldn't tolerate hearing anything opposite.

Boyd looked at him through the rear view mirror, his expression unreadable. Thierry met his eyes evenly and Boyd knew by those words that he meant he hadn't betrayed the Agency, but also that he hadn't betrayed him. By his body language, Boyd was almost positive that Thierry wasn't lying. He could independently verify that Thierry at the very least hadn't told Hale who he'd sold the information to. Although Hale could have been lying, Boyd really didn't believe it to be the case. When all of that was taken into consideration, it wasn't difficult to venture that Thierry truly hadn't known the information had been bad; that he'd honestly been trying to help the Agency.

Boyd returned his attention to the road but he tilted his head forward in acknowledgment.

"Okay," he said not unkindly.

Thierry nodded, looking out the window again and seeming satisfied that at least Boyd knew the truth even if no one else ever believed him. Not much else was said and Sin acted as though he hadn't heard the exchange, possibly because he didn't have anything to contribute but most likely because he really didn't care either way.

The weather slowly improved, moving from downpour to something resembling only slightly heavy rain and the wind also seemed to lighten. As they drew closer to the meeting point, Boyd was relieved to see the sleek black helicopter already waiting for them. He had barely parked the SUV when Sin and Thierry had already jumped out of the back; although neither said anything, it was clear they wanted to get out of such close quarters, even if it was short lived. Boyd grabbed the med kit and the three of them ran through the rain to the helicopter. Over the background sound of the storm and the slow whoosh of the rotary blades, Boyd could hear a man yelling something. When he drew close enough he was able to see the pilot leaning out the front and realized it was the same man who had flown Sin away before.

"Seriously," the man was yelling; Boyd faintly thought his name may have been Jim. "What is this, my new detail? Go fly to bumfuck Mexico and wait around for the hotshots to come running in last minute? Would you people fucking hurry? I got shit to do back home!" He hit the side of the helicopter a few times impatiently.

The three of them piled into the back and Jim seemed mollified despite the fact that no one had really paid any attention to him. He waited just long enough for everyone to get secured before he slammed his door shut and they took off. They lurched upward alarmingly quickly and it wasn't until that moment that Boyd realized he'd never actually been on a helicopter before; only planes, which were far different despite the fact both machines could fly.

The back of the helicopter held little more room than the SUV had so the tension resumed almost immediately. They each stayed quiet for their own reasons and once again time seemed to pass far too slowly. A few minutes into the ride, loud rock music

suddenly blasted out of the cockpit ahead of them, the bass vibrating parts of the floor and walls as Jim practically screamed lyrics off key.

Boyd glanced in the direction of the sound and thought he vaguely remembered Blair and Jim talking about something related to music last time. He hadn't been paying much attention to the conversation though; he'd been far more worried about Sin and hadn't cared too much about what was happening around him as long as Sin was safe.

The thought caused him to glance toward Sin, who was looking at the wall with an expression that implied he wondered what other annoying things could possibly happen on this trip. Thierry was studiously looking at the opposite wall, seemingly ignoring the music and their presence, although he couldn't seem to stop intermittently rubbing his arms or shivering. Although they both were bloodied, they did at least seem to be okay. Boyd noticed blood spreading through the cloth Sin had tied around his thigh so he pulled the med kit over from where he'd stashed it nearby.

The noise of the box dragging across the floor caught Thierry's attention and he watched Boyd wordlessly without much of an expression on his face. Not bothering to say anything, Boyd pulled some bandages out and calmly reached over to untie the cloth and replace it with fresh bandages. Sin didn't protest and just watched him quietly, not seeming to mind the attention or the treatment that he was getting from his partner. After a moment his mouth quirked up in a slight smirk and he tilted his head to the side.

"Told you we'd do well together."

Boyd couldn't help a slight smile at that. "Occasionally you're right," he said mildly.

Sin smirked again but then he glanced at Thierry and returned to staring silently at the wall.

Boyd didn't bother to say anything further and his expression returned to default neutrality. He packed the med kit up again and put it away, knowing that Thierry was

staring at him oddly but not commenting on it, before he leaned back and idly stared at the wall, wondering at Jim's taste in music.

The rest of the flight lasted in silence and without anything of import happening. By the time they started their descent toward the landing pad at the Agency's private airport, it felt like a day had passed when really it had been barely a couple of hours. Jim landed the helicopter perfectly, so gently that for a moment Boyd didn't even realize they had stopped moving. But then the music abruptly flipped off in the middle of a song and Jim could be heard yelling, "Rise and shine, sleeping beauties! Time to leave!"

Thierry was the first one off the helicopter but Sin was immediately behind him, probably partially to get out of the confines of the helicopter but also to keep the French man from potentially attempting an escape. Boyd was a little slower to crawl out and he found himself looking around the area with a strange sense of weariness, wariness, and relief. They had so far managed to successfully complete the mission, but until they made it back to the Agency with Thierry they still couldn't say it was finished.

It was odd; for a while he'd honestly thought he wouldn't live through that mission, that he'd never get free of Hale's office, but now that he was home he was reminded of Sin's ominous predictions that they wouldn't know what to expect from Connors. They may have successfully completed this but that didn't mean the future was certain. Anything could happen now; they could be disposed of entirely now that the Monterrey mess was effectively cleaned up.

And what was going to happen to Thierry? Boyd looked over at Thierry to find him peering around the airport, his skin pale, eyes dark and wary, his posture defensive. Boyd stared at him a moment but before he could do or say anything, a truck pulled up in front of them and a driver stared out at them blankly. Sin opened the passenger's door and hopped in without hesitation while Boyd and Thierry got in the back.

Once again, silence surrounded them but at least this time the ride was far shorter. As they navigated into the city, the skyscrapers that had lasted through the war loomed ominously around them. In the early morning hours, the city was dark and quiet

with very little movement or sound except for the occasional police patrol that was monitoring certain curfew zones; even they knew better than to interfere with any vehicle bearing the Johnson's Pharmaceutical logo.

The ride continued quickly with the driver focusing entirely on the road and not paying them the least bit of attention until the main Johnson's skyscraper loomed in the distance. Up until then Sin had stared out the window blankly, sketching out all of the possible unpleasant scenarios that would possibly occur with Connors, but when he saw the main building his eyes narrowed and his hand slapped down on the driver's arm.

The driver looked over at him in a mixture of annoyance and alarm but Boyd leaned closer and followed Sin's narrow eyed gaze. At first he didn't see what had alarmed Sin so much and he opened his mouth to question it, but before the words could leave his mouth, he noticed that the lights of the tower flickered briefly. His eyebrows drew together and he looked at Sin questioningly.

"Power surge?" The driver ventured curiously, also shooting Sin a look.

Sin continued to stare up at the tower for a long moment before he shook his head finally. "Not likely."

A measure of alarm crept into the man's face and he slowed the car to a full stop on the side of the road as he turned to Sin entirely. Whatever anyone said about the man, in this situation he was still technically the highest ranked agent in the car. "Then what?"

"I don't know but we're not going in through the front." Sin shook his head again, face visibly troubled, before he glanced over his shoulder to look at Boyd briefly. "Switch places," He said after a moment. "Boyd's driving. We're taking another route."

The driver barely hesitated before swinging his door open and running around the side to jump in the back. He shot a glance at Thierry and clipped on his seat belt,

absently checking for his weapons as he peered out the window with a baffled look on his face.

No one really seemed to know what was going on except Sin and as Boyd slid into the driver's seat, he looked at his partner again as confusion and anxiety built up inside of him. But he didn't ask any questions, not when Sin seemed hesitant to form any real conclusions, and as he followed Sin's directions towards Silver Lake Park he wondered what could be happening now.

## Chapter 45

The drive to Silver Lake Park didn't take long but as they passed through the streets, everyone unconsciously glanced up at the Agency's tower looming in the distance. Approximately one minute after the initial flickering, the lights in the tower went out entirely. It was odder than it may seem to an outsider but the truth was that the tower, just like many other parts of the Agency, never shut down. Although people, especially the administrative staff and non-field agents who worked in the tower, kept specific hours there were still many people who worked throughout the night and early morning depending on what needed to be done for assignments.

Never in Sin's employment at the Agency had he seen the tower shut down entirely, it just didn't happen; it was almost like the moon abruptly blinking out of the sky, that's how startling it was to him. The compound operated on its own generators and electricity system so it was possible that there was a power surge or an accident but there was no reason to take unnecessary chances now. Not when so much was going on; not when they'd just, for the first time, gone head to head with Janus.

"What are we doing here?" The driver, who turned out to be Agent Brian Dibrachio, asked as he stared warily at the vine covered gates of the park. "This place is off limits-- don't you see the signs?"

"Contaminated by radiation?" Thierry queried slowly, bare toes balling up as his feet touched the cold concrete. He stared at the sign and then at Boyd, as if hoping for some kind of rational explanation but Boyd just shook his head and looked at Sin, not knowing exactly what they were doing there either.

Sin strode down the sidewalk as they trailed behind him and didn't stop until they reached a spot in the barred fence that had just a little bit wider spacing than all of the other bars. "What's off limits to civilians isn't automatically off limits to us," He said pointedly and squeezed through the bars with relatively no trouble given his lanky frame.

He raised his eyebrows and stared at Brian. "You can stay here if you want, I don't need you to come but you--" He reached through the bars and grabbed Thierry's arm, yanking him through. "Are staying close to me." Thierry yelled in protest as his feet sank into the damp earth on the other side of the fence, wrapping his arms around himself as he looked around at the park through the early morning gloom.

Boyd followed without hesitation and they looked out at Brian who stood stubbornly on the other side. However after only a moment he sighed and shook his head, not willing to look like a coward, and squeezed through the space in the bars with far more difficulty considering he had a bulkier and more muscular build. His brown eyes swept across the park, across the barren edges of the places closest to the fence and into the shadows that dominated the inner most area.

Sin glanced at Boyd and began walking deeper into the park as the darkness and shadows engulfed them entirely. His eyes flit around quickly, searching for a sign that anything was out of place, that anyone was close to them, but all he saw was tall dead trees. As they moved closer and finally crossed the famed lake that ran through, the place became abruptly crowded with plants, vines and wild flowers.

"This place is supposed to be off limits because of radiation," he said finally, his voice low. "But I suspect that's only because of what's in here."

Boyd looked closely around the area but all he saw was the shrubbery. Obviously this had something to do with the Agency, as Sin wouldn't have brought them there otherwise and his comment earlier about not going through the front suggested they would be using a back entrance, but all the less utilized entrances Boyd knew about were inside the compound itself and had nothing to do with Silver Lake Park. He looked over at Sin.

"Is there a path through here that leads to a back entrance to the compound?" he ventured, not fully thinking that was the case because he'd never seen anything to suggest that, yet he wasn't certain what else to deduce.

They continued to follow Sin as he shook his head, his eyes on the leaves and grass that thickened as they went in further. "There's a system of tunnels under the compound," he explained after a while, green eyes flicking up calmly to look at Thierry and then Brian as they narrowed slightly. "Not many people know about it since it was only used during the war and the people that do remember it are probably under the impression that it was sealed long ago. Its purpose was for shelter against nuclear bombs; its existence is the only reason why there were so many survivors at the Agency, which actually wasn't many at all considering 60% of us were wiped out."

"It's not on the blueprints, either," Boyd said, surprised by this information. "How do you know about them?"

Sin paused and stared at the ground for a moment before his gaze swept across the park again. His eyebrows twitched slightly but he began walking again, following the lake.

"Well they were built and used for the last time before my time at the Agency, back in 2000 when this area was nuked. After that they started building the shelters we'd use now because they realized that a couple of tunnels wasn't really adequate shelter for a larger group of people and that they definitely didn't have what was needed to camp out underground for an extended period of time, which is why so many of the original survivors died later on due to radiation poisoning. Not only that but the original tunnels are only built about 500 feet underground as opposed to the shelters which are about half a mile beneath the surface, so they accounted for a lot more when building those."

He stopped talking again and for a time the only sounds were their feet splashing quietly in the water but then he seemed to realize that he hadn't actually answered the question. "I found out about them years ago in the original plans for the compound but those, I assume, have since been destroyed as the compound has been rebuilt and renovated. I'm not really sure why they aren't sealed off but I assume it's for the same reason; a more secretive escape route in case there is another attack in the future."

Boyd had always wondered how Sin had managed to leave the Agency when he'd appeared at his house; he suspected he must have used the tunnel system, knowing others didn't realize it existed. "Where does it come out in the compound?"

"There's a couple of entrances on the compound but the one I use is inside of an unused lab because it's the easiest to access now."

They approached an overpass that went over the Lake and Sin led them to a partially enclosed area. There was nothing of note inside but he knelt down and indicated a hatch on the ground which looked like nothing more than a manhole or something that would be a part of a sewage or drainage system.

"Just so you know, there's no lights at all down there and it's entirely possible that it may be compromised given the fact that it seems the park has been somewhat recently inhabited."

Brian's eyes widened slightly and he stared at the cover. "So we could just go down there and be killed?"

Sin shrugged. "Maybe. It's also likely that kids snuck in the park to do whatever kids do in fenced in, prohibited areas. Like I said, you have the option of staying behind if you're not comfortable with this."

Thierry stared down dubiously. "I don't have any shoes..."

"It's not a sewer, if that's what you're worried about." A pause. "There are rats though."

Thierry's blue eyes widened slightly and he looked at Sin in horror.

Boyd considered the distance between the Agency and the park and how long it would probably take them to get there, then he looked at Thierry. "I'm guessing it will be about a half hour walk. Depending on the situation inside the Agency, there may be some shoes available then. It won't help in the meantime but we don't have anything else to work with."

"Just try to keep up," Sin said flatly; it wasn't clear if he was directing it at Thierry or Brian, but Boyd suspected he was talking to them both.

The manhole cover was removed and they peered down briefly at a long ladder that led to the tunnel below before Sin ushered them all down first, going last so that he could pull the cover closed behind them. Once the cover was closed and blocked most of the natural light, Boyd saw that Sin hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said there were no lights at all down there. It was dark, dank and smelled strongly of mildew and as they tread through the water, several times they did hear rodents scattering across the concrete. However no one complained and there was very little speaking as they moved quickly through the darkness.

The twenty-five minutes it took to reach the entrance seemed like an eternity though and everyone was relieved when Sin stopped, even if the anxiety about what was going on above pressed down on everyone. More than once during their journey they paused briefly as Sin stared up at the top of the tunnel, looking perplexed. He couldn't explain it but several times it was as if he'd heard something, like a distant rumbling or thunder without sound, to indicate that something very wrong was going on up there. But he didn't know what exactly it was and he didn't want to jump to conclusions, so he continued on without comment.

However, as they climbed the ladder to the hatch that led into the lab, he couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't just being paranoid and that something was happening. Something that shouldn't be happening because the Agency was supposed to be protected, safe, a haven for all of the weary agents who'd watched their families and friends burn during the war.

The hatch led to the basement of the building and they took the stairs quickly to the upper floor. A burning smell permeated the air around them and when they slid out of a side entrance and into the shadows around the lab, there was no doubt that the muted sounds he'd heard had been explosions going off above them.

Smoke drifted through the air like low hanging fog and the stench of extinguished fire was stronger than ever outside. However, despite that, the place was not active at all and for the most part the courtyard was empty. There were no patrolling guards, no agents rushing to start their day and as they looked around in relative confusion, the unmistakable sound of muffled gunfire could be heard somewhere on the complex. The distinct lack of activity made it hard to understand exactly what was happening.

Thierry looked at the three agents and seemed incredibly weary at that moment. He'd managed to escape one war zone just to be caught in another one. "What now?" he asked tiredly.

"We find General Carhart," Sin said quietly and without hesitation, mouth turned down in a confused frown.

Brian surveyed the area with wide eyes, no doubt never expecting anything like this to happen. "How the...?" he started to ask, but he trailed off and just stared dumbfounded at the scene.

Boyd searched the surroundings, feeling wary and unnerved, wondering how the hell this could have happened. The Agency had tight security in the compound and even if somehow enemies slid in unnoticed, it was a place filled with people trained to know how to respond quickly to danger. Any enemies should have been quickly neutralized in a concentrated effort. Then again, if the enemy was good enough to infiltrate the Agency, they were probably also good enough to compromise the Agency's response.

