

SONNY & AIS



In_{the} Company
of Shadows

AFTERIMAGE

Afterimage

Book Two

of

In the Company of Shadows

by Sonny & Ais

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Prologue

The Willowbrook Park area was one of those rare nooks just outside of Lexington that had managed to retain its charm, even after the various attacks that had decimated much of the surrounding areas of the city. There was something very old world about the willow trees that lined the roads, sleepy-looking and beautiful as the long graceful limbs and leaves drifted to the streets and sidewalks below.

But it wasn't just the hauntingly beautiful willows that brought a sense of peacefulness to the park; massive oak and birch trees crowded the walkways, leaves turning brilliant shades of yellow, red and orange as autumn set in. Driving in from the concrete grayness of the inner city, the explosions of life and color combined with the sounds of birds calling and insects buzzing were too drastic of a difference to ignore. Even the most world-weary of city-goers could not help but admire the beauty, pausing to gaze at the park with a bittersweet sort of longing for days long past, wishing it could be like this everywhere.

There were not many residential houses in the area. The neighborhood of Willowbrook was mostly dominated by the park, expansive and beautiful, with a large goose pond in the center. However, the few homes that surrounded the park were massive and sprawling, reminiscent of a time before the war when the economy was far more stable and it was still common for people in the city to be prosperous.

For some, those homes represented the ideal location; nestled beside the flourishing park, surrounded by the brilliant shades and sounds of nature and it felt like stepping back in time. The homes seemed to add to the significance of the area and due to that, they were that much more expensive.

It seemed surreal, almost impossible, that such a neighborhood could still remain considering the times that they lived in. It was almost as though it existed in a bubble that protected it from the violence that had destroyed so much of the city. To the people who lived there and the people who frequented the park, Willowbrook was a safe haven, somewhere unaffected by violence and radiation, looting and danger, and that was exactly why Ann had put her sister there.

Her silver 2021 Bentley sped along the winding roads as she quickly approached the steep hill that caused the Willowbrook Home to loom over the park. It was a beautiful building with a steeple, tall columns, and an impressively well-manicured lawn but all it did was mask the reality of the situation.

On first assumption many people thought that it was a rest home for the elderly but it was actually a home for the mentally incompetent. Or more specifically, the mentally incompetent who had family wealthy enough to spend thousands a month on such a reputable and expensive facility.

Ann pulled into the parking lot and shut the car off but did not immediately get out. She sat in the soft leather seat for a full five minutes, just resting her hands on the steering wheel and staring blankly out the windshield as she debated whether or not she truly wanted to go inside.

It had been nearly a year since the last time she'd visited her sister, even if she paid the bill every month without delay. There had been a time when she'd made weekly journeys to the Home but then it had turned monthly and after awhile it was longer than that.

It bothered her to feel like she was ignoring her twin, yet at the same time she knew that Lydia didn't know, didn't care and frankly did not look forward to her visits. How could she? Catatonics didn't notice much. But the idea of Lydia being completely alone... of spending day after day sitting in a chair as she stared blankly out the window with no one to even attempt to engage her was a painful thought.

Slender fingers tightened around the steering wheel and Ann let her head rest against the seat as she closed her eyes.

It was so hard to understand everything sometimes. It was so hard to understand why things had turned out the way they had, why they'd come to the places they were at. She couldn't help but wonder which paths would have led to different, happier futures for them both.

What would have happened if they would have agreed to go with their mother all of those years ago? If they'd supported her decision to leave their oppressive and tyrannical father, a man who ran his family much like he ran the organization that had torn them all apart?

Would they have been happy and safe in the sleepy Midwestern town Jenny Myer Connors had migrated from as a teen? It could have been so much different had it turned out that way... had they taken the time to truly understand that sometimes divorce was necessary for a parent's happiness, a parent's sanity, and that the selfish whims of preteen girls were nothing but that.

But they hadn't and their mother had stayed, for them, had sacrificed herself, for them, and in the end the decision had cost her dearly when the attacks started.

It could have all been so different...

They would have never gotten caught up in the Agency, they would have never become immersed in an organization that thrived on violence and lies. They would have never started a whirlwind ride of alcohol, drugs and wild sex with different agents as they spun out of control, trying so hard to move past the impossibly painful stain of guilt that never seemed to wash off no matter how hard they scrubbed.

They would have never met Emilio.

Charming, sexy, impossibly beautiful Emilio. The bad boy of the Agency, the heart breaker with the deadly skills and killer smile, who wound them up around his little finger just for the satisfaction of letting Marshal Fucking Connors know that he was banging his precious little twin girls and playing them off each other in a cruel game that almost destroyed a bond between twins that had once seemed so impenetrable.

It shouldn't have happened the way it did. She felt that it was her own fault for letting him do the things he'd done. For not being strong enough to see what was happening because she'd been too blinded... too blinded by this charismatic man who could have anyone he wanted but for some reason was focusing on her, on them, two sixteen-year-old girls who'd barely just begun to fill out, even if for some reason a lot of the younger agents found them incredibly attractive.

It was so silly... so incredibly silly.

She thought she'd fallen hard for him but it was after his death that she'd realized it had been nothing more than foolish infatuation and that it was her twin who'd been truly in love. The kind of ruthlessly intense love that only a young girl was capable of. The kind of obsession that someone with more life experience would have been able to move past, to handle. The kind of desperation to fill the void left by this man that had caused her to truly lose her senses, her morals, and eventually her mind.

All for one man.

And Ann couldn't help but think that really, it was all her fault.

She was always the stronger of the two, the smarter one, the one with the backbone, the one who set Lydia straight when she was doing something impossibly foolish.

But when medical school and the experience of living life off the compound didn't have the same effect on Lydia as it had for her... Ann couldn't deny that she'd grown disgusted. Why couldn't Lydia forget him? Why couldn't she move on? Why did she have to dwell on someone who had been so incredibly bad for her, for *them*? Why did she have to stew in her misery and cry herself to sleep every night? Why did she need him so much?

And why, why God *why* did she have to gravitate towards his tragically fucked-up son?

Hazel eyes slid open and Ann gazed out the window once again, delicate lips turning down into a morose frown as she watched a squirrel scamper up the massive trunk of an ancient birch tree. He was holding something in his mouth and seemed fiercely protective of it; beady eyes moving around suspiciously and freezing every time he heard the slightest sound. She wanted to smile, to be amused by his tenacity, but she couldn't bring herself to find joy in anything at the moment. But that honestly wasn't anything new and it hadn't been for the past year.

Ann shook her head, locks of dark hair tumbling down from her loose ponytail, and finally pulled the keys out of the ignition as she stepped out of the car. She slid them into her clutch and began to walk towards the entrance rather glumly, heels clicking over the pavement as she made her way slowly, very slowly.

She wasn't looking forward, almost above anything, to the judgmental expressions on the staff's faces when they realized that she was Lydia's first visitor in over a year. Their father had never gone and she'd never expected Ryan to; it was too depressing for him and honestly he and Lydia had never been close. Lydia had always been more interested in using him as an excuse or a pawn in one of her plans to get her own way; the idea of spending time with some ersatz brother when she could be out having fun was an outrageous suggestion in her mind and one she'd never taken into consideration.

But for Ann it was different; for Ann, Ryan was a blessing and even if they weren't really related by blood, even if he didn't believe it, she loved him more than anything in the world. And just the thought of him at the moment hurt too much to bear... It almost made this excursion seem like a trapeze in the woods by comparison.

A dark cloud of depression settled over her head, the humidity of an impending storm of sadness and tears weighed down on her shoulders heavily and for a moment it was difficult to look up. She approached the main door with eyes dropped to the ground and just as she reached for the handle, someone on the opposite side of the door pulled it open before she could, causing her to nearly collide with them.

Irritation cracked the gloomy mask on her face and she looked up to see a tall, lanky man striding quickly away. She started to snap something at his retreating back but something about his posture gave her pause. His hands were shoved in his pockets, shoulders slumped and a hood was pulled so far over his face that she couldn't make out any features. An intense aura of misery practically radiated off him and she shook her head with a sigh, not willing to further upset someone who appeared to be in a similar situation as herself. Apparently, visiting patients at the Willowbrook Home was a depressing event for anyone, no matter their circumstance.

Ann slipped her hands into the pockets of her pinstriped pants and entered the building, heading directly to the receptionist's desk so that she could check in. Thankfully, there was a new girl at the desk and not the insufferable woman who appeared to have been working at the Home since the beginning of time and always gave her a stern look of disapproval every time she arrived.

"Good afternoon," the girl said politely, lips going up into an automatic smile even if there was nothing genuine behind it. "Are you here to see a patient?"

"Yes, but I'd like to settle the bill first. I'm just going to pay for the year in advance this time around." Ann opened her clutch and removed her wallet, trying to decide whether she would put it on credit or a personal check.

The girl, Beth according to her name tag, blinked at her in surprise. "But that's nearly sixty grand," she blurted out rather ridiculously, immediately looking embarrassed after the words left her mouth.

Ann hadn't previously known just how green the girl was but she was apparently new enough to not have grasped the immense amount of wealth the Home's clientele typically possessed. It was probably shocking to someone who was obviously in some kind of lower middle or working class lifestyle, making less in a year than she was about to drop in one payment, but contrary to popular belief... there were still a percentage of Americans who had managed to retain their wealth and status after the downfall of their economy. Not a large percentage, but enough of one to matter.

"Yes. Yes it is," Ann replied calmly, feeling mildly embarrassed for the girl. She wondered how much they paid her.

"Well, I have to get Maggie. I've never done *that* kind of transaction before," Beth said apologetically. She picked up the phone and paged Maggie to the front.

"Is Maggie that insufferable old cow who always looks at everyone like they've done something distasteful even before they've done anything at all?" Ann queried with a slight frown.

Beth giggled quietly and shrugged. "That's the one."

"Wonderful," Ann muttered dryly, rolling her eyes as she tapped her fingernails against the desk. Just what she needed; someone else to remind her of just how bad of a sibling she was.

Mood slipping even lower, Ann studied the young receptionist critically, for no other reason other than the fact that Beth was about ten years younger and female. She didn't know why she did it, she had never been particularly obsessed with looks or people's perception of her, but for some reason lately she couldn't help but compare her own attributes to the women around her and she always found herself falling short.

The girl in question was shorter, but that wasn't anything new since Ann was rather tall for a woman at 5'9", and seemed about twenty pounds overweight but the extra pounds only served to give her a voluptuous figure that Ann envied. She straightened her jacket self-consciously over her rather lilliputian breasts and folded her arms across them as her eyes moved to study Beth's facial features. She was a striking girl with gorgeous blue eyes, a petite delicate nose and bee-stung lips. She was not wearing very much makeup and that only emphasized how naturally beautiful she was.

Ann turned her eyes away quickly and instead focused on the items on the girl's desk, feeling sorry for herself and what she perceived as her own Plain Jane face; she felt rather pitiful for playing this game in the first place. There was nothing but a photograph of Beth and a handsome young man staring at each other adoringly, a small cup of non-fat yogurt and a huge bottle of water. Ann ignored the picture and the familiar way it stung her to see such an incredibly happy couple and focused on the yogurt. "Please don't tell me you're trying to lose weight," she said abruptly, turning a disapproving gaze on Beth.

Beth's eyebrows drew together. "Uh, yes, why not?"

"Because you're beautiful the way you are and if you don't see that, it shows that you are weak-minded and prone to conform to tabloids and magazines and television and there is nothing more deplorable than that," Ann responded flatly.

The girl looked surprised and a little irritated but just shrugged silently.

"I'm not attempting to sabotage you or something hideous like that, if that's what you're thinking," Ann continued in the same tone, which left no room for argument because it was clear that she would not see anything any other way but her own. "What would I gain by that? I don't even know you."

Beth shrugged again, this time in bemusement more than anything else, but before she could properly respond the sound of footsteps striding down the hall caught their attention.

Magdalene Porter, or Maggie, seemed more like a prison warden than the manager of a mental health facility; not for the first time did Ann wonder if this woman had become so hardened serving as a field medic during the war. As soon as Maggie came close enough, her eyes zeroed in on Ann and that familiar look of distaste settled on her toughened features. "Ah, Annabelle Connors, it's been quite some time since you were here. Typically I only see your signature on a check."

Ann grit her teeth and forced herself to remain civilized, knowing that she had to depend on these people to care for Lydia and knowing it wasn't worth the risk of making them enemies. "Ah, well you'll be seeing Annabelle Connors Scott on those checks from now on," she said tonelessly.

"How lovely." Maggie's tone didn't imply that she thought anything of the sort. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Scott?"

It irritated her to be called that but she supposed that was ridiculous since she'd been the one to correct Maggie in the first place. "I'd like to pay a year in advance and to hear about my sister's progress."

"I see." Maggie stared at her in a manner that Ann felt was almost invasive and looked as though she wanted to say something else; instead, she went about showing the new girl how to set up such a transaction.

The whole process shouldn't have taken longer than a minute but Maggie took the time to explain to Beth, in painstaking detail, every step, everything that could possibly go wrong, what to do if that happened, and how frequently certain clients did this sort of thing and why.

It irritated Ann to no end and not for the first time did she wonder why she was always the one who somehow became the guinea pig for someone in training whenever she was simply attempting to pay for something and move on. After the ordeal was finally through and her bank account was 63K smaller, she and Maggie left the ignorant beautiful girl to her non-fat yogurt and walked to the wing that Lydia resided in.

On the way, Maggie retrieved Lydia's chart from the nurse's station of that area and allowed Ann to flip through the pages. In most cases, Maggie would have explained the file thoroughly to the client as the language was incomprehensible to the typical person, but Ann wasn't typical in that regard. She had a medical doctorate in psychiatry and in the past six months had returned to the practice, rejoining the ranks of the psychiatrists who worked with Agency staff and particularly the field agents. She and Lydia had both gone to school together for their degrees, had both worked as Agency doctors before, but after she'd failed to help her own sister she'd retired from the field.

Her lips pursed slightly as she briefly scanned each page. It wasn't as thick as she'd imagined it'd been before but she supposed that there wasn't really much to record, much to report.

Although she typically referred to Lydia as suffering from Catatonia, that wasn't exactly the case; it was just that the word Catatonic was something the average person could identify with minimal explanation. However, people who suffered from Catatonia typically had specific psychological problems previous to the onset of the disorder and often suffered from repetitive motions, speech patterns and sometimes even lost the ability to move one's limbs unless someone did it for them.

While the blank staring, loss of speech and general unresponsiveness were also things stereotypically associated with Catatonia, in Lydia's case it would be a misdiagnosis, especially because she didn't respond at all to treatment for it and did not have many of the other symptoms or previous conditions that would have led to it.

The two general theories in Lydia's case were that she either suffered from Akinetic Mutism or had Conversion Disorder, or some kind of combination of the two. During the attack, she'd been strangled viciously and because of that, had temporarily lost the ability for oxygen to reach her brain. As a result she suffered damage to the left frontal

lobe of her brain, a common cause of Akinetic Mutism, and had several symptoms which pointed to that illness. She had even positively responded to certain treatments for it, although they hadn't had as strong of a response as they'd hoped.

Lydia appeared awake, sometimes even alert when her eyes tracked people or moving objects, but she was generally unresponsive and seemed unaware of the presence of others and their voices for the most part. She seemed incapable of speaking or making spontaneous movement and expressions. A typical day for her was sitting by the window and staring blankly outside while her nurses groomed her and fed her. They'd tried experimental treatments and while they had provided some increase in brain activity, it hadn't done more than allowed her to eat or walk when guided by someone else.

However the fact that she'd shown similar symptoms after particularly traumatizing events in the past caused them to believe that this could also be a psychiatric condition and not just a neurological syndrome.

After both the death of their mother and the death of Emilio, Lydia had simply shut herself off from the outside world for weeks at a time. Her inability, or unwillingness, to cope with these events had caused her to simply cut off the outside world as she retreated into the depths of her mind in an attempt to escape the consequences of their absence in her life. The fact that her symptoms had remained consistent had proved that there was no malingering or, in layman's terms, that she hadn't been faking it. Both times she'd recovered but the fact that it was something of a trend is why they suspected a possible connection to Conversion. But once again, she didn't respond to the typical treatment for it and once again, they were at a loss.

"Does her EEG remain normal?" Ann asked, shutting the file without reading its entirety and trying to ignore the frustration that welled up inside of her.

"Other than the focal slowing near the site of the infarction, her EEG is fine," Maggie replied coolly, giving Ann another disapproving glance. "You would have been informed if it wasn't."

Ann nodded calmly and tucked the loose strands of dark hair behind one ear, ignoring the ridiculous fact that she almost felt nervous about seeing her twin. "Is there anything else I should be aware of?"

They paused in front of Lydia's door and Maggie stood to the side, staring at Ann and waiting for her to go inside. "She still has the tremors from time to time but nothing to be worked up over."

Ann nodded again, for lack of anything better to say and reached for the doorknob. It was surprisingly warm, as if someone had just recently gripped it, and she looked at Maggie again just before going inside. "Has the nurse been in recently?"

"Not since lunch about two hours ago," The woman replied in the same tone.

Ann felt relieved that she wouldn't have to walk in on someone bathing her twin as they moved her around forcibly like a rag doll, but something nagged at her as she finally pushed the door open.

She remembered the previous time she'd visited Lydia, the telling chill of the doorknob as she'd turned it, a blatant indication of just how rarely anyone entered the room; she remembered the feeling of emptiness as she'd entered, as if the room was devoid of all life even though her sister was sitting there, staring, as she always was.

It was strange, but the normal sensation one felt when in a space occupied by others, that feeling that someone else was there, was always absent from Lydia's room. It was almost like she was soulless, a corpse, and it was part of the reason why she'd begun distancing herself over time. It was a difficult thing to encounter; a hard thing to take home and dream of at night.

She moved across the room slowly, the click of her high heels muffled by the colorful rug, as she went to her twin and gazed down at her silently.

The scars that had once snaked across her face and body like angry pink skinned snakes had faded even more in the past year. Immediately after the attack they'd been angry and swollen, black stitches lining them hideously but now... Now the faded lines seemed somewhat like a funky tribal tattoo and her face, Ann's face, could be seen clearly beneath. But the scars weren't the main difference in their appearance; the empty expression on Lydia's face was what disturbed Ann the most.

It was strange to see someone who looked so much like herself in such a state... And she couldn't help but wonder if someday this would happen to her too. They were twins, they used to share everything, every toy, every emotion, every illness... Perhaps this was just another gene they shared.

She cleared her throat and looked at Maggie. "Please leave me to my sister," she said flatly, no longer interested in the pretense of politeness.

Maggie nodded once and left the room, shutting the door softly behind her.

Ann sat down in the armchair that sat opposite to the one Lydia was in and couldn't help but notice that it also seemed warm. But she ignored the fleeting thought and set her purse down on the side table, folding her hands nearly in her lap as she studied Lydia. "I'm sorry I haven't been here in so long."

Her words echoed strangely in the empty room but she didn't feel silly for speaking. If there was still a chance that somewhere, somehow, Lydia could understand even if she couldn't react, Ann would talk herself hoarse. And if she could understand, Lydia deserved to know what was going on.

Ann had known this for a while but after their father died... she'd made the decision to finally come and do it. It'd taken longer than she'd thought it would to get up the courage, to find the words and prepare what she would say, but finally she was here. "I know you don't believe me, if I were you I certainly wouldn't believe me, but it's true. And it wasn't deliberate. A lot has been going on... Everything is a mess. Everything is different."

She paused and dragged her eyes away from Lydia's still face and followed the vacant gaze out the wide bay window. She appeared to be staring down at the entrance of the facility, even though there was no longer anyone there.

"Daddy's organization," she began, speaking in a slightly coded way because who knew if someone was listening somehow, "--was in shambles for a time. The pressure was on him from the higher-ups, they wanted results, he couldn't give them what they wanted and certain... assignments ended in colossal failure." Her mouth twitched slightly as she remembered turning on CNN and watching the mangled reports of a terrorist attack in Monterrey and the way her father had exploded when he'd found out that not only had it all been a waste, but that the suspicion of an American organization's involvement was likely going to cost him his career. "He became harder than ever and everyone suffered."

Ann frowned and toyed with the thin platinum band that hugged her finger. "In his desperation to save himself from a mistake that he blamed on everyone else, he began pushing my relationship, that foolish engagement that I'd never intended to go through with, even more. You know, the one with Philip Scott." Her lips curled down in disgust

and her eyes narrowed slightly. "That spineless, drunken, useless, cowardly son of someone important somewhere," she went on, once again vaguely. "Within six months of the threat of losing his place in the organization, he struck up a deal with Philip's daddy dearest, and basically promised Philip a prominent rank doing something easy and important in exchange for solidarity when Daddy was called on his errors by the big guys."

A soft scoff and she fought the urge to take the ring off and chuck it across the room. Even now it made her angry to think about how her father had used her as a pawn, and it made her even angrier that she'd done very little to go against it and that she did nothing even now that it had all gone to hell. "I'm sure you'd be disappointed in the way I allowed him to push me along. I'm supposed to be the backbone of our little duo and I let him marry me off because I was lonely. Because I foolishly thought that eventually I would fall in love with him and we could possibly be happy together. It sounds so ridiculous now... but so much has happened and I just wanted someone to..." She trailed off with an embarrassed sigh. "Anyway, we were married and then... then Daddy died. And so did his promises to Philip."

A bitter smile briefly flitted across Ann's mouth. "The disappointment was evident immediately. You'd think it was my fault. So much for any pathetic idea about love on either of our parts. Seems Mr. Scott isn't so spineless when it comes to women."

A cool breeze floated in through the window, cooler than it should have been for this time of autumn and stirred Lydia's hair slightly, brushing long strands of dark hair across her face. Ann leaned forward and pushed the hair away, frowning slightly when her fingers caught in a knot in the delicate strands. Lips pressing together in displeasure, Ann stood up and scanned the room for a comb.

"Anyway, I've gone back into therapy," she informed her twin, going to the bedside table and opening the drawer. "I decided that I was wasting my education working as an assistant and that I would be much more useful doing what I was trained for. It sounds ridiculously egotistical but I hope someday to be able to figure out how to help you. I've been researching a lot and there are new things popping up very frequently now that the industry has recovered from the disruptions from the war but a lot of things were lost... Doctors, their research, so much was wiped out. It's as though the medical field was set back ten years because of it."

Ann removed a wide toothed comb from the drawer and went back to Lydia, standing behind her as she began slowly pulling the comb through her hair. "I want to help you. You and Ryan. He's going through so much now... And he's changing, right before my

very eyes, he's turning into someone entirely different. It's painful to see and he doesn't want my help at all..."

It was the first time she'd ever said it out loud and the idea struck her painfully. Her chest constricted and her lips trembled dangerously as tears formed in her eyes. "It hurts so much to be so alone," she confessed in a small, pained voice. "Daddy was never much of a father but he was still... there. But now that's gone. And I'm losing Ryan. And you... you've been gone for so long and honestly Lydia, I'm so *angry* with you for it."

The words were out of her mouth before she could rein them in but it was something that she'd been thinking of for a few months now. Ever since that evening when she'd run into that wretched man in the hall.

Ann took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down as she began to comb Lydia's hair again. "You were always so emotionally weak, Liddie-- You were always so desperate for love in any way you could get it... but I never imagined... I never imagined until I saw it with my own eyes, that you would go so far with someone like that, someone in that condition... Jesus, Lydia, you were worth so much more... you could have had anyone, done anything, but you just..."

She was getting worked up now, breath coming faster as she struggled to get the words out that she'd been thinking ever since she'd watched that horrible tape. "You provoked things, Lydia. You took advantage of a situation that you couldn't possibly, and should have *known*, that you could *not* control."

There. She'd said it.

And she knew it was horrible, she knew that she shouldn't be saying these things when it was too late to change anything, but it made her so fucking angry to know that was once again she was out of a family member and this time it could have been avoided.

The tears wanted to stream down her face but she fought them, tried to suffocate the anger that was building in her chest, but it was too late. All of the frustration and anger and depression had come to a head and needed to be let loose. On someone. Anyone. And when the comb snagged in another tangle, this one much larger than the first, all of those feelings exploded out of her.

Ann hurled the comb across the room and stormed out, seething, as she marched over to the nurse's station and glared daggers at Maggie and the other woman who was

there. "I pay you fucking people five thousand a month and you can't even comb my sister's goddamn hair!"

Maggie and the young nurse stared in astonishment. "Pardon?" Maggie asked in a slightly indignant tone.

Ann stood there, shaking, with her hands balled into white knuckled fists. She wanted to attack the old bitch; she really, really did. How dare she stand there with that judgmental look on her face when she couldn't even be bothered to make sure people were doing their jobs? "What part of my accusation was difficult to comprehend?"

Maggie stared at her for a long moment before sighing softly, in what sounded like annoyed exasperation, and looking down at the young woman behind the desk. "Judy, who was the nurse on duty this morning for Ms. Connors?"

The nurse, Judy apparently, glanced at Ann in fear before admitting meekly, "Well, I was..."

The disappointment was clearly evident on Maggie's face and she responded before Ann had a chance to verbally abuse the girl. "Did you completely finish your morning duties for Ms. Connors?" She spoke as if she were dealing with a child.

"Well, no..."

"And why the hell not?" Ann demanded, hazel eyes focused on the girl dangerously. "Too impatient to get back to surfing the 'net?" She gestured towards the computer screen which clearly showed some kind of music website.

Judy clicked the site off immediately and shrank away from the pair of them, looking guilty and frightened all at once. Ann almost felt bad for her but right now the poor fool was the only scapegoat she had to take her aggression out on. And she did have a point. "No!" Judy objected hurriedly. "I... there was a disturbance down the hall and they paged for everyone to go to help. Lacy Daniels had another fit and was holding Tina hostage if we didn't give her coffee! But it's been specifically stated by her doctor that she can't have caffeine!"

The explanation was so ridiculous that the fire began to ooze out of Ann's anger and she stared at Judy and then Maggie, before shaking her head. So much for Willowbrook being a safe haven.

"And what happened after that?" Maggie demanded coldly, not seeming too pleased with her young employee now that accusations of inappropriate Internet usage had been thrown into the fray.

"Well, the whole thing took about two hours to resolve and then by the time I could get back to my duties, it was visiting hours and Jason showed up. I'm really sorry, Ms. Connors, and Maggie, but after all of that I just completely forgot! And Jason stayed practically the whole day-- I stopped in to bring food and everything but--"

Ann stared at the girl blankly for a moment before she figured out what the girl was saying. "What? What are you talking about? Who in the hell is Jason?"

Judy and Maggie both turned to her in something akin to surprise before glancing at each other briefly. It was very obvious that they knew something she didn't and that they found it very odd that she was unaware. "Jason Alvarez, he is a regular visitor of Lydia's," Maggie informed her with a hint of reproach in her tone, as if she somehow failed even more as a sister for not being aware of this.

Ann ignored the implication and she crossed her arms over her chest, staring at them doubtfully. "Since when?"

"Since... A few weeks ago maybe, ummm," Judy trailed off thoughtfully and counted on her fingers. "At least two months, I guess. He started coming late in the summer. I remember because the first time I saw him I commented on how warm it was and he said that it was nothing. He always wears this hooded sweatshirt, even when it was really, really warm," she added unnecessarily.

Ann wracked her brain trying to remember a 'Jason' that either of them would know well enough for him to suddenly strike up the desire to begin visiting Lydia seven years after she became a blinking vegetable, but she came up short. "You must have it wrong. Are you sure it's this Lydia he's visiting?"

"Oh, yes," Judy said, nodding enthusiastically. "I'm positive. Beth was here the first time he came. She checked him in and everything. He specifically asked for Lydia Connors and since there were no visitation restrictions, he went in and has come every so often ever since." She seemed very pleased with herself for being privy to this information, as if sharing it would get her off the hook about her Internet dilemma.

"This is baffling to me," Ann said, shaking her head as her eyebrows drew together. "Why did no one inform me?"