Shutting down the electricity was very intelligent, for instance; it was already dark so early in the morning without the traffic of the city or the pale ambiance of the sun to give clarity to the shadows, but Boyd had never realized how much darker it would be without the lights of Johnson's tower and the surrounding buildings to help them see. Now although he couldn't see any bodies in the courtyard, with the smell of gunpowder drifting through the air and dust from what he assumed was some kind of explosion surrounding them, he couldn't imagine there hadn't been any casualties. He also had no

idea who could have managed this. Was it Janus? But how the hell did they know where the compound was? Even people in the American government had no clue this compound housed anything like the Agency; how would any of their enemies find out?

He thought he saw movement on a roof across the way, a quick darting of a figure that was there and gone before Boyd fully had the chance to see it. His eyes narrowed and he slid back further into the shadows. A sniper, perhaps, but on whose side; the Agency's or the enemy's? The sniper appeared to have been heading for the opposite direction and hadn't seemed to have noticed them, but it would only be a matter of time before they were discovered.

"Where will he be?" Boyd asked Sin, looking over at him seriously.

The other man shrugged slightly, eyes flitting around to take in the shadowy figures in the darkness.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "This has never happened before. I don't know where anyone would be. There's emergency plans in place in case of natural disaster or another attack on the city but the idea of someone actually directly invading and attacking the compound was never put on the table. It's not supposed to be possible." He paused, looking aggravated. "I'd say we head to the tower but it's right in the middle of the compound with no cover and that seems like a bad idea at the moment. If he's alive he's either fighting or giving orders, but I'm betting surviving officers are somewhere secure to keep some chain of command in order in case the heads are assassinated."

Brian paled considerably at the words but he seemed simultaneously shocked and impressed by the matter of fact way Sin spoke about the situation. He swallowed and his hand dropped down to the gun that lay at his side.

"Maybe we could check one of the fallout shelters?" He looked surprised that he'd actually spoken out loud but seemed encouraged by the fact that no one immediately shot the idea down and continued. "They're secure, well-fortified and they

only have one exit and entrance so anyone who tried to infiltrate wouldn't be able to realistically take it over unless they have a whole army but from the looks of things--"

"It seems like one relatively small but well organized group, judging by the lack of open combat," Sin finished the sentence and nodded. "They'd be more likely to strike quickly and silently instead of drawing everyone into one big fight, which is most likely why they are using darkness to help them with the element of surprise. A direct attack on a bunker would be foolish for such a plan."

Boyd quickly ran through what he remembered of the blueprints, the placement of the bunkers, and where it would make the most sense that they would develop a command post under these circumstances.

"From what I recall of what Lenny told me, the three shelters have an interconnected camera system to monitor each other. The bunker near the courtyard was the most recently built and also has several well-fortified cameras on its own circuit that monitor the area directly surrounding the entrance to the shelter. Given that the electricity and generator seem to be down, all the cameras are probably down in the compound but that shouldn't affect the bunkers; they have their own generators that I doubt have been compromised yet since I seem to recall they were more difficult to access."

He looked at the others thoughtfully. "Assuming that the camera system hasn't been destroyed there as well, that bunker may be the most logical choice; it's centrally located and has additional surveillance capabilities allowing them to see whether an enemy or ally is approaching the shelter. We could check there."

Sin nodded and immediately began to move in the direction of the bunker, "Sounds good."

He tossed one of his guns to Boyd and the two of them moved ahead slightly while flanking Brian and Thierry. They remained in the shadows of the buildings, the lack of light from lamp posts providing them with the same cover of darkness that the intruders depended on and the four of them spread out enough to not make them a

single target. Despite the fact that there was obvious activity going on elsewhere judging from the random bursts of gunfire that sounded in the distance, they didn't come across any enemies, any agents or any bodies in the short distance between the lab and the courtyard.

The courtyard was quite eerie because of how deserted it actually was; even late into the night or early into the morning there were typically small groups of people going to and fro. But now there was nothing except dark splatters on the ground that seemed to indicate drag marks and blood, soft scrabbling sounds that echoed off the walls of the surrounding buildings and the unmistakable feeling that from somewhere around them, they were being watched. But no one attacked and if it was an ally, no one attempted to call out to them or join forces. So they continued on with Sin and Boyd slinking stealthily through the darkness as Brian supported the now limping Thierry, whose feet were covered by bruises and bleeding lacerations that had accumulated since their escape from Hale's compound.

At one point Sin heard low whispering somewhere around them but when he lifted his gun, aiming it in the precise direction the sound came from, the whispers abruptly stopped and he could hear nothing more. It seemed like an eternity to get across the courtyard but when they finally reached the entrance to the bunker, the weight of what felt like thousands of pounds lifted from their collective shoulders in the hopes that in the next few moments they'd find out exactly what was going on.

However the relief didn't last long; as soon as they approached the doorway a shot rang out and slammed into Brian's shoulder, sending the young agent careening into the concrete archway that housed the bunker's blast door. Thierry yelled in alarm, automatically ducking for cover as he simultaneously pulled Brian deeper into the doorway, pressing his hands against the wound. Sin and Boyd pinned themselves against the walls, ducking down and behind the railing as they sent gunfire through the darkness and in the direction the shot had come from. A moment passed without them knowing whether or not they'd successfully killed their assailant but before anything else could happen, there was a low beep and the door to the bunker slid open.

Boyd immediately grabbed Brian and helped Thierry pull him into the bunker; although he'd only been hit in the shoulder, none of them were about to stand up until they were out of danger and Brian couldn't put weight on his hand to crawl in on his own. Sin briefly stayed outside as cover but no one else shot at them and he ducked inside seconds before the door slid firmly shut. Boyd glanced quickly around the open room they found themselves in but they were alone; the door was obviously automated. A set of stairs led down and Boyd flipped the safety on the gun and slid it into his waistband.

He returned his attention to Brian; Thierry remained crouched next to him, looking pale and in pain although he was currently concentrating on pressing his hand to Brian's wound.

"Are you alright?" Boyd asked Brian, although his gaze flicked down to Thierry's feet as well.

Brian nodded slowly, wincing as tried to sit up straight and looking simultaneously relieved that they were in the bunker and mortified that he'd been injured. He glanced at Sin, who brushed by and clamored down the stairs, before returning his gaze to Boyd as they helped him to stand entirely. "Yeah. My first time getting shot though-- hurts like a bitch."

"Yes, it does," Boyd agreed, moving to Brian's good side to help support him. He noticed that Thierry had moved off to the side and was standing there silently, his expression becoming more difficult to read now that they were in an area that was going to lead them directly to people from the Agency.

He could see that there were small smears of blood beneath Thierry's feet each time he moved and it almost made him feel bad for him; as far as he could tell, Thierry had not betrayed them yet who knew what he would face now. Janus had intended to kill him and the Agency had rescued him, but Boyd didn't know what Connors intended to do with him. There was the possibility that Thierry had given Janus the location of the Agency but Boyd highly doubted that Thierry had been privy to the location in the first

place so he didn't see how he could have betrayed them that way. Even so, he supposed it was a possibility; yet Thierry had seemed so believable in the car.

"They should have a small medical facility down there so we should be able to get you both help," Boyd said finally, and he looked at Thierry so he knew that meant their health was equally important and he didn't consider him to be an enemy at that moment.

Thierry looked at him silently and inclined his head slightly before the three of them made their way down the stairs to join an impatient Sin, who stood in front of a second doorway. Thierry moved as quickly as possible but given the considerable distance between the first doorway and the second doorway, the torn soles of his feet caused him to lag slightly behind. Despite that, they made the long descent fairly quickly and reached the bottom just as the door opened and a disheveled General Carhart appeared on the other side. It didn't seem as though he'd been in any combat, but it did seem as though he'd either been in bed when the events had begun or had been working out, judging from the t-shirt and athletic sneakers he wore. His hair was spiky, uncombed and his jaw was shadowed by stubble; it was a far cry from the professional manner he usually dressed in and everyone seemed to note that except for Sin.

"What the hell is going on?" Sin demanded as a greeting, green eyes narrowed accusingly at the General.

Carhart stared back at him, his face a mixture of relief at seeing them back safe and aggravation over whatever was going on in the room behind him. "We have a problem."

"No shit," Sin said sarcastically and moved further into the room when Carhart stepped aside to allow them entrance. His eyes rested on Thierry briefly, who studiously avoided his gaze, but other than that he didn't speak to the man or ask them about the assignment.

The doorway led into a large room that seemed to be the size of the Agency cafeteria; in addition to cots, there was a mess area and a latrine but in the far corner of

the room there was a monitor system set up as well as a desk with communicative tools. It could easily hold a couple of hundred people and the additional doorways most likely led to rooms that could contain even more. However despite the size, there were only about thirty agents in the area at the moment, two of which Sin recognized as General Stephens and General Willis.

"Is this you people's idea of a secure compound?" Sin demanded after a moment, drawing the attention of the others in the room as he stood there glowering at them all.

Carhart made a face and closed the door, moving towards the other generals as he ran a weary hand through his already unkempt hair. Boyd saw that both General Stephens and General Willis were there.

"A lot has happened in the last hour, Vega. We're not entirely sure how it came to this. We only recently managed to group here and piece together what's happened and what locations have been hit so far but we have scouts out gathering information as we speak so that we can formulate a more specific plan."

Boyd glanced toward Carhart again, finding it difficult to reconcile the casually dressed, unkempt man in front of him with the impeccable General he was used to seeing.

One of the men at the table looked at them with a weary, mildly put off expression. Boyd recognized him as Stephens, although he'd never met either general formally. It took him a second to realize that must be Kassian's supervisor, the person Harriet had mentioned.

General Stephen was a lean but well-built man in his late fifties, whose black hair was flecked with grey along the sides. His eyes were a piercing dark green and a large scar crossed from his temple to his jaw on the left side of his face. He glanced briefly at a nearby agent but that was enough for the man to jump to attention and immediately move over to Boyd's side, reaching out to pull Brian along with him toward one of the

doors, presumably to a medical treatment facility. The agent didn't so much as glance at Thierry, though, leaving it clear but unspoken that he was to remain in their sight.

The other general just stared at Sin with unconcealed hostility. "Doesn't anyone teach it to be respectful?"

"Didn't anyone teach you how to keep militants off your base?" Sin countered flatly, staring at Willis and not seeming at all impressed by his rank.

"Hsin, shut up," Carhart snapped before any more could be said. He glared over at the other medic present and jerked his head in Thierry's direction. "Take care of him but I don't want him out of our sight."

The medic nodded, not seeming to know who Thierry was or why he was important, but following the order regardless. He led the French man over to a table and instructed him to sit down before he went about the process of examining his wounds and especially his battered feet.

Boyd's gaze lingered on Willis, not pleased in the least to hear him referring to Sin as 'it.' The man was large and muscular, looking as though he could easily have a second job as a professional wrestler even at his age of what appeared to be late fifties to early sixties. His dark eyes glittered intelligently even as he looked at Sin as though he meant less than dirt to him and distaste made his expression turn harder.

"This isn't the time for a pissing match. We were in the middle of an important decision," Stephen said curtly and turned to Willis. "As I was saying, I realize that in a perfect world, consolidating the non-combatants into a more defensible position would be preferable, but in this setting that would be opening ourselves up for disaster. Most of the support staff and non-field agents on this compound have no practical training in how to respond to combat situations; whether or not they meant to, they would just get in the way. It's better to keep them in contained areas where we know they won't cause more trouble or put themselves or others at risk."

"And in the event that one of the intruders managed to infiltrate this area, or if the attackers actually turn out to be rogue agents, we'd be a bunch of sitting ducks. This whole situation is too complex, too confusing, to even consider such a simple solution," Carhart said wearily, not seeming at all happy about what he was saying. "Maybe if we weren't shrouded in darkness with no communication at all--"

"And how would they manage to infiltrate?" Willis demanded, cutting him off. "There would be an escort, we could gather the trained field agents--"

"So you're saying you know all of the maintenance, service and clerical staff by sight?" Carhart asked flatly, staring at the older man with little to no patience on his face. "I think we need to end this argument now before we waste any more time on it. It's already been vetoed by two of us and if the Marshal or Inspector were here, they'd both agree."

"I don't mean to interrupt, Generals," Boyd said as soon as there was a natural pause long enough for him to speak, "but we just returned from a mission and... What exactly is happening? I don't know about Marshal Connors, but I would be surprised if the Inspector wasn't in the tower right now. Have we lost communication with them? How did this all start?"

"Are we briefing every random agent on the situation now?" Willis snapped, seeming more interested in his losing argument than in answering Boyd or Sin's questions.

"Considering Vega is the only rank 10 field agent we have on the compound at the moment and that their unit is one of the most classified, I don't think writing them off as random agents is very wise," Carhart replied tiredly.

When Willis didn't reply immediately, Carhart looked over at Boyd finally. "We know for a fact that both Connors and your mother are on the compound, both of their cars have been in the parking lot since last night or very early this morning but contacting them is another story..." He crossed his arms over his muscular chest and shook his head in irritation.

"At some point around 0400 hours, the compound was attacked, but I'm sure you gathered that much already. Before anyone really knew what was happening, the electricity went down and the back-up generators were most likely tampered with or destroyed because it never came back up. The phone lines were found to be useless and whoever is attacking had the foresight to use some kind of frequency jammer because radios and cellular phone signals are not responding either."

"Great," Sin said aridly, looking unenthused by this information.

"Precisely." Carhart frowned. "There were a series of explosions powerful enough to damage a number of areas but not flashy enough to garner attention from the outside, which is actually helpful considering the mess that would be caused if civilians were to alert the authorities. Even though the police department knows we're out of their jurisdiction, we don't need civilians getting too involved. They can be misled about the sound of gunshots and the cause of it but not by something as obvious as a large fire," he said dryly.

"But with everyone scattered around the compound in the darkness and with an unknown amount of assailants and casualties, all we could do was gather as many of us as we could and come here to formulate some kind of plan before these guerrilla terrorists could pick us off one by one."

"No one's been up to the tower?" Sin queried, eyebrows drawing together.

"It's been barricaded," the General replied. "But with no way to contact those on the inside, we're not sure if that was a defensive move on the part our people or something that was done to keep our people out so that the assailants could have free run of the place. We were hoping that the amount of guards that are positioned there would be able to provide a somewhat decent defense though."

Boyd glanced around and recognized four of the people inside the room as field agents of ranging ranks; some of them were people he had seen in the training room before or sparred with. He didn't know most of them very well except a few by name, but they obviously must have lived on the compound to have been able to respond so

quickly or make it to the bunker. He tried to think of the others he knew that lived there who would also be trained in combat. "What about Senior Agent Trovosky's team?"

It was unclear whether Stephen decided it was worthwhile to answer the question because it was related to his unit or if he just wanted the random side discussions to be finished already. "Agent Archer is currently set up as a sniper; the others have not checked in or live off the compound. Agent Torres from General Willis' unit is attempting recon as well. Both agents have been checking in periodically and should return shortly. There are no doubt many other field agents who are already engaging in combat but unless our communication starts working again we won't know their positions or status. And, of course, we have those who have already gathered here."

"So where are you at as of now?" Sin asked after a moment, seeming as impatient as Stephen was. "What's the plan to get this under control?"

Carhart looked at Stephen and Willis before he spoke. "Our first move was to get as much information as we can with the men we have out there now and once they return with some insight as to what the state of things is, we can go from there. But two things are certain; we need to get an idea of exactly what we're up against and we definitely need to get inside the tower."

A dark eyebrow rose as Sin eyed them doubtfully. "You don't have any ideas of what you're up against? Thirty seconds before we arrived we deduced a possible scenario."

Willis scowled at him, leaning forward with his hands flat against the table. "I think this situation would be a lot easier if we put him back in his cage where he belongs. All he's doing is exacerbating an already difficult situation and I will not have him disrespecting his superiors while you," he gave Carhart a disdainful look, "do nothing to control him."

Boyd's eyes narrowed at the words but he didn't have the chance to say anything.

"Exacerbating a difficult situation?" Sin asked incredulously. "Excuse the fuck out of me for wanting to know why you're sitting here with your thumb up your ass whining about why you can't go play savior to the whole world when you don't even know how many militants you have out there or who they are. Even Brian over there figured out that it's probably a small but well organized group of people who are trying to do their best to confuse you all with their explosions and darkness so that they can do whatever they planned to do while you're distracted. If they just wanted to kill us all, they'd have a much larger force with them and they'd have already fucking blown us to high hell with remote detonated bombs. And they most likely got in the same way we did-- with the goddamn tunnels that are sitting unblocked and unmonitored under the entire compound."

Willis continued to glower at him but after a while he looked away, not having a suitable answer and after a time it was Carhart who replied as his brow furrowed. "Those tunnels have been a security breach ever since Connors decided to keep them unguarded but I suspect he had his own reasons for that. I'd assumed they were sealed after the creation of these bunkers but obviously that is not the case."

"I was under that impression as well," Stephen said, seeming annoyed with the side arguments and the messiness of the situation. "If that's the case, then the fact is that they are unsecured and Agent Vega is correct at least that if they came from the outside then it's very possible they entered through them. We have to decide what to do about that now." His piercing gaze turned to Sin and Boyd. "You have just come from the tunnels? Did you note any enemy activity within them or at the entrance outside?"

Boyd answered before Sin could, mostly because Sin still looked annoyed and he didn't want the conversation to continue going down paths that resulted in General Willis and him at each other's throats.

"No enemy activity, sir," Boyd verified. None of the generals had sounded surprised about the idea of the tunnels so he had to assume they knew everything about them or at least their entrance and exit points. "However, the park appeared to have been disturbed sometime previous to our arrival so that could have been one of

the entrances they used although it's a possibility that was a coincidence. We didn't encounter anyone until we made it to the bunker's entrance, however; that was the first time we were shot at. Otherwise it was clear from the lab to here."

Stephen stared at him a moment, his eyes sharpening on Boyd's face; it didn't appear as though he disbelieved him, rather that he was thinking harder about this. "It was clear? Were you alerted by someone to come to this specific bunker?"

"No, sir." Boyd met his gaze straight on despite the intensity of it. "We just guessed you would be here. We were looking specifically for General Carhart."

Stephen considered that, seeming somewhat dubious of the idea, but his mind was going down another path because he didn't bother to ask further questions about that. "That's unfortunate; we need more manpower available down here or accessible to communication; it would be best if someone was telling others to come down." He looked over at Willis and Carhart.

"Obviously in their case, leaving the tunnels unsecured resulted in additional backup we wouldn't have had with the tunnels sealed, but so few people know of the tunnels that it's not likely there will be more allies coming through. Regardless of the number of militants present on the compound now, we can't afford to have their numbers expand. Ideally, the outside entrances to the tunnels should be at the very least guarded right now but without some sort of communication our agents would be too far away to send messages to. We should post guards on the entrances within the compound and assign one of them to be a runner to alert us if additional enemies are approaching. That will address the issue of if they are outsiders."

Carhart nodded in agreement and started to turn to the small group of officers to their left but paused. "There's four internal entrances into the two tunnels; one of them leads directly into the basement of the tower. If we send a team in through the connecting tunnel, we'll be able to penetrate it and find out what's going on in there."

He looked over at the group finally. "Captain Darrell, I want three groups of three agents posted at the other entrances, the lowest ranked agent will serve as the runner.

We need to organize a team of the most experienced agents we have here to penetrate the tower, Vega will serve as team leader."

Three sets of eyes snapped to Carhart incredulously and even Sin's mouth pulled down in a slight, dismayed frown. "You can't be serious."

"With all due respect General Carhart--" Darrell began but Willis cut him off.

"You're out of your mind and that is out of the question. We already have very little manpower and you want to send in an entire team with that psychopath? How do we know we can trust him? How do we know he won't turn on *them*?" The outraged general demanded.

Sin stared at the man coldly. "As long as you're not there, it shouldn't come to that."

Willis leaned across the table again, eyebrows drawn down. "Are you threatening a commanding officer?"

"Enough of this nonsense," Carhart snapped. "Willis--"

"No, it's bad enough that you and Stephen want to leave our allies unprotected and exposed but now you want to send the good men we do have out with a raving lunatic. The man is a freak, a monster, he enjoys killing--"

Sin's eyes narrowed dangerously, his entire body growing tense as his hands flexed.

"--and he is just as much of a threat as these cowardly intruders who bombed residential buildings at four in the damned morning. He should have never been released," Willis raged on.

Carhart looked over at Sin but before he could interrupt, the other man continued with his tirade. "He belongs in that box because he's nothing but an animal. Don't any of you remember what he did to poor Lydia Connors?"

Before anyone had time to react, Sin had one impossibly strong hand wrapped around Willis' throat, fingers tightening. Everyone froze and stared at the scene in shock; Thierry looked up from the medic with widened eyes at the sight before him and the same frightened expression that he'd had in the truck returned.

"Keep your fucking mouth shut about things you know nothing about," Sin said flatly.

Everyone watched in shock as Sin effortlessly held the general, who outweighed him by fifty pounds or more, nearly off the ground. Boyd watched the scene, his fingers twitching nervously as he struggled to decide whether he should intervene. But it didn't look like Sin was about to go into one of his berserk fits-- it just seemed like he was pissed. Even so, Boyd stepped forward and touched the back of his partner's shoulder.

"Ignore him," he said quietly, looking over at Willis briefly. "Calm down."

For a moment it didn't seem like Sin would heed the advice, and Captain Darrell fumbled for the small remote that all officers and guards carried, the remote that controlled Sin's collar. But then Sin's shoulders slowly relaxed and the unchecked anger dissipated. He released General Willis abruptly and stepped back, glancing at Boyd for a long moment and then at Carhart.

"Just keep him away from me," he muttered and stalked over to the door, looking anxious to be out of the bunker and away from everyone in it.

Stephen, however, was the first to respond. He looked between Willis and Sin with narrowed eyes, seeming very unimpressed with the entire situation.

"This is the last time I will say this; now is *not* the time for pissing matches. Agent Vega, if you can't control yourself, remove yourself from the situation until you can." Despite the words, it was calmly said.

"Willis." Stephen looked at his fellow General with a hard expression but didn't directly reprimand him; it would be a poor decision in a crisis situation to show disrespect to fellow commanding officers. "I trust Carhart will take appropriate measures

with his men. We don't have time to waste squabbling in here. Our people are in danger as we speak and the longer we wait to execute our orders, the more likelihood for casualties there are."

Willis rubbed his neck and glared at Sin warily, seeming simultaneously furious at the assault and confused by the fact that he'd backed off. "I've given my opinion on every matter you put on the table and I've been subsequently ignored and disrespected each time. From this point on, I remove myself from the discussion."

Carhart stared at the man in incredulous exasperation and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Your concerns have been addressed Willis, and both General Stephen and myself are in agreement about everything that must be done. By getting on your soap box every time an issue is brought forth and ignoring common sense to perpetuate inappropriate behavior based on misinformed gossip and assumptions, you make yourself look ignorant and childish. And if you want to discuss the issue of disrespect, please do not forget that despite the fact that I am the youngest General here, I am still technically your superior and you have second guessed me and insulted me long before Agent Vega arrived."

He paused and took a deep breath, running a hand through his hair and causing it to spike out wildly, not looking at all like the superior of a sixty year old man. "

Your expertise in handling terrorists is needed here, Willis. I'm hoping you will utilize your knowledge and skills to help us in this situation and realize that despite your personal feelings regarding Vega and despite the fact that he allows others to provoke him," Carhart sent a pointed look at Sin, who rolled his eyes in response, "it has been proven time and time again that he is capable of completing assignments alone that other men need an entire team to tackle. Not only that, but he is one of the agents that we have on hand who obviously has knowledge about the tunnels and the locations of their entrances and exits. If you can think of someone more fit to infiltrate the tower, please enlighten me."

Willis said nothing for a long moment and straightened his jacket before he finally cleared his throat. "Fine. Then I will at least say that I'd feel more comfortable if a more... controlled agent of rank also went with the tower team."

It seemed that he wanted to add something, so he spoke again before anyone could respond. "When our scouts return, I also highly suggest sending out the remaining men in groups to the areas that have seen the most activity. It is unlikely that this bunker will be attacked and we gain nothing by hoarding the men in here instead of sending them out to engage."

"Agreed," Stephen said, seeming glad to get the argument behind them. "Agent Archer will accompany Agent Vega."

Willis looked slightly mollified by the comment but before he could speak, an insistent beeping erupted from the computers. Thierry jumped as he looked over at the computers in alarm, as if thinking it was an alert that a missile was launched in their direction or something equally dire, but the medic treating him explained quietly, "That's just the proximity alarm."

Most of the people in the room turned toward the screen that was showing movement. One of the monitors displayed what appeared to be the camera's view by the door to the bunker. A group of people were crouched in the area while two men could be seen shooting into the darkness rapidly. Although the men were turned away, the camera apparently included an infrared light because the view was surprisingly clear, detailed, and seemed more like it was looking out at daytime rather than a nearly pitch black scene.

The quality was good enough that even Boyd, despite having met the man a while ago and for a relatively brief time, could recognize Archer's broad shoulders and military crew cut. Watching Archer duck back while the other man inched forward, a flash of a grin seen on his face as he looked to the side briefly, Boyd wondered if that was he and Sin had looked like on the monitors, minus the pleased expressions.

"Excellent timing," Stephen said in approval, as if it was a testament to their skills that Archer and the others had known to arrive at that moment. He looked toward an agent who immediately pressed a button, causing the bunker door to slide open up by the group of people. They filed into the bunker's main room shortly after with Archer and the other man ducking in last.

The three generals looked expectantly toward the door; a group of seven agents entered the room with Archer in the lead, his serious eyes darting around the room the second he entered even as he reloaded his gun. His gaze only lingered briefly in assessment on Thierry, Sin and then Boyd, before returning to Stephen. The other man who had been at Archer's side on the camera came in last. He looked to be in his twenties with light skin, brown eyes, and short cropped dark hair. His build was lean and very athletic and he held himself with a casual sort of grace even as he glanced around the room quickly.

"General," Archer greeted, checking that the safety was off his gun and then sliding it back into the holster.

"Report," Stephen said immediately.

"The tower remains inaccessible," Archer said evenly, seeming unaffected by the entire situation. "I counted fifteen of our agents who'd congregated there to try to contact Marshal Connors; eight of them were already dead and I brought the rest with me. Visibility is low. Night goggles don't help; they don't provide sufficient details to distinguish enemies from allies so I had to stop my sniping detail. I found two snipers of theirs and killed them but there may be more. It's unknown why they did not have similar problems I did deciding between enemy and ally. They were targeting the tower so they may have told their people to stay away from the entrances outside. The snipers are probably the reason for the high casualties in that area."

Willis looked at other agent expectantly. "What did you find, Andrew? Were you successful in infiltrating the kill zones or getting an idea on how high the casualty count is among our people?"

The young looking agent, Agent Andrew Torres presumably, frowned slightly and raised his shoulders in a rolling shrug. The name and the relation to General Willis immediately caused something to click in Boyd's brain and he had to wonder if this was the same Andrew who'd had a brief relationship with Ryan. It seemed to fit; Willis' focus on search and rescue missions and this Andrew's almost crest-fallen expression fit perfectly with Ryan's description of the terrorist apprehension unit.

"Unfortunately sir, all three kill zones are currently too hot for me to get in solo. I'm still unsure as to how stable the actual structures are but I viewed a number of corpses around the immediate area, which does not lead me to believe that most people inside were unharmed. Upon trying to move closer I was fired at from multiple directions and had to retreat. I wasn't able to meet up with Agent Archer until just recently, on my way back to base, but since he's managed to pick up more people it's possible that a group of us will be able to split up in teams in order to investigate further."

General Willis looked away, clearly frustrated with the situation. "If three out of five of the main residential halls have been attacked directly, it's no wonder we haven't been able to get much manpower down here. Especially since all three house a high concentration of our field agents." He shook his head. "Did you notice any activity anywhere else aside from those particular sites?"

Andrew nodded, brow furrowing as he thought about it. "There appeared to be snipers stationed around Residential Complex A as if they are trying to keep anyone from getting too close or entering the building and that wasn't even one of the structures that was bombed. And, of course, the shooters that are focusing on this bunker and most likely trying to take out additional reinforcements. I heard a lot of shooting at various points during my run but whenever I got close enough to an area, the fighting had already ceased and the spot was deserted with the exception of a corpse sometimes. Also I'll note that there were several corpses that I suspect were a part of the infiltration team as they were all dressed the same and had black masks."

Carhart's eyebrows shot up and he immediately jumped on the information. "Was there anything distinguishing about them?"

"Negative, sir. The handful I came across were of varying ages and ethnicities."

"Hmm." Carhart looked at Stephen and Willis as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Obviously our people are engaging sporadically with the enemy but it seems that we should focus on the areas that have constant activity. Archer and Vega will lead the tower team, that much is certain. The team who will guard the second entrance to that tunnel, which I believe is in the main Infirmary, will accompany them until they ensure that the area is clear and then remain at their station. So that leaves the other two entrances."

Sin looked up finally. "Well the first entrance to the second tunnel is in the empty lab building on Havit Street but that seemed pretty deserted when we came through. The second entrance is in the basement of Residential Complex A though, which is most likely why the enemy is guarding it."

It was no wonder that the enemy hadn't been dispatched from that area already though-- most of the inhabitants of Complex A were upper echelon agents but the majority were non-combatant types like Jeffrey, who lived on the eleventh floor.

Carhart and Stephen looked at each other as if in silent agreement about something. "We'll need a strong team for that area."

Before the conversation could go anywhere else or they could designate any more team leaders, Andrew blurted out suddenly, "I'd like to volunteer for Residential Complex C, sirs."

Boyd spoke up immediately: "I would as well."

The fact that Ryan lived there wasn't lost on Boyd and that was where he knew he had to be to help him. Even if the bombs hadn't directly impacted his floor, smoke or fire could have reached it. The fact that Andrews had mentioned seeing corpses around the buildings wasn't promising either. Even if Ryan had made it out of his apartment he

could have been attacked and even though Boyd had been teaching him some moves, he didn't think Ryan was anywhere near ready to be in combat with these enemies.

Carhart glanced between Andrew and Boyd, not seeming very surprised that either of them seemed in a rush to go to that specific location. However, he seemed torn between ordering them to go with Sin's team and giving the okay, but in the end he nodded. "If the others are fine with that, then I am too."

In the end, nobody had any real objections and the next five minutes were spent designating teams for specific locations. Captain Darrell ended up leading the team that would assault the entrance at Complex A and aside from the teams chosen to take on the tunnel entrance in the lab, to guard the entrance at the Infirmary and the other residential complexes, two snipers were selected to attempt to clean the area around the bunker. There were at least two members of the tech support staff who'd had the foresight to make it to the bunker on their own and they were chosen, along with two agents, to make their way to the location of the diesel backup generators in an effort to fix or re-enable them and get some of the power restored. Everyone was given instructions to pick up more manpower along the way and either bring them along or direct them towards the bunker for further orders.

Once orders were given and plans were created it didn't take long for the teams to assemble and consult on a few last minute issues and to arm themselves in the supply room. Sin and Archer's team was assigned an additional three agents who were introduced as Green, Banks and Williams, while Boyd and Andrew were pairing up with Agents Thomas and Lowe. The teams were ordered to leave in staggered groups so the snipers aiming at the door to the bunker wouldn't have the chance to kill them all in one spot. Captain Darrell's team was the first to depart, disappearing silently out of the room and up the stairs. The team heading toward the lab left a few minutes later.

Agent Thomas moved closer to Boyd and Andrew, asking for specifics of what they were heading into and Andrew ended up moving to the side with him. Eventually Lowe approached as well, so Andrew waved her over, appearing to want to introduce himself and get acquainted with the last-minute team. Although Boyd was interested in

what was being said, he wanted to talk to Sin before one of their teams left and he lost the chance.

After a moment, he approached Sin's side and silently tilted his head toward the main door to the room before heading in that direction. Sin followed him out into the hallway where they had some sense of privacy away from the background murmur of several conversations occurring at once. They stood for a moment and just looked at each other, noting how weary the other looked after a long night of running and fighting, something that obviously wasn't over yet. Blood splatters still stained Sin's clothing and although he most likely looked as impervious as ever to the others, Boyd could tell that he was tired mentally if not physically.