This time it was Maggie who spoke, and she did so with the same air of annoyance and displeasure as she did everything else when it came to Ann. "What purpose would that have served? We don't typically alert clients to the patient's visitors unless there are restrictions or alerts set. Lydia had none and honestly I found no reason to report to you about it. You should be thankful that *someone* has interest enough in your sister to come see her so regularly."

The anger flared up again and Ann glared at Maggie venomously. "You seem to forget who pays you, Magdalene. Whenever anything happens to my sister, I want to be informed. This place is supposed to supply her comfort, security, and so far all I see is people who don't even know how to properly groom her or back check random men who come to see her. This 'Jason' person could be anybody! Do you forget the times we live in? My family is very wealthy and people are *very* desperate. He could be planning to kidnap and ransom her for all we know!"

Maggie licked her lips, finally beginning to look slightly uncomfortable. "Surely that's not the case..."

"You old fool," Ann snapped contemptuously. "You have no idea what kinds of enemies my father had." There were any number of people who would like to wipe his family tree clean even though he was already dead-- who would like to get their hands on his money, money that she and Lydia now possessed. He had so many people against him, both in and outside of the Agency, that she trusted very few people, especially strangers. The fact that his murderer was still unidentified made her all the more paranoid.

"Jason's nice," Judy objected suddenly, looking upset at the idea of him being a psychopathic kidnapper; she was obviously quite taken with this person. "We all think he's just an old love of hers, maybe someone who just found out about her condition recently."

"Oh is that so," Ann mocked. "And why is Jason so nice, pray tell? Does he feed her and brush her hair?"

"No," Judy admitted. "Mostly he just sits there and stares at her. I can tell he's trying not to show it, but usually his eyes seem very sad."

Ann blinked, surprised by this information, and stared down at the girl doubtfully. It made her all the more confused and she rubbed her forehead, once again trying to

place the name with a face but finding none. Lydia didn't have any 'old loves'. She had a long list of previous fucks who'd went after her for one thing and had unsurprisingly lost interest after getting it. She was well known for her sexual exploits but as far as Ann knew, and she knew everything, Lydia had no old boyfriends who would care enough to come calling. "What does this person look like?"

Judy leaned forward, as if she had been hoping for this question. "He's very tall and slender, but you can tell he has a nice toned body," she once again said unnecessarily and this time it was obvious that she had a crush.

"And?" Ann demanded impatiently. "What's his ethnicity? Is he White? Hispanic? Asian? What color is his hair? His eyes? Can you tell me anything useful at all or were you too busy trying to figure out how toned his body is beneath the hooded sweatshirt?"

Blushing, Judy shook her head and seemed embarrassed. She couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen years old and with the way she was acting, it was obvious that she'd never had a boyfriend or a lover; that she wasn't used to being around men. "He definitely isn't White, but I'm not sure exactly what he is... He has tanned skin like a Spanish person but... but his features are very exotic. His eyes kind of have an Asian tilt but they're very bright green."

It felt as though all of the air had been sucked out of her lungs and Ann felt herself go cold as the world went still around her. She reached out and held on to the edge of the desk, suddenly feeling very off balance as she stared down at the stupid young girl with the idiotic crush.

"My God Annabelle, you've gone as white as a ghost," Maggie exclaimed, looking truly concerned as she took a step forward.

Ann held up a hand to ward her off and shook her head, trying to regain her bearings. There was no way... It had to be a coincidence. It had to be... "Are you sure about this, Judy? I need you to be very positive about what you're telling me." Her voice came out slightly strained but with an air of authority that a silly little girl like Judy would never dare to disobey.

"I--I'm positive," Judy said, finally looking just as concerned as Maggie. "He was just here. He left only a minute or two before you came in."

Her fingers tightened around the edge of the desk and suddenly Ann saw a very clear flash of herself nearly colliding with a tall lanky man who seemed to be hiding under his hood.

And recognition set in immediately.

The height, the broad shoulders and deceptively thin physique, that purposeful stride and the almost intimidating presence even if it had been clouded over by depression...

"Jesus," Ann murmured softly and pressed a hand to her forehead, eyebrows drawing together as she tried to figure out what this could possibly mean.

"Tell me, Annabelle. If there's something the matter, if he's dangerous, we have surveillance tapes, his fingerprints from the sign in sheet... We will do anything we can to ensure that he does not harm your sister," Maggie said in a firm voice, appearing very alarmed at the prospect of this happening and at the potential scandal that it would cause for her boss and the other wealthy clients if it should reach the media. If it came out that a dangerous individual had been allowed on the premises, it was almost certain that the other clients would remove their family members...

"No," Ann said, clearing her throat and regaining her bearings. She stared out the window and tried to calm her racing thoughts, the way her heart was beating fast enough to thunder out of her chest as she forced herself to think rationally about the situation.

Her first instinct had been fear; had he hurt Lydia? Did he have some ulterior motive for coming here? What was the reasoning behind the timing; why had he waited until after her father died? All of those disturbing thoughts had flew through her mind rapidly but as she took a couple of deep breaths, she told herself that each scenario that played out mentally were highly unlikely.

What would he gain by hurting Lydia? He hadn't even set out to hurt her before. And Ann couldn't quite forget that strange look on his face all of those months ago in the hallway; the way he'd turned ashen at the sight of her and the uttered apology as if he were sorry that she'd had to be in his presence at all.

Ann pursed her lips together, mind going from frantic to analytical in a fragment of a moment, even if the heated anger and indignation remained. Even if he wasn't hurting her, even if his intentions weren't bad, how *dare* he...

"Next time he arrives, do not mention what has happened here this evening. And as soon as he signs in... you call me immediately."

She finally looked at them again, staring hard at the older woman and the silly young girl, and with that warning glare, a glare that let them know what would happen if they didn't do as she said, Ann stormed away. As she strode quickly down the hallway, heels once again clicking loudly in the now completely silent wing, she couldn't help but try to figure out what this could possibly bring in the months to come.

Chapter 1

The projector whirred quietly as it cast onto the screen a picture of a man with a grizzled face, unhappy expression, hair slowly shifting from dark brown to grey, and a five o'clock shadow.

The members of General Carhart's Insurgency Unit seemed largely unimpressed by the man; Owen was half-asleep, Jeffrey kept reshuffling his papers almost obsessively, Sin looked bored out of his mind, Boyd was idly looking at the screen, and Carhart was watching his team.

The only one missing was Ryan, who had yet to return from the medic wing. Boyd was worried about him and had tried to stop by but was repeatedly sent away because he 'wasn't family.' Ann had made the decision, probably to protect him and give him a chance to recover, but Boyd couldn't help feeling resentful of the fact he was being denied from seeing his best friend. But despite that, Ryan had continued to research as much as he could on his laptop and insisted in messages to Owen and Boyd that he was fine and would be out soon.

In truth, he wasn't really missing much.

The unit had been experiencing a lull in Janus-related missions, something that had been happening since Hale Clemons' death. They weren't sure if Janus was regrouping after the infiltration of such an important compound or if it was something entirely unrelated, but whatever the case, Janus had gone deeper underground than ever and information was scant. The fact that the disc Boyd had copied at Hale's compound still wasn't entirely examined and decrypted yet didn't help matters.

But with the absence of activity in Janus, they'd been able to turn their attention on a more pressing issue: whether or not Thierry had, in fact, betrayed them.

"So Jourdain Allard is a spy," Carhart said, referring to the man on the screen as he flicked through the report Boyd had given him.

"Yes," Boyd said, leaning back in his chair and flicking his gaze toward the man's image. "It was exactly as Thierry said."

Carhart nodded, his lips pressed together as he narrowed his eyes. "That's good news for him then. Even though he was let out of confinement recently, there hadn't been any firm plans of discontinuing interrogation even though he's been consistently honest and

helpful for the past few months. But this... this is big. We've been looking for a hook into Di Zhi for awhile now. This will get Thierry out of hot water for good, I'm sure."

He looked away from the image and focused on his agents. "What else can you tell me?"

Boyd indicated his report as he spoke. "I don't think even Revolución is aware of it. He appears to be selling their information to Di Zhi through a variety of means. One time he left a package in what appeared to be a predetermined spot; the package was picked up by a Di Zhi informant. Another time he used flowers sent anonymously to the informant; we were able to get a shot of the card he ordered with it but the message seemed vague and unimportant. We assumed there was a code behind it." He looked toward Jeffrey questioningly.

"There was," Jeffrey confirmed. He reached forward to flip the projector to the next picture, a magnified surveillance shot they'd taken with the message card nestled within orange, red and white flowers. The words were somewhat blurred and appeared to be a generic rambling of well-wishing. "It was a moderate cipher; nothing extremely difficult but certainly harder to break than the typical fare. Some of it is gibberish, likely to throw anyone off, but he otherwise appears to be giving dates and times of shipments."

Boyd inclined his head. "That makes sense. Revolución's had several armament shipments intercepted in the past few weeks as far as we could tell from overheard conversations. Allard appears to be getting money to betray those locations; arms supplies can make a person good money on the black market."

"Hey," Owen said suddenly, and it was as much of a surprise that he sounded relatively alert as it was the fact that he was contributing to the conversation when not directly asked. He was staring at the screen with a peculiar expression, his shirt rumpled, eyes sleepy, and elbow on the table as he leaned his head against his hand. "Where'd he get that bouquet?"

"He went to a shop and chose random flowers as far as I could tell." Boyd looked at the screen; as strange as the question was, there was obviously something significant to Owen in the picture. Before he could see what it was, he suddenly felt pressure against his crotch.

Boyd was startled by the touch, not expecting it at all, and managed a passably casual glance toward Sin, who was sitting across the table, slouched in his chair as he gazed in boredom at the image. Sin's body language and expression gave nothing away to the

others in the room but as soon as Boyd glanced over, he nudged Boyd's crotch once again with his foot.

Boyd discreetly slid his hand beneath the table to grab Sin's foot, wondering what the hell he was thinking. They hadn't been obvious about their sexual relationship since returning to the Agency and didn't do anything even close to public displays of affection. They didn't feel the need to fuel any further rumors and it wasn't anyone's business what they did behind closed doors. Given that, he couldn't figure out what possessed Sin to start this when they were in the same room as three other people who could easily look under the table at any time.

Trying to act normal and keep the conversation going, Boyd asked, "Why?"

Owen chuckled, apparently highly amused and, like the other two in the room, completely oblivious to what was going on across the table. "Dude's a guilty psychic or a masochistic florist, that's what."

Jeffrey looked at Owen oddly. "What are you talking about?"

Sin began slowly massaging Boyd's crotch with the toe of his sneaker, applying just the right amount of pressure to cause a slight shiver to go down Boyd's spine. Boyd shifted slightly and one side of Sin's mouth rose in a tiny smirk that was barely there before it was gone.

Boyd's fingers curled against Sin's shoe as he tried to determine whether or not he should just shove Sin away. There was a chance that the movement would draw attention but Boyd knew that if he let this go on too long, he'd get lost in the moment. He was already starting to find it difficult to concentrate fully on the meeting with that inexorable movement, making him all too aware of the layer of clothing separating them and the familiar tightening of his stomach as he hardened.

"Come on," Owen said, gesturing toward the screen as if it should be obvious. "Hollyhock, Rhododendron, Judas Tree and Nasturtium? The Hollyhock is a little random but the rest of them are hilarious." When the others just stared at him, he waved his hand helplessly. "Their meanings, man."

"One moment while I consult my trusty flower encyclopedia," Jeffrey said sarcastically.

Across from Boyd, Sin rolled his eyes at the two and their incessant bickering, seeming completely casual as he covertly molested his partner under the table. It wasn't odd that

he wasn't verbally contributing to the discussion, he'd never been much for briefings and debriefings, but the way his foot began to slowly work against Boyd's growing erection was more than a little out of place. Boyd glanced at him casually again, trying to ignore his increasing heartbeat and the heat that was spreading from his stomach. But Sin's face gave nothing away as to what he was doing and he gave no indications as to how far he planned to take this.

Owen pushed himself back in his chair with apparent great effort, as if it was a shame he had to wake himself up just because his co-workers couldn't get the joke. "Well I'm no expert or whatever but I'm pretty sure that's like saying, 'Hey, watch out for me-- I just betrayed my own country!' Pretty stupid message for a spy, unless he wants people to know not to trust him."

Owen gave the others a more alert, intense look as he got into the idea and Boyd shifted minutely in his seat as Sin began to run the edge of his shoe slowly against the now obvious bulge.

"My money's on he's psychic and he secretly regrets betraying his people, right? Bet you ten dollars within the next few months he has some guilt trip and somehow kills someone in the other group. They find out and they go hardcore revenge and then there's a little war between the two and Jourdain dies in the scuffle." Owen paused and added thoughtfully, "Or maybe there's an accident when he's trying to deliver a message and they're like, BAM, on his doorstep the next day because they figure out it was him. Or else--"

"Where do I place bets on how long it takes you to give up this stupid idea?" Jeffrey asked pointedly.

Boyd's heart began to beat faster, breath slightly catching as Sin teased his growing erection through the rough denim of his jeans. The conversation happening around them seemed a long way away and he stared intently at the screen because if he looked away he'd become too distracted by Sin's expression. It was almost as if he could feel Sin more clearly if he didn't have anything else to distract him.

Even if logically he knew this was a bad place for this, he couldn't deny that for some reason he was as excited as he was paranoid, and as turned on as he was slightly annoyed with his partner. It was strange and contradictory but it was entirely possible that after everything that had happened in the past two years of knowing Sin, he had turned into some kind of adrenaline junkie. His hand tightened against Sin's shoe but this time it was because he wanted to increase the pressure, not push it away.

"I dunno, maybe Carhart's a secret bookie?" Owen suggested in a seemingly innocent manner.

Carhart looked weary and sat back in his chair in a manner that showed his growing impatience. "Do you have something of value to contribute, Owen? Or are you just trying to be asinine?"

"Um." Owen gave Carhart a rather startled and paranoid look, as if it had just occurred to him that his supervisor could hear the conversation and now he didn't know if he was in trouble. "Well, I just thought... you know, the flowers... some sort of clue..." He waved a hand vaguely at the screen, then finished with a quieter sort of sheepish guilt as he hunched into his chair, "I guess choice b."

Looking slightly disgusted but not entirely angry, Carhart glanced at the screen again thoughtfully. "What would he gain by selling information to the Chinese?" His hazel eyes moved over to Sin and Boyd as he pursed his lips. "Was there any indication about what kind of information it was?"

"I'm a little rusty on my lip reading," Sin piped up finally in a bored drawl as he pressed his foot more firmly against Boyd. "But he definitely said 'Janus' before he blocked his mouth entirely."

"So I read," Carhart muttered, still appearing thoughtful as he rubbed his chin. "It's possible Di Zhi is finally making a move against Janus and this is the information they need."

"Ohh, that could be," Owen said suddenly, sounding a little more awake as he sat up straighter once again. "I heard something about that on the down-low this morning before the meeting. Rumor has it Janus is smarting from the ass-kicking in Mexico so they're trying harder in other areas to gain power. But they're going into Di Zhi territory, which is pissing them off."

Boyd barely stopped himself from rolling his hips forward to increase the pressure. Gritting his teeth, he moved his hand to grip the arm of the chair. Somewhere inside him he wanted to moan but he forced himself to stay silent, trying to concentrate on breathing evenly and staring at the screen. He knew if he let even a hint of his voice out it would give away what was happening and, fuck, Sin *knew* how hard it was for him to keep quiet. The asshole was playing with him, and probably found it damn entertaining to watch Boyd inconspicuously struggle.

"Are these rumors from reliable sources?" Carhart asked, not looking entirely trusting of anything Owen had to say at the moment but going on before he could answer. "If they are, that's something we may need to further investigate. Di Zhi is one of the only organizations that share our common enemy of Janus-- if they make a move against them, it may mean good things for us. And it may be time that we stop tiptoeing around each other and try to collaborate on this. We don't have many people on our side, and even if Di Zhi is wary of us, they haven't shown outright hostility like they have for Janus."

Owen grimaced. "Well, that's sorta the problem and why I didn't bring it up earlier. They're not *unreliable* sources but it's all just conjecture right now, mostly. I was planning to try to get some more concrete leads after this. I think these are probably more than rumors but right now all I got for proof is my own gut, which doesn't really mean much. It'll probably take awhile before I can track down some of the more reliable sources who'd know for sure."

The General nodded and seemed mostly pleased by the answer, his faith in Owen appearing to have been regained. "Work with Ryan on that if you have to." After a moment he looked at the others. "Well that's all we can do for today. When there's more information on the table, we'll be able to do more with this news."

It was a dismissal and as soon as he said it, Sin's foot slipped away innocently and he sat up straight in his chair, leaving Boyd feeling flustered, hot, and his pants uncomfortably tighter. For all that Sin was able to just stop without consequences, Boyd felt like he was reeling in his seat.

"I'd like to talk to the two of you, though," Carhart said to Boyd and Sin.

Owen and Jeffrey were gone within seconds; in Owen's case, he looked like he wanted to leave before he could say something else to mess things up, and in Jeffrey's he looked as though he was headed straight toward another meeting. Boyd shifted uncomfortably in his seat and watched them go with a feeling of longing that didn't make it to his face. He wanted Carhart to leave so he could rip into Sin, or maybe just rip his clothes off.

Boyd looked sidelong at his partner and saw he still had that perfectly innocent expression. Of course he did; he wasn't the one who was getting aroused in the middle of a meeting with their superior staring straight at them.

The thought brought a spike of paranoia with it. Shit, did Carhart know? Is that why he made them stay behind? If he made them stand up right now, Boyd was going to kill Sin... He discreetly slid his hand over his crotch and resisted the urge to narrow his eyes toward Sin; that would just make it more obvious if Carhart was already onto them.

And why wouldn't he be? He'd only been half a table away; he could have heard something, or noticed Boyd's discomfort, or maybe Boyd's eyes were dilated slightly now and there wasn't anything he could do about that. It was hardly surprising if Owen or Jeffrey missed out with them bickering at each other but Carhart had a better view and more time to spend studying his two field agents.

It was somewhat dismaying to realize that he didn't entirely find the thought to be objective. Not that he was an exhibitionist by any stretch of the word or that he wanted Carhart to be watching; rather, it was the idea of being caught that was slightly thrilling.

He'd never have initiated something in that sort of setting on his own and it wasn't usual for Sin, but he had to admit that part of it felt a little like when they were on missions. It was similar to when everything was uncertain and adrenaline rushed through his system; when the world seemed a little clearer and the pounding of his heart made all his decisions seem more important, when they never knew if they were being watched or if they would be caught at any second.

Boyd pressed his back against the chair and tried not to shift again because now the hand that had been meant to cover his arousal was starting to replace Sin's foot with slight movements of his fingers that he didn't feel his mind had actually ordered.

Maybe he really was becoming a junkie.

Concentrating on trying to appear normal, Boyd let the chair dig into his back as he worked on keeping his breathing even and expression neutral. He couldn't quite bring himself to look Carhart in the eyes so he instead studied the report lying in front of him as if he was very interested to see if he had missed any details that would support Owen's current theory. He couldn't say what that theory had been-- he'd been a little too distracted-- but he was fairly certain something had been decided and he'd just have to figure it out later.

The General stared at them both for a moment before his gaze finally settled on Boyd. Boyd didn't know if it was his imagination, but the man seemed more serious and intense than he had throughout the entire briefing. Carhart's eyebrows drew together slightly as he folded his fingers together and continued to scrutinize the younger man.

But finally after a long moment of Boyd feeling paranoid and Sin looking thoroughly unconcerned, Carhart spoke.

"I submitted your name into the pool of potential candidates for promotion to level 10," he said suddenly, calmly.

Sin's eyebrows shot up and he glanced over at Boyd without saying a word.

Boyd stared at Carhart in surprise. That was not at all what he'd expected and it took a moment for his mind to process the words. Candidate pool? Promotion to level 10? What...

He remembered having a conversation with Sin about the levels once, and how he'd mentioned something about tests and training and how rare it was for anyone to be invited to level 10.

"Ah," Boyd said after a moment. Between the surprise and the new information, his mind was now completely on the conversation and his arousal was starting to fade. "What does that mean?"

Carhart nodded, as though he'd expected this question, and waved a hand expressively. "It means a lot, actually," he replied. "And it also means nothing at all."

Sin snorted softly and crossed his arms over his chest. He didn't say anything but there was something peculiar about his expression and it wasn't entirely obvious whether he was pleased or displeased by this news. His eyebrows were slightly drawn together but that was the only sign that he was thinking anything at all about the topic since he was giving nothing else away.

"It's rare that this is brought up because it's done out of necessity and of course when the right candidates have presented themselves. Vivienne has, in my opinion, wisely decided that solely relying on Sin and Kassian is no longer the best course of action for the Agency. Not only does it mean that we are without a level 10 for extended periods of time when they go on assignment, which was the case when you were in Monterrey and Kassian was in Russia, but it also wears on the agents and can create a situation where they are too much in demand to physically and mentally keep up with the tasks expected of them."

Carhart paused and his eyes went to Sin; this time his lips pursed and it seemed that he had something more on his mind but he didn't say anything. Instead, he continued. "The

training has only been initiated a couple of times in the past few years and out of all nineteen candidates in both pools, only one was chosen to be promoted and he has since died on assignment. It's a very grueling process and it is difficult to meet the goals expected and to achieve the scores needed to rank up. So even though I submitted your name, it doesn't mean you will necessarily reach that point." He shook his head. "Don't think I doubt your abilities; I just want to stress how difficult it really is. Sin can tell you that."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "I don't remember it being very difficult," he said blandly.

Carhart looked back at him and after a moment rolled his eyes, which was both surprising and amusing at the same time. "Fine. Kassian and I can tell you that, since we're currently the only two *normal* people alive who have gone through it. I forgot that we are in the presence of Super Agent. Forgive my lapse."

"You're forgiven," Sin replied with a smirk.

Boyd was glad to see the two of them getting along better, that Sin wasn't set on denying Carhart any sense of familiarity, but he was more intent about the fact that not all of this made sense to him. His arousal and all thoughts of messing around with Sin were now completely gone as he focused solely on the conversation. "What about the other generals? They didn't take the level 10 training?"

"Not everyone worked their way up from the ground. I started out higher rank because of my military career and accomplishments there but I still had to move up from a lower ranked agent to 9, 10 and then I was promoted eventually to General after many years," Carhart informed him.

"The other Generals were given their titles when hired because of a variety of reasons." His tone seemed to be a mixture of bitterness that some people were handed power and pride in the fact that he'd worked for his position. "It wasn't that way for everyone in the past but many people died in the war."

In other words, Boyd interpreted, at least one of the generals was probably assigned the position as a political move. If that was the case, in all of the Agency, in all of their field agents who could be scattered around the world, there were really only three people alive who had made it through the training and subsequent missions? He looked over at Sin, his expression neutral but eyes more serious than usual, almost subconsciously studying his partner as he thought about it.

Sin, Kassian and Carhart... It wasn't as though Boyd doubted his abilities, but that was a daunting group to live up to. He'd seen Kassian on the field and the man knew what he was doing; he was professional, quick, controlled, and far above the level Boyd felt he was at himself. Carhart had made it up to General and Director of Field Operative Activity, which put him in an even higher position than the few other Generals.

Boyd may not have ever seen him actually on the field but it was obvious he knew what he was doing and was damn good at his job. And there was no point in even trying to compare himself to Sin, who was in many ways on a league of his own from everyone else. The prospect seemed especially intimidating knowing the numbers Carhart had quoted.

"So," Boyd said thoughtfully, as he looked back at Carhart, trying to work this out, "assuming I would be able to make it through the difficult training and I would manage to achieve the scores necessary for the promotion, what would be the ultimate outcome? It seems as though Level 10 denotes solo missions and more difficult tasks. If so, what would happen to our unit? Would Sin get a new partner?"

"Not at all," Carhart said with a shake of his head. "In fact, we're doing things a little bit differently this time around. Instead of one person, we plan to promote three."

"Three?" Sin's eyebrows shot up in surprise and skepticism. "You just went on and on about how hard it is to find one and the goal is three?"

"I didn't say we'd find them all in this particular pool or even this year," the general replied dryly. He paused and narrowed his eyes at both of them. "Neither of you are supposed to know about this, so do not broadcast the fact that I told you. Candidates are to be left under the impression that there will only be one chosen for a number of reasons. I trust Boyd to put in his all regardless, which is why I'm telling you at all."

"Why three specifically?" Boyd asked. "Why not more or less?"

"We could most likely use more," Carhart admitted. "But there are varying factors that weigh into the decision, one is money and the other is necessity. Right now we don't have every base covered with just Sin and Kassian but with five Level 10s, we at least have the bare minimum needed to properly extend our resources. In a perfect world, there would be multiple Level 10s for each major department and backups for injured or recently dead, but in the real world we're going to take what we can get. So we're looking for someone to specialize in espionage, someone to take Kassian's place as

head field agent and team leader for assignments which call for such, and someone who is relatively good in every field so that there is a suitable back up."

The only one of those three that Boyd felt he'd actually do well in was espionage; he wasn't the type to want to be a team leader and he didn't have enough experience in the other fields to be a jack of all trades.

What did that all mean for Kassian, though? Last he'd heard from him, he'd said that it finally looked like he was going to be able to stay around for awhile. Given this news, it made him wonder what that directive had really meant. It wasn't as though he had anything invested in what happened with Kassian but he was curious.

"It seems like you're implying Sin's job won't change but what about Kassian? You're looking for a replacement for him as the head field agent as well as for espionage?"

"It is very doubtful," Carhart began slowly, "that we'll ever find, or at least not at this time, someone who can make as good an assassin as Sin and someone who we can give as high a level of clearance to. So for now, he's in a class all by himself."

"Aren't I special?" Sin said, sarcasm oozing from his voice.

Carhart ignored him and went on. "Kassian isn't being replaced for espionage. That's what he was originally intended for and we need more than one person for that, as undercover assignments can typically go on for any stretch of time. We just need to find someone to replace him as field op leader. It's not something he was supposed to do but he was good at it and so he wound up doing both."

"Ah," Boyd said. That made sense. This was a lot to take in but he wanted to know all the details before he thought about it too closely. "What does the training consist of? Would I do that on the side of our regular missions?"

"It's a bunch of bullshit," Sin said before Carhart could respond; he leaned back in his chair and made another face. "You have to live on the compound and deal with morons constantly."

"I wouldn't call it bullshit," the General corrected Sin. "It's very intense physical and mental training for two months while, yes, living on the compound with the other candidates and then a month of constant testing in various areas. It is very rigorous and time-consuming; candidates are only allowed out of the training area every so often. It's

like the boot camp I went through in the military except three hundred times more intense."

"Yeah. Bullshit."

Boyd leaned back in his chair. Well, that certainly did sound intense.

It occurred to him that Sin and he wouldn't see each other during that time. He didn't exactly relish that idea; he felt like he was finally getting to a point where they could afford to be around each other. With Connors and most of the restrictions on Sin gone, they'd even been able to meet up at his house or in the city a few times. He didn't want to give up his ability to be around Sin whenever they felt like it.

On the other hand, he didn't have a problem with working hard for an ultimate goal if he knew the perks would be worth it. He still wasn't exactly clear on what becoming Level 10 would get him, though, other than probably a pay raise and more work. And he still hadn't been told what that meant for their partnership.

"What would that mean for this unit, then? If I made Level 10, would anything change?"

"No. You'd just have additional work," Carhart said. "But while you're training, there won't be any missions for you unless it is exceptionally important."

Boyd considered that. "Would I ever have solo missions? Or long undercover missions like Kassian has had?"

Carhart nodded without hesitation. "It's very likely. Kassian is an extreme example though-- his assignment is part of an ongoing cover identity and that isn't a typical case for any agent-- but it's also the reason why we need another Level 10 for espionage."