"Hey," Boyd said somewhat pensively and glanced at the door before searching Sin's expression and deciding to get straight to the point. "I know you'll have a lot on your mind, but if the enemy is targeting the tower I can only imagine they're going for the administration. My mother is really just a civilian; I doubt she's ever had real combat training. She wouldn't stand a chance against an attack and... I don't want her to die." He hesitated then asked, "Can you go help her? I'd go myself, but Ryan..."

Sin stared down at him silently at first, his eyes an almost startling contrast to the darkness of the room and the pitch black that Boyd knew awaited them outside. But then he raised one shoulder almost casually and readjusted the strap to the shotgun holster which lay across his chest.

"I will if she'll let me. You know how she is."

"Yes, I do," Boyd said mildly, looking away to search the shadows as if he would find an answer there as to how to deal with his mother. "But if she's really in trouble I hope she will accept help. If not, there's nothing we can do about it." Despite the fact that she had never been a particularly loving woman, she was still his mother, his only living family, and he had to admit that the last few times he'd seen her she had actually seemed to be trying to help in her own way.

He ran a hand tiredly through his hair, noting now that he had a brief moment of respite just how much his jaw hurt and how annoying the blood was dried on the side of his face and neck. "Even so, thank you."

Sin shrugged again, nodding slightly and although it seemed like he wanted to say more, his eyes skipped briefly to the door and he stopped. His team was assembled, armed and heading past them and up the long staircase that led to the main door. He and Archer made eye contact briefly but the other man didn't so much as say anything to rush him, although the look on his face made it clear that they needed to be moving out. Sin didn't think the man was particularly fond of him but at the same time, as long as he was technically the team leader, Archer didn't seem in a rush to step out of line either.

When they were partially up the stairs and mostly out of earshot, Sin looked at Boyd again. "Don't get killed or I'll be very annoyed with you."

Boyd gave him a brief ghost of a smile, amused by the wording and pleased that Sin was concerned for him. At the same time, he couldn't deny he felt the same in return; they'd barely managed to escape Janus already that night and they'd at least had an idea of what to expect going into there. Here, they not only had no idea who exactly the enemy was but also had no idea what the enemy was truly capable of. Sin would be heading straight for the tower which seemed like it could be a focal point of the enemy's attack.

Ever since he'd realized how mortal Sin actually was, Boyd couldn't help but feel a sense of paranoia and fear each time they parted or headed toward danger. The same to you."

They exchanged another lingering look and Sin turned to go, intending to sprint up the stairs and after his team but before he could take even one step, he turned back and gave Boyd a curious narrow-eyed look. "There's been something I've been meaning to ask you since Monterrey-- I may as well do it now before I might potentially get killed and never get a real answer."

"Alright," Boyd said slowly, taken aback by the sudden change in topic, and looked at Sin almost warily. "What is it?"

There was another pause as Sin studied his partner but then he raised his eyebrows. "That night at Lunar when you told Estella I gave you a 'vibe'... what exactly did you mean?"

The question was so random that for a moment Boyd just stared at him; he'd been expecting something serious and alarming and instead he was asking about vibes? He looked at Sin in confusion, not knowing for a moment what he was even talking about, but then he remembered the conversation.

He glanced around, noting that no one was nearby but stepped closer to Sin just in case. "I saw you the night before," he said so quietly that only Sin could possibly hear him. "You had my shirt and moaned my name." He quirked an eyebrow, meeting Sin's eyes. "Aside from the fact that it made it incredibly obvious, it was also very... stimulating."

Sin stared at him blankly for a stretch before shaking his head slowly. "You're such a--"

The echo of someone's voice calling down to him interrupted the sentence and he grimaced slightly. "Never mind. We'll talk about this later." He jabbed a finger at Boyd for emphasis, "Be safe, voyeur."

With that being said, he turned around and sprinted up the stairs, disappearing into the darkness.

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Sin could hear the faint sound of Boyd's quiet laughter drifting behind him and although a slight grin touched his lips, it quickly disappeared as he made his way up to the surface. As his legs moved automatically, he pulled his thoughts back in order and began to think more about the situation they were in.

He'd said on more than one occasion that he didn't respect his superiors and he'd told Boyd flat-out that he wished he could have stayed in Mexico under his assumed name but... But for some reason knowing the compound was being attacked unsettled him in a way he couldn't possibly understand. The Agency housed the people who had made his life hell for the past fifteen years, who had driven him to the brink of insanity and dragged him back just so they could control him again-- but it also was the place where Carhart lived, where Ryan lived. It was the place that tied him to Boyd. It made him wonder if he did have some sense of loyalty for it after all, even if he didn't feel the same sentiment for specific individuals that worked there.

The whole thing irked him for a number of reasons and while he was confident in his abilities and knew that the other agents were more than competent as well, the whole thing just seemed terribly odd. Who were these people? How did they know about the tunnels? Yes, they were unsecured and generally unwatched, but the only people who should even know of their existence worked for the Agency. And how would they know to specifically bomb residential buildings that were mainly occupied by field agents?

Was it just coincidence or was it an inside job? Was there a mole on the compound? Someone who knew where everything was so specifically; someone who had a detailed map of the compound and of the location of the backup generators and tunnels? Someone with ties to Janus? And if that was the case, why weren't they launching a full scale attack? Why hadn't they done as he'd suggested earlier and just used the mole to plant a number of remote detonated bombs to wipe them out? Why were they sneaking in and playing distraction games? What was their real goal?

There were too many questions, too many unknown variables, and it made him wary.

When he caught up to his team, they jogged up the stairs silently, no one speaking until they finally reached the outer blast door. Archer raised his arm to unlock the door manually but before he could do it, Sin grabbed his arm. "Wait."

Archer stopped and looked at him, though he didn't say anything.

Sin glanced at the other three agents in the team before raising an eyebrow at Archer. "How about we make a deal." He said it as more of a statement than a question.

Archer narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What kind of deal?"

A sly smirk crossed Sin's face and Agents Green and Williams looked at each other, unsure of what the notorious man was up to. "I'm not very good at this whole team player, team leader business so... how about I just let you take over that role and in return, you don't give me shit if I wander off on my own once we're in the tower."

Raising an eyebrow, Archer studied Sin for a long moment, appearing to consider the proposal very seriously. It was too hard to read what he was thinking but he didn't seem to dislike the idea. Finally, he nodded curtly. "Deal."

Sin inclined his head slightly, pleased, and released Archer's arm so that he could open the door. They moved out quickly, ducking for cover in the expectation that they would be fired at, but nothing happened. Sin wondered if that meant that the hunters had become the hunted now that their agents were finally on the move. Whatever the case was, they headed towards the Infirmary with caution and although they heard the faint sound of sporadic gunfire deeper in the compound, they didn't encounter anyone until they moved closer to their destination.

"I wish the sun would rise already," Agent Banks muttered quietly, pushing unruly strands of red hair out of her eyes as she tightened her grip on her gun. Her dark eyes flicked through the shadows in paranoia as they jogged towards the tall building to meet up with the other team.

"We still have another hour for that," Williams replied quietly. "And even then, the light won't be strong enough to break through the smog until after seven. We'll have to make do with the night vision for now," He said, touching his goggles absently.

Before Banks could reply, Archer looked at them briefly, a silent order to cut the conversation and the two agents once again fell into silence.

As they approached Hart Place, the tension in the air picked up considerably and Archer gestured for everyone to spread out. Sin ducked down slightly and crouched behind a low stone wall across the street from the building, eyes scanning the perimeter as he quickly located the position of the other team, the team that would remain at the first entrance as they made their way down the tunnel and to the second. He spied Agent Jared, the team leader, at the northeast corner of Hart Place and started to make eye contact with Archer to signal the man's location before he realized that Jared was crouched next to a prone figure.

Shaking his head in disbelief that they'd already lost a man, Sin crouched behind the wall again and made his way quickly to where Archer had ducked behind a tree. "They already have a man down," he muttered softly. "They're laying low so it's probably another sniper."

Archer leaned farther to the left and allowed his gaze to skim briefly over the area. "Make your way to Agent Jared. You'll possibly draw out the location of the shooter."

Sin shrugged and stood up entirely; he didn't mind being bait. He stepped out into the open and not even a second later, the crack of a gunshot exploded in the otherwise eerie silence and he dodged out of the way just in time, barely missing a direct shot to the head. Just as soon as he escaped the first bullet, another one whizzed over his shoulder as he zigzagged across the road, making his body a small and constantly moving target as the shooter attempted to take him out.

Sin could hear Banks and Green hissing at him to take cover but he ignored them and continued to take a meandering route over to Jared until the direction of the shots became obvious. The moment he realized the shooter was on the roof of a small residential building across the street, he rolled out of the way of another bullet and ducked behind a lamp post as he finally made eye contact with Archer. But it seemed Archer was already on it and Sin watched as the older man crouched behind the wall and positioned his rifle, aiming it at the sniper before firing two quick shots. There was a

clattering sound in the distance and their assailant tumbled over the side of the building lifelessly.

Waiting a moment before moving again, Sin jogged over to Jared and recognized the prone individual as a lower ranked agent who'd just been promoted from being a guard. His skin was pale and a considerable amount of blood was spread across his torso, but for the moment he appeared to be alive. Jared looked at Sin warily, moving almost protectively closer to the downed agent and seemed almost defensive as he said, "There were two of them. We managed to take out the other but Agent Shield was wounded before we located the position of the second."

Sin shrugged, not really sure why the man was explaining this to him. "I didn't say anything."

Archer and the other three agents approached quickly, although they stayed relatively spread out across the area. "Where's the rest of your men? Didn't you have three others on your team?" Archer asked, eyes searching the area for signs of them.

"I have two," Jared said as he glanced down at Shield. "They'd made it into the Infirmary just before Shield was taken out and as I didn't have a good vantage point to find the shooter, I ordered them to move ahead while I wait for back-up."

Archer nodded briefly at the logic of that order and continued to scour the area but ultimately he didn't see any sign of enemy movement or any other agents. He finally looked down to study Shield, gaze tracking the way his blood was spreading through Jared's clothing as well. Sin knew as well as Archer did that Shield stood little chance of surviving even if they got him help immediately. He'd already lost a lot of blood and judging from the location it seemed to be flowing from, the bullet had likely struck a vital organ. It was incredibly unlikely he would live past the next few hours.

Even so, Archer jerked his head toward the Infirmary. "Bring him," he ordered to Jared, who looked relieved by the fact Archer wasn't telling him to leave Shield behind. "Carry him alone; we can't afford to lose another gun."

Jared nodded and struggled to half carry, half drag Shield along with them. Banks and Williams spread to the sides while Green covered their backs and Archer and Sin led the way. The Infirmary was not far away and it was likely that there would still be medic staff inside, even if they were hiding.

The door opened silently to the building and Archer silently motioned Sin and Banks to accompany him as they moved quickly inside and secured the area. The main room was empty and didn't appear to have been disturbed by the fighting outside; the glass windows were unbroken, the tables and chairs were upright, and everything was in its place. Archer's hawk-like stare scrutinized the room quickly and efficiently; he seemed to come to a satisfactory conclusion because he motioned the others inside. Once the door was quietly closed, the muffled silence of the building seemed almost eerie compared to the bursts of noise from outside.

They moved quickly through the building, making their way toward the back where the entrance to the basement would be found. They didn't encounter anyone along the way, neither enemies nor hidden allies, and the only sound they made was the occasional scrape of Shield's boots along the ground as Jared dragged him along. They almost reached the back hallway when Archer suddenly raised a hand to stop them. He was staring into a room through his goggles with narrowed eyes and it wasn't until he moved closer that Sin saw what had caused Archer to pause.

One of the larger staff offices was found inside and although the entire room was in disarray, as if the people inside had rushed out in a panic, the main thing of note were the two bodies sprawled on the floor. Sin nudged one of the bodies over with the toe of his boot and he saw that it was indeed a member of the staff, his white jacket stained irreversibly with blood as he stared up at them lifelessly. However it didn't seem that the intruders had simply murdered the man in cold blood; closer inspection showed that both dead employees were armed and had their weapons in hand. It didn't bode well for what had come of the rest of Jared's team, especially considering there were no signs of them at all so far and the intruders seemed to quickly take out anyone who could potentially pose a threat.

Not taking much time to examine the area, they continued on their way to the very back of the building. The infirmary was typically active at all hours of the day and night just like any hospital would be, but the complete lack of staff members indicated that they'd either been able to flee the building and were allowed to do so because they were non-threatening to the enemy or were being held somewhere upstairs with the in-patients. It was obvious that Shield would likely not survive even with help and the extra time it would take to send one of their small team to find a doctor would only put the rest of them in danger. Sin didn't bother to voice these opinions out loud though, he assumed Archer had come to the same conclusions and he seemed rational enough to do the most logical thing in the situation.

At the rear of the building there were two additional examination rooms, the back exit and the door which led to the staircase. They needed to head downstairs to the basement in order to reach the tunnel entrance but before going there, Archer indicated them to stop in front of one of the rooms. Banks, Green and Williams stayed fanned out across the hallway and rear exit to stay alert for any sign of the enemy while Sin stood in the doorway to the room watching Archer and Jared work.

Together, they lifted Shield onto a table where he grimaced and laid back, the sheen of sweat now coating his skin so thoroughly he looked as though he'd been doused in water. His forehead was cool to the touch and he was absolutely coated in blood. Archer didn't seem to notice these points, or perhaps he simply chose not to make it obvious how dire Shield's situation was. He found a roll of bandages and in his typical manner, quickly and efficiently bound Shield's wound as best he could in a short amount of time. Shield hissed at the treatment and made a soft, pathetic groan that caused Jared to watch him with a mixture of guilt and disquiet.

It didn't take long for Archer to finish and although it had seemed like he would probably leave without saying anything, he leaned close to Shield and said quietly, "We'll be back for you, Agent." They left Shield lying on table and exited the room, closing the door behind them.

If there were still enemies in the building, it was obvious that they would be found exactly where the team was headed; in the basement. It put them in the difficult position of managing to get down the completely darkened staircase and down into the basement, where they could be ambushed at any time. In the end Archer opened the door carefully, everyone staying to the side as they did so and Banks tossed in a couple of light sticks, mostly to see if anyone inside would react to the sudden movement.

Nothing happened immediately and Sin slipped inside, crouching down and pressing himself against the wall as he glanced around the area. Through the green glow of his goggles, Sin could see the two bodies that lay sprawled on the staircase. There were no doubts that they were the two remaining members of Jared's team and when Archer slipped inside, he shook his head grimly. He motioned for Jared and Green to remain outside the door to guard the rear exit and hall so that their backs were protected as Williams and Banks slipped inside the stairwell.

It was silently and simultaneously understood that Sin would go down first and he did so without hesitation, stepping around the bodies silently as he disappeared into the pitch blackness that lay below. His boots moved noiselessly down the stairs and as he went down the second flight, he could make out the outline of a man standing near the basement door in the darkness. The man was leaning against the wall, twirling something in his hand and it was obvious from his body language that he didn't sense that anyone was behind him.

Sin crept down slowly, slipping his knife out of his belt and before the man had a chance to react, the blade was drawn across his throat. Sin cradled the body and moved to the side, propping it against the wall as he slipped out another light stick and signaled the others to come down; the brightness of the green glow was a quicker and easier way to signal than using a flashlight. As he did so, he leaned closer to the heavy door and could hear the faint sound of voices on the other side although he couldn't understand exactly what was being said.

Within seconds Archer, Williams and Banks crowded the stairwell and as Sin shoved the light stick back into his pocket, he indicated the corpse on the floor and the

fact that the enemy was obviously also using night-vision goggles. He then pointed to the door and gestured that there were at least three people on the other side. Archer immediately responded by pulling a stun grenade off his belt and first pointing to the door, then himself and Sin. It was likely that the people on the other side would hesitate before attacking immediately after the door opened since it could very well be their own comrade, and that brief moment would be the key to the plan working successfully.

Archer grabbed the door handle and turned it, pushing the door open slightly. The conversation on the other side came to an abrupt halt and that fraction of a second of hesitation was just enough time for Archer to throw the stun grenade inside and slam the door shut again. Within seconds there was the sound of a loud blast, muffled on their end by the steel door, and Archer yanked the door open quickly as he and Sin dove into the room to take advantage of the momentarily stunned intruders. Not only were their ears effected by the blast but night vision goggles had a tendency to strongly amplify the already blinding flash of the grenade.

There were four men in the main room immediately on the other side of the door and between the short, controlled blasts from Archer's MP5 and Sin's accurate shooting, all of them were down in under twenty seconds with little to no resistance due to the effects of the grenade. Williams and Banks moved into the cleared area and Archer signaled for them to investigate the hallway to the left as he and Sin made their way down the right side.

The entire basement was nothing more than several wide open spaces that were designated for equipment storage and other supplies with a large electrical room at the back. The hatch door that actually led down to the tunnel was very subtle and had probably been ignored and forgotten about in the many years of disuse but as they approached the area that it was located in, it was obvious that it wasn't being ignored anymore.

Given the gunfire that had just occurred in the next room, the masked intruders weren't caught off guard this time. Sin and Archer ducked for cover as soon as they entered the area that housed the hatch as gunshots were fired at them from three

directions. There was a brief stand off from across the room and it was only when Banks and Williams entered and provided a distraction that Sin get the chance to unload his shotgun into the small group. They didn't go down quickly or easily though and one managed to shoot Williams in the leg just before he died. Thankfully it wasn't more than a flesh wound and he still had enough mobility to be useful to the team.

They secured the area quickly, ensuring that there were no enemies anywhere else in the basement or in the immediate area below them in the tunnel. Banks went back to find Jared and Green, who would remain in the basement to secure the entrance as Jared's team was originally supposed to do, and after a brief exchange of instructions the rest of the team climbed down the long ladder and into the darkness of the tunnel, making their way to the tower.

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Despite Andrew's warnings of the dangers in the residential areas, Boyd, Andrew, Lowe and Thomas didn't run into any more snipers or enemies along the way. That was primarily due to the fact that other agents appeared to have passed through the area shortly before they'd arrived, judging by the combination of slain Agency employees and masked bodies that were sprawled out along the sidewalk and behind bushes. Boyd and the others didn't stop to look for their allies to see if they were in the area still; it would have delayed them getting inside to check on the building and they couldn't trust that other intruders wouldn't come to replace the ones who had fallen. This was their chance to infiltrate Complex C without a fight and they took the chance quickly.

However, the damage to Complex C did not look promising; there were massive chunks missing in the lower levels, leaving rubble and broken cement in its wake. The metal structure of the building was still relatively intact; the upper floors hadn't caved in but with fourteen floors rising above the severely damaged foundation, it could only be a matter of time before the structure became too unstable to be safe. As they headed into the building, they could see bodies strewn across the debris; the victims appeared to be people who had still been asleep when the complex was hit, or who had been crushed

while trying to escape. Boyd thankfully didn't recognize anyone as they passed by but that wasn't saying much since he couldn't see a lot of faces and in some cases the corpses had been reduced to body parts.

Andrew, Lowe and Thomas looked between the bodies and the way ahead with tense shoulders; Andrew especially seemed to be affected and his loping stroll became more of an angry stride as they headed deeper into the building. Without the night vision goggles, Boyd could tell they would have had a very difficult time navigating the area. Not only was it dark out, but the air was filled with smoke and dust from the collapsed building, making it hard to breathe in some places without wanting to cough continuously. He held his shirt over his mouth and nose as he passed through a particularly heavy cloud and noticed the others do the same.

In spite of the severe damage, it was exactly as the generals had noted; there were no fires to put out and no other damage than the structural collapse. It suggested that rather than using bombs the enemy had actually rigged the lower floors for demolition, probably with TNT and nitroglycerin, and had weakened the structure. If they had demolished the entire lower floors properly, it would have caused the building to implode and collapse in on itself but that kind of project would have taken weeks to months of prior preparation. Instead, it appeared as though they had created enough damage to weaken the structure considerably but not enough to destroy the entire building while still causing a suitable enough distraction for whatever they intended to do.

As they made their way into the building and through the rubble, they didn't see any living residents or intruders and with such a large building there was no point in searching in a group of four. They decided to split into two groups to more efficiently search for enemies or any allies that may be in the area so that they could direct them to the bunker for orders. They decided to split up; one group would start on the lower floors and move upward while the other would head to the top and work downward. It made the most sense for Boyd and Andrew to head toward the top while Thomas and Lowe started on the lower levels. One main reason was that Andrew and Boyd both

knew that they each wanted to check on Ryan on the fifteenth floor and for that they'd be heading in the same direction. In addition to that, Thomas and Lowe had worked together previously and understood each other's style so they seemed satisfied pairing up and appeared comfortable with the decision.

Andrew and Boyd moved quietly upward through the building, slipping in and out of the stairwells as they ran into places they couldn't pass through or heard sounds of unknown origin ahead. Andrew seemed intent on taking control of the situation, not because he seemed to be power-hungry but because he seemed more passionate about getting back at the enemy and deciding how to do so.

He seemed to be a little more reckless than Boyd; there were a few times when he intended to wait to get a better idea of the area ahead of them while Andrew seemed primarily interested in making sure no one was immediately around the corner or obviously in the way before he headed in. Boyd suspected that was due to a difference in training. While he and Sin were trained in subterfuge and assassination, Andrew's unit was trained specifically to stop terrorists and prevent the kinds of things that Boyd and Sin did to others, from happening to their allies. The end result was his style of fighting being more upfront than stealthy, which could also be due to the fact that he was used to being with a team on assignments rather than solo or with only one other person to have his back.

They didn't see many people around for the most part but in some areas in the lower levels, the dust had yet to dissipate fully and it greatly hampered visibility. Sometimes they could hear low talking but the people speaking never seemed to be in the places he and Andrew were passing through and it was difficult to tell if it was residents of the building making their way out or if they were the enemy. As they moved as quickly as possible, Boyd noticed Andrew glancing at him occasionally, almost as if he wanted to say something. Andrew had briefly introduced himself when they'd initially left the bunker and Boyd had barely done more than say his own name back. Given the tense situation and how intent they both were on the mission, it was no surprise that they hadn't had much in the way of conversations.

They passed through an empty hallway connected to the stairwell that would take them toward the area of fifteenth floor that Ryan's apartment was situated. As Boyd paused at a corner and Andrew headed around first, he was finally tired of being distracted by Andrew's occasional glances so he looked at him directly and asked quietly, "What?"

Andrew didn't answer for a moment but finally gave a one shouldered shrug. "Nothing. Ryan just told me a little about you, is all."

Boyd considered that briefly, then said, "I see." He paused; he could have left it at that but he had to admit he was somewhat interested in the person Ryan had been seeing. He also wondered what Ryan had said about him. "Was it anything interesting?"

The other man's mouth quirked up into a slight grin. "Depends on what you think is interesting. Mostly it was about how awesome you are and how everyone sucks for not thinking so as well. He mentioned your partner too."

Boyd couldn't help a smirk at that; Ryan never changed. "I suspect he had rave reviews for Sin, too," he said mildly.

Andrew shrugged again as they entered Ryan's floor. "He didn't go on about him nearly as much. He mainly kept trying to tell me that Vega isn't as bad as everyone says and that he isn't as scary as he looks."

"Well, I won't argue with that assessment," Boyd said quietly.

They continued silently down the hallway and would have kept going but Boyd heard the faintest of sounds. He paused and turned his head toward Andrew; it was difficult to read expressions with the night goggles covering most of their faces but he could tell well enough what he was thinking. Boyd jerked his chin toward the hallway and Andrew nodded then followed him as they headed toward the source of the noise.

They passed several open apartment doors but no one appeared to be in there. Several of the apartments seemed to have been left in a state of disarray and at first Boyd thought it was due to the situation; the bombs hit the building and probably

knocked things down. It wasn't surprising that many apartments and floors appeared to be abandoned; given the state of the lower levels, there was no telling how stable anything above them actually was and the startled residents had most likely evacuated immediately, or tried to until they ran into the enemy.

He suspected that was partially the case but as they passed a few more open apartments, he noticed drawers that were left open, boxes strewn across the floor, and invaluable items scattered carelessly across tables and chairs. Although it was possible that the residents had been trying to grab all their valuables before running off, he highly doubted that anyone at the Agency would be that concerned about material things to put that above the alarming situation that was whirling around them.

The implication was clear; it seemed that someone had been in there afterwards, looting and the apartment doors that had been left open in each staff members rush to get out had given them the chance to do so. Boyd couldn't see Andrew's expression but he did notice that his shoulders seemed to tense the more he looked in the open apartments and his stride seemed to lose a sense of the casualness it held before.

Partially down the hallway there was another open door to an apartment; Boyd didn't hear any voices inside but there the distinct sound of things being shuffled around and fabric rustling. Andrew paused briefly on one side of the open door and peered in, then flattened himself against the wall again and waited a second before moving quickly to the other side. Boyd briefly looked into the room, noting that a masked man was facing away from them as he rifled through a hutch against the far wall. Boxes were strewn across the room, looking as though they'd been carelessly thrown to the side when they yielded nothing interesting.

He didn't appear to be armed but that didn't mean guns weren't hidden beneath his clothing. His pockets appeared to already be filled with items and as Boyd watched, he held up what appeared to be an old necklace that had been encased in wrapping to protect it. The man immediately shoved it in his pocket and let the case fall to the floor. He didn't seem aware of their presence and no one else could be seen or heard in the apartment.

Andrew jerked his head toward the door and the two of them silently slipped into the room. Boyd automatically assessed the layout; an open kitchenette sat to the left with an island counter in the center and a half wall that separated it from the living room. To the right of the door, an old heavy couch sat several feet in at an angle, facing the far wall where the television sat in the hutch the man was looking through. An inner hallway led further into apartment with what appeared to be at least three doors, all shut.

Boyd suspected that set up was similar to Ryan's place, which meant one was a closet, one the bathroom and one the bedroom. From the better vantage point, Boyd still didn't see anyone else in the apartment so he returned his attention to the man. It was obvious from the way the enemy had overtaken the Agency that these were professionals who had no qualms with killing people and would know better than to be alone without a weapon.

"Drop it!" Andrew yelled abruptly at the man, who was caught off guard with his hands still occupied, but almost simultaneously Boyd automatically shot the man in the head.

Andrew looked at Boyd in a manner that showed even without a visible expression that he was startled but before they could say anything, Boyd noticed movement in the hallway. He ducked just in time to avoid getting shot and saw Andrew drop behind the couch. Boyd was too far away and had to throw himself behind the counter; he was almost too slow and felt the bite of a bullet grazing his leg. He stayed crouched behind the island, hearing the gunfire between the man and Andrew like staccato thunder claps encased in the room.

Boyd started to look quickly around the side and almost got shot in the head; he had to jerk back behind the counter again and waited a few seconds then tried from the other side. He nearly got hit again and with narrowed eyes had to pull back. The man was a fast shot; he was able to hold Andrew off and yet each time Boyd tried to so much as peek around the edge he was able to almost kill him.

The cover Boyd had chosen put him at a disadvantage; both sides of the island were well within view of the inner hallway so he was caught there. He wouldn't be able to get to a new hiding place without running straight into the open, a perfect target for the enemy who he had no doubts would be able to kill him in the space of time it would take him to get to a new vantage point.

As for himself, he wasn't very well-versed with guns; although he'd had training with them, he could hit people when he aimed at them and he could shoot people in the head provided they weren't moving around too much, he was a relatively average shot. Truthfully, he didn't even feel completely comfortable with them, although he wasn't as uneasy about them as he was with knives; he preferred other weapons and improvisation. As a result, without a better vantage point, the ability to look long enough to be able to properly aim at the man or access any other weapons within reach, he was basically unable to do anything.

Andrew and the man continued to exchange gunfire; although Boyd couldn't see what was happening, he could tell from the sound of their fight that they each were very good at aiming and didn't need to waste extra bullets. He heard the man suddenly make a muffled noise of pain and he quickly glanced around the edge of the counter, noting that he appeared to be holding one hand against his lower leg.

Boyd fired at him but missed; he started to jerk back behind the counter and the man shot at him, missing Boyd but hitting the end of the side of his gun as it disappeared around the edge of the island. The sudden pressure jerked it abruptly to the side, causing it to fly out of Boyd's hand and skitter across the floor. It twisted against Boyd's finger violently in the process, causing him to hiss in pain. He moved his fingers to try to get the ringing sting to dissipate; as it was, he didn't feel like he'd be able to hold the gun properly or pull the trigger for a moment, even if he could reach it without putting himself in danger. He couldn't tell if that man had done it on purpose or not but whatever the case, for the moment he'd effectively cut the danger down from two people to one.

From what he'd seen, Andrew seemed to be aiming for non-vitals on the man. If he was able to hit the man's leg during that chaos, Boyd didn't doubt that he would have been able to get a lethal shot.

Boyd looked down at his hands; he couldn't see color properly with the night goggles on but he could tell that his fingers were a little darker, probably red from the abrupt pressure of the gun. He tried looking around for any other weapons in view but he was stuck; there was nothing within reach and the counter didn't even have any cupboards for him to search through.

He was just reaching for the gun again when the gunfire abruptly stopped and he heard the unmistakable sound of a body sliding to the floor. He stayed still for a moment, not knowing whether it had been Andrew or the man who had fallen, and he grabbed the gun and peered quickly around the corner. The man was slumped at the end of the hallway and at that same moment, Andrew appeared by the hallway with his gun drawn as he quickly checked the other rooms for any other enemies. While he did that, Boyd stopped to check the bodies for any identifying information that could give them an idea as to where they came from. There was nothing that stood out though; the only similarity between the two was that they were both men that wore all black and were masked.

Boyd was just standing from checking the second body as Andrew returned to the living room with a shake of his head to indicate no one else had been around.

"Are you okay?" Andrew asked as he drew closer to Boyd, sounded a little perturbed.

Boyd nodded, absently rubbing his fingers. They ached but he could move them; he was lucky he hadn't been any slower and the man hadn't shot him in the hand or fingers instead. "I'm fine." He looked toward the man then to Andrew. "You're a good shot."

Andrew lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Top of my class." Inclining his head in acknowledgment, Boyd started to pass by Andrew but was stopped by a hand on his

arm. He looked back expectantly, noting that Andrew was frowning. "Why'd you kill him right away?"

"Because he would have killed us," Boyd said simply.

"He may have had information," Andrew pointed out.

"What good is information if we die before we can relay it?"

"It's worth it to try to take hostages, to try to flip people," Andrew insisted. "If we can get inside information now we could save lives. What if they have other devices planted somewhere that they plan to detonate sometime soon? What if they plan to attack again in the future? We need to know these things, to prepare for it, to protect ourselves. How many good people have already died or been severely injured because we were caught by surprise? If you just kill them without even asking anything, you'll never even know where they came from. It leaves you vulnerable to similar attacks in the future because you didn't stop to get any Intel."

Andrew's body language and tone was strong with determination. "There are a hell of a lot of bad guys that can be flipped to give up info on the higher-ups. They don't want to be caught or hurt any more than the next guy and some of them don't care about their cause or boss so much once their own life is in danger. It's worth it to try; if we don't, we're leaving a lot of peoples' lives up to chance. I don't know about you but I couldn't live with myself if I knew a lot of allies died just because I didn't want to take the time to ask the enemy a few questions ahead of time."

"I don't trust them," Boyd said seriously. "You shouldn't either. Obviously they're our enemy so I know you're not about to invite them out to coffee but the more chances you give them the more time they have to figure out a way to take advantage of you, to catch you off guard and kill you. How would we have carried a hostile hostage around anyway? And if we left him here it's entirely possible he'd escape. Or what if we decided to drag him around with us and we ran into his comrades? They would simply have to free him and we'd have one more enemy, which is not even assuming by that point

we've found allies we're trying to escape with and would be endangering with his presence."

Boyd raised an eyebrow although Andrew couldn't see it behind the night goggles.

"It's impractical in this situation. These people are professionals so a few light-hearted questions in this room wouldn't have gotten anything out of him. We wouldn't have had any way of transporting him to a more secure facility, not that one really exists in this situation except possibly the bunker and then we'd just be showing him exactly what our command post looks like inside including the number of generals and agents and camera angles we're privy to. He was trying to kill us and his comrade would have done the same if we'd given him the chance."

They stood there a moment facing each other, perfect examples of the different training their units had received, before Andrew looked away with a frown. "I don't agree." He didn't sound angry; he was stating a fact.

"That's fine," Boyd said, uncaring. "Right now I'm more concerned about Ryan." He turned toward the door again and started to head out.