Boyd looked down at the file in front of him and thought about it; about the unit and about the possibility of promotion. It would probably sound strange if he said it to anyone, but he had come to like this unit, for all its faults and the constant bickering during briefings, and he would have had to seriously consider if he wanted to break it up or leave it behind if that had been the case.

He liked the group and liked being Sin's partner, even if sometimes he wished he could just go alone. Part of that was because Sin still had a tendency to do his own thing when he felt like it, but a larger part was that he liked to be in control. He liked creating

the plans and the backup plans and having the ability to adjust on the fly if need be. It was the sort of thing best done solo.

It was the sort of thing he'd done when he'd first started as an agent even if he'd had no idea what he'd been doing back then... It would be interesting to get a chance to do that again, only this time with some experience to back it up.

Boyd often had moments where he felt like he wasn't as good of an agent as Sin or Kassian, and he wasn't the type to like being second best. He wanted to know he could hold his own as well. Or maybe he just wanted to prove it.

He didn't mind his job as it was now so maybe that would be the perk; the same partnership but with the ability to branch out alone now and then. The chance to really work his mind around the puzzle of the mission, to be the only one responsible, the only one who could receive the majority of the backlash if it went wrong. The chance to avoid nearly getting his partner-- the person he cared about more than anyone else-- killed because of his fuck ups.

Maybe he would even be assigned to accompany Sin on some of the harder, higher level missions, the ones he returned from grim-faced. Maybe it could help.

And that was the catch. Having more control over his own missions put the Agency more in control of him. It meant he could be given assignments that would tax him more than usual, he could be put in situations he didn't agree with, he could be ordered to do things he didn't want to do. Level 10 meant more pay, more action, more responsibility, and more memories he may want to forget.

What was the alternative, though? He was stuck with the Agency for life; be it a long one working small missions or a short one filled with more intensity.

He suspected part of his new found addiction to adrenaline had something to do with the years he'd basically wasted away in a meaningless, emotionless state. Having something that made him truly alive, that pushed him to the limits and made him fear that he may not make it through, made returning home that much more relieving, made having someone to be with that much more important.

He could spend years never quite living up to his potential and have to do things he didn't want to do anyway, or he could also give himself the chance to have a little more control and push himself along the way.

He knew the offer was a double-edged sword and he didn't know what he would ultimately choose, but he wasn't about to let the chance slide by.

"When does training start?" Boyd asked as he met Carhart's eyes.

"Two weeks," Carhart replied, appearing pleased. "You'll receive a formal letter in the mail about it, detailing what you're supposed to do." He looked between the two agents again. "Any more questions?"

Boyd shook his head, already thinking through what this would mean for his near future and logistics like ensuring all the bills for the house were on automatic payment because he probably wouldn't have time to bother with that sort of thing once training started.

"I think that covers the major points," he said, then looked at Carhart again.

Belatedly, he wondered what had prompted the general to nominate him; was it just that Carhart thought he was that good, or was it that he wanted another Level 10 in the unit? Did he want to avoid sending the two of them on extended undercover missions together again so it all wouldn't go to shit like it had before? Or did he truly believe that Boyd would make a good Level 10?

It wasn't that he distrusted Carhart's motives; it was simply that he was curious. Granted, overall he'd done a good job on his missions, but the ones he had failed in, he'd failed spectacularly.

Alexis was fully his fault. It may have turned out that it wasn't exactly their fault that Monterrey went down so poorly, but Boyd still knew that he held some of the blame due to his emotional decision. He didn't actively think about it anymore, but after having spoken to Kassian and having been briefly on his team during Monterrey, Boyd was very aware of how unprofessional he seemed in comparison to the senior agent.

The older man nodded and stood up. "I'll see the two of you later. Enjoy the rest of your day."

Carhart turned around and started to leave, but before actually exiting, he looked over his shoulder at Sin with a disapproving frown. "And next time you get bored at a briefing, find other ways to entertain yourself." With that being said, he walked out the door and shut it behind him.

Looking largely unconcerned by the comment, Sin got to his feet with a stretch as he eyeballed his partner warily. He didn't say anything but he had the same peculiar expression on his face that he'd had at the very beginning of the conversation about promotion.

Boyd waited until Carhart left before he slumped back in his chair and slid his eyes closed, running a hand across his face. *That* was embarrassing.

He could feel Sin still staring at him, so he dropped his hand and looked sidelong at his partner. "What were you thinking?" He asked it lightly, not disapprovingly. "And why are you looking at me like that?"

Sin's intense green eyes focused on him and he raised one broad shoulder nonchalantly. "My mind started to wander," he said simply. "I was trying to refocus."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "How does covertly molesting me help you refocus?"

"Gives me something better to think about," was the unapologetic reply.

Rather than respond to that, Boyd just gave Sin a mild look. "And the look?" he prompted, making sure Sin knew he noticed that he'd conveniently not answered the question the first time.

There was a brief silence as Sin stared down at him and idly dragged his fingers along a rip in the thigh of his jeans. He started to shake his head in a manner that usually meant he was going to brush off the topic at hand, but instead he narrowed his eyes slightly and shrugged. "I was just wondering if this is really such a good idea."

"Why not?" Boyd asked calmly, although his eyes narrowed slightly as he watched his partner more closely.

Another silence and this time Sin just shook his head and turned towards the door. "Never mind." He pulled the door open and walked out into the hall, shoving his hands into the pockets of his fading ragged jeans; secondhand gems from a flea market.

"Oh, what the hell," Boyd muttered to himself, annoyed. Did Sin not think he would understand? Or did he think he wasn't good enough for Level 10?

It took him a moment to gather his things and make it out into the hallway, but as soon as he caught up to Sin, he spoke quietly enough for their conversation to stay between

them. "You can't give me that look throughout the entire conversation, say it's a bad idea, and expect me to just ignore it when you won't explain. I want to know your reason."

"You're going to get pissed off and defensive regardless, so what difference does it make what I have to say?" Sin asked dryly as he walked down the hall.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Boyd said mildly. "And what makes you think that's the only reaction I'd have?" There was no edge to the question despite the fact he was mildly indignant about the assumption.

"Because you seemed annoyed when I told you what I was thinking." He looked over at Boyd with a frown.

Boyd sighed. "I wasn't annoyed until you told me never mind. And that was only because you'd been giving me a look the entire time and then wouldn't explain it." He raised his eyebrows. "Seriously, Sin. You're my partner and one of three people alive right now who have been through the training. Your opinion isn't exactly irrelevant here; regardless of if I agree, I still want to know why you think it wouldn't be a good idea."

Sin stopped walking and turned to Boyd, crossing his arms over his chest. "It has nothing to do with whether or not I think you deserve to be promoted. I'm just concerned, I guess." He shook his head and raised one hand, rubbing his head as though he was in pain.

"Concerned?" Boyd echoed in confusion. His gaze absently drifted toward Sin's hand; his partner had been more tired lately, more prone to headaches. When he'd asked Sin a few weeks ago why that was, he'd just said he'd been having trouble sleeping. It was no wonder, since Sin had never been very good at sleeping. In all the chaos after the raid, he'd probably also been woken up by sounds of construction on the compound at night. "Why?"

"Because it's a lot of shit. It's a lot that will be expected of you and a lot that they will make you do, a lot you won't want to do. I'm not talking about their bullshit Olympic training crap, either. I'm talking about assignments like the kind you were so against when I told you about them in Monterrey and assignments that send Kassian away for years a time where I'm sure he had to do shit he probably thought he was never capable of. And even though you've been here for a couple of years, I don't think you're ready to be sent off to do that kind of shit." Sin shrugged again and finally looked away.

"It's not some exciting 'promotion' like Carhart is making it out to be. It sucks. But you can do whatever you want."

"I know," Boyd said after a moment and looked away as well. "At least, I know that the solo assignments you're given aren't always the sort of thing to envy, and I know Kassian was gone for awhile. I know I didn't agree with the assignment you told me about. I don't know what I really think about all of this yet. It's not something I would have thought to nominate myself for if I'd had the chance. And anyway, I..."

He paused, eyes narrowing as he tried to work out his thoughts. "I like a challenge, I guess." He looked over at Sin. "I suppose I figure that if it isn't right for me, it'll be quite obvious once training starts and I just won't get promoted. Things will return to normal, I'll probably have improved myself in general during the training, and there will be no harm done."

"You won't know whether or not it's right for you until you're promoted and they give you the assignment and then it will be too late," Sin pointed out. "I have no doubt that you'll be promoted. You're a fast learner and you're good at the job. I just think you don't need to be in the position I often find myself in because of my rank. It fucks with my head and I've been doing this for over a decade and I'm sure it affects Kassian too, just like it fucked with and killed every other Level 10 in the past, and they were doing this shit a lot longer than you've even been here."

Sin dropped his hand and shrugged again, looking more tired as the conversation progressed. "Carhart is going to tell you whatever he needs to tell you because he knows he needs more people for the job. He's not going to tell you the straight facts about what will be expected of you. But it doesn't matter anyway. That's just my opinion. You'll do whatever you want and it's not really my business."

Boyd considered that a moment. "How did that other Level 10 die? The one Carhart mentioned."

Sin squinted and went back to rubbing his head again. "I forgot the details. But he was on an undercover assignment and he never came back. He just disappeared for months but then his body parts started showing up in pieces."

"Guess they figured out who he was," Boyd said mildly. "I'll have to think about this. I already planned to; I wasn't going to just jump into it."

He glanced away briefly, pushing his hair back from his face with a light sigh. Maybe Sin's tiredness was contagious; this conversation was starting to wear on him as well. He didn't know what he was going to decide and right then he really didn't want to think about it. He had two weeks and he did his best thinking at home alone, anyway.

But even though Sin was saying not to go through with the training, Boyd was still pleased that Sin seemed so certain that he would pass. There had been a time in their partnership when Sin seemed to think he was nothing but a fuck up; a stupid kid who relied on gadgets to survive. It was nice to know that things had changed.

The pleasant thought shifted his concentration away from the serious topic at hand and allowed him to just focus on Sin, or maybe he was using it as an excusable segue to stop himself from more serious thoughts. He couldn't help noticing that, even pissed off and tired, Sin was still incredibly attractive. Sin didn't know how tempting his full lips looked when they were pulled down in that sullen frown and he definitely didn't realize how those intensely staring green eyes could turn Boyd on.

After a moment of silence, Sin sighed and ran a hand through his hair. When he swallowed, it caused Boyd's attention to drift to the smooth tanned skin at Sin's throat, the way his Adam's apple bobbed...

Now that his attention was firmly turned away from the topic of training, Boyd suddenly thought about Sin's 'refocusing' during the debriefing. There had been a moment in which he'd wanted to reach out and pull Sin into a kiss, he'd wanted to lean against him and feel his strength and the heat of his body and despite the serious topic, he still wanted to; maybe he could drag him all the way to Sin's apartment where they could do more.

But even this infrequently used hallway was public domain and he knew very well that there were cameras that guards would be watching. Even though most of the guards had long since backed off and neither he nor his partner had gotten much trouble from them for awhile, he wasn't about to give them more shit to talk about.

So Boyd kept his expression neutral as he said, "But that's for later. What are you doing now? I was thinking we could continue with where we left off back there." He tilted his head toward the conference room.

Sin's eyebrows rose and he looked at Boyd in surprise and something else that almost seemed like... relief. It wasn't obvious which he was relieved about; to be done with the

conversation or that Boyd hadn't taken his concern the wrong way. "I think that's the best idea I've heard all day," he said with a slight smile.

As they made their way across the compound, people bustled around; it was notable how different everything seemed in contrast to how it had been in the spring. When they'd returned from Mexico there had been so much tension in the air, as if everyone was walking a fine line of caution and paranoia due to fear of Connors' wrath, but now it seemed that people were more at ease. Or as at ease as anyone could really be at the Agency.

It was ironic considering that there had recently been so much damage, death and destruction right there in what had once been a safe haven, and that the assailants were still unknown. But it was just one of those strange things that went along with how different the world was since the war and the aftermath. People didn't expect much from anyone else, didn't expect much from the world as a whole, and no one ever really seemed surprised when tragedy struck; even if it was on their own doorstep.

Boyd shoved his hands in his pockets as they walked across the large, grassy courtyard quietly.

No one really paid much notice to them other than a couple of people that glanced their way. It was nothing like the attention they'd received in the past. However, it was obvious that people still wondered about their relationship; about the slightly effeminate gay kid and how he'd managed to get so close to the psychopath who'd previously seemed incapable of normal human interaction.

It was just that now they wondered quietly.

And even if the guards in Sin's building more than likely knew what went on behind his door, the door they guarded rather lazily these days, other than the occasional winking remark no one went on too much about it.

As they entered the apartment and Sin kicked the door closed impatiently behind him, Boyd was pretty sure that he'd receive one of those remarks on the way out.

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Boyd stared at the ceiling, sweat coating his skin and the familiar smell of sex and Sin's apartment hanging in the air. His fingers rested against the old scars on his bare

stomach, and his legs were tangled in the sheets. He took care not to move the bed too much when he dropped his head to the side, studying his partner.

Sin lay at his side, half-covered by the sheets, his expression drawn in the fitful sleep he'd fallen into. It was the middle of the day but given how tired Sin had seemed lately, Boyd didn't think it was necessary to wake him. Even if he slept until the following morning he probably wouldn't get caught up on the amount of sleep he needed.

When they'd been in Monterrey, it had seemed like Sin had finally been able to properly rest, that his expression had seemed relaxed and calm. Boyd had always thought that Sin had been that way because of their distance from the Agency, and now he felt that the assumption was verified. Connors and his totalitarian rule may be over, but there was still a lot to do and there were still webs they were each caught in now that they'd returned.

Vivienne was giving Sin more slack than he'd had in years but that didn't mean he was no longer considered a monster by some, despite the fact that many people had a new-found fascination with him after they'd found out he'd become an 'unlikely hero,' as Kassian had put it, by saving Vivienne's life.

Watching Sin shift uncomfortably and tighten his expression, Boyd felt a dual surge of emotions; a sense of sadness that Sin no longer felt peace even in sleep, and a warm feeling of fondness toward his partner.

He carefully pushed himself up onto his elbow, twisted on his side and reached out to gently run his hand along Sin's forehead, pushing some of the dark hair away from his face. Although Sin seemed to subconsciously lean into the touch, he otherwise did not react and thankfully seemed no closer to waking than he had been before.

There hadn't been many chances lately to just watch Sin without interruption in the pale light of the day. The moments when they were alone and away from the public were often filled with frantic sex and exhausted sleep afterward. In Sin's case, he always seemed restless when asleep; maybe they were the same nightmares he'd had from before, resurrected now that his stress level had increased. There was no way to tell for sure.

Several times Boyd would fall asleep only to wake and find that Sin was gone. Most of the time he didn't think twice about it; they never made it a point to explain their every move to each other and he sometimes left Sin's in the middle of the night, too, usually because he had something he had to get done that night or he couldn't sleep due to the

occasional distant sound of construction. However, at times he did think about how he knew what he felt toward Sin but he didn't know what exactly Sin felt in response. Because of that there were times when he had to wonder if their reasons for leaving were different.

It wasn't something that seemed especially pertinent, though. He knew Sin cared about him as a friend and a partner and that was the most important thing at the moment, given all of the hurdles they'd crossed in the past two years. But it was still something he wondered about from time to time. He'd thought about bringing it up but the time never seemed right and he had no idea what he would say, anyway.

Aside from all that, right then he was thankful for the relative quiet and for a moment that was not caught up in the whirlwind of time. And he was glad that he had the ability to watch his partner sleep, even if Sin looked like he was likely having a nightmare, because only a few short months earlier it'd seemed like they would never see each other again.

Boyd felt that moments like this emphasized that what he really felt for Sin was love; it was something he couldn't help, something he didn't really feel like denying. This was the first time that he could recognize at the time it was happening how much he cared about another person. With Lou, Boyd had realized long after the fact that Lou had mattered as much as he did; he hadn't had moments where he just stared at Lou and allowed himself to just acknowledge and experience what he felt.

When Sin was near, Boyd was intensely aware of his presence, of how good it felt to have him there, sometimes even when they were arguing. The familiar feel of Sin's body, the sound of his voice, the smell of his apartment and even the light cloud of cigarette smoke that drifted around him; these were all things that had become like second nature to Boyd's life, aspects that were as normal as if they were part of his own mannerisms and experiences.

He couldn't imagine what it would be like without Sin because it felt like Sin was the most important part of what he had. He'd gone through a lot of shit since he'd joined the Agency, but Sin had been there all along the way. Whether Sin had been part of the problem or the solution no longer felt important to him. In some ways, the only reason Boyd had bothered to pull himself out of his self-assigned hell after Lou's death had been because Sin was there. Even if Sin hadn't been the sole motivating factor in the things that had happened, it was difficult to say whether or not those changes would have occurred if Sin had not been there.

By now, Sin was a constant, someone he could never quite take for granted because he'd nearly lost him more than once. For all that they would argue sometimes and had an imperfect partnership, Sin gave him a sense of safety. Boyd knew that whatever happened in the future, he'd be able to count on his partner to be there to have his back just as he had so many times in the past. He knew he had someone to return to.

Boyd's fingers sifted through Sin's soft hair and he leaned forward to lightly kiss his forehead, sliding his eyes closed as he rested there a moment, listening to Sin's even but somewhat shallow breathing and the rustling of the sheets as his feet shifted on the bed. This was the sort of thing he wanted to have from now and into the future; the knowledge and reassurance that despite how busy they may get and how much else may happen, they could at least return to a moment like this even briefly.

After a few breaths of peaceful silence, Boyd pulled away and sat up. He took care to keep the bed as steady as possible as he crawled over to the side and stood, intending to wash up briefly before venturing outside once again. He didn't want to stay there and risk accidentally waking Sin up since he wasn't anywhere near tired.

It didn't take long before he was dressed and had his hair back in a ponytail to make it less obvious it was still damp. Awhile ago he'd finally had his hair dyed back to as close to his natural blond color as he could so it no longer had the contrasting brown ends. He'd let the woman in Unit 16 cut it at that time, giving it a strangely metropolitan style. She had assured Boyd that he looked quite hot but he hadn't really cared, he just hadn't wanted to look so conspicuous anymore; it was bad for his profession.

When he returned to Sin's bedroom he found the other man still asleep. Feeling relieved that Sin hadn't been disturbed, Boyd silently left the apartment.

There was a guard standing watch outside who had become accustomed to Boyd coming and going. He was one of the guards who seemed to think he knew what really went on behind the door because he gave Boyd a knowing look and asked with a smirk, "Get your fill?"

Boyd didn't respond other than giving him a neutral glance before ignoring him. He heard the guard make a slight amused noise behind him but he let the sound get drowned out by the door shutting as he stepped into the stairwell and headed downstairs. Once outside, he took a moment to just stand there and take in the day, thinking about how much had changed, and continued to change, in the last few months.

The cool October ambiance somehow seemed to be reflected within the Agency's walls. Outside, the glimpses past skyscrapers showed an overcast sky with a dull grey tinge as the clouds crowded out the clear blue beyond. The wind was cool and light against the skin; occasional gusts seemed laced with ice, a portent for the winter just a month or so away.

This year the weather seemed especially uncertain; the inevitable progression from cool to cold was broken by infrequent and surprising standalone days with wind that was warmer than expected or clouds which seemed clearer than usual.

The same feeling of transition, imbalance, and change could be felt within the compound. After Vivienne Beaulieu's rise to power following the infiltration several months prior, there had been a lot of changes.

Some were probably long overdue, like establishing new disaster protocol with prevention and reaction procedures for possible other infiltrations; those came with a mandate that all staff must be trained on the changes.

The tunnels were blocked and secured, the perimeter was strengthened, and even if no one could say for sure it was happening, it was generally assumed that there was an in-depth internal affairs investigation to discover who the traitor might have been, if anyone. This resulted in employees suddenly disappearing for a few hours to a few days, and when they returned they wouldn't say what happened. Vivienne had made it very clear that she would not tolerate any insubordination among the staff and was willing to take measures against it.

It was part of the reason why many people were happy with her rise to power. A lot of agents, especially the generals and higher ranking staff, felt she had no idea how to deal with the Agency. She was a civilian and even if the Agency was only a pseudo militaristic organization, there were some who felt that her background with Public Relations and as House Speaker didn't qualify her for the job at all. They thought it was bad enough when she'd been Inspector, but now it was worse that she was Acting Marshal as well.

However over time, some people had started to have grudging respect for her. The compound was more secure, the buildings that had been decimated were being redesigned and rebuilt, and temporary studios nearby had been acquired to house the hundreds of staff who were displaced. She remained as cold and aloof as ever, but rumors of a professionally trained and experienced replacement for Connors eventually

coming were starting to allay some fears that she would remain solely in power indefinitely.

In some ways, Boyd and Sin had benefited quite a bit from her reign of power. No one knew her exact reasons but she had given Sin more relative freedom than he'd ever had. He still had a GPS unit implanted within him so he could not disappear, and there was no doubt that he would continue to be swiftly and mercilessly held accountable for any wrongdoings, but there was a certain sense of leeway he was given for the moment and neither Sin nor Boyd were planning to complain about it.

The other person who had benefited in a bizarre way was Thierry. There was no doubt that, had Connors remained in charge, Thierry would be long dead by now. Only, of course, after he had spilled all the pertinent secrets he was privy to. Boyd suspected that in that scenario Thierry would've been given to Shane indefinitely.

Vivienne, however, did not work that way and had likely utilized some other method of interrogation, something less likely to result in a quick death. She was a strong supporter of wringing every single drop of use out of people before she disposed of them. That coldly logical part of her personality had once affected Boyd heavily as her son as well, but even that had slowly been changing.

He had seen her a handful of times since the infiltration, primarily for work-related updates but once to discuss brief personal matters, and he'd realized that in the months since he'd made an effort to be more independent, her opinions of him mattered less than they had before.

She would probably always hold some amount of sway over him simply because she was his mother and he'd been heavily influenced by her for years, but it was gratifying to recognize that now he mostly cared about her thoughts from a business perspective; she was his superior and the temporary head of the Agency, and that was it. He'd felt more her equal than ever before and, as if she'd sensed the change in him, she'd started to treat him a touch less coldly, a hint more respectfully, and each time he'd walked away he'd felt less in turmoil than ever before.

The situation wasn't perfect and was a work-in-progress; his relationship with her was as convoluted as ever, but the difference was he was starting to feel he had some sense of control in it, that she wasn't the one always calling the shots and telling him what to do and think.

The wind picked up abruptly, skittering fallen leaves across the pavement in front of him in a playful, colorful dance, and the loose part of his hair briefly obscured his vision. He pulled some hair behind his ears and only realized as he looked up that he'd absently wandered toward one of the buildings rather than toward the parking lot.

He was mildly surprised to find himself in front of the residential building that he knew housed Thierry, but then he supposed that thinking about the man briefly must have subconsciously led him there. He almost turned and walked away, passing it off as a brief moment of tiredness, but something stopped him.

He didn't know what would happen with Thierry once they had finally verified the latest report, but he did know that he fully believed him now. When he imagined Thierry, he couldn't think of him in his fine suit with his wine and smooth words as he led them around Paris, or really even the man he'd slept with for information.

Instead, Boyd remembered the scared and stubborn man with bleeding feet who had walked from one chamber of death directly toward another under a different group's flag. For all that Thierry was and had been, that act took someone with a lot of courage, someone resigned with a completely dismal outlook on life, or someone incredibly stupid. He knew Thierry wasn't stupid but he realized that he didn't know which of the other two reasons it had been.

He'd betrayed Janus for the Agency's allegiance, but why? The game he'd been playing had served him well for so long; what had caused him to deviate with such important information?

Boyd realized he wanted to see him; he wanted to talk to him and, since one never knew when they'd get a second chance in the Agency, it was better to see him now before something could happen. As far as he was concerned, Thierry had proven himself to at least be a man with some sense of defining character; Boyd just didn't know exactly what that character was yet.

He flashed his ID at the guard outside, who recognized him and waved him in without a second glance. When he asked where Thierry was, he was given an answer in a bored tone as the guard already looked away to survey the surroundings.

He didn't really know what he intended to say to Thierry but that didn't stop him from jogging up the stairs two at a time until he arrived at the third floor. The stairwell door swung heavily shut behind him as he stepped into a well-lit, well-tended hallway with rich maroon carpeting and lights warming the walls. He didn't have to search for

Thierry's door; it was the one with the two guards standing outside at attention, eyeing him warily as he approached.

"What are you doing here?" one of them asked; it was less a challenge than it was wariness of the anomaly of his visit.

"I want to speak to Beauvais," Boyd said calmly and showed his ID card again.

It probably wasn't necessary; like the first guard, he seemed to recognize Boyd immediately. That was no small wonder given Boyd's infamy the year before with the guards and the population at the Agency in general. Even so, seeing "Level 9" flashed before his eyes seemed to remind the guard that he was seriously outranked here and if Boyd wanted to see the detainee, then he had the clearance level necessary to do so.

The second guard had yet to look away from surveying the halls with an alertness that was not usual for most guards who grew bored with their duty.

The first man stepped to the side to give access to the door. "Good luck," he said sarcastically. "He makes less noise than a mute most days."

Although that comment did not fit the Thierry that Boyd had first been introduced to, it was not surprising. Months of interrogation and imprisonment would not exactly make a person more talkative or cheerful. Even if Thierry had been moved to a nicer apartment, the guards stationed outside his door made it very clear that he was still not to be trusted and that he was, at the moment, little more than a glorified prisoner on probation.

Boyd paused only briefly before he knocked on Thierry's door.

There was a long moment of silence and for a moment he didn't think Thierry would answer, but then the light under the door was briefly darkened and Boyd knew the other man was on the inside looking out. He continued to stare at the door calmly but as several moments passed he began to wonder if Thierry would ignore him. However, after what seemed like an eternity of standing next to the two guards, the locks clicked and the door swung open.

The man standing on the other side was neither the flamboyant man from Paris nor the determined but obviously frightened prisoner who they'd led back from Mexico. This was someone entirely new, someone tired-looking and wary; someone who was staring at him distrustfully, as if he really didn't know what to expect from such a visit.

"What are you doing here?" Thierry asked, French accent as prominent as ever and voice dull, subdued.

Boyd felt a brief sense of sympathy from seeing Thierry look so worn and wary; he tried to make the man feel as at ease as he could while not giving anything away in front of the guards. Glancing briefly past Thierry into his apartment, his body language relaxed and expression neutral, Boyd met Thierry's eyes again. "Can I come in?"

There was a brief moment where he wasn't sure whether or not Thierry would actually grant the request but then the other man shrugged finally and stepped aside, allowing entrance. The door was shut quietly after Boyd entered and neither of them spoke at first, giving him the opportunity to look around the main room of the apartment.

It was very similar to the floor plan of Sin's place, with the kitchen, entry and living room all attached with doorways leading off to a bedroom and likely a bathroom, and it was almost as Spartan. There were no personal touches, no decorations and nothing to imply that this was someone's home other than the faint smell of Clove cigarettes that lingered in the air.

But then again, it wasn't a home. This was most likely not the place Thierry would prefer to spend his time, let alone live.

Thierry walked away from the door, bare feet shuffling over the tile of the entrance as he went over to the living room area to pick up his still-lit cigarette. He was obviously thinner, paler, and although he wasn't bruised and bloody like he'd been the last time Boyd had been in his presence, he still seemed like a man who was suffering. His wavy brown hair hung lifelessly in his eyes; eyes that lacked the twinkle they'd once had in a situation that seemed to have happened a lifetime ago. He was still undeniably attractive but the aura of smug arrogance that had once clung to him like an almost suffocating fog was now gone.

"I have nothing left to tell anyone," Thierry said after awhile. "So you see, you don't need to be here."

Boyd felt something for Thierry; he didn't know if it was sadness or what, but he did know that he remembered the feeling of desolation and hopelessness when everything had fallen apart for him. It must be even worse for Thierry, who lost his livelihood and freedom and now was held prisoner by the Agency; yet if he were to escape the Agency's hold then the groups like Janus that he'd betrayed would be out to kill him.