Andrew let Boyd's arm slip from his grip, then sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah, okay. Me too." He was only seconds behind Boyd and together they silently but quickly headed toward Ryan's apartment.

Although they didn't say anything, this time the same thing was on their minds; if the enemy was armed and still inside the building trying to loot the apartments, that posed a threat to Ryan if he hadn't left his apartment yet and his door was somehow open or damaged. There didn't appear to be any obvious damage in the hallway outside the apartment but that didn't mean there couldn't have been damage elsewhere or Ryan couldn't have been hurt in other ways. Or, worse, decided to leave his apartment and was caught by an enemy somewhere else in the complex.

For some reason, Boyd found himself growing more uneasy as they drew closer and it sounded so silent in the area. It wasn't that he expected Ryan to be watching anime with the sound blasted in the middle of a situation like this but the total silence was a little alarming. He'd expected for there to be a sign that he was alive.

They paused at the door, one on either side, and looked toward each other for a moment although they couldn't read each other's expression with the night goggles on. Andrew tried the doorknob even though he didn't really believe it would open. With the power out, there was no way to unlock the door even if they'd had the keycard to get in unless Ryan opened it from the inside. "Ryan! It's Andrew and Boyd! You in there?"

There was no answer and once again, no sounds to indicate that anyone was actually inside the apartment.

Andrew's mouth tightened and he moved back to the side, looking toward Boyd then nodding at the door with his gun raised. Boyd shook his head and motioned for him to move away; Andrew tilted his head in silent question but stepped back and monitored the hallway, gun raised in case any enemies appeared.

Boyd crouched near the lock, then took the night goggles off and pulled the small detector he'd used at Hale's mansion out of his pocket. He hadn't bothered to grab a flashlight while he was in the bunker because night goggles were far better in the dark but in this instance he wanted to see what he was doing without the color deadening aspect of the goggles.

Andrew had seemed ready to try to slam his way into the apartment but Boyd wasn't comfortable with that; if Ryan was in there and wasn't answering, it was possible he had made his way to the door before something had happened. Perhaps he'd been overcome by his illness or something had fallen on him when the building was damaged. If they slammed the door out of the way and went running in there with guns half-cocked, they could potentially hurt Ryan even more. Boyd was also fairly certain that the enemy hadn't made it inside; as far as he'd been able to tell, they were primarily opportunists and no apartment doors had appeared to have been forced open.

With a little jimmying he was able to pull the cover plate off the lock; using the flashlight function of the detector, he peered at the wires and the mechanisms inside. He'd been told once that there was a way to manually open the Agency's keycard locks but he'd never attempted it; with the electricity out it wasn't like he could unintentionally trip any alarms or electrocute himself so he decided to try. After a few long moments of working on the lock while Andrew remained alert, Boyd finally heard a soft click. He stood, placing the detector back in his pocket and putting the night goggles on again and then glanced toward Andrew, who nodded then returned his attention to their surroundings.

"Ryan," Boyd called as a warning, "we're coming in." He didn't receive an answer or any indication that he'd been heard.

The door opened with little trouble and the two of them entered the room, automatically looking around for any sign of Ryan.

The living room itself was a mess; when the detonation devices went off the entire building had likely shaken violently and the end result was several pieces of furniture being knocked over on their sides. Ryan's desk had fallen backwards, his laptop, mess of papers and action figures dumped on the floor in disarray. The bookcase in the corner had also fallen over and a mess of books, manga and comics were strewn across the rug. However, nowhere in the mess did they see Ryan and the silence of the apartment alarmed Boyd considerably.

They picked their way through the mess carefully and Andrew called out urgently for his ex-lover, body tense beside Boyd as he shoved large obstacles out of their way. "Where the hell could he be?" Andrew demanded out loud, frustration evident in his voice as he peered into the empty bathroom.

Boyd shook his head and didn't answer. The idea of Ryan being out in the courtyard somewhere was worse than him being trapped in this mess. An even worse thought was the idea of him being among the mutilated bodies in the bottom floors of the building. His chest tightened and although he didn't show any outward signs of

emotion, his heartbeat sped up. He pushed the bedroom door open and swept his green tinted gaze over the dark room for a moment, almost starting to turn and leave when a soft sound caught his ear.

It wasn't exactly a moan and wasn't exactly a whimper, but it was a definite pained sound. Boyd moved quickly into the room and surveyed the surroundings; the overturned chest of drawers and the bed. "Ryan?"

There was another sound and this time it sounded almost smothered, strangled. Eyebrows knotting, Boyd moved toward the mattress which had slid off the box spring and yanked on it with all of his strength, struggling with the weight of it for a moment before he realized that Ryan's thin, sickly body was trapped beneath it and that it was angled so that the corner was crushing into his chest.

Swearing out loud, Boyd yanked on the large mattress and righted it, sitting it on the box spring before he scrambled over the side of the bed and called out for Andrew. Ryan's face was slack and covered with dust, his breathing labored as he made an occasional wheezing sound that at least no longer seemed strangled. He didn't appear entirely conscious but he had no other visible injuries and Boyd was just thankful that he was alive.

"Goddammit," Andrew hissed, voice thick with concern as he stared down at the slender man.

Boyd crouched awkwardly beside Ryan. "Ryan? I'm going to check for injuries. If you can understand me, say yes." Ryan didn't answer as Boyd had expected but the comment served two purposes; one, to tell Ryan what was happening in case he was conscious enough to understand, and two, to verify the level of his awareness.

He conducted a quick head to toe assessment to check for any injuries that may affect their rescue. There wasn't any airway obstruction, there didn't appear to be blood anywhere, he didn't feel any broken or fractured bones, but Ryan was probably in shock; they would have to deal with that outside the building. He examined his neck next and didn't notice any obvious signs of closed head, neck, or spinal injuries that

would complicate their removal of him; however, they wouldn't know for certain until they could get him to better treatment.

With Ryan mostly unconscious it was difficult to check for anything like pain in the neck so they had to operate on the assumption that there were injuries they were unaware of that would be made worse if they handled him too roughly. At the same time, in an unstable building and situation, it was most important to get Ryan out of there and they didn't have the luxury of time to find a perfect solution to get him down fifteen flights without any trouble.

"No sign of C spine or other major injuries but we should still be careful." Boyd turned to look at Andrew, who was standing there still staring with a grim look on his face. When he didn't move immediately, Boyd ordered, "Help me. Find something to carry him with."

Andrew seemed to come back to himself and quickly scrounged through the living room until he returned with a simple, sturdy chair that hadn't been broken in the chaos. It took quite a bit of maneuvering but between the two of them they were able to support Ryan's back and neck as they sat him on the chair. Andrew stood behind the chair and carefully tipped it back on its hind legs so it leaned against his stomach while Boyd carefully moved Ryan's to the side just enough to grab the front legs of the chair. Ryan's head tilted forward in that position but they couldn't help it; Boyd just hoped he didn't have a spinal injury this was worsening.

Although the carrying Ryan with a chair was the best way to deal with narrow, uneven spaces and going down stairs, it also meant neither of them had a free hand for a weapon. That forced them to go a little slower than they would have preferred, but they couldn't afford to run headlong into enemies with an injured comrade and no guns drawn.

As they passed through the building, they set Ryan down on each floor. Andrew stayed with Ryan to monitor his health while Boyd silently and efficiently checked the hallways and main apartment rooms for signs of walking wounded; people who were

uninjured or barely hurt and still in the building. Normally he'd yell out to such people, telling them to come to the sound of his voice, but since there was still a large chance of hostile activity in the area, he didn't want to alert anyone to their presence.

He found plenty of abandoned apartments, some corpses of people who had been crushed under debris, and a few other victims who were severely injured or unable to move but were still alive. Although their orders had been to eliminate hostiles from the area, Boyd suspected that Carhart wouldn't exactly complain that they'd also taken the liberty of assessing damage of one of the largest residential buildings on the lot.

The generals had been adamant that they take out the enemy before worrying about the wounded but Boyd highly doubted that Andrew had suggested this area because of the high level of enemies present; he probably hadn't even known that there were enemies inside when he'd suggested it. It was possible that Andrew's goal of rescuing Ryan hadn't been as transparent to Carhart, who didn't know about he and Ryan's past relationship, but Boyd didn't particularly think Carhart would be upset about it considering he had his own ties to the sickly young man.

So with their main shared objective fulfilled, they went about taking in as much of the layout as they could so that at least others could be saved later before the building really did collapse in on itself. They didn't have time or the ability to stop to rescue everyone who was seriously injured so Boyd kept a running tally in his mind documenting the number of victims he found, where they were located, and anything he noted from the quick glances into the apartments such as if the people were caught under something heavy. Over the course of several floors, he found seven people caught under debris that looked heavy enough that he suspected it would require cribbing or equipment to extract them.

A few of the people were awake enough to realize that someone had come and gone and some of them, likely staff who were not used to combat or crisis situations, yelled out in fear and pain, frantically wondering why they were leaving. The best he could tell them was that help was coming; although he didn't say it aloud, he knew they were injured severely enough that he would be unable to help them anyway unless they

were brought to the infirmary. With the instability of the building, he didn't dare try to move anything too heavy or roughly on his own; although the enemy had failed to hit the most crucial points in the foundation, they had still damaged the building enough that they had to worry about dynamic weight of people moving around, impact weight from something that could still fall down, and even the wind itself could affect the balance and stability of the building.

As a result, it was important to minimize their exposure in the building and get out as soon as possible, even if that meant leaving people behind him. If he and Andrew were injured or killed on their way out then no one would know what the inside of the building was like or where the victims were that needed help. Ryan would be helpless and probably die without ever regaining consciousness, Thomas and Lowe could put themselves in danger by attempting to rescue them and if none of their team returned then the command post would likely send in another team that could meet the same fate.

They were lucky in that they didn't run into the enemy on their descent back down the building but even Ryan's alarmingly light weight was a strain on their muscles by the eighth flight. Boyd could feel his body trembling lightly with a combination of weariness, stress, and simply the fact that he had already done so much that night and he needed to rest. They didn't dare slow or stop, though; Ryan's breathing had become more labored as they descended closer to the heavier clouds of dust and other airborne debris hovering in the hallways like fog. He'd started to cough and there were a few times when his breath caught briefly in pauses that were startling each time, as if he'd stop breathing. They tried to keep his head tilted back as much as possible in order to keep his airway free but it was difficult with the chair carry and they didn't have a dust mask to give him.

Boyd found himself searching the floors even more quickly than before, barely taking the time to even glance inside rooms whereas before he'd at least poke his whole head inside provided he felt it was safe. Considering the fact that the enemy had detonated the bombs in the middle of the night with people still asleep, there were

surprisingly few people who had been killed, although the number did seem to rise the lower they went. It made him wonder what sort of scenes Thomas and Lowe were running across. And what of the enemy Andrew and he had run across upstairs; was anyone like that down here? From what the generals and Sin had said regarding the exit and entrance points of the tunnels, it didn't seem likely that there was any real reason for hostiles to still be in the area after using it for their initial distraction.

It was entirely possible, considering the level of skill and professionalism that the other intruders had displayed so far, that the looters had simply been rogue agents and had been acting alone in their quest for money. That still didn't mean that others weren't lurking around with other goals, though.

As if bidden by the thought, he heard scraping of boots against debris ahead of him and he ducked into an empty apartment, his gun drawn as he waited with a pounding heart for the person to pass so he could see if they were friend or foe. As the footsteps approached he was able to determine that there were two people but they weren't speaking to each other. He watched sidelong as they moved quietly past the door and was relieved to recognize Thomas and Lowe. He put his gun away and moved into the hallway behind them.

"Thomas, Lowe." He said it quiet enough not to let his voice carry in case the enemy was nearby but even that sudden noise caused them both to spin and aim their guns at him, mouths in taut lines even as he held his hands up to show he had no weapon. Within a few seconds, they recognized him; he saw their shoulders relax as they held their guns down to the side.

Thomas let out a low breath, shaking his head. "Sorry. It's just this place..." He waved his free hand vaguely to indicate the entire situation.

Boyd didn't see reason for him to apologize for being on guard, although if he'd been an enemy he could have killed them before they'd turned around. He just shook his head at them and passed between the two of them, heading toward Andrew. "How many?"

"A lot of dead," Lowe replied, her voice carefully neutral but there was a slight tremble to it as if she were troubled. The hint of emotion was not otherwise visible in the bit of her expression they could see or her body language so Boyd didn't think about it too much other than to assume she was disquieted by the situation. "No walking wounded, no agents; I think they already escaped. There were fifteen injured that will need further help."

Boyd inclined his head. "I found similar; seven need immediate attention. Did you run into the enemy?"

"One guy," Thomas said flatly. "He's dead." Beside him, Lowe seemed to hold herself stiffly but she didn't speak.

Nodding again, Boyd led them toward Andrew, who seemed relieved to see the rest of the team. Thomas and Lowe turned their heads toward each other at the sight of Ryan on the chair but they said nothing; it wasn't exactly normal procedure for Andrew and Boyd to have extracted Ryan like that.

Without them speaking, Boyd knew what they were thinking. Technically, Ryan should have been left behind like the other victims they'd found who had been unable to move, to be recovered by rescue teams. Even though they'd managed to bring him down the building without any major incidents, how were they expecting to get him safely to the bunker in such an uncertain situation with enemy fire that could rain down on them at any time? They needed access to their weapons, they needed to be unburdened.

Lowe's mouth seemed especially set in a tight line; Boyd didn't understand exactly why until he overheard Thomas say quietly into her ear, "You couldn't have done anything for her, Rachel. It was too late."

Lowe just shook her head once, an angry gesture, and stepped away from Thomas to flank one side of the chair with her gun drawn; Thomas simply drew his gun and moved to the other side without speaking again.

Ryan's complexion seemed paler by the second and this close to the lowest floors he could hardly seem to breathe. Lowe very studiously didn't look at him but there was tension in her arms and shoulders that increased with each ragged breath Ryan audibly drew in.

Boyd looked toward Andrew who just shook his head once and carefully tipped the chair backward. The two of them didn't need to speak to understand that they were each extremely concerned for Ryan's health and needed to get out of there as soon as possible. Boyd faced forward once again and grabbed the front chair legs. Ryan's legs lifelessly rocked against Boyd's sides as they walked and even through the layers of clothing he could feel the heat of his skin. He was worried that it would all be for nothing, that Ryan's illness would prove to be the death of him even if they managed to make it to the bunker unharmed.

Together, the four of them made their way as carefully and quickly out of Complex C as they could. As they headed out into the night, Boyd couldn't help but glance up at the tower which loomed in the distance; wondering silently how Sin was doing and whether or not he was okay.

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Both tunnels ran underground between the two buildings that held the entrances and branched out at some point in the middle, leading off the compound and to whatever exit point that had been designated. The lab and Complex A led to Silver Lake Park and as far as Sin knew, the tower tunnel led to another restricted zone that was on the outskirts of the city.

They approached the branch with caution, expecting another fight as they drew closer, but there was nobody at the immediate opening and so they continued on their way. Williams asked whether or not two of them should search the exit point and see if militants were guarding that area as well but since their team was already a man short, Archer decided against such an action when they still didn't know how hot the actual tower was.

They jogged through the tunnel quickly, silently; the only sounds were their booted feet splashing quietly in the thin layer of water that flowed above the concrete. But as they moved closer to the tower entrance, anxiety picked up and the tension was thick in the air. Once again their opponents had the high ground; once again there was a high chance of them being slaughtered before they even made it into the tower. All it would take was two enemies with sub-machine guns at the end or top of the tunnel, and the entire team could be killed before they even got a shot off. The only thing they could count on at this point was somehow gaining the element of surprise and hoping that despite the relatively small groups of intruders found outside on the compound, there wasn't a large concentration of them inside the tower.

Sin moved ahead of the team automatically, mostly because he was faster and seemed to have better awareness of sound, but no one objected to the matter. Even though he was anything but leader material, it was generally accepted that he was the best fighter and had the best chance of surviving situations that most other people did not. He was a risk taker while most other agents put more caution into their actions; trying to change him would be a fruitless effort and so no one objected to his behavior as long as it didn't endanger anyone else.

So he continued to run ahead, listening and looking as he waited for a sign that this would either get ugly or be really simple. There was still the possibility that agents had been the ones to block off the entrance to the tower and if that was the case, there would be no more fighting after this point.

But he didn't think that was the case.

Not when the militants seemed to know the compound so well; not when they'd done little more in other areas than cause distractions. And certainly not when Connors, Vivienne and a large quantity of sensitive information was located in the tower.

There was no way the intruders had just bypassed it entirely.

For most of the run, nothing happened and no one got in their way but as they drew closer to the entrance, Sin's eyes narrowed slightly as he zeroed in on the end of

the tunnel. They were still a quarter mile away from the exit and although it was difficult to see that far in the darkness, even with the illumination from the goggles, he stopped abruptly as he saw the distinct forms of two men standing near the ladder.

He automatically ducked down and flattened himself against the wall, turning to look back at Archer and the rest of the team in the hopes that they would get the picture and do the same. Although it was hard to see from this distance, sounds echoed off the tunnel walls loudly and their footsteps would be a dead give-away.

Archer and Banks immediately followed his actions but Williams hesitated, staring ahead to get an idea of what Sin could be seeing so far in front of them. The hesitation and the sounds of his boots splashing, something he couldn't avoid considering he was now moving with a limp, cost them the element of surprise and a burst of gunfire exploded in their direction. Williams was thrown back from the impact and his body slammed against the side of the tunnel with a resounding thunk as he cried out in pain. Banks scrambled over to his side but continued gunfire forced her to freeze in place and pin herself tighter against the wall.

Archer scowled and glared in the direction of their attackers, unable to see clearly because of the distance that still remained. The gunfire continued sporadically and as they remained ducked down, it became obvious from the direction of the shots that the intruders were firing randomly and really did not know exactly where they were.

Banks started to sit up and move towards Williams again but Archer grabbed her arm to keep her from moving; that was what had drawn attention to them in the first place.

"How far?" he hissed to Sin, his voice barely a whisper.

"Four hundred yards, give or take," Sin replied and fingered his Ruger as he debated the effectiveness of it in this situation.

Archer looked over at him silently for a moment but didn't say anything and slid down into a prone position on the ground as he unhooked his rifle. Through the scope of

the M24, he could easily make out the two men who were hunkered down at the far end of the tunnel. One man appeared to be talking as the other frowned in their direction and sent another burst of gunfire their way.

The bullets ricocheted around them wildly, one bouncing off the wall and slamming into Archer's arm. He grit his teeth violently, not making a sound even as his hands shook slightly from the pain. Another blast of gunfire echoed down the tunnel.

"Take them out," Sin growled at him quietly. Their assailants weren't stupid; although they couldn't tell their exact positions, they were aiming for the spot that Williams' scream and fall had come from. It'd only be so long before their random shots struck something vital.

Archer ignored the pain that spread through him and focused on his targets once again. Forcing his hands to remain still, he fired. One man fell and as the other began spraying bullets in their direction indiscriminately; Archer took him out as well with a clean head shot. After the resounding ring of gunshots died down, there was complete silence.

Sin stood up and looked over in the direction of Williams with a slight frown but didn't say anything. He wasn't here to tell these people what to do; that was Archer's problem now. All he cared about at the moment was keeping his promise to Boyd and getting up to Vivienne. At this point, the team was slowing him down. He was used to doing things on his own and not having to carry the weight of others; it was aggravating and that had been one of the things that he'd disliked about the idea of being with a partner before he'd actually gotten to know Boyd.

"Did it penetrate your vest?" Archer asked shortly as he got to his feet, voice gruff but not impatient with the unfortunate agent. This was the second time he'd been shot since the team had assembled and there was no doubt he was going to be left behind if the bullet had managed to hinder him any more than his leg already was.

"No," Williams grunted faintly. There was the sound of water sloshing around as he struggled to get upright. "But it still hurt like a motherfucker."

"Then get up and stop wasting time," Sin snapped, unable to keep his impatience to himself anymore. "I have an objective and if I fail it because you're taking too long splashing around in the puddles, you'll find the next bullet penetrating your skull."

There was a brief silence but no one seemed ready to argue with him or antagonize him further. Not when his voice was already darkened with a sharp undertone of danger and not when he really did make a good point.

Within the next minute they were on their way again and as they carefully climbed the ladder that led up into the basement of the Tower, surprisingly they didn't run into any more hostiles in the immediate area. Sin didn't know if that was a good or bad thing though; he didn't really know how to take anything that happened in this situation. The entire tower was full of non-combatant types on a regular basis with the exception of field agents who were briefing, debriefing or training. The situation could have already been handled by the agents inside or the hostiles could have already corralled and overpowered the defenseless employees who typically worked in the tower at this hour of the morning. Anything was possible.

As soon as they reached the main floor, the muted silence of the area disturbed him. As they spread out across the floor and the rest of the team began doing a sweep, Sin was not surprised by the number of unconscious or dead people he saw in the halls and lobbies. They appeared mostly to be field agents, trainers; he recognized David Nakamura sprawled outside the training room but didn't know if the man was unconscious or slain. Despite that, there were no hostiles present and as the team split up to find survivors and to open the main doors, Sin went his own way just as he'd said and began to sprint up the long flights of stairs.

The silence, the presence of so many dead and no killers, could either mean that the intruders had gone floor by floor decimating any threats or that they'd already finished what they'd come to do and had escaped already. If that was the case, Vivienne was most likely already dead and he'd have failed Boyd before even getting into the tower. If that was the case, who knew what sensitive material the intruders

could have gotten their hands on. Who knew what the hell this event would lead to for everyone, he and Boyd included?

But something told him that it wasn't the case. Something told him that they were still here somewhere. Why else would there have still been guards at the base of the tunnel?

His feet moved automatically, skipping rows of stairs as he made his way up to the seventeenth floor and ignored the eerie muted silence that accompanied the feeling that there should have been some sign of life behind the doors he passed but that for some reason there wasn't. By the time he reached the tenth floor, suddenly the lights flickered on briefly before dying again. By the time he reached the twelfth, his goggles were off and the dim, bluish light from the backup generators flooded the staircase.

At least the tech support guys had been successful in their mission which was a damn good thing; otherwise he would have had a lot of trouble even getting onto the seventeenth floor with the keycard system down if the intruders hadn't already destroyed the door in order to get inside. When he reached the executive level he saw that the door was indeed damaged; the lock was dismantled and melted through, and he scowled darkly at what that could mean.

Sin pushed the door open slightly, slipping inside and immediately ducking down as he crept across the main lobby that separated Vivienne's area from Connor's. The silence in the area was heavy but it didn't have the same muted quality as it had downstairs; he didn't have the feeling that there were dead people in the immediate area, the feeling of a presence that no longer really had a presence. But even so, considering the state of the door it had obviously been infiltrated and he had very little hope as to what he would find. It was possible that Vivienne had been killed in her office far off in the other wing or that she'd even been kidnapped for some purpose.

His mind continued to wander down these dark avenues but as he moved closer to the hallway that led to Vivienne's wing, he heard the faint sound of speaking drifting

from Connors'. His eyebrows drew together slightly and he turned, going in that direction instead, the sound growing slightly in volume as he moved closer.

When he entered the inner lobby of Connor's wing, he immediately crouched down further and pressed himself against the side of Samuel's desk, peeking around it at Connors' door. It was closed but he could distinctly recognize the sound of Connors' quiet anger, the loathing in his tone evident even if Sin could only make out a scant word here and there of what was being said. It seemed that he was arguing with a man but the other voice was too faint for Sin to understand any of what was being said. He saw shadows moving under the door and by the sound of Connors' voice, there was no doubt as to where the conversation was going to lead.

He began to move automatically, to eliminate the threat, his hands automatically tucking away the Ruger so that he could blast a hole in whoever was on the other side of the door with his shotgun but just as he started to rise... something caught his eye.

Vivienne stood pressed against an ancillary hallway, staring around the corner at Connors' door. For a moment he didn't think she could hear them, that she didn't know what was happening, but then her pale blue eyes turned on him and the look she gave him caused him to stop in his tracks.

Sin had never been accustomed to reading Vivienne's expressions. It didn't happen often, but occasionally there were certain aspects that she and her son shared that made it obvious they were related. He had been around Boyd long enough to recognize certain expressions and in this moment he found that he could do the same to Vivienne.

It was an unspoken understanding that she would prefer if he stayed exactly where he was, if he pretended he didn't know what was happening behind the door.

They stared at each other silently for a tense moment and Sin's hands tightened on his weapon. Indecision plagued him and he closed his eyes briefly, trying to decide what to do, what he was supposed to do, but in the end it was the sound of Connors' voice that made the decision for him.

The sound of that low voice, so heavy with disdain, so sure of itself, made something in Sin's head click. In that brief moment flashbacks raced through his mind; he saw all the things that Connors had done to him, all the things that he'd said to him... all the threats regarding his freedom, his partnership with Boyd, the looming question over both of their lives now that the Monterrey mess was finally cleaned up...

He thought of all of these things and opened his eyes again, hawk-like gaze spearing into Vivienne directly as the door to Connors' office suddenly creaked open and the sound of the Marshal's alarmed voice spilled out loudly into the lobby. There was a low murmur, the sound of the other man offering a quiet 'goodbye' and then the loud bang of a solitary gunshot that left their ears ringing.

Vivienne didn't even flinch at the noise but the look she gave him seemed at once thankful, more determined and, somehow, heavier. A small amount of tension seemed to leave her shoulders but she didn't dare move from the wall, the scant amount of protection she had from the man now in the inner lobby.

Sin's gaze finally left her face and he twisted slightly to peer around the corner of the desk just in time to see a figure all in black standing in the doorway of Connors' office as a pool of blood spread outward from the door and under his booted feet. He was standing calmly, looking completely relaxed, and even though his back was to Sin and Vivienne, the mask was pulled up from his face. He was staring down at Connors' body quietly, watching the growing crimson puddle, as he fingered the trigger of his gun.

Hands tightening on the shotgun once again, Sin shifted and began to rise but before he could totally react, there was the sound of footsteps coming towards them from the main lobby and a female voice calling out to Connors' killer:

"Everyone else is out-- we have to get moving if we're finished here."

Just as the man began to turn and Sin intended to blast a hole in him, the woman came jogging into the lobby and her eyes zeroed in on Sin's back. Gunfire erupted almost immediately and as Sin ducked out of the way of the rain of bullets, the man yanked the mask back over his face and quickly made his way across the room.

The man looked in Sin's direction, paused briefly, but before Sin could react the woman noticed him. She aimed her gun at him, shouting out a warning to her teammate, and Sin swore under his breath. He leaned out abruptly, sending a powerful blast at the woman with the shotgun. She jumped out of the way, dropping her own gun in the process, as the shell tore through the wall. The woman landed on the opposite side of Samuel's desk and glanced back at the man briefly before Sin rolled out from his side of the desk, abandoned the shotgun and grabbed her by the throat in an attempt to drag her up.

She cried out in pain as his powerful fingers dug into her skin brutally but sent an elbow slamming into the side of his face before twisting out of his grasp and sending a flying knee directly into his midsection. Sin grunted in pain but didn't let it phase him as he pounded a powerful uppercut into her face and wrenched one of her arms behind her back as he pinned her against the side of the desk. He'd done it with the intention of using her as a human shield for the barrage of gunfire that he expected to come pouring in from the outer hall but when it didn't come, he looked up and saw that the man was already gone.

The woman tensed against him and began struggling frantically as she realized she was now alone. Her panic only increased as Sin pressed his Ruger against her temple but before he could pull the trigger, Vivienne stepped out of her hiding spot and stopped him.

"Don't," Vivienne commanded, her unreadable, cool expression back as she studied the woman struggling against his grip. She calmly walked over to them and yanked the mask off her face. The woman looked to be in her late twenties to early thirties, with light skin, long black hair that was mussed from the fight, and light brown eyes that were currently glaring furiously at Vivienne. Although Vivienne's expression gave nothing away as to whether she recognized the woman or not, Sin knew he'd never seen her before. "She could be useful."

The woman wrenched against Sin forcefully, looking ready to tear Vivienne's head off as she spat, "I won't talk, if that's what you're thinking. You may as well let him kill me now."

Sin snorted softly. "That's pretty loyal considering one of your guys just left you to die."

She twisted to turn her glare on Sin. "You don't know anyt--" She stopped speaking abruptly as soon as her gaze fell on his face, eyes widening in a strange mixture of shock and alarm as she took in his features. The sentence died in her throat as she continued to stare up at him and his eyes narrowed suspiciously, quickly picking up on the fact that she recognized him from somewhere.

Vivienne's eyes narrowed very slightly at the woman's reaction but she didn't bother asking her about it; it was obvious the woman wasn't willing to cooperate. "Knock her out. We will bring her with us."

The woman turned back to Vivienne and started to speak but before she could, Sin brought the butt of his gun down on her head without hesitation. She went limp in his arms and he picked her up effortlessly, slinging her over one shoulder. He stared down at Vivienne silently for a moment, not knowing how he felt about this entire situation although he did know that his goal was still to get her to safety. "Temporary command post up until now has been the central bunker."

Vivienne nodded but didn't move to leave immediately. "Summarize the situation first; I have not been off this floor since this began. Who is in control at the command post, what mission did they give you that resulted in your presence here, do we know who the enemy is and what is the status of the rest of the compound?"

"Stephen, Willis and Carhart have been in control up until now but it seems they'd only managed to group up shortly before Boyd and I returned from our assignment so at that time the only information they had come from hypothesizing and scouts. All they know so far is that the enemy is operating in small bands, that they know the compound very well and that they got in through the underground tunnel

system. They used demolition on three residential halls and killed the lights to cause confusion and distraction as they came here, which I assume now was their ultimate goal. It was also assumed that many agents were down because of the damage to the residential buildings but the agents that managed to gather at the bunker were sent in groups to the hot spots in the compound to get control of the situation."

Sin paused briefly, deciding that he would leave out the fact that Boyd had been the one to ask him specifically to help her. "Me and a few others were sent here because we figured the Tower was the main target and because it was assumed that you and the Marshal were still inside even though it'd been blocked off until now."

She considered that a moment. "The woman said everyone is gone. As a worst case scenario, assuming she was lying because she was somehow aware of our presence and it was a trick, what sort of resistance do you believe we will run into between here and the bunker?"

Sin couldn't help but note that this was the first time she was speaking to him as if he was an actual intelligent being and not just an entirely irrational psycho. "They've been operating in small bands from what I can see, using the cover of darkness to their advantage. Now that some light has been restored and Agent Archer is patrolling downstairs, assuming he hasn't been killed, I should be able to get us out effectively unless for some reason they suddenly swarm us and I become outnumbered."

He stopped talking briefly, glancing out the window. "Although the sun is beginning to rise and since darkness was their only ally here, I'm assuming she was being truthful when she said they were out. Sunrise was probably their signal to retreat. Unless they suddenly double back to save her, which is doubtful since the man left her to die, I think going back should be relatively painless."

Vivienne nodded. "If it is only a rescue party for her we would need to fear, then I doubt we need to worry."

She started to leave then paused and looked back toward Connors' body, which she could finally fully see from her angle. Sin couldn't see her expression but she held

herself still for a moment and said nothing. Her gaze slid over to Sin as she appraised him intently, probably deciding the likelihood that he would talk. After a moment she quirked an eyebrow with a look that seemed to say she would not tell anyone about their role in Connors' death and she expected the same of him.

He only nodded in response and together they moved out of the office and made their way down the seventeen flights of stairs in the dim flickering lights from the backup generators. As they expected, they encountered little to no resistance and it really did seem that with the exception of bodies, the only militant left on the compound was the woman that was currently draped over his shoulder. After all that had happened, all of the damage and casualties, it frustrated him that they'd basically gotten what they wanted and left.

They'd achieved whatever their goal was, whether it was assassination or information retrieval or both, and escaped just as they'd planned. Even though they had a prisoner who could potentially talk, he couldn't shake the tension, the anxiety, that they still didn't know what that had been about... who these people even were and how they knew all that they'd known. Still he couldn't help feeling as though the entire confrontation, as brief as it'd been, had ultimately rocked the core of the Agency as a whole and left them with unanswered questions and an overwhelming sense of helplessness at the idea that someone had managed to pull off such a presumptuous plan and that they could very well do it again.