He was like a refugee from his former life.

Although it was true that in many ways Thierry had basically brought all this upon himself through his former lifestyle, it made Boyd wonder even more why he'd helped the Agency with that information.

Even if the Monterrey meeting hadn't been a trap, if they'd raided it successfully and had gotten away, wouldn't that have still cast doubt on Thierry in the end? Or had he been so confident that multiple people had access to the information that he wouldn't have been singled out?

"Thierry," Boyd said not unkindly. "Except for those guards and you, no one knows I'm here. This is... more of a social call than anything. I just didn't want to say that out there; I don't know what their orders are and it was possible they would turn me away if they thought it wasn't specifically for work." He tilted his head. "Is that alright?"

Thierry's cobalt blue eyes rose briefly to study him, face drawn distrustfully as he sat down on the sofa and pulled his knees against his chest. Sliding his cigarette between his lips and flicking a lighter idly, Thierry looked up again from under his mess of dark brown hair. "Social call? We are not friends."

"I know," Boyd said, remaining by the door until Thierry decided it was alright for him to stay. "But I don't really think we're enemies, either."

"Maybe not," Thierry conceded as he dropped his eyes again and took a drag of his Clove. "But it is hard to tell anymore. Who wants me dead, who wants to use me for what I know, who is using me for information..." He looked at Boyd again. "Trust is no longer in my repertoire, Agent Beaulieu. I merely exist as long as I am useful and that is all I can expect from anyone."

Boyd nodded, not surprised by that given the circumstances. "I don't expect you to believe me because you have no reason to, but I really don't have any ulterior motives in coming here."

He studied Thierry, tilting his head slightly as he amended, "Well. It would be a lie to say that I wasn't curious about something, so in a way, yes I suppose I do wonder about some information. But I just want to ask it for myself. Even though it's one reason I came here, another is just because I wanted to check up on you. Even if you told me right now you don't want to answer any questions, regardless of if they're out of curiosity or for orders, but you wouldn't mind me staying for a bit, simply as a person with no ill

will toward you, then I would stay and not ask anything. I'm aware that this probably sounds like a lie, but know that it wouldn't be something calculated I would do just to get in your good graces so you'll answer my questions later."

Thierry nodded but his expression didn't change. He continued to gaze at Boyd intently, slender fingers absently bringing the cigarette to his lips once again. "You are one of the few Americans here who actually pronounce my first name correctly," he said, seemingly randomly, before going on. "Americans are interesting creatures. They criticize those who speak their language with a slight accent but have no issues with butchering most other languages, my name included. There is only one other who does not call me a scientific hypothesis. It seems Vivienne Beaulieu also manages to avoid calling me 'Theory.'"

He paused and tilted his head slightly, eyes narrowing. "I assume her last name and also knowledge of French pronunciation cannot both be coincidences with yours."

Boyd watched him a moment though his expression did not change. He could imagine where this was going; if Thierry had met his mother there was little doubt that he would have been aware of the sort of person she was. Knowing that Boyd and she were related, Thierry could be even less likely to trust Boyd, possibly suspecting that he was similar to her or she would get information out of him later. If that's how it turned out then there wasn't much that could be done about it; it would be unfortunate, but Boyd wasn't about to beg Thierry to trust or believe him.

"When we met, I told you my mother is French," Boyd said in assent. "I assume this means you've met her."

"Obviously," Thierry said, finishing his cigarette and stubbing it out in the ashtray that was balanced on the arm of the couch. He crossed his arms over his chest and turned his attention to the window, looking out with his chin lifted slightly, some of his previous haughtiness creeping back into his expression. It almost seemed as though he was making an attempt to get across that he wasn't just a tired, beaten prisoner; he was still the man who'd played every major international rebel group and profited from it immensely. "What is it that you want here? I do hope you had the prudence to *not* bring Sin."

"He's not exactly a lap dog I bring with me everywhere," Boyd said dryly. "As far as I know, he's nowhere near here." He paused, watching Thierry a moment before he decided to just ask. "I wasn't lying when I said I was checking on you. But in addition, I

suppose I was wondering if you'd been planning from the start to give all that information to the Agency."

Thierry glanced over at him, appearing mildly surprised that he'd actually been forthright with the question, and he seemed to appreciate the directness. He wasn't a naive or stupid man; he was probably better at reading body language, tones and figuring out the undercurrent of a question or comment than most spies at the Agency. It'd been imperative for his previous profession that he be able to tell who was lying, who was playing games, and most of all, who didn't believe what he was saying but was trying to hide it.

The fact that Boyd wasn't playing the usual verbal games that others did was surprising but a relief nonetheless. "You mean, the information that they tortured out of me?" Boyd's gaze did not waver and his expression did not significantly change, but Thierry was able to tell that he was not particularly pleased by the reference. "Yes," he said evenly. "I have no intention of pushing you that far for the answer, though."

Making a face, the French man crossed one knee over the other and folded his hands on top of them as he appeared to consider the question. "The answer would be yes-- I had always planned to give the Americans my allegiance, but I would not have liked to give up all my secrets at one time and ensure that I could never show my face in Europe again without fear of assassination. You bring less attention to yourself if information is given and acted on slowly rather than all at one time, you see. Certain things I was exclusively privy to for quite some time, but as that time passes, other people in that close inner circle of specific organizations also find out and then it can be any number of people who are possibly the rat and not just the young French man who has been tied to them since he was a child."

He paused and raised his eyebrows ironically. "Although I suppose the Mexican incident was a test that I failed. I suppose I should have known better."

"Tied to them?" Boyd echoed; he didn't know anything about what Thierry was referring to. He'd never thought too much about how Thierry had gotten into the position he'd been in; he would've just assumed Thierry had chosen the lifestyle. After all, he'd seemed to be quite good at it. Maybe it hadn't been a conscious decision after all, though. "How so?"

Thierry gazed at him and seemed somehow pleased that at least all of *his* secrets weren't made readily available to everyone at the Agency. Even so, he answered

anyway. "Without my father's money it is entirely possible that Janus would have taken a lot longer to become more than just another unruly group of rebels."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, surprised by that. He'd never heard anything about Thierry's family being involved with Janus or supporting them through funding. He wondered if Carhart or Sin knew about that; and if they did, why they'd never mentioned it.

If Thierry's father had been so supportive of Janus, it made Boyd wonder if Thierry's betrayal had been an especially hard blow to them. Then again, they may not have cared; they were primarily interested in their ideals and secondarily the people involved only as long as they continued to support them.

It wasn't surprising; any group went after traitors but Janus especially took care to deal with the situation. With such a grassroots organization built initially on idealist activism, they didn't appreciate it when someone stopped believing.

"Why did your father support Janus?" Boyd asked, watching Thierry closely. "And why were you planning to support the Agency, then? I take it you must not get along with him very well?"

"That really has nothing to do with anything. I don't blindly follow people just because they are my family or take an opposite position just to be contrary." Thierry examined the sleeve of his shirt and seemed dissatisfied with what he saw. "It doesn't matter one way or another to him at this time, in any case. He was assassinated, likely by the Americans."

"I didn't realize that," Boyd said, careful to keep his tone inoffensive.

If Thierry's father really had been giving money to Janus it would not be surprising if the Agency had in fact sent assassins. It even could have been Sin or Kassian who did the job. The more he heard about the situation from Thierry's side, the more he wanted to know. It wasn't really that Thierry had inside knowledge on Janus; it was mostly that he was curious about Thierry himself.

"Why give America your allegiance, then? I'm not trying to imply anything," Boyd added reasonably. "I just don't understand why you would have chosen the Agency over an organization you would have known since you were a child, unless it's precisely because you know what happens within Janus that you don't support them. That, or the Agency must offer you something Janus does not."

The other man waved his hand in a motion that was both careless and elegant at the same time. "Who knows?" He said vaguely. "I just get these whims sometimes..."

Boyd raised an eyebrow at that but fell silent for a moment. It was pretty clear that Thierry was finished with being forthright, which was unsurprising since there was no real reason for him to explain himself in the first place. Beyond that, Boyd was asking some fairly intrusive questions simply because he was curious.

"I've kept you long enough," he said lightly, tilting his head as he considered the other man. "I'll leave." There had been enough of a lull that his words and changed subject did not seem particularly abrupt.

Thierry shrugged casually as if he didn't care one way or the other, but his mouth automatically turned down into a frown. It was hard to tell what the man was thinking, as he was likely very well-versed in masking his true intentions, but it almost seemed that for one instant he didn't want Boyd to go. "Wait."

Boyd paused and looked at him curiously.

"If no one sent you, why did you come here? Why would you want to check up on me?" Thierry's tone was neutral but as he spoke, he turned his face away conspicuously as though he didn't want Boyd to see his expression anymore.

Watching him briefly, as if determining how much to say, Boyd did not immediately answer. After a moment, he looked away and ran a hand through his hair with a quiet sigh.

"There's no way I'd know what it must be like to be in your exact position right now," Boyd explained seriously. "Honestly, for most people I'm not sure how much I'd care. It's not exactly like you're an innocent in this. I don't know what they did to you here; who or what they forced you to see or think and talk about. Since my mother's in charge, I can only assume she chose the most efficient way, which, knowing her, probably also happened to be the most merciless. She may have sent you to a man here..."

He paused briefly then looked over, meeting Thierry's eyes when the other man finally glanced up. When he spoke, for all that his expression did not change and his tone was calm, there was the briefest flash of something in his eyes that showed he wasn't lying or fabricating a story to gain Thierry's confidence. "I don't know how much you know or care about what happened to Sin and me after we came back from Monterrey and I

don't really want to talk about it in depth. But because of the magnitude of the fuck up, they sent me to that man."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "It was only a few weeks but it felt like forever, and when I got out I was completely alone and fucked up. After all that, having no one around... I think I really needed someone to come by, to ground me or snap me out of it, but there was no one to do that for a long time. And as for me, it was only a brief time that I was with him; I don't know what it would be like for longer."

Thierry's full lips turned down in a sour frown as he absently brought up a hand to massage his temples. He didn't speak though and continued to watch Boyd without interruption, perhaps out of fear that the flow of words, the flow of direct honesty, would stop.

Boyd briefly wondered if it was alright for him to mention the missions but then he decided it should be fine since he had no intention of giving any pertinent information away or details; he just thought Thierry should know why he could afford to trust him a little more now rather than even a month or two earlier.

"We've verified almost conclusively that you did not betray us, that the information you've since given was legit. I may not have an idea of what exactly it's like for you right now but I feel like maybe that small part of you that could potentially exist, the person who may be alone and isolated, afraid and distrustful; I feel like that at least I can understand. I believe that you didn't purposefully send us into a trap, and when I think that, I know that when I was in your territory in France you were relatively nice to me. Now that you're in my territory in America, I don't see why I can't return the favor. Of course, I'm perfectly aware that I don't know you very well or what has been happening with you lately. It's just that when I thought of you being in a position similar to the one I'd been in, I found myself here. If it turns out you aren't or are uninterested in my presence, that's fine. It was just an offer and I did show up rather suddenly."

"I do not..." Thierry trailed off, face screwing up slightly in displeasure and switched to fluid French. "*I do not think it is possible for me to be uninterested in you, Boyd Beaulieu. For all of my games...*" He paused again and narrowed his eyes at Boyd as though trying to make the decision about whether or not he should continue before tossing his thick black hair carelessly with a slight smile. "*For all of my games, my affections for you in France were quite genuine. I have thought of you often since then and especially while in captivity.*"

Surprised, Boyd watched him a moment, searching his expression for any signs that he wasn't being serious. It was true that the disc Thierry had given him contained more information than Carhart had been expecting, that Thierry's words and behavior in France had seemed sincere. But since then Boyd had assumed that they were all things Thierry did with everyone; that it had been fabricated interest to lull the other person into giving him what he wanted.

"Why?" Boyd asked finally in French.

"After the Monterrey debacle I wondered often if you were blamed for any of it and I wondered at the trouble it may have caused for you. In captivity, I wondered if you cared at all about the fact that you and your insane partner brought me back to what, for many weeks, appeared to be my executioners." He looked up at the ceiling wryly. "Not that it matters anymore. I have nothing left-- my money is frozen away and untouchable, my hotel was burned down, my lover killed and I cannot return to my home. I am merely a ward of the Agency now and I suppose death would not be quite so bad as this pathetic existence."

Boyd hadn't heard about any of that. *"Janus did that?"*

"Yes," Thierry replied, switching back to English. "They are quite spiteful when someone has crossed them. Although I suppose it's special circumstances for me."

"When did that happen?"

Thierry was silent a moment and he extended his arms before him in a slight stretch, appearing nonchalant about the topic. "I happened to be out of the country right after your attack. They could not find me so they took their aggression out on things close to me."

He looked up again and smiled briefly. "It was then that I went into hiding."

Boyd slid his eyes closed. He knew what it was like to lose a loved one to violence. He didn't know if Thierry ever found his lover's body but he doubted it; Janus had probably been watching for him to return. He'd probably heard about it instead and wasn't able to ever return for closure. Then again, was it really closure, seeing the dead body of a lover? He knew it hadn't really worked that way for him with Lou; closure for him had been trying to let go of the memories of his death and moving past it.

"I didn't know." Although he didn't say it, Boyd's tone made it obvious that he was sorry it had happened.

Thierry folded his hands behind his head casually and changed the topic. "I am glad that you came. It is good to know I have at least one person who is friendly."

Boyd watched him a moment then looked down and searched through his messenger bag. He didn't say anything at first; just ripped a blank sheet of paper from a notebook, dug around for a pen, and wrote something down. He glanced back up as he held it out.

Reaching forward, the French man glanced down and a smile graced his lips. "Your telephone number?"

"My cell, in case you need to call me."

Thierry slipped it into his pocket with a nod and another brief smile. "As long as you keep your partner away from me, I am happy to have it."

Ever since they'd rescued Thierry from Hale's, Thierry had seemed especially unnerved by Sin. In France, he'd seemed to treat Sin like someone to play with but in the back seat of the car in Mexico he'd looked absolutely terrified. Given the fact that Thierry had finally gotten the opportunity to see Sin in action up close and personal, it was no wonder. Warren Andrews acted the same way after seeing Sin fight.

"I don't know of any burning desire he has to see you right now," Boyd said honestly. "I don't think he'd do anything to you even if he came here, if that's what you're concerned about. In some ways, he's different when he's not on a mission."

"It would not matter even if he was," Thierry replied after a moment. "I cannot see him as a normal man anymore and being in his presence would cause me great discomfort."

"Why?"

"Because he is not a normal man. Those men in Janus-- they are cruel, yes, but still they are men. He is like..." Thierry trailed off for a moment before waving his hand again. "I do not know the words to explain. But the way he kills is not human. I am sorry that I was once so capricious in his presence and wish I had shown more restraint."

"He's a man, too," Boyd said calmly but firmly. "Yes, he's unusually good at his job, which can include killing people. It's not a trait people would normally work for but it's

just what's happened with him, and part of that is due to circumstances. Even so, no matter how efficiently he can kill that doesn't mean he's not human. He doesn't just helter skelter hurt people for no reason; he's a good person, once you get to know him."

The look Thierry gave him was very similar to the one Kassian had given him that time in his kitchen but, unlike Kassian, Thierry just nodded and let the topic go. "Thank you for giving me your number. I am sure I will find use for it, even if I have no *real* use for it."

"If that's how you're going to be, maybe I'll have no *real* need to answer when I see your number," Boyd replied lightly, willing to let the topic go. He knew he didn't have the same view as many other people and saw no reason to argue about it. That hadn't worked very well with Kassian and it wouldn't work with Thierry either. "Incidentally, what is it so I know to program it in my contacts? Otherwise I'm liable to ignore you."

Thierry got to his feet and crossed the room to a small desk, scrawling something on a paper in flowing cursive. "That is a tactic that I find myself using quite often, although in the past I had ways to find out who it was anyway."

"Don't tell me you did something crazy like star-sixty-nined them and threatened to tell their mothers if they didn't 'fess up to who they were?" Although Boyd's expression remained straight, there was a hint of teasing in his eyes. He took the sheet from Thierry and slid it into his messenger bag. "Because if so-- my God, man, that's diabolical."

The other man smirked slightly. "I am not sure what star-sixty-nine is but it sounds indecent."

Boyd laughed briefly. "The way you've experienced it, I'm sure it is. But here in America we don't typically incorporate sex acts into our every day phone lives the way I've noticed you French do." He smirked but said a little more seriously, "It tells you the phone number who last called. It's quite useful at times although I confess it's been awhile since I used it."

"You Americans are not as adventurous as us French," Thierry replied easily. "But we have a similar way in France, except it is 3131. I was indicating something else, however. A way in which I screened private calls with a device I was gifted with. It was quite handy-- I suppose you could call it... a tracer?" He seemed unsure of what the English word for whatever he was thinking of would be. He shook his head and continued on, not giving Boyd the chance to respond. "In any case, I apologize for my

rudeness in the beginning. I was wary, I think with good reasoning, but it was unwarranted."

"There's no need," Boyd said dismissively. "In your place, I would have done the same."

Thierry nodded, seeming pleased that Boyd understood.

With nothing more to say between the two of them, Boyd left. The guards in front of Thierry's door gave him a cursory, partially curious glance as he walked past, but in the end they didn't say anything and Boyd continued on his way. As he put distance between himself and the building, he couldn't help but allow his mind to wander back to thoughts of Level 10 training now that his concern for Thierry was put to rest.

Chapter 2

The sky looked strange.

It was obvious that a storm was in the works, that much would have been obvious to anyone. But he wondered if anyone else noticed how the swirls of ash gray were quickly overtaking the normally muddy hue and how odd the hodgepodge of colors really were. It seemed unnatural for the sky to look like cigarette smoke drifting around with a sandpaper background but the whole state of the environment was unnatural these days so it wasn't too startling.

There were immense black clouds hovering in the distance and seemed to have been sitting in the same spot for quite some time—for as long as Sin had been sitting on the roof of the Tower. But that too was kind of fitting, in its own way. They were hanging over Old Bridgepoint, an area that had once been a nice quiet suburb of the city but was now nothing more than a landfill of crumbled buildings, scorched earth and the ever present smell of decay.

Sin sighed and leaned back, stretching his body out to rest on the short wall that lined the edge of the roof while allowing his legs and feet to dangle over the side. He stared up at the sky and lit a cigarette even though it was already starting to mist.

For some reason, as he watched the advancing tempest, he couldn't help but wonder if it was an omen for whatever was going to go down at the Agency or, more specifically, in his life during the coming winter.

Winter seemed to be a dark omen anyway when it came to Boyd and him, so why should this one be any different? The first winter had been after the bad idea of Boyd's birthday present and the disaster of the mission to Paris; the second had been spent in a coma while Boyd hid in the darkness of his house... who knew what would occur this time around?

It reminded him of a science fiction novel that he'd read once; in it, the characters had a tendency to say ominously that 'winter was coming' and Sin had to fight the urge to say the words out loud with the exact same ominous feeling behind.

Today was the day that Boyd had received notification of his admission to the three ring circus of a promotion process and today had been the day that he formally accepted.

If Sin was going to pretend he believed in premonitions and omens, it was possible that the ominous black storm rampaging at Old Bridgepoint was undoubtedly going to move their way and be a sign that something bad would happen because of the training, because of the possibility of Boyd being promoted or... possibly something bad happening to him while Boyd wasn't around.

It seemed a strange thing to consider but Sin had to admit that when Carhart had mentioned the whole damn thing, it'd been something that had crossed his mind.

He hadn't shared his first or even second thoughts with Boyd; he'd only shared the third.

His first thought had been that it was way too soon. Boyd had experience but Sin wondered if he really had enough. He didn't doubt his partner's abilities; Boyd was good at his job, damn good considering he'd started with no prior background in... well, anything, but that didn't mean everything by itself.

Level 10, for Sin, meant assassination; it meant killing people who didn't always deserve to die and snuffing out people that hadn't necessarily been involved other than the fact that they were with the target.

Level 10, for Kassian and many agents before him, meant long term undercover assignments. Missions that tested a person's willpower to do things that they considered morally wrong but had no choice to do once they were in the position; assignments that could cause a person to completely lose themselves in the work, in the persona that they'd taken on.

That had happened to a lot of Level 10s in the past. They'd come back confused, unable to leave behind that part of their lives, and in a lot of cases they'd just come back... wrong. With something missing that had been there before. In some of those cases, the agent had to be 'let go,' whatever that meant in the Agency's vocabulary.

And Sin wondered if Boyd was ready for that and everything that came with it. The only extended undercover operation that he'd been on had been anything but typical; the bulk of it had been more like an extended vacation than an assignment. And although Boyd had showed that he could survive in tough situations; it'd been a situation where they had both made mistakes.

He didn't think it was a good basis for promotion; if anything it was a good basis to show that Boyd and himself both needed to get their shit together better when it came to certain aspects of that kind of assignment.

And then there was the physical aspect of the situation.

Boyd was in good shape but he didn't have a whole lot of experience in hand to hand combat and he had even less with a gun. That didn't count for everything; he'd shown on a number of occasions that he was a genius when it came to improvising, but Sin knew what was going to be expected of him at the training and he knew that it was going to be more than a little tough.

But he also knew that Boyd was resourceful, intelligent and above all, a fast learner. And that would be more than enough for him to get as far as needed to get promoted.

Sin had very little doubts that Boyd would indeed be promoted. Even though he didn't have the experience, he was trustworthy and above all, he was loyal. To the Agency, to Vivienne, that was all that mattered.

It didn't matter that they were taking him out of the frying pan and tossing him head first into the fire; what mattered was that he wouldn't sell anyone out and that he would do what he was told and, as far as the Agency was concerned, he could figure out the other shit along the way.

And if he got hurt trying to figure it all out... well, that was the price they were willing to pay.

That was what worried Sin the most. He knew how this place worked and he knew that just because Connors was gone, that didn't mean the core values of the place had changed. And the basic summation of those values was simple: Duty first, personal freedom nonexistent. The assignment first, the agent's life last; the least important thing on the list.

If an agent had to die to complete the assignment, that was fine. Because it was for a greater good; the good of the government and way down the line it could be manipulated to seem like the good of the people as well.

Sin took a long drag of his cigarette and closed his eyes, wondering when exactly he'd become so bitter about the organization that had spawned him.

One would assume he'd be programmed to believe their rhetoric, to believe in what he'd been doing since he was a child, but it was the exact opposite. He'd been in it long enough to see it for what it was; just another organization, just like Janus and Di Zhi and

Revolución, who was going to kill and sabotage and plot so that they could get or maintain the power.

And in a strange Wild West world where no one had truly regained the position of World Power after the war... well it was up for grabs and there were a lot of sticky fingers snatching greedily at the title.

He exhaled slowly and felt the mist become a drizzle, not letting it faze him even though the rain would inevitably put a chill in his bones and snuff out the cherry of his Lucky Strike.

It was a brand that had been almost obsolete even before the war had put most major companies permanently out of business, and that was most likely the reason the guard outside his building seemed to have a never-ending supply of them. Apparently a friend had taken hundreds of cartons of them from an old grocery store when he'd rather naughtily taken part in the citizen riots. No one had been buying the things and they'd just piled up in the stock room; his friend had theorized that he'd done a favor by taking them off the owner's hands.

They were on the stale side but Sin wasn't about to complain. The guard had gifted him with a dozen cartons and smoking was what got him through the night these days. He could more than afford his own cigarettes, the eventful trip down to Payroll had more than let him in on that, but he wasn't about to be an asshole to one of the few people who, for one reason or another, had warmed up to him in the past months.

It was a strange phenomenon and one he didn't truly understand, but it seemed that ever since he'd 'saved' Vivienne and took their only suspect into custody, some people had started talking to him more.

It would have made sense had he been any other pariah but he was the pariah to end all pariahs and these were people who would have spit on him in the past had they not known that he would have ripped their fucking tongues out.

So the shy smiles and casual chit-chat was odd and a little annoying. As if he was going to suddenly get chummy just because they decided to stop being assholes? The only reason he was civil with the guard downstairs was because that guy had never really done anything other than look at him funny.

And everyone had looked at him funny before. Because everyone thought-- no, everyone knew that he was crazy.

That was something that he'd recently come to terms with.

It brought him absently back to the third reason the coming storm could easily be a premonition for himself during Boyd's absence.

Ever since he'd awoken from the coma, everything about his body, his mind... just everything felt different, felt wrong. He found himself doing things that he didn't understand and remembering things that he didn't want to remember.

It was like someone had opened the lid on the Pandora's Box of his brain and let every single memory jump out with a vivid clarity that disturbed him.

He remembered what it'd felt like the first time they'd put him in the box, that panicked sense of hysteria that had lasted for days and days until they added sedatives to the fray. He remembered the first time he had to assassinate someone who didn't deserve to die, what it felt like to pull the trigger and splatter a wasted life across the concrete and how hard it had been to sit there across from Connor's smug, satisfied face afterward.

Sin remembered Harry and the incident in the gym, even though it had all been blurry before, and with that he remembered the first time he'd nearly killed Boyd. A few nights ago he'd practically relived the second time and every ounce of guilt that had plagued him so much that night in the forest had come rushing back.

He also recalled, in vivid detail, what it'd been like to feel so betrayed in France. He couldn't help but revisit that several times now that Thierry had been the topic of every briefing for the past few months and he and Boyd were apparently on civil terms again.

Sin couldn't help but remember every single aspect of every emotion he'd felt the first time he'd thought that Boyd truly had traded him in for Thierry. That the tentative friendship he'd grown so attached to, so desperate for, had been taken away because of a misguided attempt to help his partner; how much it had burned to see that friendship being given to someone who despised him, to Thierry. Sin couldn't help remembering how much it'd hurt when his partner had treated him with nothing but cold silence for all of those months and how dejected he'd felt, and how confusing it'd been to feel anything about it at all.

However it wasn't just that; now this strange force in his head was trying to push entirely repressed memories over the edge as well, things that he'd blocked out for years.

And Sin was quickly buckling under the weight of what that meant. Because it meant learning things about his past, about himself, that were better left forgotten. Because he'd been able to pretend that he could be normal, could be decent, could be someone that deserved Boyd's friendship and companionship, and if he remembered all of that... well, then he'd know that he really didn't.

The truth of it still hung just around the corner of his peripheral vision as he fought to hold it down and put it back in the shadowy depths where it belonged. But the idea of what this image, this memory, could mean, scared him and so did the hallucinations that he'd been having lately. His own fear and nightmares manifested into a walking, talking representation of it all that mocked him and made him doubt his own sanity, made him very much aware that he had very little sanity to doubt.

It was very easy for him to see now that he did indeed have a problem. There was something wrong with him; something that caused him to slip into a stupor and see only the past as if nothing else existed around him. There was something wrong with him that caused him to talk to himself, yell at himself, because the person he was arguing with wasn't even alive anymore.

And it fucking scared him. All of it did. It exhausted him; made him afraid to close his eyes because of what he would see and he woke screaming when he finally did doze off.

It scared him because sometimes he couldn't tell reality from nightmare and sometimes it happened unexpectedly, not just when he was waking up from a dream.

And that was why Boyd leaving was a kind of double-edged sword.

On one hand, he had taken great measures to keep Boyd in the dark about everything that had been going on. Boyd knew about the nightmares, that had never been any big secret, but he didn't know about the hallucinations, the stupors, the fact that sometimes Sin saw people who weren't really there.

He didn't know that sometimes Sin felt so much on edge that the only thing keeping him from putting a bullet in his head just to make it all stop, was the fact that he could take refuge in Boyd's house; he could try to drown his nightmares in sex and the fact that there was someone that existed that could make him feel real, human, who could talk him down when he was on the edge because Boyd wasn't judging him and fearing him like everyone else.

Sin didn't want him to know. He didn't want Boyd to lose the faith that he had; that Sin was sane, that he could be normal, that his past behavior had been nothing but a product of his environment and not something that was truly chemically wrong with him.