And for some reason he didn't believe it was Janus. This group had been too tightly organized, too deadly, too quiet and stealthy. When Janus attacked they wanted everyone to see it, hear about it and know it was them. They wanted their power to be known and their propaganda to be spread; this just wasn't their style at all.

Even though that was possibly a good thing, that Janus was still in the dark about their base and their identities, it just meant that there was some new threat out there and that this one knew the Agency like the back of their hand.

It was a disturbing thought.

The thoughts crowding his brain kept him tense on the walk down to the lobby and as his gaze swept the area and they took in the gore in the Tower, the unease only built inside of him. The metallic smell of blood was heavy in the air in the main lobby and it seemed that many of the dead were agents who had tried to fight off the intruders as they'd initially stormed the building. Archer caught up with them as they headed towards the now unsealed entrance and he shortly reported that many of the non-combatants had simply been hiding or locked away by the intruders while many of the field agents that had put up the initial fight were dead. He also reported that Williams had been killed as the militants had begun to make their escape and that Banks was badly injured but holding up for now.

Sin took in all of this information with little reaction and they continued on their way as the non-wounded employees of the Tower slowly began re-emerging from their hiding places to find out exactly what had gone wrong in the compound that was supposed to have served as a safe haven for them after the horror of the war.

The walk across the courtyard was no better; the area immediately surrounding the tower had a large quantity of dead agents and intruders alike and they passed more than one dead or wounded person on their way to the bunker. The entire time, Sin kept one hand on the woman and one hand on his gun as they strode quickly across the courtyard although he stole a couple of glances at Vivienne now and then. Her face was as frozen and unreadable as always, lips pulled together tightly and shoulders tense as the clacking of her heels seemed to echo across the ground eerily because of the silence.

When they reached the bunker, there was no sniper fire this time and they were granted entrance without delay. They were greeted with mixed emotions and expressions as they entered but Sin released a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding when he spotted Boyd standing off to the side; when he saw that he'd returned safely.

Boyd looked over the moment he heard the clicking of his mother's heels striding into the room. She appeared physically unharmed but he could tell from the way she

held herself that she had something grave on her mind, which he suspected was the fact that the Agency had been infiltrated. She never appreciated it when situations were not fully in her control and he could imagine her taking it as a personal affront that the organization she had spent much of her life working for had been so easily taken over for even a short period of time.

The second he knew she was okay he looked at Sin, quickly checking him visually for any signs of injuries, anything that implied he was putting on a front when in truth he needed to be in the medical wing. Sin seemed to be perfectly fine; the only thing that seemed out of place was the person draped over his shoulder.

Carhart glanced between Vivienne and Sin with an unreadable look but the way his shoulders relaxed slightly showed that he'd been worried. Stephen glanced at Archer as he entered and seemed pleased to see him safe while Willis only looked irritated to find that Sin had managed to survive.

Vivienne strode directly across the room toward the generals, for the most part largely ignoring the people around her. A few of the agents turned to watch; she often spent much of her time in her office so there were some people who had still never seen her in person and others who simply followed her movement because she was the highest ranking person in the room. When she passed two nearby agents who were watching her dumbly she suddenly stopped and turned a cold blue gaze on them, causing each to straighten to attention.

"Relieve Agent Vega of his burden," she ordered coolly while the two of them glanced quickly over to Sin. "See to it that she is for the moment sedated, secured, and under constant watch. She is not to escape and not to be given the opportunity to do anything inconvenient such as killing herself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Inspector," they both said with a nod, looking a little surprised and alarmed that the infamous Vivienne Beaulieu had singled them out. Furthermore, neither seemed particularly thrilled about having to get in Sin's vicinity but together they were able to carry the unconscious woman toward the rooms in the back of the bunker.

Vivienne let her cool gaze rest on the other people who had been watching her; it was enough of an unspoken order that they jumped and returned to the duties they'd been doing before. The generals greeted her with the proper respect given her station which she acknowledged with a simple nod of her head. Although they were in the center of the room, with plenty of activity surrounding them as the agents went about their assignments, there was enough of a space around them that when she leaned in and spoke quietly, no one but the generals heard what she said.

As Boyd watched, he did not miss the reactions the three generals had to whatever she said. Willis looked upset and displeased while Stephen just slid his eyes closed gravely and nodded. Carhart however, straightened and raised his eyebrows slightly before giving Vivienne a sharp look that clearly showed he grasped the gravity and the meaning of whatever her words had been.

While Boyd was wondering what she could have said to get such reactions, he suddenly felt Sin's presence at his side. He turned his attention to his partner immediately, unable to keep from looking him over quickly once more, before smiling slightly as he looked up to meet Sin's intense gaze.

"Hey. I'm glad to see you're safe. And thank you." He didn't have to specify that he meant for helping his mother.

Sin shrugged. "You don't have to thank me. How's Ryan?"

Boyd's expression darkened and he looked away. "I don't know. He wasn't severely injured in the impact to his building but he could barely breathe and that hasn't improved even after we got him to the bunker. He's in a medical room now but they want to move him to the medical building as soon as they're certain the enemy is gone. It sounds like the equipment they have here isn't sophisticated enough for what they need."

Sin's mouth turned down at the corners and his gaze wandered back over to Vivienne. "Well they should have no problems doing that when full power is back up. All hostile presence with the exception of that lovely young lady I carried in, is gone. I

guess they got what they came for." There was a slight pause. "Whether that was information or killing Connors or both."

"What?" Boyd looked sharply over at Sin. "Connors is dead?" He asked it quietly so the question didn't carry beyond their conversation.

"Pretty dead." Sin tilted his head slightly and dragged his eyes back to Boyd. "And you know what that means, don't you?"

Their eyes met as Boyd studied him seriously. "My mother's in charge now."

Regardless of what Vivienne's rise to power meant for them, it was clear that at the very least it meant great change for the Agency.

## Epilogue

The wind was surprisingly warm when it blew past Boyd, ruffling his clothing and lifting the short, jagged ends of his hair into the air. With the sun slowly sliding behind the scattered hi-rises, staying hidden behind the ever-present sheen of clouds, he could see the muted shadows idly expanding along the ground until they started to bleed into each other, until the surrounding debris and cement was starting to mimic the progression to darkness in the sky above.

The weather was mild and calm for the time of year but he would have been at Crater Lake anyway, even if the temperature was below freezing. Even if the very act of staying there could be dangerous to his health.

He had been out there for hours, perched with his legs bent in front of him and his arms resting across his knees, balanced comfortably at the top of the mound of debris. His gaze was distant as he stared at Crater Lake below; the algae had continued to grow until the stagnant water was more colorful than it had ever been before. The wind pushed light ripples across the pond; the algae rocked with the movement, creating a mesmerizing pattern.

Several weeks had passed since the compound had been under attack and with everyone scrambling to get things back in order, there hadn't been adequate time for his unit to decrypt the files he'd downloaded at Hale's. They still didn't know if he'd even gotten anything useful or if he had, how useful it would be.

For now it was a game of wait-and-see, which wasn't as bad as it could have been considering Janus activities appeared to have slowed to a lull. Whether they were recovering from the breach in their once impenetrable community or plotting payback, no one knew for certain, but the lapse in movement gave them time to recover as well.

But for the Agency, a complete recovery would be a long time coming. The only thing that was taken care of quickly and cleanly was damage control with the local

media when some civilians had complained of what sounded like gunshots and explosions going off deep within the compound going uninvestigated by the police. A community watch group had urged a local paper to look into it but Vivienne had swiftly taken charge of the situation.

The cover-up was that a highly organized group of infiltrators had attempted to rob the labs that were supposed to exist within the walls of the compounds. The story had been accepted with little problem; it actually served to further validate why the Johnson's compound had such high security in the first place.

The story was not far from the truth besides the reason for the attack, and it provided answers for any future questions that may occur when the actual rebuilding process began.

Three of the main residential dormitories had suffered severe structural damage and would have to be rebuilt, either partially or entirely, which resulted in hundreds of agents having to temporarily live in the bunker shelters. The casualty count hadn't been as high as initially feared but the number of seriously wounded and disabled employees was staggering. Many had been wounded in the destruction of the buildings; most who'd come in contact with the enemy hadn't lived to tell of the experience unless they were non-combatants, who'd been terrorized but otherwise relatively unharmed.

The safe haven that had once been the compound had suffered a blow that would never quite be repaired. The consensus among most of the employees, especially residents, was that it was no longer safe. Although his mother was taking steps to make changes in the security, no one really felt secured when the perpetrators hadn't even been identified. Fingerprint scans from the corpses of fallen intruders hadn't proven very useful other than the fact that most of the individuals appeared to have had very colorful criminal records but their identities just led to more questions and dead ends. Their only real clue was the girl that Sin had detained in the Tower and according to whispers, she would be a tough nut to crack.

Over the past two weeks things had gone from chaos to slowly becoming business as usual and missions temporarily slowed; he'd spent most of his time on the compound helping out but there was only so much he could really do. Things for he and Sin were temporarily stagnant but despite that, he still felt somewhat uneasy about the state of their partnership.

With Connors gone, the threat was lessened considerably but he still had no idea what his mother had in store for them. Although one door was closed, Vivienne's control of the Agency only opened others with more questions but there was nothing to do but sit and wait.

In the downtime he'd found himself preoccupied by thoughts that he'd either been trying to avoid or hadn't been able to put in proper words before.

Before that night in Monterrey, he had been so obsessed with Lou's death that it was as if everything related to Lou in his mind had been as stained by the violence of his murder as the pavement had been by his blood.

If he'd taken the time to actually consider his life, he would have had to acknowledge that he'd let the things he'd wanted slip through his grasp without much of a fight just because he no longer believed in goodness, in happiness. He'd done the opposite of what Lou had always wanted him to do.

Lou had always pushed and cajoled him through his life, kept him moving forward when he otherwise would have stagnated. Lou had forced him to live through the little pleasures in life until he'd gotten to the point that he'd believed in a future, he'd actually started to expect that his tomorrows would be worthwhile and his yesterdays wouldn't be filled with regret.

For a little while it had seemed possible after first meeting Sin. Especially after Monterrey. But after the torture and seeing the images of Lou being murdered over and over again, it had almost happened again.

He'd once again allowed himself to wallow in the helplessness, the guilt and the fear. The small part of him that had cracked and thawed after his time with Sin had quickly frozen over and once again he'd forgotten all the good and had tried to focus on the bad. He'd become exactly what he'd been before coming to the Agency and once again he'd blocked out the memories of Monterrey just like he'd blocked out the good memories of Lou.

Boyd didn't want to be like that anymore. He didn't want his life to move on and this time to pass only for him to later look back with regret regarding decisions he made from now on. He didn't want to lose Sin, to lose what he felt when in his presence. He didn't want to push him away just because he was scared.

The wind picked up again in the other direction, whipping his hair around so that it tickled his ear. His eyes burned and it was only then that he realized he'd been staring so long that he hadn't even properly been blinking. He blinked a few times and glanced down at his watch, temporarily drawn out of his reverie. He'd invited Sin to leave the chaos of the compound, and it was almost time to go pick him up from the compound.

He closed his eyes, tilting his face against the wind, and just breathed in. The scent was familiar although not something he could properly identify other than to say it smelled like the city and, to an extent, memories. When he finally slid his eyes open again, he couldn't help a sudden nostalgic smile as a memory resurfaced. It hadn't been warm by any means but it had definitely been intermittently windy like this day when Lou had first kissed him, in the same spot he was now sitting.

He looked down, and the slowly undulating ripples in the water mesmerized him as he stared at Crater Lake, studying the color of the algae as it danced upon the waves. He continued to sit there, just staring into space and once again allowed his mind to wander. He was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't even realize that anybody was near him until Sin was already up the mound, standing beside him and surveying the area.

Boyd looked at him, thoroughly startled. "What the-- How did you get here?"

Sin glanced down at him and raised an eyebrow. "I walked."

"No," Boyd said patiently. "How did you get off the compound? Don't tell me they left the tunnels unsecured again already..."

"Oh, that." Sin sat down beside him, green eyes flicking down to the water as he studied the colors in it. "I was kind of surprised about that too. Apparently I'm allowed to roam free from now on."

"Wow," Boyd said, impressed. "That's quite the change, although I can't say I mind. Is that what the meeting was about?"

Sin nodded and stretched his long legs out in front of him, looking over at Boyd finally. "They took the collar off too."

Boyd blinked in surprise and looked down at Sin's neck automatically. He reached out and let his fingers trail along Sin's skin, the skin the collar usually covered. "Indefinitely?" he asked, not looking up.

Sin shrugged, a casual roll of his strong shoulders as he idly tilted his head to give Boyd's fingers better access. "That's what was implied but you never know what will happen later on. I don't expect much." He paused and raised an eyebrow slightly. "Apparently it was your mother's order."

Fingers pausing, Boyd met Sin's eyes with a significant look. "Really." He said it as a statement more than a question. Well, that was certainly one more aspect pointing toward her changing, although he couldn't say he minded the direction she seemed to be going. "Did she say why?"

"I didn't actually speak to her but Carhart told me all she said was that she thought it was unnecessary for the time being. Which implies it might be used again sometime in the future if she deems it necessary but I'm not too worried about it at the moment. I'll just have to be on my best behavior," he said with a smirk.

Boyd couldn't help a grin from growing. "I don't know," he teased, drawing the words out. "Are you even capable of good behavior? I have my doubts."

"It depends on what you think is good," Sin replied with a snort. "What I think is good is vastly different from a normal person's idea of it." He leaned forward slightly and pulled his legs up, resting his arms on his knees as he went back to looking down at the water. "Have you seen Ryan lately?"

Dropping his hand down beside him, Boyd stared at the water as well and shook his head once. "I haven't been able to see him since the attack. As soon as he was in the Infirmary, Ann blocked all visitors and since I'm not family, they won't give me much information."

Another low gust of wind rocked the algae within Crater Lake and pulled at their clothing. "They did tell me that he's recovering and he recently regained consciousness. He's still weak, though, and they expect him to remain in intensive care for a while." He paused. "But he's alive, so I'm relieved. I was really worried for a while; he looked horrible when we were transporting him."

Sin nodded and absently picked at a rip in his cargo pants. "Carhart said foreign material from the dust and debris made it into his lungs and worsened his condition. I asked for details but even he can't get in to see him. I suppose Ann is feeling overprotective since Ryan is the only person resembling a family member she really has left."

"Maybe," he said belatedly, not honestly caring that much about Ann's place in the whole thing; he had too much else on his mind.

Sin looked up finally and glanced over at Boyd curiously. "Why did you want to meet here anyway?"

Boyd looked over at Sin, studying him closely for a moment. Sin's hair was still too short for his taste. He preferred it longer so that he could tangle his fingers in the strands but his long, dark eyelashes still contrasted to the vivid green of his eyes in a

way that he would never get tired of looking at. He reached out, his palm sliding against Sin's cheek to pull him closer, and leaned over to kiss him.

The sun had completely disappeared behind the buildings around them, the shadows growing longer and deeper, and the clouds were spread in hues of red, pink and orange that faded between each other. Crater Lake reflected the color of the sky, making the algae blend in with the warm tones and creating what looked like a secondary sunset.

Although Boyd usually would have avoided any public display of affection, he didn't really think about that at the moment. It was growing dark and Crater Lake was in an emptier part of the city. There was no one around who was likely to notice or care about what they were doing, any more than anyone had when Lou had reached over and quickly, cautiously kissed him that first time, in this same place. Now, Sin's familiar scent and taste overcame him, along with the strength that seemed ever-present in his body and personality.

Boyd's fingers curled against Sin's cheek and when he finally pulled away, he couldn't help smiling.

One dark eyebrow rose and Sin leaned back slightly to study him. "You wanted to meet here so that you could kiss me? Not that I'm complaining."

"No," Boyd said with a light chuckle as he stood. He looked down at Sin, tilting his head thoughtfully. "It's a long story. Do you mind if I tell you over dinner? Are you hungry? I know a great place in the area that sells ice cream, if nothing else."

"Well, you know I'm always ready for ice cream." Sin stood up and gazed at Boyd for a moment before shaking his head with a crooked smile and turned. "Let's go then," he said as he started to make his way down the mound.

Boyd hesitated a moment, balanced at the top of the pile of debris as he stared down into Crater Lake once more.

Then, turning, he slid and jumped his way down the mound to follow Sin.

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*End Book One*

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