He didn't want him to know the truth. He didn't want the look in Boyd's eyes to go from trust to wariness, his touch to go from comforting to hesitant with fear. He didn't want him to look at him like he had that night in Paris. He didn't want things to change from the way things were now.

So on the one side, it was possibly good that Boyd would be gone while Sin sorted this all out. He wouldn't have to witness the things Sin so desperately wanted to keep secret.

But on the other hand...

On the other hand Boyd had become his security blanket; the only person that could ground him when he felt too out of control, too on the edge of insanity, and he didn't know what he would do without that safety net.

It was disturbing and it only added to his anxiety. And he wished more than anything that even though he was afraid of Boyd seeing the real him and running off, that Boyd could be there with him when it all went to shit. And he knew it was selfish. But what the hell could a guy do? It'd only just occurred to him to want things for himself, it was just too bad that it didn't always necessarily coincide with what Boyd wanted.

"What the *fuck* are you doing up here, Vega?"

Sin's eyes snapped open and he stared up at an upside-down Carhart blankly for a long moment before he realized why this was strange. "How..."

How had he *not* noticed Carhart coming up here? He hadn't been that lost in thought. Even if he had, in the past months he'd been more aware of his surroundings than he'd ever been in his life. Was he really that tired?

"Did I startle you?" The general's tone wasn't necessarily nasty, but it was definitely displeased. "You're slipping, Agent."

Sin narrowed his eyes at Carhart. "Shut up. I'm tired."

"No kidding. You look like shit. I was hoping you didn't suddenly start drinking and coming to briefings hung over because that's what it looks like. Either that, or you're on drugs."

"Or maybe I just have fucking insomnia," Sin growled impatiently. "What the hell do you want? Why are you even up here?"

"I could ask you the same question," Carhart replied coldly, crossing his arms over his chest and seeming totally unfazed by the steady drizzle. "There's a crowd of people below us that think there's either a corpse up here or someone on the verge of suicide."

"No way," Sin said in disbelief, the corners of his mouth turning up in bemused amusement. "You're lying."

"Am I?" Carhart's cerulean eyes narrowed and he looked anything but amused. "See for yourself."

Sin pulled himself into a sitting position with a snort and looked over the edge, eyebrows shooting up. There was a good sized knot of people seventeen floors below him, standing on the sidewalk in the rain, staring up. "They thought I was suicidal and sent your nagging ass? They really must want me to die."

"Smart ass." Carhart made a face, not seeing the humor. He'd been humorless and irritable lately, ever since they'd finished up the whole Monterrey thing. Sin wasn't entirely sure what his problem was but he attributed it to the fact that the Agency had been turned upside down after the attack and Carhart had even more on his plate than usual.

"I happened to be leaving the building and saw them all congregating like brain-damaged cows, staring up like a bunch of idiots at the sky. The only reason I concerned myself is because I recognized those old dilapidated steel toed boots of yours. Don't you have anything else to wear that doesn't look like it was in ground zero when the nuke exploded? "

Sin continued to stare down at the group, ignoring the slightly light-headed feeling that it caused. "I have some sneakers," he replied blandly. "Can't get used to them."

"I see." There was a brief silence. "So are you going to explain to me what you're doing up here?"

Sin gave a silent sigh and stared at the sky for a long moment, his expression moody. He really didn't want to go into specifics; he didn't want to explain why exactly he'd felt the need for a time out from the rest of the world.

Sin looked over his shoulder at Carhart but before he could open his mouth to say anything, vertigo hit him like a brick and his vision dimmed. Everything swayed dangerously as things got darker and he felt himself falling forward before a strong hand gripped his shoulder and dragged him, embarrassingly effortlessly, onto solid ground.

Sin's back hit the floor of the roof and he blinked up at Carhart several times, trying to regain his bearings and refocus his vision. He was more than a little disturbed by what had just happened, what had almost happened, but he was fully prepared to brush it off until Carhart decided not to let him.

"What the *hell*, Hsin?" This time, the alarm and anger was clear. He looked torn between hitting Sin and completely losing his cool in a very emotional, un-Carhart like fashion. Not only was Sin, in his eyes, being irresponsible and reckless, but now there was obviously something else very wrong.

"Just calm down and give me a seco—"

"That is it. You're on the fucking bench, Vega. You're done."

"What?" Sin squinted up at Carhart in annoyance. "I didn't realize I was on the baseball team, Coach Zachary. Was I at least the short stop?"

"You're done," Carhart snapped again, ignoring the sarcasm. "No more assignments, no more briefings, no more fucking *anything* until—"

"Are you crazy?" Sin demanded, sitting up, temper flaring up dangerously. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem is that you nearly fell off the fucking roof!"

Sin opened his mouth to argue but paused, shifting uncomfortably. "There's no reason to make a big deal out of this, okay?"

Carhart glared at him. "You nearly fell. Off the roof."

"You're exaggerating..."

"The only reason you didn't fall off the roof is because I happened to be close enough to grab you a split goddamn second before you went splat all over those idiots down there. Do you understand that, Hsin? You could have died stupidly and foolishly, because you don't have the fucking intelligence to not sit on the edge of a high rise when you're suffering from fatigue." Carhart raked a hand through his hair and looked away, appearing highly upset by this scenario.

With an aggravated sigh, Sin slumped forward and put his face in his hands, massaging his now throbbing head. "I'm just tired," he said rather lamely, but really it was all he had to say.

He felt defeated. He had no real defense against anything Carhart was saying and, honestly, he knew he was in no condition to be on the field, especially with Boyd. Endangering himself was one thing but putting his partner in danger because he couldn't handle his own chaotic mind was another entirely.

"That's fine," Carhart said evenly, appearing to have regained control of his temper. "But I think there's something else going on."

"Give me a break," Sin retorted, disgust in his tone. "Don't act like you know me so well."

Carhart's eyes narrowed and he stood up straighter. "Maybe you don't think so. Maybe you think I don't know you at all. Maybe you even think I'm out to get you like everyone else. But I do know you well enough and for long enough to have seen you running for a week on less than ten hours sleep with a lot more vigorous assignments than you've been on lately and I have *never* seen you in this condition. I've never seen you so out of it, so exhausted, that you nearly tumbled face first off a roof from such a simple motion as trying to turn around. So my instincts tell me that something else is going on."

Sin had nothing to say in response so he just looked away with a sigh. There was nothing he could think of to use as an argument, nothing he could say to defend himself or make excuses with.

He knew Carhart was right, as much as he hated to admit it. "So what's the story, coach?" he asked, weariness heavy in his voice.

"No assignments until you take, and pass, a full physical and mental examination. You're no good to anyone in this condition."

"Like it will matter if something important enough comes up?" Sin asked dryly. "If the head of Janus popped up tomorrow, you'd send me out to kill him even if I was armless and blind."

"Cute." The General didn't seem at all impressed with his wit today. "But lucky us, you're not the only rank 10 available at the moment and even luckier, Janus appears to be licking their wounds on the down low so nothing should come up before you're cleared."

Sin nodded, not really knowing what he felt about any of this and finally got to his feet, shoving his hands in the pockets of his ragged jeans. He almost didn't want to ask but he needed to know the answer. "What if... I don't pass?"

"If it's just insomnia, all you need is a good long sleep." Carhart studied him, the paleness and the dark circles, the frayed expression as if he was coming apart at the seams. "But if it's something more than that, you'll have to follow up until you are."

Sin didn't respond at first and stared down at the floor, at the puddles that were quickly rising from the now steadily pouring rain. Thunder boomed somewhere in the distance and he saw a bright flash in his peripheral vision.

"Is it something more than that, Sin?"

This time Carhart's voice just sounded outright concerned. It was enough to put Sin on edge, to make his back hunch forward as he crossed his arms over his chest protectively and refused to look up and meet the older man's eyes. But he couldn't lie. Carhart would find out eventually and, really, there was no point.

"I don't know. I think..." He cleared his throat and looked up finally, green eyes piercing into Carhart's blue ones. "I think I may have problems with the mental examination."

Thunder cracked loudly, closer this time, and there was another bright flash. The two men stood staring at each other, neither of them seeming to mind the storm that raged around them as the weight of the admission seemed to settle on Carhart's shoulders.

He'd known for a long time that there was a lot wrong with Sin because of what he'd been through as a child and, really, all of his life, but this was the first time that Sin was actually saying it out loud. And he wasn't really sure he knew what that meant.

"We'll deal with it when we get there," Carhart said finally. "For now, let's just get out of here so we don't get fried by lightning."

Sin nodded, finally feeling the icy chill soaking into him, and followed Carhart toward the exit. But before they went downstairs, he stopped and looked at the General again, mouth turning down in a scowl. "Don't tell Boyd. Please."

It wasn't a plea--it was more like a demand with the 'please' put in as an afterthought but it didn't bother Carhart. That was just Sin's way. "Everything is confidential as long as you want it to be. It's nobody's business but your own and as long as he's in the barracks training and you're held off on missions anyway, there's no need for him to know as it isn't affecting your partnership."

Sin nodded, allowing himself to feel somewhat relieved even though he had a feeling it wouldn't be that simple. He followed Carhart blindly, not really paying attention to where he was going or what he was doing as his mind spun and his head swam dizzily. He hadn't thought that he was this bad off but now that he thought of it, he couldn't really remember the last time that he'd slept. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd eaten. It had probably been days, which explained the aching in his head and the overwhelming weakness.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and kept his head down, shoulders slumped as the two of them walked through the pouring rain. After the events of the past few moments, it seemed that everything else was finally weighing down on him entirely and he felt like he really could actually fall into an exhausted sleep. Feeling a mix between relieved and anxious about the idea, he glanced up finally to see what direction Carhart was leading him in and saw that they were on the other side of the complex from his apartment building.

"Where are we going?" He asked, voice coming out hoarsely.

Carhart glanced back over his shoulder and came to a stop in front of the Tower. "You're going to the medical wing. Tell them your commanding officer wants you to have a full physical and mental examination."

Sin glared at him. "Now?"

"Yes, now. Wouldn't you rather know what's going to happen instead of waiting around? The quicker things get done, the quicker we can find out where we are and I'll tell you how long you're on leave. And don't give me that look-- I send agents for full checkups all the time." They stepped into the lobby, dripping onto the marble floor. "It's perfectly fine and no one will look at you any weirder than they usually do," he said dryly.

Sin made a face and pulled his hood over his head. "Fun."

Carhart shooed him towards the bank of elevators. "Get going. I have a meeting with Vivienne but I'll be checking up on you as soon as I'm done. Got it?"

"Whatever. Pain in my ass," Sin muttered and went rather sullenly to the elevator. He didn't feel like doing this now and hadn't planned on following through any time soon but he knew the general would just be a pain in the ass until it was done.

The elevator arrived and he stepped on with a couple of other people. They sent him mock cursory glances, trying to study him without obviously studying him, but when they saw the dark expression on his face they quickly glanced away. It was as awkward as always whenever he was stuck in close proximity with people and even though he'd previously gained perverse amusement out of the way these people acted, now it just made him even more annoyed, more tired. He just wanted to be left alone, to be ignored and invisible, but everyone made it impossible.

The elevator arrived at the appropriate floor and he exited quickly, thankful for being away from them, and strode towards the clinic. He'd just reached the door when he saw a familiar figure with a familiar head of blond hair leaving.

Sin froze in his tracks, feeling more than a little horrified, and started to turn on his heel and walk away but before he could, Boyd happened to glance over. His honey brown eyes locked on Sin and Sin knew it was too late.

"What are you doing here?" Boyd asked in surprise. He stopped walking and stared up at Sin, adjusting his messenger bag absently over the black jacket he wore. He'd mostly given up the long trench that had previously been his staple, but his wardrobe was still considerably devoid of color.

Sin faltered, but only for a moment. He knew that if he hesitated, Boyd would notice and question him so Sin tried to quickly come up with a believable story. Trying to keep this a secret had turned him into a rather fantastic liar. It was interesting considering the fact that he'd previously seen no reason to hide things from anyone because he'd never cared what anyone thought before. But Boyd was different. He cared about Boyd's opinion and in a way he was trying to protect it.

"Carhart apparently felt the burning desire to concern himself with my haggardness and interrogated me about it. I blame insomnia but he thinks everything else in the world is

wrong with me and sent me here to get checked out. I know nothing's wrong though so I was debating skipping out on it."

It wasn't entirely a lie. In fact it wasn't a lie at all; it was more that he was leaving out specific details of the entire truth.

"Ah," Boyd said knowingly, accepting the story on face value. "I'll let you in on a little secret; they're not in the best mood right now. Apparently some of the construction briefly affected their computers earlier and it wiped out part of their electronic filing system. Now IT's in there trying to recover medical records, patients got backed up and a few nurses called in sick, and half the staff is pissed because they've had to miss breaks. If it's not urgent, you may want to wait until tomorrow."

"Or next week," Sin replied with a shrug, turning away from the medical unit. "I know what they'll say, anyway. 'You're underweight, shouldn't be smoking, lack nutrition and we have no idea why you can't sleep.'"

They began walking back in the direction Sin had just come, towards the elevator bank and far enough away to ease the pressure that had briefly settled on his shoulders.

It wasn't that he enjoyed keeping things from his partner but this was something that he felt he had to deal with on his own without worrying about how Boyd's perception of him would change because of it. But then again, he didn't really want to deal with it. He just wanted it to go away entirely.

Realizing he'd fallen silent or that he'd missed if Boyd had said anything as a reply, he abruptly changed the topic away from himself. "Why are you here?"

"I had to have a complete physical before training starts," Boyd replied easily. "I was able to get it all finished but it took twice as long as it should have and they won't have the results until a few days later than usual."

"Oh." Sin started say more but they got into the elevator with a couple of other people and he decided to keep further conversation about the training to themselves. Not many people knew the specifics about what happened during it or how people were chosen and candidates were supposed to be hush-hush about it. It was all rather secretive and mysterious and he actually didn't give a damn about keeping it that way, but he didn't want word to get back to the wrong person that they were chit-chatting about it in front of others. Just because he didn't want Boyd to do the training didn't mean he wanted to ruin his partner's chances.

The elevator dinged as they stopped at another floor and he put his hands in his pockets impatiently, wanting to be out already. As the ride continued to draw out, he felt someone staring at him and glanced over his shoulder.

Sin instantly recognized the awkward-looking girl with the red curls and peacock blue eyes as the one who had helped him out in the Payroll Department.

"Hi," she blurted, seeming surprised that she'd actually said it.

At the sound of someone voluntarily speaking to Sin, Boyd looked over at her; although his expression would have seemed neutral to most people, Sin knew him well enough to recognize that he was surprised.

"...Hi," Sin replied slowly. Speaking to the pariah in public? Maybe there was more to her than the slightly ditsy payroll clerk that she appeared to be.

She nodded and folded her hands in front of her, not really appearing to know what to say anymore. They stared at each other and finally, after quickly glancing at Boyd, she spoke again. "So did you get everything sorted out?"

Feeling slightly amused by the obvious fact that she was trying to manufacture a conversation for no good reason, he put a name to her face. "Yes, Rebecca, I did."

Rebecca seemed briefly shocked that he remembered her name but nodded nonchalantly, as if for some reason she wanted it to appear to the other people in the elevator that she spoke to Boyd and him all the time. "Good to hear."

Boyd glanced toward Sin questioningly but didn't say anything; it was clear to Sin that he didn't recognize Rebecca and had no idea what they were talking about but he figured Sin would explain later. For now, Boyd went along with Rebecca's strange game.

The elevator reached the ground floor and he and Boyd stepped out but before they disappeared in the sea of people who were rushing through the main lobby, he glanced at the red-haired girl once more. "Nice to see you again."

It was said with very little inflection and didn't sound genuine at all but she seemed pleased anyway and responded with a grin before going her own way.

"Who was that?" Boyd asked as soon as they were out of her hearing range.

Sin shrugged and absently raised a hand to his head, rubbing small circles along his temples as a minor ache that would undoubtedly turn into a raging migraine began to spread. The weariness and exhaustion had not gone away since his earlier encounter with the general; if anything, having to put on an All Is Well performance at the moment was making it even worse.

"She works in the Payroll Department. She helped me out a couple of months ago."

"Payroll?" Boyd echoed, sounding and looking a mixture of surprised and amused. It was likely that he'd either forgotten about their earlier conversation or hadn't believed Sin would ever actually check it out. "Does the mystery finally end as to how much you have?"

Sin threaded his hand through his hair with a slight wince. "Around twenty million or so."

"*What?*" Boyd said, actually so shocked that he stopped walking and stared at Sin. "I suspected you'd have a fair amount but how the hell do you have so much?"

"Only about five million of it is actually mine. Seventy-five percent is money transferred over from my father's account when they found out he died. It had never occurred to me that would have been the case even though I suppose I should have expected it. Apparently there was more after his property and other assets were liquefied but that went to various banks and debt collectors." Sin raised an eyebrow. "He was a great spender but not so great at remembering to pay bills."

"Wow," Boyd said after a moment, then continued to walk again. He looked away, seeming to consider that while also taking in the new information. "He must have been making quite a bit of money to still have had that much even after debts."

Another shrug, even as Sin continued to rub his head, eyes squinting slightly. "Agents made an obscene amount before the economy went downhill. And we get bonuses for special assignments, which is what his entire career seemed to consist of. And from the way he spoke, it seemed he demanded more quite frequently and typic--"

His headache seemed to be intensifying with every word he said. His vision seemed to get fuzzy around the edges, the sharp pain in the side of his head growing stronger until it felt like a drill digging into his brain with the accompanying shrill sound.

"Typically... got what he wanted," he finished more slowly than he'd intended, having to focus to get the words out as things started to get blurry--confusing. It seemed as though... It almost seemed like... Like the conversation-- the direction it was going in... something about it was really...

He didn't look surprised at all-- in fact there was an almost-smile gracing his aristocratic features and his expression was almost smug; even as the sound of footsteps grew louder towards the door.

It should have alarmed him; no one knew where this place was. It was supposed to be safe. Secret. It was a place no one knew about; not his employers, not the enemies of his employers. It was where he left the boy when he was gone.

But when the door was kicked in, he didn't even blink.

Instead he graced them with a raised eyebrow and didn't try to hide himself or the teenage boy behind him. "You're the fuckin' noisiest assassin I ever met, bro."

Sin actually missed a step and stopped walking, reaching out with one hand to brace himself against the wall. It was hard to keep his composure when memories of his father-- a memory that he'd never had before-- were abruptly breaking through the barriers he'd erected long ago.

But he had an audience. And he couldn't deal with that now. Boyd was there and he had to say something.

"Maybe Carhart has a point," Sin managed finally, combing a hand through hair that was now damp with sweat.

"Are you okay?" Boyd asked, watching him closely and clearly concerned. "I know I said they were busy but I'm sure they'd take you."

Sin waved off the comment and straightened, clearing his throat and casting an unpleasant glare toward the surrounding people who seemed quite interested in The Monster's momentary lapse. It wasn't even that they were concerned; they were just curious, like people surrounding the cage of a mutant at a freak show.

"I'll be fine. I don't want to deal with more assholes staring at me right now."

Boyd didn't seem entirely convinced. He watched Sin seriously for a long moment; it seemed he may argue the point but then, probably deciding that Sin wouldn't listen anyway even if he pushed it, he nodded and let it go. "I suppose if it's mostly due to lack of sleep for the past few months, it wouldn't significantly change anything to wait a few more days. It may even be the case that some of the equipment they'd need isn't working now anyway. Maybe you should consider some sleeping pills for the moment."

They exited the Tower and walked past the guards, down the stairs and into the heart of the reconstruction. This time, real drills could be heard all over the compound and Sin cupped a hand to one ear as if to block the noise. "Yeah, maybe. Listen-- I have to get out of here. I can't deal with all of this bullshit noise."

"Okay," Boyd said, almost as if he'd expected Sin to say something like that. "Let's go to the city. I know a pharmacy nearby where we can get you something to help." He glanced over. "Incidentally, did they give you a check card or some other way of using the money in your account?"

"Yeah, I went to the bank and they sent me a card but I prefer to use cash so I just withdrew a large enough sum of money to last me for awhile. I don't like the idea of leaving an electronic trail that frequently."

"Hmm." Boyd considered that briefly, then looked over at Sin and said matter-of-factly, "I've decided that you will buy me something at some point, even if it's just an ice cream cone. All that time I struggled to support your whims, my needs, and afford my house, and here I find out you were a multi-millionaire all along, using me like your own free-money ATM. It's very disheartening." There was a faint sense of drama in his tone to indicate that he was teasing.

"You don't like being my sugar daddy?" Sin inquired with a raised eyebrow. "I see how it is."

"Maybe we just need to reverse the roles once in awhile," Boyd said mildly, seeming amused. "You can start paying for me and I can start calling you in the middle of the night, demanding candy or books."

"I could just give you all my money. I have no use for it anyway," Sin replied, completely serious. He'd gone years without having access to a bank account-- he didn't really need one now and rarely used the cash that he'd taken out.

Boyd glanced over and answered more seriously, "No, you need to keep that. You may not think you need it now but it's impossible to say what will happen in the future. At any rate, after everything with your father, you at least deserve the money."

That was an interesting way to think about it; when he'd first found out Sin hadn't liked the idea at all. He still didn't entirely, as if using his father's money was upsetting the balance in his brain that kept himself from thinking too hard about a lot of things. It was a ridiculous idea but it had crossed his mind nonetheless. He'd never considered the idea of whether or not he deserved it and he had to wonder if his father would agree.

"Yeah, maybe," Sin responded thoughtfully and they let the topic drop.

They headed toward one of the employee parking lots; they moved faster than normal due to the steady rain. Thunder boomed somewhere in the distance and for a strange moment, Sin confused the sound with gunfire and had to strongly resist the urge to reach for a weapon.

There was really something wrong with him lately. It was becoming clearer as the day went on. It'd been bad for awhile but the level of wrongness seemed to be steadily climbing and he could only wonder when it would plateau and what that would mean for him.

"Maybe I should eat something at some point," he muttered as they finally reached Boyd's car. There was a chill in his bones from the rain and he suddenly felt even more fatigued.

"Yes you should," Boyd agreed as he unlocked his car doors and got in. He waited for Sin to get settled into the passenger seat before he continued. "We can hit any number of places on the way to or from the pharmacy. Do you want to come to my place afterward? It may be quieter, to help with any headaches."

"You just want to use me for sex," Sin said with a small smirk, tilting his head against the cool surface of the glass and closing his eyes. Not that he minded if that was the case-- he needed a distraction from the downward spiral of his current existence.

"Just making sure I get my money's worth," Boyd deadpanned.

The sound of the windshield wipers and the rain against the car were constant, low-level background noises. Despite the somewhat poor visibility, Boyd smoothly drove them out

of the parking lot and onto the streets. There weren't many other cars as they pulled onto one of the main roads, which was likely due to the weather and time of day.

The ride wasn't long yet for some reason the hum of the engine and the constant pitter-patter of rain on the roof was almost enough to lull Sin into sleep. But as soon as his eyes closed, it was like a part of his brain knew that unconsciousness brought about bad things, and he was awake instantly even before he'd really fallen asleep.

It left him feeling groggy, disoriented and his stiff wet clothes only added to the general discomfort. With an irritated grunt, he glanced over at Boyd and couldn't help but stare at him for a long moment. Sometimes it surprised him that he was so attracted to Boyd, that he was attracted to anyone at all, but this was one of those times when it was completely undeniable.

Boyd's face was damp and pale from the cold but his wind tousled blond hair and golden brown eyes were enough to completely capture Sin's attention. Sometimes Sin tried to go back and figure out exactly when the moment had been that he'd realized how good looking his partner was but whenever it had happened, it was lost to him now. It was one of the memories he would have gladly turned over and over in his mind but of course he only got to closely examine the unpleasant ones.

Sin looked away finally with a sigh and tried to move his mind into a different direction than it appeared to be inevitably heading. He decided that a long bout of frantic fucking would be good for him right now. It would not only get his mind off things but it would also hopefully put him into a coma-like sleep that dreams wouldn't penetrate.

His mind wandered down the side road of perversion as he thought about all of the things they could do to get him good and exhausted, but before he went too far Boyd was pulling into the parking lot of a local Smart's Pharmacy, the only big chain to survive the nation's economic downfall.

If the real Johnson's Pharmaceuticals had a monopoly on the drug industry, then Smart's definitely had a monopoly on pharmacies. Before the war, major corporations still tried to give the illusion of having a competitive field of business but now things had changed so much that no one bothered. The laws against monopolies were almost non-existent in a world that had gone to shit and had pushed many businesses and owners toward bankruptcy. Johnson's was just a little more obvious than most and it was most likely ignored by the powers-that-be because of their involvement and donations in government ventures; the Agency being a very good example of that.

The situation as a whole left the power in the hands of even fewer people than it had been in the earliest part of the 21st century. The few transnational corporations that had survived the international economic plummet now openly held hands with the government, aiding them with big money and getting a free pass to dominate markets everywhere. There was very little room for ordinary people to fit into the equation and that was a big part of the reason there were so many angry citizens running out and joining up with ragtag groups of rebels who were demanding change.

However it wasn't to say that most citizens were aware of what was going on; the people as a whole were as blind as always. They didn't realize that four corporations owned just about every aspect of every kind of business in the country and that these corporations frequently worked together in joint ventures. So the general population couldn't possibly understand the end result that boiled down to everything, especially the media, being controlled by a couple companies who were more than happy to lie to them about anything as long as it kept the government happy and their monopolistic grip firmly intact.

It'd been that way for over a century but it had never been as tightly controlled as it was now. Most people were unaware, blissfully ignorant to their real lack of free choice. Some people knew and didn't care because they didn't see how it negatively affected their lives and they ultimately felt that it was fine. But then there the others; the ones who had been personally touched by it, who had seen people destroyed by it, and those were the ones who got angry.

"I've never actually been inside one of these," Sin commented blandly as they entered Smart's Pharmacy.

The store was well-lit and fully stocked. It was so welcoming in a city that was full of generally run-down establishments with out-of-date merchandise that people probably looked past the fact that Smart's charged ridiculous prices for just about everything.

"It's all very exciting," Boyd said mildly. "Over there are the overpriced bottles of shampoo and in a few aisles we'll reach their lovely collection of over-the-counter painkillers. Would you like a full tour? We have time."

Sin snorted and looked at the items in each aisle. There wasn't very much of a selection of different brands, most likely for the same reason that there weren't very many more pharmacies. "I'll have to pass on that one. Seeing the sign for an eight dollar gallon of milk 'sale' has already told me all I need to know."

Boyd smirked lightly to himself and led them to Aisle 7, whose sign proclaimed it housed painkillers, flu and cold medicine, and toys. They turned the corner and, indeed, one side of the aisle was filled with boxes and bottles of varying types of medicine, including candy-like kid-friendly types that proclaimed tasty flavors and bright colors. The other side of the aisle seemed to house cheap toys ranging from tiny stuffed animals to rickety plastic trucks. Although they all seemed to be rather cheaply made, they were priced around \$10 to \$40.

"Incidentally, the toddler euthanasia wasn't always by the toys," Boyd said as an aside, gesturing to the pills. "They say they ran out of room over by the candy but my impression is that they want the parents in pain to buy placating toys." He skimmed the medicine as he spoke, then crouched down in the area where painkillers met flu and cold. "After all, if you're already here with a headache and you have screaming children with you, it's possible you'd be a little more willing to buy a rickety truck, even if it's \$25, just so they'll be quiet. I've seen it happen, at any rate." He shifted to the side a little so there was room for Sin to browse the choices. "Here they are."

There were only three different brands-- one was the big name which was distributed by Johnson's Pharmaceuticals, the other was a newer brand that had popped up in the last decade that Johnson's would likely merge with eventually and the other was the store brand.

"Tough choice," Sin said in a droll tone. "What are the odds that any of this shit will actually work on me?"

"With your system? I suspect you need a horse tranquilizer or two." Boyd considered the choices, picking up one of each of the bottles and flipping them around so he could study the contents. After a moment, he smiled lightly to himself in amusement. "I'd go with this one." He held up the new brand, looking up at Sin. "It has 38 milligrams of Diphenhydramine citrate and the others only have 25. As a bonus, it also has 20 milligrams of calcium, which should be helpful if you decide to skip your milk intake for the day."

"I don't like milk," Sin replied and took the bottle, staring at it skeptically. "You know how much shit they put in the 'milk' they sell these days? I bet only a quarter of a gallon, if that, is actually from a real fucking cow."

At first it seemed Boyd hadn't heard Sin's comment or was too lost in thought to properly respond, but then he said in a tone that was a hint too offhanded, "I wouldn't know; I haven't bought it for years."

Judging by how intently he studied the shelves, he seemed especially interested in the sleeping pill prices listed. Without giving Sin the chance to respond, he continued with a new topic. "Otherwise, I know a woman who runs a store with homeopathic remedies, most of which I can't speak for either way. But I've been told her remedies work quite well; I'm fairly certain the sleeping remedy was specifically mentioned."

Sin nodded, tossing the bottle back on the shelf unceremoniously.

Boyd tilted his head thoughtfully. "I don't know how well it would work on your system, and it's probably a little more expensive, but it's possible that homeopathic remedies will work where you'd otherwise need a high dosage of more conventional medicine. Since it's not regulated, she may even have something more powerful than what's available over the counter here. What you probably really need is a prescription from the medics but obviously that can't happen today. And anyway, if you saw them then hopefully you wouldn't need the prescription in the first place."

It was a shame that he would eventually have to go to them regardless of whether or not he got a good night's sleep at any point in the near future. Them *and* some damn shrink. Fucking Carhart.

"Can I help you with anything?" A low, male voice asked suddenly.

A tall guy with an average build was approaching them, not looking entirely welcoming but not looking entirely unwelcoming either. He seemed wary in general, as if he was used to people trying to shoplift from the overpriced establishment and for some reason felt the need to equate that with Sin and Boyd.

"What would I need your help for? Reading the box?" Sin stared down at him blandly, not really impressed by the guy's manager name tag and the keys that jingled on his belt.

The guy, Bill according to his name tag, bristled at the sarcasm and put his hands on his hips in a show of authority. Or something.

"Well you don't seem to be making any purchases--"

"We've been here for five minutes," Sin interrupted, feeling irritated. He was probably more irritated than was necessary but he felt miserable and annoyed already and now here someone was, coming along to make it all worse.

He crossed his arms over his chest, mouth turning down in a scowl as he felt an almost uncontrollable desire to hit the man. It was irrational but it would definitely make him feel better for about ten minutes. He wondered if that meant he was going back to his previous overly violent and short-tempered behavior patterns.

That would be bad.

But at the moment he didn't care.

Bill stared at him uncertainly for a while and after a moment his face took on the usual glazed over, dead-eyed and bored expression of a clerk who was dealing with an unruly customer. He'd either decided that this was going to be more trouble than it was worth since they hadn't actually done anything wrong yet or that his suspicions weren't worth the crazy green-eyed man hitting him.

"Well let me know if you need anything," Bill said finally and walked away.

"Smooth," Boyd said under his breath, sounding mildly amused. "While not always an asset on our trips, sometimes watching you intimidate the shit out of someone is admittedly entertaining."

"I did nothing," Sin denied, not even trying to sound innocent, and turned away from the aisle toward the exit.

Boyd followed him out of the store and back into the dismal weather. The rain continued to come down in steady streams, cold to the touch and somehow feeling even more likely to soak through their clothing and saturate their skin. The buildings loomed high around them; the windows that weren't broken or covered in a layer of filth reflected the dark sky and the dim, dirty lighting of the sun filtered through storm clouds.

It was not the best of conditions to be out in which was why it was surprising that, rather than head toward the car, Boyd gestured Sin in another direction toward a nearby alley.

"There isn't closer parking and it's easiest to access this way."

Sin nodded and ran a hand through his soaking wet hair. Wherever they were going, he just hoped it would be over with soon. As surprising and embarrassing as it was, he didn't think he'd be able to stay out here for much longer. It was a testament to just how

fucked up his body was lately-- which was odd because just after he'd awoken from the coma it'd seemed like he'd been stronger than ever.

Although Boyd didn't say anything, it was either luck or his awareness of the possibility that Sin still wasn't feeling the best that found them in an abandoned building much sooner than would have been expected. Their footsteps echoed resoundingly around them, like muted ghosts that were following in their wake. Dirt and debris littered the place liberally and judging by the lack of footprints in the dust on the floor, this was not a well-used area.

There was little insulation left in the walls that remained standing but the floors above them were mostly intact. It was a bit warmer than would be expected in those conditions, which was odd considering the fact that it was doubtful there was any sort of heating system in place.

Boyd led them unerringly further into the building in a serpentine route that didn't seem to have any obvious visible cues as to when he turned left or right, but within a few minutes they'd somehow transitioned smoothly from the dirty building to a slightly more well-kept hallway. Boyd glanced back occasionally, although it was hard to tell why. His default neutral expression was back in place as he seemed to unconsciously fall a bit into his mission mode while he led them through an unmarked building.

In the end, they probably only walked for about seven minutes before they reached a second hallway which led slowly up then connected to a ramshackle room with windows facing the dank outside on the left and an open door leading to another room on the right. There was a large handwritten sign utilizing several bright colors in flowing script, which read "Linnea's herbs" and, below that, "remedies, tea, homeopathy."

The somewhat small store they walked into was packed with a variety of jars and bottles which seemed to be filled with loose leaves of varying kinds, small bottles of mostly clear and brown liquids, and a number of small boxes and pill bottles crammed onto tall shelving units. Even so, there was strangely a comfortable amount of space between aisles to move, which was good because there were a few other people already there idly browsing the selection.

A dark-skinned woman with brown eyes sat at the counter talking to a tall, thin man, but she briefly smiled at them as they came in to acknowledge that she knew new customers had appeared but was unable to excuse herself at the moment.

"Now how is it that a boy who never used to leave his house knows about this little hole in the wall?" Sin asked curiously, walking over to one of the cramped aisles and staring at a little jar of leaves that allegedly helped with erections.

Well. That was one problem he didn't have. He wondered if they had something to brew that helped with constant hallucinations and possible schizophrenia.

The thought caused him to pause for a moment and stare into space. The fact that he'd just labeled himself with a mental illness, after years of telling himself that the whole process was a scam and largely useless, was disturbing. But that was probably also because he'd spent many years in denial, telling himself that he was the way he was because of the way he'd been made and that there was nothing wrong with him personally except for his bad temper and tendency to overreact.

But now, he supposed, the cat was out of the bag on that one. He was more "accepted" on the compound than he'd ever been before and it was fair to say he was suffering from the worst psychosis he'd ever had. The irony did not escape him.

"I wasn't always quite so agoraphobic," Boyd replied, sounding faintly amused. "Most of the out-of-the-way places I'm aware of are because Lou took me there or knew a person, but in this case it was actually a girl in college."

"Why did she bring you here?" Sin picked up another jar and examined it.

"She didn't." Boyd noticed jars of tea leaves nearby and automatically wandered over there to presumably search for jasmine. "Eloise was one of those people who had enough money to afford to keep with her moral values. She loved Linnea's because it was homeopathic and she could support locals like her. She waxed poetic about this place so often that it was impossible not to know where it was, and that building back there was a shortcut Lou and I used to take for other places in the area."

"Ah." Sin stopped his random search through the aisle and followed Boyd. "What are we looking for exactly?"

"I don't remember the name of it exactly," Boyd said, reluctantly pulling himself away from the tea. "I'll recognize it when I see it." He skimmed the aisles until he located the sleeping aids and studied the variety, which included lavender satchels to be placed under the pillow. He picked up a package that proclaimed it as Linnea's All Natural Sleeping Aid and studied the contents, his eyes narrowed in thought. After a moment he

shrugged with one shoulder and stood up, handing the box to Sin. "I thought it had a different name but that sounds like the ingredients I remember her listing."

He peered over at the boxes Boyd held and started to say something but before the words could leave his mouth-- there was a loud boom outside, very nearby, and the lights began to flicker. Everyone paused as car alarms went wild in the distance and Sin once again started to speak, but before he could, there was another loud crack and the shop was abruptly cast in pitch darkness.

It surprised everyone but it had a particular affect on Sin, one that left him startled, confused, and disturbed beyond belief.

He didn't know if it was the sudden darkness, the loud cracks from lightning striking nearby or what, but suddenly all he could see was a myriad of images. Images that frightened him, haunted him, and suggested things he couldn't possibly understand.

Blood everywhere-- so much blood and his father laying in a pool of it, not quite dead yet but getting there and staring with wild eyes.

Staring at him.

The lights flickered back on just as abruptly as they'd gone off and Sin was snapped out of his trance. Snapped out but not quite in his right mind yet as he blinked repeatedly, trying to understand what he'd just seen.

Boyd had been looking to the side, probably wondering about the lights, but turned to Sin in time to catch something in his expression that made him look closer. "Are you alright? You look pale."

"I..." Sin trailed off, still seeing that expression; the look in those familiar green eyes, before shaking his head. "I'm just ready to go."

"Alright," Boyd said without pressing the issue. "Why don't you wait for me in the room outside? It's less congested and should give you a chance to rest while I buy this."

Sin nodded, not about to argue, and walked out quickly. In a normal situation he'd have probably said no, claimed to be fine and refused to make himself look a weakling even though he felt that way, had been feeling that way, now. But at the moment he was just going to take the time to compose himself.

Because... what the hell. Just, what the hell was that?

He couldn't take it anymore-- he couldn't handle the random images, the brief flashbacks. All of these pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that just wouldn't complete no matter how many clues he had. And it all had to do with his father's death. It had to be-- everything had to be connected but nothing would fit right to show a complete image.

But Sin didn't know if that was good or bad. It was so frustrating--so confusing and at the moment he didn't want to fucking remember. He didn't want to feel the things it made him feel. He just wanted it gone. He wanted the brick walls around his memories erected again-- he wanted all of this just blocked away.

Sin growled in frustration, burying his fingers in his wet hair, and shook his head back and forth. Why was this happening now? Now that everything was good. As good as it was going to be anyway, given their circumstances and jobs.

Why did it have to happen now that they were settled and relatively unthreatened and comfortable and now that he felt fucking... fucking normal. More human than he ever had. Like he had a life instead of just an existence.

Why could nothing ever go right for him?

Boyd's voice interrupted his thoughts as he approached from behind. "Ready?"

Sin nodded and grabbed Boyd's arm, dragging him out of the building and back the way they'd come. He was anxious to be out of this area, to be out of this fucked up weather and to momentarily put everything out of his mind.

Although Boyd seemed surprised by the abruptness, he didn't resist. Normally he probably would have made a comment, something wry or amused, but in this case he stayed quiet.

He had to have been picking up on Sin's anxiety, his tenseness, but he didn't question it. It was very likely that he attributed it to the fact that his partner was ill and feeling more than a little affected by it. A man who was used to being almost impervious to such things would undoubtedly be taken aback by such a phenomenon.

He had no reason to know what was really going on; Sin had become quite adept at hiding the truth in the past few months.

They reached the car in half the time it'd taken them to get to the store, and as soon as they were inside and Boyd tossed the package in the back seat, Sin was on him.

His mouth covered Boyd's, tongue sliding into his mouth as he kissed the other man frantically, hurriedly, ignoring Boyd's grunt of surprise. Powerful hands rose, smoothing over Boyd's cool, wet cheeks and combing through his hair as his fingers trembled slightly although it wasn't obvious if it was from his chaotic thoughts or his impatience to feel something, anything, other than the mixture of distressing emotions that were threatening to overtake him at the moment.

Boyd started to lean back, to say something, but Sin followed him insistently, not letting him get the words out. "Please," he rasped against Boyd's mouth. "I want you."

Boyd's body remained slightly tense, perhaps disturbed by the fact that they were somewhat in public or maybe just confused by Sin's sudden vigor, but after a moment he relented and he began to kiss Sin just as ardently. After all, there wasn't a soul out on the street because of the onslaught of rain so why the hell not indulge?

The windows began to fog as they panted against each other's mouth, Boyd climbing dexterously over the center console to slide onto Sin's lap, his erection pressing into him insistently. The denim of Sin's jeans was rough, stiff, against the cloth of his black pants but it provided a satisfying friction that made him groan low in his throat.

Sin leaned his head back against the seat, reaching down to recline it more as Boyd began grinding against him, as his mouth moved down from Sin's mouth and lapped at his neck, at the sensitive part of his ear. Sin's eyes rolled slightly in his head, a helpless moan escaping as pleasure overloaded his senses and for the moment... For the moment he could think of nothing else but the erection that was demanding attention between his legs.

His eyes slid open, eyelids heavy and green eyes smoldering with lust as Boyd pulled back slightly and began unbuttoning Sin's jeans, unzipping them. "You're so fucking hot," he mumbled, gaze moving over the blond man hungrily, wanting nothing more than to fuck Boyd right here and take out all of his frustration, confusion and fear on his tight ass.

But Boyd had other plans-- likely because they really were halfway in public and sex in the front seat of a car didn't sound like the smoothest of endeavors.

He freed Sin's swollen erection and wrapped his hand around it tight, jerking it fast and hard as Sin swore under his breath-- squeezing his eyes closed once again. But just as he did, the image of his father, of that wild eyed confused stare, instantly flared up in his mind and his fingers dug into the leather of the seat as his heartbeat accelerated dangerously.

Sin shook his head, wanting it to be gone, but the image just overlapped with another memory-- a memory of a blood streaked face that was too pale to be alive and Sin gasped slightly, his throat closing up, as he began to lose his focus. As he felt the dark part of his mind beginning to advance and take over-- trying to cast him entirely into the shadowy depths of the thing that overtook him at times like these, that made him hallucinate and lash out and want to hurt someone--

But then Boyd was reclining the chair further and sliding down, crouching in the cramped space between the glove compartment and the seat, before his mouth covered Sin's cock.

As lips tightened around the base and a hot tongue began sliding up and down the length of it, all intelligent thought left Sin's mind, leaving nothing but an almost unbearable feeling of pleasure that caused him to make all kinds of undignified noises.

He bit down hard on his bottom lip, trying in vain to silence the harsh open mouthed pants and breathless moans as the tight suction of Boyd's lips moved up and down faster. Sin dug his fingers deep in Boyd's hair and began lifting his hips, unable to quiet the grunts and random curses that spilled from his own lips.

It only took a few moments of fucking Boyd's mouth to be on the verge of an orgasm and Sin could feel it building-- he could feel his gut tightening and his toes curling as he slammed up against Boyd faster. But then the other man was pulling back and instead of sucking, Boyd began licking his dick languorously, tongue lapping at the clear fluid that was beginning to leak from the tip.

"Just fucking make me come," Sin growled, eyebrows drawing together as he shuddered almost violently.

He needed this, he needed to have a mind blowing orgasm that would just erase everything from his mind and leave him completely brain dead for awhile. Maybe then he'd get over this shit. At least for a little while.

"Jesus Christ, Boyd don't tease me," he hissed, eyes sliding open to stare down at Boyd, who was looking back up at him with sly mischief in that golden brown stare. It was as if he was punishing Sin for being so pushy, deliberately making him wait because he'd been in such a rush.

But Sin was in a rush.

"Please Boyd," he repeated, aware that he was begging and not really giving a damn. Just because Boyd was the one on his knees didn't mean Sin was the one with the power-- quite the contrary, in a situation like this it was the one giving oral sex that had all the control.

Looking more than a little pleased with himself, Boyd took Sin's dick in his mouth again and this time his head bobbed up and down faster, lips wrapped around tighter. He didn't stop until Sin was practically screaming, arching up off the seat as he came hard inside of Boyd's mouth.

Sin collapsed against the seat, panting breathlessly as little sparks of color exploded behind his eyelids. He could faintly hear and feel Boyd shifting, climbing back over the center console, and he finally opened his eyes again to stare stupidly at his partner.

He'd more than achieved his goal; as usual Boyd had the ability to completely blow his mind. If insanity had a temporary cure, its name would be Boyd's Blowjob. He could open his own store full of home remedies; it'd give the term 'Head Shop' a whole new meaning.

"What about you?" Sin mumbled, fumbling with his jeans as he attempted to cover himself.

Boyd snorted softly and put on his seat belt, looking calm and collected as he turned the vents on defrost to deal with the foggy windows. "Unlike you, I have a little patience," he said dryly, seeming amused. "But don't worry, I have something else in mind for later."

A half grin found its way to Sin's mouth and he closed his eyes, feeling exhausted but, as usual, unable to sleep. He looked forward to a night of being kept up by something other than bad dreams and insomnia for a change.

Chapter 3

The day for Level 10 orientation somehow seemed to arrive more quickly than anticipated.

Boyd had learned, as he'd entered the room and found name tents with the units listed beneath, that there were eight candidates including himself. He'd read the names but only recognized two of them; Ryan's former boyfriend Andrew Torres from Counter-Terrorism and Kassian's teammate Harriet Stevens from Insurgency.

Coincidentally, Andrew and Harriet had arrived at the same time and the difference in their reaction to seeing Boyd had been extreme. While the Puerto Rican man's handsome face automatically melted into a friendly smile and he extended an arm in a casual wave, Harriet just gave Boyd a steely-eyed look. It seemed that the aura of irritation that had surrounded her in Mexico followed her back to the States and as she took her seat, folding her arms across a loose fitting sweater that completely hid her shape, Harriet looked around at the other candidates in obvious disappointment. Obviously she'd been expecting more.

The others turned out to be Cade Carter from Counter-Terrorism, Emmaline Walker from Intelligence, Patrick Stanley from Counter-Terrorism, Tobias McAvoy from Intelligence (although he apparently went by 'Toby' judging by a conversation he overheard) and Jonathan Logan from Intelligence and Special Ops.

Jonathan was the only one to actually have Special Ops on his tag which was kind of interesting in itself. Special Ops was such a broad division that it was usually made up of high-ranking agents who only came in from time to time on very special missions. A good example was Blair from Insurgency who also doubled in the Aerial Support Unit, a section of Special Ops.

The fact that Jonathan had it listed as a home division made it obvious that he was frequently called upon for unique assignments and Boyd had to wonder exactly what the man's expertise was. Other than two scars on Jonathan's pale face-- a crescent shaped one under his eye and another slit through his upper lip-- the man appeared completely ordinary. His brown eyes and hair were completely unmemorable and even his clothing was rather drab. But it was entirely possible that looking plain was something he was good at; it probably allowed him to easily blend in and disappear.

After a moment of intrigued staring, Boyd turned his gaze away and looked at the front of the room.

He'd arrived five minutes before they were supposed to start but they were all still sitting around at eight minutes past the hour. At a long table in the front of the room there was Sin, Kassian, and Carhart. Sin was slouched down in the chair, looking half-asleep and entirely under-dressed for the occasion in his usual threadbare t-shirt and a pair of ratty jeans. He had a hooded sweatshirt on over the t-shirt with the hood pulled down far over his face, shading his expression and slightly shielding the fact from the unobservant that his eyes were practically closed.

Boyd was fairly certain he had never seen Sin look in worse shape except for the times that he'd been badly injured on assignment. His skin was pale and pasty and there were dark circles under his eyes. The fact that he was dozing off in front of a room full of people was a testament to how exhausted the man must be. Boyd hadn't seen him for several days and he was worried to see Sin looking in such poor shape in front of everyone, but then again, since when had Sin cared what others thought of him?

Boyd couldn't tell if Sin was half-asleep because he'd finally taken the sleeping pills or if he was still as out of it as he'd been when they'd taken the trip to Linnea's. Regardless, it made something in Boyd twist to see his partner looking so ill yet there wasn't really anything that he could do about it.

Once Sin went to the medic wing and had them determine what the issue was, then they could help him. Boyd was hoping that with a week or two of good rest and well-balanced meals, Sin would start to look like his old self. Boyd knew they almost certainly wouldn't have any missions together for the next few months and as long as no solo missions came up, maybe this training would actually help Sin by giving him an excuse and chance to take the time for himself to recuperate.

Despite his worry, Boyd made a point not to look at Sin any more often or longer than he did anyone else. He got enough shit about receiving special treatment due to his mother being in charge of the Agency and the last thing he needed in his first impression to the other candidates for Level 10, was to seem as though he could be getting special treatment here too due to any sort of confirmation of his relationship with Sin.

Moving his attention to the others seated in front, Boyd looked over at Kassian. He hadn't thought about Kassian and Sin being present at the first meeting for Level 10 but he supposed it made sense. They were, after all, currently the only two people in the position that he and the others were vying for and they would have the best information.

As usual, Kassian cast a professional image that was starkly contrasted when seated next to Sin. Unlike Sin, he'd chosen to dress more formally with plain black slacks and a button down shirt even though the sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. He was sitting up straight and looked very alert and actually interested in what was going on although there wasn't a hint in his expression as to what he thought of the candidates.

The difference between the two Senior Agents at the front of the room was almost comical.

By this time, most of the candidates were scrutinizing Sin and Kassian, Sin in particular, but Harriet seemed to especially be focused on General Carhart. Her deep brown eyes were fixed on him intently, her striking features set in what appeared to be a permanently stoic expression although now she displayed a hint of deference. It seemed she wanted to make a good impression with all of them but the General especially.

It was strange but at times Boyd forgot how elite their unit must really be for Carhart to be heading it. Carhart was the third highest ranking person at the Agency with more clout than any other General, yet Boyd still found it odd that the man who had once told him to 'just call me Zach' was such a powerful figure.

Whatever the case, Carhart wasn't paying as much attention to the group as Boyd would have expected. Carhart was sitting up straight in his chair, arms folded in front of him but he seemed to be alternating between staring out the window and down at a file that lay open in front of him although Boyd couldn't tell if he was actually reading it. The general had been that way lately-- distracted, anxious, and his youthful good looks were starting to seem weary, with frown lines etching themselves on his forehead. Boyd didn't know the reason but he did wonder what could possibly be bothering the usually easygoing man.

As if feeling the steady gaze on him, Carhart glanced up at Boyd suddenly and stared back for a moment. He seemed to realize that his lack of attention was obvious and cleared his throat, closing the file and turning his cerulean blue eyes on to the last man in the room.

Instructor Douglas Ferguson, according to his name tag, was standing next to the table and surveying the trainees dotted across the room. Boyd had never seen the man before but for some reason his last name sounded vaguely familiar-- likely it had been mentioned in his initial training to become an agent.

He was an interesting-looking figure at 6'2" with a very solid and powerful build, and an unruly mass of windblown black curls that fell across his forehead stubbornly. He stood with his hands on his hips as his extraordinarily pale blue eyes bore into each agent in front of him, shaking his head from time to time although it wasn't obvious why.

"Alright girls, let's start this thing," he said suddenly, voice booming loudly and with a slight Australian accent. "My name is Douglas Ferguson, specialized trainer for high ranking-agents. If you don't know who I am, it means you weren't trained with the best when you were promoted to Level 9 and that probably means you're going to fail this whole thing before we even get too far into it and that's just the way it is."

Boyd resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow. Well, the man was certainly confident. Douglas was probably just trying to scare them away to some extent but it was obvious that he really believed what he was saying.

"Everyone should at least be marginally familiar with the three men sitting to my left and if not, you're an oblivious cunt who once again probably shouldn't be here." Douglas crossed his arms over his chest, jerking his head to the left. "And in case there are any such people sitting in front of me, and believe me I'll weed your asses out soon enough, we have here General Carhart who's basically my watchdog, making sure I don't abuse you all too much."

Carhart gave the Instructor a wan smile and shook his head slightly, not seeming at all surprised by the drill sergeant approach or the language Douglas used quite easily.

"Then we've got Captain America here," Douglas went on, indicating Kassian in all of his Blond All-American glory, "Or Agent Kassian Trovosky as some of you may know him. He's one of the only two agents who actually made it to Level 10 and managed to be good at it. A prime example of miracles happening every day."

Kassian seemed to give an internal sigh but otherwise didn't bat an eyelash, also appearing quite used to the man's style.

The more that Douglas talked, the more Boyd was entertained by Douglas. He had an odd combination between his somewhat unkempt appearance and his harsh mannerisms and words. His description of Kassian and Carhart amused Boyd as well as their beleaguered responses.

"And last but not least... well maybe least is a good word, we have Agent Hs--" Douglas broke off abruptly when he glanced at Sin and scowled. It appeared as though Sin had actually dozed off this time and was slumped down in his chair, hood completely covering the top half of his face as he leaned on one arm.

Douglas growled in irritation and kicked Sin's chair. "Wake your ass up."

Sin woke with a start and sat up, the hood falling back to reveal his red rimmed eyes as he stared up at Douglas moodily. "What?"

Kassian shook his head and met Boyd's eyes briefly, mouth twitching slightly.

Boyd returned the look with slightly raised eyebrows. Although Kassian had looked equal parts unsurprised and displeased by Sin's display, Boyd was equally concerned and amused. Normally he would feel exasperated by Sin's tendency to completely disregard any sense of protocol but in this case he knew how awful Sin felt. But other than the worrisome aspect, it was somewhat funny to see.

"Well I'm sorry, Your Majesty, but in case you haven't noticed you've got a fucking audience," Douglas said, sarcasm oozing from his voice. "Now look alive, damn it."

Sin didn't make any attempt to look lively and made a face, glaring at the trainees as if they were the root of all his problems. They stared back with expressions varying from dismay, to irritation and surprise.

"Sadly, Agent Vega is probably the best assassin and fighter you're ever going to meet," Douglas finally went on, still scowling at Sin. "We're actually planning to use this dumb fuck for training purposes later, so look forward to that."

Training purposes? Surprised, Boyd glanced toward Sin. Boyd's expression was mostly neutral but there was a slight questioning aspect to it that he knew Sin would be able to interpret. He hadn't heard anything about this and wondered if Sin knew, or even what 'training purposes' exactly meant.

Sin looked at him with a slight one-shouldered shrug and didn't look at all surprised by the revelation.

"The reason these two gentlemen have graced us with their presences today is that they are the only two Level 10 agents that are currently living at the moment. Interpret that any way you want and the worst thoughts that come to your head probably don't

even begin to cover it," Douglas said, turning his attention back to the trainees. "If anyone can best fill you in on what you can expect if you, and it's very unlikely you will, receive this promotion, it's them. But before we get to that, I'll go into some details about what the word 'training' really means when it comes to this."

Douglas clasped his hands behind his back and narrowed his eyes slightly, likely gauging any reaction they would have to whatever he was going to say. "If you're thinking it's going to be the same shit as Level 9, you can get that out of your head right now. The only thing that set up and this set up has got in common is that you'll be staying in the bunkers, but this time there's very little interaction allowed between trainees and non-trainees."

He paused for a moment, letting that sink in. "Got it? There's no taking time off to stroll about the compound or going out for cokes and burgers or whatever the fuck you people like to do in this town. You stay in the bunkers, you interact with each other and that's the end of it except for two phone calls a day and one trip outside biweekly. That's the end of your connection with the outside world until your three months of training is through. It's better for you in the long run-- it will keep you focused on what you're doing but it's also a test in its own right."

Boyd didn't visibly react to the news but he did see the frown on Patrick's face. He wasn't someone that Boyd had ever formally met but there was definitely something familiar about the tall and extremely muscular African American man. He was very powerful looking, to the extent that it could be intimidating, but his good-natured expression and calm voice as he'd greeted the others in the room told Boyd that he wasn't someone who would use his size to make people fear him.

In fact, Patrick appeared to be the polar opposite of Cade in that way. They both cut incredibly muscular figures but while Patrick seemed naturally kind, Cade's arrogance was very apparent. It was the way he'd strutted across the room as he walked in, sizing every one up and making rude comments under his breath. The gym shorts and sleeveless shirt that he wore were also an obvious ploy to bring attention to his mass of muscles.

The two agents were as different as night and day in their personalities and it made Boyd wonder just how he would interact with these people for three months with barely any time to himself.

He'd known ahead of time that they would essentially be in lock-down during the training and although he would miss his freedom and his ability to see Sin, he was confident that

he could do it. To him, this entire training session was going to be a test of his ability to work and adapt on his own. In the long run, training was only a few months out of his life and the challenge probably wouldn't be bad for him as a person or an agent.

"What if there's a family emergency?" Patrick asked finally, looking hesitant to speak but obviously thinking his question was pertinent enough.

"What if there's a family emergency on a mission? Gonna haul ass back to town then?" the Instructor asked rhetorically.

Patrick looked away, appearing troubled, but didn't say anything further and after a moment Douglas went on.

"The training is not just physical," he said, eyes sliding away from Patrick to focus on Cade. "Got it? Not. Just. Physical. So don't think being all juiced up is going to be the deciding factor in who gets through this thing. There's a variety of tests and endurance challenges which focus on physical and mental, and don't think there's going to be any warming up to the hard stuff, either. It's all hard stuff."

He nodded to himself, curls falling around his face haphazardly. "If you didn't already have an excellent understanding of the basics, you wouldn't be in front of me, or that's what we're assuming anyway. If it turns out you're a total piece of shit then that will come out sooner than later when you get maimed while sparring or killed on a mock mission. We've even had a suicide during a mock up interrogation," Douglas said with a chuckle. "Some fucking people, huh?"

The other trainees reacted more to this information than anything else that had been said so far. Emmaline shifted uncomfortably but didn't say anything and covered up the movement with a sip from her water bottle. Toby also looked taken aback by the news but Cade had the strongest response. He snorted and leaned back in his chair with a doubtful raising of his eyebrows, giving Douglas a look that clearly said he didn't believe him.

The expression wasn't missed by Douglas and he stopped whatever he was about to say to stare directly at Cade. "You got something to say, juicer? Or is your face just twitching from all of that extra testosterone?"

"Yeah, I do," Cade said, shifting in his seat to give more of a lazily intimidating presence. "You seriously trying to tell me I may not stand a chance against these pussies?" He gestured toward the rest of the trainees.

Douglas stared at him for a moment before exchanging highly amused glances with Carhart, who just shook his head and declined to involve himself. "Well judging from your response, I'd say you don't have the mental capacity to get past the first week. You've got no i-fucking-dea what the rest of them can do and you're judging solely based on muscle-mass alone which means you're an idiot already for underestimating opponents you know nothing about." He paused and then pointed at Sin. "You're about sixty pounds bigger than Agent Vega. Do ya think he's a pussy too?"

Sin glanced at Cade, suddenly interested in the discussion.

"I ain't talking about him," Cade said dismissively. "He's a freak, everyone knows that. I'm talking about the others in here-- the two with the real pussies, no offense darlin'," he addressed that only to Emmaline and didn't seem as though he really cared if he offended her because he let his eyes linger a little too long on her breasts, "and the rest of them who may as well. C'mon, man, that one over there looks like he'd piss his pants if someone said 'boo' too loud at night if he didn't have his teddy bear and night light." He pointed at Toby.

Boyd was mildly interested to find that, for once, he wasn't the one singled out as being weak at first glance. Typically, the macho men took one look at his slightly effeminate features, his slender body and his medium-length blond hair and they thought he would be as much threat as a little girl.

"You're a tool," Toby replied, not looking very surprised by the summation of his appearance. He was probably used to it by now; he was slightly shorter than average height and rather thin, but his aristocratic features and pale blue eyes seemed to be permanently full of disdain. His clothing as well as his demeanor made him seem very much like a man who thought highly of himself and his appearance, but not much of the rest of the world.

"Oh don't make me cry," Cade said sarcastically, clearly unimpressed by Toby's response.

Harriet shook her head disgustedly, perhaps with his attitude or simply with the fact that someone somewhere considered him to be in the same league with her, but she said nothing.

Surprisingly, it was Patrick who spoke up despite the fact that he appeared to be a rather shy individual. "It wouldn't hurt to show some propriety, man. We're here with

superiors for a possible promotion. Don't ruin it for yourself before we even start training."

Cade made a show of turning in his seat and looking at Patrick but rather than continue to argue he just made a rolling shrug. "I'm just saying," he said lazily, but he subsided. "We'll see it once training starts anyway."

"I'm sure we'll see plenty once training starts," Douglas said with a wide grin, appearing to thrive on the idea of Cade's possible future failure. "But for now, ladies, let's get back to the matter at hand, yeah?" He leaned against the table, and tilted his head to the side. "And if you've gotten any doubts about what I'm saying, the three people sitting here have all gone through this very same training and each time there have been colossal failures and deaths. If you're prepared to deal with that, by all means stay and hear the rest of what these agents have got to say but if for some reason you know you're not cut out for the kinda shit that's going to go down-- then please get the hell out now and don't waste my time."

Patrick actually appeared to consider it briefly while Cade just leaned back in his chair with a smug expression that said he didn't quite believe it and had no intention of going anywhere. Andrew settled more firmly into his seat but he seemed a little harrowed by the idea of how difficult this would be.

The others did not seem to react, including Boyd who just watched Douglas with his usual neutral expression. He already had a good idea from Sin and to an extent Kassian and Carhart about just how difficult and challenging the Level 10 job was, let alone the training, so he was unsurprised by Douglas' speech. It was obvious that this entire meeting was a test on its own; to get an idea of the personalities of the candidates and see how easy they were to upset or shake their convictions.

Douglas waited for a few moments before shrugging. "Good. So we can move on." He turned toward the table and looked at Sin and Kassian. "The floor is yours, kids."

Sin gave him a look that clearly told Douglas what his opinion of having the floor was and it was Kassian who finally stood up. Kassian seemed completely confident and sure of himself, glancing over everyone as he apparently gathered his thoughts. Harriet sat up a little straighter and her mouth turned up in a small smile as she watched her team leader; looking simultaneously proud of him and for some reason slightly embarrassed.

"Like Instructor Ferguson said, Agent Vega and I are the only two active Level 10 Operatives at the moment and we're here to pretty much give you some insight as to

what you can expect from that title and what will be expected of you. I've been through two of these orientations before and was involved with the training for both sessions so I can tell you now that it really is as tough as the Instructor is making it out to be. Out of almost two dozen trainees, I've only seen one man get promoted and he died shortly after that." His voice was calm and carried across the room easily. "You should all know that Level 10 Field Operatives have an extremely high mortality rate. The average life expectancy is five years after initial promotion, although Agent Vega and I have thus far been an exception to that."

Emmaline raised her hand slightly.

Kassian looked at her with a brief smile and nodded. "Yes..." He glanced at her name tag. "Emmaline?"

"I typically go by Emma," Emma offered politely, smiling. "Agent Trovosky, where is that statistic coming from? If there are so few Level 10 promotions and you two have remained Level 10s for years, how is the average life span so short? Were previous Level 10s killed so quickly?" It was the first time Boyd heard her speak; her voice was smooth and rather pleasant-sounding, which seemed to fit her general appearance and personality.

The differences between the only two females in the room was as striking as the contrast between Patrick and Cade. While Harriet was tomboyish and obviously reluctant to show any femininity at all, Emma did nothing to hide it. They were both highly attractive but unlike the tight knot Harriet had in her black hair, Emma kept her long brown, thick hair down in waves. While Harriet wore no makeup, Emma had chosen to subtly enhance her beauty with cosmetics. While Harriet wore over-sized clothing, Emma wore slim cut pants and a stylish blouse, although her clothing was not provocative in the least. While Harriet's dark brown eyes often seemed distant and unreadable, Emma's deep blue gaze was often polite, interested, and amiable. While it was rare to see Harriet seem friendly, Emma had greeted each trainee with a smile that had actually seemed genuine.

The only two women Boyd ever had much interaction with at the Agency were his mother and Harriet so seeing Emma was almost a relief. Not all female agents were as extreme as the former two; somehow Boyd just seemed to interact more with people who had intense personalities, sometimes dramatically so.

"Actually, yes." Kassian held her gaze for a long moment despite the fact that he was obviously not only addressing her. "This Agency has been around for quite some time and in the distant past, it was common for there to be many Level 10 agents at a time."

But as the war worsened and we were directly bombed, many agents were killed and a lot of the veterans who would have been next in line for promotion were replaced with new agents who had to take years working up the ladder such as some of you."

He finally broke Emma's gaze just as Harriet glanced at the other woman but Harriet's expression was unreadable.

"It wasn't that those agents were unskilled," Kassian continued, "it's just that we are typically sent on assignments that really do seem like suicide. I have been on many missions that seemed like inevitable death and somehow my luck just hasn't run out yet. But it isn't only assignments that take us out-- it's the pressure as well. Many times it has caused agents to crack, to go crazy, or to lose themselves in a personality that isn't really their own. Many Level 10 agents have subsequently committed suicide or wound up locked in a mental ward, unable to handle things that happened to them or even things that they'd done for the sake of the mission."

Kassian shrugged expressively. "The reason I'm here is to ensure that you all are aware of what you're getting into. It may seem like a small step but really it's a huge difference in what you'll be expected to do. These are not the average assignment where you're in and out after the task is accomplished. You are put on assignments where you have to sacrifice every part of who you are to get the job done, and if you don't, the consequences can be very severe."

Emma raised her hand again and waited until Kassian looked over to acknowledge her. "Yes, I actually have two questions. What sort of resources are available for Level 10s to handle the job, such as counseling, vacations or other services? And, secondly, I'm wondering how you've both successfully dealt with the stress."

She looked toward Sin, her expression as amiable and interested as anyone else she looked at, showing that she either did not buy into the idea of him being a freak or she was prudent enough not to let it show. "Senior Agent Vega, I was especially hoping that you'd have a chance to answer that question; as far as I understand it, you've been Level 10 for longer than anyone else as well as being the youngest, which must have been especially difficult in your formative years as a teenager."

Sin seemed disturbed that she was directly addressing him and didn't say anything for a long moment. He just stared at her blankly for enough time to make it sufficiently awkward and only seemed to come to himself when Kassian turned to stare at him as though he was an idiot. Sin narrowed his eyes toward Kassian in a manner that was obviously threatening before turning the glare to Emma. "Pass."

"Christ," Douglas muttered softly, shaking his head to himself.

Carhart sat up finally and cleared his throat, casting a furtive glance at Sin before speaking for him. "Therapy is offered to all agents but the higher up you go, the more benefits will be offered to you in that way. Level 10 Field Operatives receive very individualized care from the psychiatric and medical staff because, as Agent Trovosky said, they're often put into situations that are damaging to them mentally and physically. The Agency does everything possible to give these people what they need, even if it is not always successful."

"Are you implying my therapy hasn't been successful?" Sin asked dryly.

The general looked at him directly and asked pointedly, "Do you think it's been?"

Sin opened his mouth to reply, likely with some smart-assed comment, but for some reason he frowned and seemed to decide against it as he settled for brooding silence once again. Boyd was mildly surprised by that but thought Sin was probably just too tired to feel like arguing.

Carhart met Emma's gaze as she attentively listened. "Agent Vega is a difficult case if you're trying to put the concept of how useful psychiatric care is to Level 10s into perspective. Being a fighter since the age of thirteen likely does something to a man that no one, not even a doctor, could possibly comprehend."

"That's understandable," Emma said with a nod. "Therapy in any regard depends on the person, circumstances, and therapist. I was just wondering what sort of resources may be available for Level 10s or how Senior Agents Trovosky and Vega have dealt with the issues that have arisen as a direct result of their high-ranking position. I assumed that successful therapy or other techniques to de-stress and relearn behaviors must have been involved to some extent. I can see how that was a poorly worded question, though." She said it easily, not in any way implying that Carhart or the others were reprimanding her for her question, but rather acknowledging that she could see the error of her ways and was already compensating for it.

"I can't speak for Vega," Kassian said, dropping the use of Sin's title for some reason, "but I believe that the services offered to us can be quite helpful. After completing extensive undercover assignments, it's possible that you can be required to see one in order to make sure that you're at the place you should be when you return. I just came from a two-year undercover op and I've found it useful, and although I'm not seeing

anyone regularly at the moment, I always have the option to go back and see the doctor I dealt with in the past. My coping mechanisms typically just involve having somewhere to go that is completely removed from work."

If it hadn't been for the fact that Boyd had actually visited Kassian's house, he probably would have believed that well-executed evasion. Especially standing there next to Sin, Kassian had such a put-together, well-rounded, good guy appearance that it was easy to believe him when he implied nothing was really wrong. Boyd knew that in many ways Kassian definitely lived up to his reputation; he was an adept, textbook example of a great agent except for the fact that his morals sometimes conflicted with his assignment. Yet he knew that Kassian also put up a front so that the rest of the people at the Agency, and even his friends and neighbors, were not aware of any insecurities or flaws he may have.

Boyd knew that the place Kassian went to that was "completely removed from work" was his home, messy and littered with empty bottles and cans of alcohol and that he seemed to sleep on the couch more often than not. It wasn't Boyd's place or in his interest to judge the man; he knew enough about Kassian's assignment in Russia and the type of Level 10 assignments Sin had been given that the stress all of them talked about was very real. It also wasn't as though he was an expert on Kassian or that he even necessarily cared to be; he'd really only been around him a few times but even in that time he could tell there was more to him than met the eye.

Part of that was simply because Kassian had given him the opportunity; mostly because Kassian knew Boyd didn't care about him either way so Kassian had taken the chance to let him see beyond the facade.

For Boyd, the things that Kassian tried to hide from others just made him seem more real, like he was more of an understandable person because he also did things that he regretted or thought he needed to hide. It was just interesting because since he'd visited Kassian's home over the summer, Boyd hadn't really been confronted with the disconnect between Kassian's life at home and Kassian's persona at work. Of course he'd noted the difference when he'd visited but this was the first time he was in the context of the Agency and realized even just a hint that he could read beyond what Kassian was saying and presenting to what was really happening behind that professional exterior and polite smile.

As for the other trainees, they didn't seem to notice anything amiss at all. In fact, judging by their reactions they were more caught up on the length of time Kassian's mission had lasted than the coping skills he mentioned. Andrew looked surprised but didn't say

anything and once again Patrick looked quite disturbed by the news; it seemed pretty obvious that he had not expected many of the things he was hearing. It was hard to tell what Emma was thinking; her expression did not change from professional interest as she nodded in thanks to the information, but there was a slight tensing of her shoulders.

"Are assignments of that length typical?" Toby chimed in suddenly, looking intrigued by this notion.

"They can be," Kassian replied. "It depends on the division you're in and the type of work you typically do. My expertise is espionage, so I'm more suited for those missions which is why they're assigned to me. However with missions of that length there is always the option to opt out, although there is a large bonus involved if you go through with it and it's likely considered a dereliction of duty if you say no."

Toby nodded and seemed to think hard about that although he maintained his smug, slightly arrogant expression throughout. Boyd thought Toby was trying very hard to appear as though that information didn't intimidate him but it was obvious by the way his lips turned down at the side that it did.

"It's not surprising," a quiet voice with a slight Irish accent rang out suddenly. Jonathan looked around the room briefly before focusing his gaze on Toby. "The deeper undercover one goes, the more information they're going to access about their enemy and that's what espionage is all about."

"That's right," Kassian agreed with a nod.

"How much warning is usually given before assignments?" Andrew asked, shifting in his chair to get more comfortable or perhaps out of some sense of fidgeting. "Like, say your two-year assignment. Did you get enough time to put your affairs in order or do these things get sprung on you last minute?"

"I was given time," Kassian replied. "It takes some time to devise a thorough understanding of the role you're supposed to take on and to make any physical changes that you may need to make for one."

"So what kinda missions are we talking about anyway?" Cade piped up from the side, his pose and tone somehow a little flippant although he seemed honestly interested in the answer. "Long undercover missions, assassinations, what?"

Douglas, who had been eyeballing Cade since his last comment, looked like he wanted to respond with something both belittling and belligerent but smiled coldly to himself and settled for saying, "I bet you'd be just gorgeous in an undercover mission."

Kassian glanced at Douglas knowingly and was most likely very aware that the Instructor was going to have a lot of fun with this trainee just by the wicked glint in his blue eyes. But before the other man could say anything more, Kassian replied. "We can't go into specifics, you're not high enough classification level at your current rank, but you can expect a variety of assignments in all divisions. It will probably come as a surprise to those of you who are used to team assignments in the Counter-Terrorism division especially."

Carhart nodded in agreement with Kassian, paying more attention to the discussion now. "When I was first promoted, it was a big change because I was used to working as part of a larger unit from my years in the Marines and then working in General Stephen's division in a close-knit team. But you get used to it. I did and at the time I wasn't nearly as focused as a lot of our new agents are today."

"And look who you had as a partner," Douglas chimed in with a chortle.

Sin glanced at Carhart, who ignored the comment.

Boyd had nearly forgotten that Carhart had once been partnered with Emilio but as soon as Douglas said it, combined with Sin's glance, he knew they couldn't be referring to anyone else. He tried to imagine going from a setting like the Marines to a partner like that while also being promoted to Level 10. That must have been quite taxing on Carhart; Boyd had felt like he'd had issues when he'd first started as Sin's partner but at least Sin had been pretty straightforward about his personality from the start.

Emilio sounded like the sort of person who'd been unrefined and unpredictable, but who had been so charismatic and likable that he could get away with being an asshole all he wanted. Granted, he had never met Emilio because the man had died over a decade before Boyd had joined the Agency but Emilio's reputation certainly preceded him.

"What sort of assassination are we talking about here? Who would the targets be?" Andrew asked, and although his expression wasn't very readable, Boyd could tell that he was a little uneasy about the idea, which was unsurprising since he seemed to have a bit of a hero complex. He'd been so upset about Boyd killing an enemy during the raid; what would he be like on a mission where he went in specifically to kill someone without the immediate reward of seeing the innocent lives he'd saved?

"Now what kind of dumb fucking question is that?" Douglas drawled, tilting his head as his curls bounced around wildly. "Even if you were classified to that information at the moment, you think we just have a list of people waiting to die all lined up for ya?"

"I meant what kind of people," Andrew mumbled, seeming slightly embarrassed.

Cade smirked off to the side, looking pleased to see someone else get berated by Douglas.

"You'll find out if you get to that point, trainee. *If*," Douglas said with a snort.

Kassian waited until the Instructor was through before glancing down at Sin. "Do you have anything to add?"

"No."

"Fine." Kassian looked back at the trainees, looking somewhat tired of having to talk to them. "Does anyone have any questions for me or Agent Vega?"

"I have a question for Instructor Ferguson," Emma offered, looking up from some notes she was quickly scribbling on her pad of paper. "How do you decide who'll be promoted?"

"There's a variety of factors that are taken into consideration and just for your information, I'm not the one doing the judging. That's up to the top dogs-- the guys behind the big desks and what not." Douglas brushed his unruly hair out of his eyes, seeming somewhat aggravated with it. "Everything is considered a test, whether it's written, oral or physical and you'll be judged and scored on all of it. Scores are tallied and the list is narrowed down but it's not just numbers that are the deciding factor. Other things are taken into consideration as well but I'm not about to share that with you fuckrags just yet. The best trainee is a trainee who don't know shit because they can't pretend like they do. Everything is a lot more honest that way, am I right?"

Boyd was glad at least to hear that they would be taking everything into account. He agreed with Douglas' assessment but he also suspected that the trainers would keep them in the dark on purpose, to create more doubt and uncertainty and make that all a test on its own. The more unpredictability they would have to deal with, the less likely they would fall into any sense of a routine or get too complacent. He did the best in those types of situations anyway, so it would work to his advantage although he could

see that being problematic for someone like Cade who seemed incapable of taking his head out of his ass for longer than a few minutes at a time.

"I have a question as well, Instructor," Toby spoke up. "When will it be announced who is going to be promoted?"

"Approximately four to six weeks after training is complete," Douglas replied. "If any of you actually get promoted. *If*. You will be notified, although everyone is called in, even if you didn't make it, just so it can be explained to you why exactly you suck."

Cade looked smugly over at the others, as if he could not imagine himself being one of those people but for once he did not speak. He seemed to especially focus on Toby, Harriet, Emma and, unsurprisingly, Boyd.

Although Boyd somewhat agreed with Cade's earlier assessment of Toby in that he doubted the man had what it took to stand up to Cade immediately, he knew that Harriet at least was not the sort of person to let such slights go unnoticed. Part of him was secretly waiting for when she would get back at Cade for his earlier comments along with the smug look he'd just given her. He didn't particularly like Harriet but sometimes it was entertaining to watch strong personalities be aimed at people other than himself.

"Well, if you girls don't have any more questions, you're free to enjoy your last week of freedom before I lock your asses down in the bunker," Douglas said, waiting a moment to see if anyone would speak, and then turned to Carhart which effectively ended the orientation.

The trainees hesitated briefly as if to determine if it was okay for them to move, then one by one they left. Andrew was the first one out of the room, followed by Jonathan. Emma took a moment to gather her things and slide them back into her bag. Patrick started to leave but paused and hovered a moment, as if he intended to say something to her, but Cade apparently decided that it was a good time to hit on her as he leaned against her desk and said something in a low voice. She mostly ignored him, giving him only a cursory, polite smile, and stood up to go.

Cade made an attempt to block her in but she smoothly moved around him and walked out with him close behind. Patrick watched them a moment before finally leaving as well. As soon as most of the trainees were gone, Douglas and Carhart walked out talking, only paying brief attention to the others still left in the room.

Boyd wandered down toward the front, where Kassian remained in Sin's vicinity. Harriet was the only other trainee still there and she headed toward Kassian, saying something to him that Boyd didn't initially pay attention to.

"What did they mean, training purposes?" he asked Sin.

"What?" Sin asked, staring at Boyd blearily. "What are you talking about?"

"The Instructor said they planned to use you for training purposes later," Boyd reminded him patiently.

"Oh." Sin rubbed a hand across his face. "Some nonsense."

"They use him as an example," Kassian said suddenly, obviously having overheard the conversation. "Of how quickly and efficiently a Level 10 is expected to get things done but he doesn't necessarily have to be there for that. I don't know if they've changed things since the previous training but last time they also wanted to have one of us there for sparring."

Boyd glanced briefly at Sin in a mixture of surprise and exasperation although the emotions did not make it to his face. Why would Sin not just tell him that if it was such a simple answer? He was sympathetic toward the fact that Sin was exhausted but Sub had done the same sort of thing to Boyd a number of times before and it was frustrating. Sometimes it seemed like the situation got unnecessarily complicated because Sin didn't tell him about something he knew about well in advance.

Boyd turned his attention back to Kassian. "We may have to fight him?"

"Possibly. One of us. Most likely him though," Kassian replied with a shrug.

"Why most likely him?" Harriet asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Because he's the better fighter," Kassian said, irony dripping off his words as he glanced down at Sin again and shook his head. "Even though he looks hung-over at the moment."

Sin flipped Kassian off and got to his feet. "Whatever. You should know about that, huh? Drunk ass Russian."

Boyd kept his expression neutral and looked over at Kassian, mostly out of surprise that Sin's comment in any way rang true, but he made the movement casual enough that for anyone watching it would seem like he was just seeing how Kassian would react to one of Sin's usual baseless insults. He found that Kassian glanced his way briefly, a question hidden in his eyes asking whether Boyd had said anything. Boyd shook his head just the faintest bit in a subtle move and Kassian gave him a brief half smile, acknowledging it.

Although Sin missed the quick, subtle interaction Harriet apparently hadn't because she gave Kassian a strange look. But she didn't say anything about it; instead, she completely changed the topic back to the matter at hand. "How would that be scored? What determines how well you do compared to everyone else?"

"Well, it's not like you're all just supposed to set out to beat each other. It's not really a competition even though I know everything turns into a competition with you, Harry," Kassian said, smiling slightly as he raised a knowing eyebrow at her. "When I did it, while Vega was... indisposed..."

"You mean locked in a box while doped up with tranquilizers?" Sin corrected, staring at Kassian and not looking anything remotely close to good humored or friendly.

Harriet's eyebrows drew together slightly at the description and she briefly gazed at Sin, her expression a strange mix between pity, curiosity and an edge of intimidation as she recalled her teammate's fear of Sin on the way out of Mexico. Even when he'd been in a coma and looking very close to death, Michael had stared at the man with complete fear in his eyes and begged Kassian to strap him down in case he woke up. A man who was that feared and was treated with such measures-- it only made her wonder what he was capable of. Even in his current sickly state.

Kassian shrugged and continued. "It was more like I was training them rather than outright fighting them, helping with techniques I've learned over the years. But when I was trained, they had me spar with him multiple times."

Harriet's eyebrows shot up, looking surprised. "I didn't know that."

"He did really poorly," Sin offered helpfully, rubbing his forehead again. "It was quite funny."

"Fuck you." Irritation was starting to creep into Kassian's sky blue eyes as his jaw clenched.

Boyd looked at Kassian in mild surprise that didn't make it to his face. He remembered his own first spar with Sin; it had ended in a laughably short amount of time with Sin nowhere close to breaking a sweat. Granted, Boyd had at that time only had half a year's training and Kassian would have come from other areas before he sparred, but against Sin no one truthfully stood a chance.

Given Kassian and Sin's rivalry and Kassian's dislike of how he was constantly compared to a person who was a phenomenal fighter and assassin but had little in the way of overarching morals as far as he knew, it was unsurprising that he wasn't pleased with Sin's comment. What surprised Boyd was that the usually mild-mannered Kassian was getting annoyed enough that he actually snapped back in public.

"But how do they judge it?" Harriet persisted, shooting Kassian another look.

"Based on how well you can stand against his retardedly fast reflexes. I suppose they figure if you can spar with him and not die, you stand a good chance against most other opponents," Kassian said, tone getting gradually more annoyed, more sarcastic as Sin smirked at him. The contrast between their personalities-- Kassian at first making an effort to be professional and Sin doing his best to get underneath Kassian's skin-- was very obvious and it was no wonder why they had a complete inability to get along.

"Given the fact that Sin can take out an entire room of enemies in a matter of seconds, no one stands a chance of winning against him," Boyd said honestly, glancing toward Sin. "I suppose it does measure a sense of prowess but it just seems... contrived and insulting on all our parts, including Sin's."

Boyd lifted shrugged lightly. "Maybe that's the point. As long as they judge the entire training on multiple levels--mental, physical, and so on--a person should be able to continue even if failing abysmally there but I just don't see most of us making it far. No offense meant to Emma but, for instance, I doubt she'd last longer than a handful of seconds. I know I didn't, at least, the first time I sparred with him."

Harriet glanced over at Boyd and studied him for a long moment before raising her shoulders slightly in reluctant acknowledgment that she apparently thought he was right. "I agree. They likely will take into account how well we do under the pressure of facing such an opponent and possibly even how strategic we are during the course of it."

"Captain America made it pretty far," Sin said, mocking smirk firmly in place as he continued to lock eyes with Kassian. "He even hit me once."

Kassian shifted slightly, body tense as anger seemed to build inside of him. His eyes narrowed as he shook his head, irritation practically radiating off him. "That was over ten years ago. Things have changed since then."

"Well, we can give it another shot if that's what you want," Sin said, smirk widening into a smile as if he was looking forward to the chance of inflicting some violence on someone. "You must have your big boy shorts on today, Kass."

"You're such a fucking asshole," Kassian replied. "I'd love to wipe that smirk right off of your face."

"You're more than welcome to try," Sin said, voice lower, more threatening, as he faced Kassian entirely.

The two of them looked on the verge of actually attacking each other. Although Boyd wasn't as familiar with Kassian's body language, he knew Sin was in one of his reckless moods where he was lashing out just to see what reaction he could get and how far he could push it; this wasn't just talk between them and for that reason Boyd tried to run interference.

"This isn't the time or place for that," Boyd pointed out reasonably. "If you both really wanted to challenge each other it should be in an actual spar in the training rooms, not a brawl like it would be if you started now. Your emotions would interfere with your skills."

Harriet said nothing but stared at Kassian in surprise, appearing more than a little uncomfortable with seeing her Senior Agent and Team Leader who was typically so level-headed and in control, so easily rankled by Sin. It also came as a big surprise considering just how hard Kassian had tried to keep Sin alive back in Mexico, when it was more than obvious that they both disliked each other intensely.

Sin raised his eyebrows at Kassian, a challenge in his eyes. "I don't mind a good brawl."

Kassian stared at him hard for another long moment before exhaling slowly and flexing his hands, glancing at Boyd and Harriet as he appeared to come back to himself. "Be an asshole by yourself, Vega. I'm not going to be brought down to your level."

"How fucking impressive of you," Sin sneered. "Must be great being such a paragon. Too bad it doesn't come with balls."

"Do you really think I'm afraid of you?" Kassian asked incredulously. "I've never been and I never will be. You should know that by now. You're nothing to me but an annoyance."

"And you're nothing but a do-gooder little bitch who thinks you're something special just because you do whatever the hell you're told."

"I think I'm going to go," Harriet interrupted suddenly. "I have some things to take care of before training starts."

Sin and Kassian looked at her, a slight edge of embarrassment crossing Kassian's face as he nodded distractedly. "Yeah, of course. Sorry you had to witness this."

"Oh brother," Sin muttered, rolling his eyes and sitting on the table, appearing to have lost interest--or maybe just having lost the energy--in continuing to bate his rival.

Harriet cleared her throat, seeming awkward as she quickly looked at Boyd and Sin before focusing on Kassian again. "Well, I suppose I won't see you for awhile then..." Her tone was strange and it was hard to say whether or not she was leading to something she was hesitant to say.

"I'll see you during training," Kassian replied, seeming oblivious to her awkwardness and tone.

"Oh, right. Okay." She nodded and tucked stray strands of black hair behind her ears. At the moment she didn't seem so much like the hard ass who'd judged Boyd so harshly in the back of that van in Monterrey; rather, she seemed like an insecure woman who was frustrated with herself and her situation. But she quickly caught herself and shot an almost irritated glance at Boyd, as if his presence was somehow making the situation worse.

Boyd just looked at her evenly, wondering at her interaction with Kassian and how she was such a markedly different person around him, but before he cared to think on it much she was already moving to leave.

Harriet hoisted her black backpack on one shoulder and nodded at Sin briefly more out of respect that he was a superior than anything else before saying, "Well, I'll see you later Senior Agent Trovosky."

"Good luck," Kassian said amiably, watching her walk away. When she was gone, he cast another look at Sin. "I hope they skip the sparring this time around."

"Afraid I'll beat up your girlfriend?" Sin asked dryly, hunching forward with a wince as he put his head in his hands. "Don't worry, I have no desire to kill a bunch of pathetic little trainees if that's what you're thinking."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "You'd better not be including me in that statement."

Sin peeked at him through his fingers. "Oh. I forgot about you."

"I'm that easy to forget, am I?" Boyd asked dryly. "Especially when I've been right in front of you for the last hour? I'm flattered."

"You were barely there anyway. You didn't say a word. I think points should be deducted from your score just for that," Sin replied with a snort, getting to his feet again with a stretch.

"Scoring me already?" Boyd asked with an amused smirk. "That was quick. I'll have to watch out with Judge Sin on my back." Out of the corner of his eye, he realized that Kassian was watching the two of them as they bantered; first Kassian seemed to study Sin's expression and then he looked toward Boyd, who didn't let on that he'd noticed.

"I could say something," Sin smirked. "But I won't."

"I'm grateful for your restraint," Boyd said, amusement clear in his tone. He hadn't meant to choose such poor wording that would have been so easy for Sin to twist, and for all that he was glad Sin hadn't taken the opportunity it was somewhat entertaining to imagine what he would have said.

"Ha." Sin looked over at Kassian as if he just remembered that the man was still standing there. Sin took in the way the other agent was examining Boyd and him before his expression once again turned into one of annoyance. "What the hell are you looking at?"

Kassian shrugged. "Nothing. Just observing."

"Observing what?" Sin demanded.

The other man raised an eyebrow. "Nothing. Why so quick to be on the defense, colleague?"

Sin just shook his head, looking aggravated, and said nothing.

His previous irritation and bad temper appearing to have been put behind him, Kassian rolled his eyes and nodded at Boyd. "Well, it was good to see you again."

Boyd inclined his head in acknowledgment with a trace of a smile. "You as well, although we'll be seeing each other at training, Instructor."

Kassian tilted his head slightly, a half smile on his face as he began to walk away. "You should know that doesn't really count as seeing *me*."

Boyd's smile widened wryly, thinking of the almost awkward insecurity Kassian had displayed when Boyd had visited his home, and how at odds that was with the confident and controlled image that Kassian had shown at the orientation. "True. My mistake."

Kassian stopped his backwards walk and hesitated for only a brief moment before saying, "You should come over again sometime."

The invitation somewhat surprised Boyd. He actually considered stopping by again but they only lived a few blocks apart and aside from the awkwardness it had been an interesting trip. He also hadn't known if Kassian would have wanted him to visit again; he'd left on terms of disagreement after the topic had turned to Sin and during his stay Kassian had seemed so awkward about having anyone over that Boyd had thought that was the end of it. He was mildly pleased to know he was welcome; he couldn't say why he felt that way except that overall he found Kassian to be surprisingly pleasant company.

"Perhaps I will," Boyd said after a moment, tilting his head.

"Well, you know where I am." Kassian lifted his hand in a casual wave and turned entirely, striding out of the room.

As soon as Kassian was gone, Boyd looked over to see Sin staring at him questioningly and nonplussed. Rather than addressing that immediately, Boyd asked instead about something he'd been wondering since Kassian and Sin had started to fight. "Why do you like to antagonize him so much?" He asked it lightly and curiously, not in any way

accusatory or taking Kassian's side; it was simply that Sin seemed to take special delight in baiting Kassian.

"Why not?" Sin retorted, still eyeing Boyd oddly.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Surely there's more reason than that."

"I don't like him. In fact, I think I despise him." Sin started rubbing his head again, eyelashes lowering over red-rimmed green eyes as he stared down at Boyd. Despite the fact that he'd been all ready to fight Kassian, he looked completely out of it. It was surprising that no one had really mentioned it further than Douglas' initial comment.

"Why?" Boyd asked, honestly curious.

"Why the hell not?" Sin growled, looking exasperated. "What's so good about him?"

"Well, for one thing you'd be dead right now if it weren't for him," Boyd pointed out. "I don't think he likes you much either but he refused to let you die when he had the chance."

"What are you talking about?" Sin didn't look too enthused by this information.

Boyd sighed and looked away. He'd never really told Sin any of the details from Monterrey; for awhile it was because it was too fresh and painful, then there was so much going on that it seemed irrelevant, and after long enough it just didn't seem necessary anymore.

"The orders Kassian was given were to infiltrate the Janus base, get whatever information they could, and recover me," Boyd said after a moment. His voice was relatively even, if a little heavier than usual, but he didn't immediately look back to meet Sin's eyes. He'd had enough time to deal with all the issues that had come up after they'd left but it didn't mean he liked talking about it. "I was told that... if we found your corpse we were just supposed to leave it."

A strange expression briefly flashed across his face, something like a grimace but somehow darker. "I didn't want to abandon you or believe you were dead so I insisted we look for you anyway. Even just so I could find your body and, I don't know. I had this stupid idea that I could make sure you got a funeral." He shook his head to himself. "He could have refused but when I pointed out that we had matching GPS, Kassian went along with it in the end."

Sin didn't look very surprised by the information; in fact it was just what he would expect from Connors and the Agency in general. Why waste time and effort on someone who wasn't an asset anymore? It was just another reason it was so bizarre that they'd actually spent the resources to fix his injuries after he was brought back. It just didn't make sense, especially since it had still been in the era of Connors. Sin didn't know what, but he was almost sure something had to have been in it for them. "How noble of him. The great hero Kassian strikes again."

Boyd looked at him more seriously. "Sin, you technically died twice in Monterrey. First, when Janus removed the GPS from your throat. And second, when you went under cardiac arrest just moments before *Chingón* stopped us in the van. Michael almost didn't resuscitate you and Kassian was furious with him, then did CPR himself. Your heart actually stopped beating. They told him to stop because you were dead but he wouldn't. He reprimanded Michael later for not helping you soon enough. When you were nearly dead and they were all talking about you like people usually do, saying maybe they should tie you down like you were some sort of animal or monster, he defended you and said you were human. Maybe you think he's just too much of a do-gooder and his tendency to follow whatever ideals he has annoys you, but..."

Boyd crossed his arms across his stomach, his eyes flashing dark briefly as he remembered that trip and how it had haunted him. Part of that feeling made it into his eyes and voice. "Jesus, Sin. I was scared fucking shitless. I'd thought I lost you, then I had hope you could make it, even though it seemed impossible, and then I almost lost you again. Maybe it seems like nothing to you now but I know no one else in the position he was in would have done all that for you. It's your right to be as flippant about it as you want, and I don't know your history with him so maybe knowing this doesn't matter to you, but as for me I'll never forget that. Whatever your rivalry with him, he did save your life. I'll always be grateful to him for that."

Sin sighed and sat back down on the table, looking annoyed and weary, his voice increasing in intensity as he spoke. "It doesn't matter to me. I don't care. I don't like him. Whatever he does, whatever good guy act he puts on to seem like the humanitarian, it has nothing to do with me. Am I glad he got you out of Monterrey? Yeah. Am I glad he didn't let me die in the back of some shitty Agency truck? Yeah, I guess. But he's still an asshole and I'm so fucking tired of people acting like he's so perfect. So fucking good and noble. Blow me."

He seemed to be working himself up now, voice rising even though he wasn't actually directing the anger at Boyd. He seemed to be ranting in general, not giving Boyd a

chance to speak. "I'm fucking sick of everyone here. I'm sick of the way people use me to do their fucking dirty work and then act like Kassian is so fucking superior because oh wow-- he feels bad about the shit he does! He has a conscious! Big fucking deal. I get the job done and I don't go whining to everyone about how bad it made me feel inside. Maybe if I did, I'd be a bit more fucking likable but too bad I couldn't care less about my reputation in this shit hole. I have more fucking guilt built up inside of me than anyone will ever understand but that doesn't mean I'm going to broadcast it just so people can suddenly remember that I bleed just like everyone else."

Sin ran a hand through his hair violently, looking agitated, angry. "And he's a condescending fuck on top of it all."

Boyd watched him a moment; he'd never actually seen Sin get so worked up or show so much emotion over anyone other than himself. He knew that Sin didn't like Kassian but it was a little surprising to see him get so involved in his rant. At the same time, he supposed if he'd had so little sleep for as long as Sin had, he'd be pretty touchy too, especially over old wounds or rivalries.

Besides, Sin had a point; it was understandable that Sin felt resentful for being compared to Kassian and, in others' eyes, always falling short on the points that could make him seem more human, while Kassian failed at things that no one would necessarily criticize him for. Especially being judged on something like morality when Sin had his own morals and emotions that very few people seemed to understand. Just because Kassian would refuse certain assignments didn't mean that Sin never wanted to, or that he never felt bad for things he'd done.

Sin had nearly died because he'd stopped to help a civilian in Monterrey whereas Boyd would have let her burn. Even just between Sin and Boyd, Sin actually had a far more grounded sense of morality and was much more likely to act on them. Yet most people in the Agency would undoubtedly automatically label Sin as the remorseless killer, the monster without a conscience, before they would consider Boyd who appeared to be more 'normal.'

It wasn't a matter of Boyd feeling no regret for anything he'd ever done or considering himself to be a monster; it was just that he didn't think that it was accurate or appropriate to make all those assumptions about Sin without even bothering to understand him. After a long enough period of time, Sin had stopped trying to prove people wrong; after all, why try if they wouldn't believe it anyway?

In that way, Kassian and Sin were alike; they both put up a front at the Agency but they'd come to opposite conclusions. While Kassian tried to put up the front that everything was fine, Sin had no chance; his childhood had not been 'normal' and most people would not be able to forget his history at the Agency regardless of how long he acted as a normal, functional human being. So, Sin had chosen to put up a tough front; to push people away with his attitude and intense glares, to protect the part of him that was vulnerable and aching human.

It was an understandable defense mechanism. The people who judged Sin would probably never believe his vulnerability even if confronted by it; if anything, they may use it against him. While Kassian's only known "flaw" of sticking to his morals made him seem like a hero, Sin's "flaws" numbered so great in most peoples' minds that the only thing he had going for him was how phenomenal he was of an assassin.

It was as if people thought that Kassian was a model human and Sin a model killer; two people in the same position whose personalities and reputations made them seem so separate when, Boyd felt, in reality it was more as though they were two sides of the same coin.

But it wasn't really his place to tell Sin about Kassian's home life and he knew it wouldn't matter anyway. Part of what Sin was upset about was his own situation at the Agency and that was something that had been improving lately, but only slowly and without any promise of remaining so forever.

"Well," Boyd said finally, "far be it from me to enter the fray on the Great Kassian and Sin Rift. You're right that they treat you unfairly, though."

Sin pushed himself away from the table, body completely tense. "Listen, I'm going to go. I'm really--" He broke off and stared at Boyd with a frown. "I just need to calm down. I'm aggravated and I really don't know entirely why. I just need get my head together."

"Alright," Boyd said, not wanting to keep pushing him. "You have my number if you need me."

"I'll call you in a little while." Sin stared at him for a long moment and at first it almost seemed like he wanted to say something more. But then the aggravation flared up again and he just shook his head in disgust. "I can't deal with anything right now. Sorry." With that, he turned and hurried out of the room before Boyd could say anything else.

Boyd watched him go; he didn't like to see Sin so stressed but there was nothing he could do that he wasn't already doing or offering. He knew when to leave his partner alone to give him a chance to recuperate and cool off and this was definitely one of those times. What bothered him the most was that as time went on it seemed like, subtly and slowly, things were getting worse for Sin. He couldn't blame Sin for a touchier temper after such consistent exhaustion but he wished Sin would just go in to the medic wing and get it over with.

Boyd sighed and looked away, making sure he had all his belongings as he left, absently beginning to go over the things he'd heard in the orientation. As unsure as he'd been about whether or not he truly wanted the promotion, he had to admit to himself that a part of him was truly looking forward to being tested and for the opportunity to prove that he could work just as well on his own. The fact that it sounded difficult only made it more of a challenge, which he thought was a good thing.

At the same time, he knew this would be something that he'd have to focus on entirely; there would be no room for worrying about Sin. He wanted to be there for his partner yet Boyd was incredibly aware of the fact that even standing right next to Sin he wasn't really any help. Besides, training was for a limited amount of time--only three months, which was really not that long in the grand scheme of things.

And for all that what he wanted to be around Sin and help him, that didn't quell his independence. The more he thought about the training, despite the difficulty of it and the fact that it would open him up to more taxing missions if he were to actually pass, there was a part of him that shifted and stirred at the prospect, as if waking from a long sleep.

For years, he'd systematically killed off every emotion within him as a defense mechanism to deny all the fear, pain and anger that he hadn't had any release for until he'd forgotten what it was like to feel alive. Even after he'd started to rediscover his emotions one by one through his time with Sin and the Agency, there were still parts of him that he felt hadn't fully reawakened and in some cases, possibly never would. He would never--could never--be the same person he'd once been but that didn't mean he couldn't improve or become someone new while also slowly reconnecting with parts of himself that he wanted back.

Since he was small he'd been the sort of person who'd welcomed challenges because without them he fell into a sense of complacency. School had been too easy for him, boring him so completely that even with his interest in learning new things he'd felt as though it had been a waste of time. Imagining years ahead of him in the same rut had been incredibly disheartening and had given him very little motive to try hard at anything

because it had all seemed so meaningless. Although to others it had seemed like a huge leap at that time, he'd ended up graduating early and taking college classes when he was years younger than anyone else around him. That had been what he'd needed to renew his thirst for knowledge and, truthfully, within that feeling, his passion for life as well.

Boyd didn't know if Level 10 was the right place for him but he wanted to try. He knew that some of the missions he could be assigned would be controversial, maybe things he disagreed with, maybe things that he'd later regret doing. He hadn't forgotten the McCall assassination or the way Kassian and Sin referred to their solo missions with muffled heaviness. Boyd wasn't any closer now to being a blind devotee of the Agency's mission statement than he had been when he'd started.

He was intensely aware of how horrible it could all turn out in the end. He knew he could be stuck on missions that lasted years, he knew he would be putting himself in situations that could severely tax him. He knew he could be maimed, and he knew he could die.

But what was the alternative?

Realistically, he was stuck with the Agency for life. If they ever let him retire, he'd be shadowed for life and if he ever tried to run, they'd likely kill him. But since the people he knew and cared about were all at the Agency, he had no reason to want to do either. He could stay in Level 9 indefinitely, staying as Sin's partner in Carhart's unit and there wasn't anything wrong with that, really.

Except he wanted to be independent, he wanted to be stronger as a person. He wanted to prove himself on his own, all on his own, not as someone with connections.

There were still people who wouldn't take him seriously because of his looks or because they felt it wasn't right that he skipped straight to Level 9 without all the years and experience like everyone else. There were people who thought he was only there because of his mother, that he wasn't good enough on his own.

There had even been a time when he'd wondered if they were right. But he no longer felt that way. He wanted to be taken seriously, to show that he could rightfully compete with others.

He was already in a highly classified unit that put him a lot of dangerous situations as it was. Maybe he didn't have solo missions but at the same time he'd been in a lot of

dicey situations already and made it through. A lot of the time it'd been dumb luck, or he'd had help; only a few times had it been actual skill. Boyd wanted to get strong enough that he was more of an equal with his partner-- although, of course, no one could truly be Sin's equal with fighting or assassination.

The longer he stayed at Sin's side as a rank below him, the more Boyd would let that same complacency take over.

But he didn't want that to happen. Now, he wanted to be challenged.

Boyd knew that he would never be able to change anyone's negative view of his personality, of his family, his partner, but what he *could* change was himself. If he wanted to be taken seriously, he had to show them why he should be. If he was already stuck for life in the Agency in a dangerous situation, he may as well challenge himself and continue to rise through the ranks. Maybe he didn't really subscribe to the Agency's goals but he was already caught in them anyway.

This sort of offer came once in a blue moon; who knew the next time they'd have Level 10 training, who knew the next chance he'd get to show that he wasn't someone to be taken lightly? If he backed out, wouldn't that just be proving to anyone who knew he'd gotten the invitation that he didn't feel he was good enough on his own?

It wasn't really that he particularly cared what others thought of him, but at the same time he was tired of not being taken seriously. He could be a damn good agent, too. He'd already basically done missions on his own before but now wanted the chance to create and fulfill a mission completely alone, without having to worry about others and how his actions may affect them. He wanted more control in his life. He wanted to stand at his partner's side and not feel like he was looked at as inferior in many regards.

He wanted people to say 'Agent Beaulieu' and think of him as Boyd, not as The Inspector's son, not as someone who was only as good as he was reflected through the more capable people around him.

For a few months, this was going to mean he was taken out of his comfort zone. He was probably going to be pushed harder than he'd ever been pushed in his life and Boyd couldn't help but look forward to that. He wanted to be able to say he'd actually tried for something, actually put his mind to something unlike he had in years; that he'd found a goal to believe in just for himself, only for himself and not a reflection of those around him.

Afterimage

After years of feeling dead inside, he wanted to remember that feeling of challenge, of alertness that he'd rekindled when he'd pushed himself to go to college. He wanted to stand on his own, be worthy on his own and succeed on his own. He wanted to prove that he was just as strong and capable as anyone else.

And, most of all, he wanted to be recognized for his individual accomplishments and be defined simply as himself.

Chapter 4

The public transportation system had never quite recovered from the attacks on the city. It had never been stellar; had never quite reached the outer suburbs, but now it was extremely limited and the actual buses were poorly maintained. With so many other things to address such as the rampant crime and massive reconstruction that was still going on, it made sense that the bus system was not on the top list of things to spend the minimal budget on but they could have made more of an effort.

As the bus shuddered down the pot-hole filled road that led out of the inner city, Sin couldn't help but think that it reminded him of the bus that had taken Boyd and him to Monterrey when they'd first arrived in Mexico. It wasn't nearly as beat up and there were actual windows instead of holes with tarp but the cushions on the seats looked as though they hadn't been replaced since the city was bombed and the advertisements that lined the sides were covered with graffiti.

It was difficult to believe that anyone would willingly ride in such a dilapidated vehicle unless they had no other choice but it was likely that many people were in that exact predicament. The bus had been incredibly crowded even at the beginning of his ride. Every seat had been taken and as he'd squeezed through the people standing between the rows of seats he'd sworn that--

It was hard to say but Sin could have sworn that through the din of overlapping conversations, someone had whispered his name.

He'd frozen in place, effectively holding up the line of people trying to fit in the bus behind him, looking around wildly for the source of that spectral whisper... But someone shoved him forward roughly, accompanied by an impatient grumble and he'd forced himself to move on. Sin chalked it up to just another case of his mind playing tricks on him and tried not to dwell too much on the downward spiral of his sanity.

Sin stared at a scrawled cursive graffiti that proclaimed 'American democracy is a sham!!' and tilted his head against the bulletproof glass of the window, letting his unbearably heavy eyelids fall half-closed. It was hard to believe that he felt as run down as he did-- never in his life had he been so weak and that was saying something since he'd averaged four hours of sleep a night for the last fifteen years. But now he only averaged about thirty minutes of sleep and even those few moments were restless and filled with horrible nightmares that made him bolt up in alarm, ruining any chances of rest again for the remainder of the night.

That's how it had been the night before and every night that week. It only got worse as time went on and he was tempted to use the sleeping pills that Boyd had given him but he was afraid. He was afraid to have a full night's sleep even if he knew he badly needed it. He was afraid of being put in the kind of induced coma-like slumber that sometimes occurred when he was in the box-- knowing he was having nightmares but unable to yank himself out of it because of the drugs. And he didn't know if he was prepared to experience that just yet.

He sighed and massaged the side of his head with one hand, the pounding intensifying with every jolt of the bus over another pot hole. Sleep deprivation was a strange thing-- it almost made him feel the way he felt when very intoxicated. Concentration was shot, his hands were extremely unsteady, his temper was short and he felt that old burning need to take his aggression out on another person.

The craving for violence had faded away in the past year, only really flaring up when he had an actual aim for it, but in the past month it had come back with a vengeance. It was disturbing and the darkness that lingered inside of him wanted it bad. It pushed him to take his anger and frustration out on other people and it made him act like the old Sin. The Sin he'd tried so hard to put in the past ever since he'd realized that he wanted to be a better person for Boyd, but that was quickly going to hell as well.

His behavior only an hour prior was evidence enough of that.

He squeezed his eyes shut, teeth grit as he went over the argument with Kassian at the Level 10 orientation. He'd wanted to hit Kassian so much-- so very badly that for a moment the mental image of the other agent bleeding on the floor had imprinted on his eyes and seemed incredibly real.

And he'd wanted to make it real. He'd wanted Kassian to bleed.

The only thing that prevented him from attacking the man had been Harriet's interruption. For some reason it had snapped him out of the blood lust and he'd had to sit down to regain his bearings; to calm down and come to his senses because that was the last thing he needed. The last thing he really wanted.

Just one more person to feel regret about.

He didn't want to kill Kassian-- the man annoyed him, Sin thought he might even hate him, but Sin didn't want the man's blood on his hands. Especially when, thinking back, he had no choice but to realize that his sudden overflow of blinding rage had been for

no real reason. Kassian was condescending but it was Douglas who had done the belittling, the comparing, and it was then that his anger had started to build-- that his blood had started to boil.

He didn't know why; normally people's opinion of him didn't matter at all, but for some reason Kassian was definitely a chink in his armor.

But it made him so angry. Everyone, even Boyd apparently, was so taken with Kassian. He was so heroic, such a good guy, so easy to relate to-- such a textbook Agent who could be perfect if he wasn't so damn noble. How could he go wrong?

And Sin... what was he? A psycho, a monster, a freak-- someone who didn't deserve respect even though he basically lived for the Agency. Someone who was expected to understand normal behavior patterns even though he'd been dehumanized since he was a child. Someone who was used as a model for how a Level 10 should be even though they'd spent years keeping him locked in a cell unless they needed him for an assignment.

Why?

Because he didn't know how to behave like a normal person? Because he didn't tell everyone that killing people like Andrew McCall and the prime minister of Italy made him feel like a fucking failure of a human? Made him feel like the monster everyone said he was. And the only reason he felt a little more real now was because he had Boyd, who made the effort to understand, to touch him without fear or loathing in his eyes, and to remind him that he wasn't inherently fucking evil.

Kassian had three dozen Boyds in his life-- a ton of people who wanted to sympathize with him and understand. Sin had spent years with no one but his own damaged psyche and because of that everyone scorned him and celebrated Kassian even though their situations were nothing alike.

Sin didn't understand what anyone wanted from him. He just didn't get it. Why couldn't they understand that he would never be normal, he would never live up to society's standards of a functional person?

He couldn't.

Not with everything that had happened to him, all the things he'd done, and the complete lack of normal human interaction for years of his life. Why did he have to be

constantly reminded that because of this, Kassian was so much more superior while he would always be a 'freak' and a 'dumb fuck?'

It seriously made him want to kill someone and it had taken him over an hour to calm that need for violence down.

Sin exhaled slowly and opened his eyes, staring out the window as the bus drew closer to the last stop on the line. They had reached a nicer part of the city, one that was frequented by the affluent and thus had been repaired first by the powers that be. The run-down old bus seemed very out of place there; wealthy people could still afford ten dollar a gallon gas and expensive electric cars to drive around. They didn't need to get on the bus and probably despised the eyesore in their neighborhood.

Ironically, Sin was technically one of the few wealthy people that was left in the city but the idea of that money was unreal to him. It didn't exist in his mind and as far as he was concerned, it had nothing to do with him as a person. Money meant nothing to him-- never had, probably never would. It couldn't erase the memories, it couldn't make him sane, it couldn't turn him into someone that didn't cause people to back away from in fear. It didn't matter if he had twenty million or a hundred million-- he would still be someone who was hated by most people, including himself.

Self-pity and depression had apparently overridden the anger but he didn't care enough to drag himself out of it. He wouldn't have been able to even if he wanted to.

It was kind of like how he wanted to tell Boyd so badly, just explain everything to him in vivid detail... But he couldn't. He'd tried and he couldn't. It was too scary-- the idea of Boyd looking at him in fear, disgust... The idea of Boyd looking at him the way he had in France was too much to bear; the memory of that night in the hotel was something Sin thought about constantly and it firmed his decision. He just couldn't risk it. Not yet-- not until he was in a more stable state of mind.

"And when do you think that will be?"

That voice-- that same soft voice that sounded like a cross between a faint whisper and radio interference, seemed to surround him once again.

Sin sat up ramrod straight, eyes opening wide as he looked around quickly to find the source. And this time he did.

Emilio sat in the seat diagonal to him, leaning forward as he stared at his son with a knowing smile on his handsome face. But he didn't look right-- his olive skin was ashen, a few shades paler than it should have been. His typically clear green eyes were dull, slightly unfocused, as if a film covered them but it didn't stop the intensity of his gaze. Deep red blood trickled from the side of his mouth, smeared across his perfect teeth and out of one ear as it caught and clotted in his thick black hair.

Emilio's chest didn't rise and fall with the movement of breath and his dark clothing looked shiny and wet when he shifted, as if more blood was hidden within the folds.

There was no mistaking what Sin was looking at; a corpse-- an animated, moving corpse that was smiling relentlessly at him with burning green eyes.

The image flickered and dimmed and Sin knew it was a hallucination, he knew it was all in his mind but he couldn't look away.

"Do you really think this is going to help?" Emilio asked mockingly as his image gradually disappeared.

Sin shuddered and squeezed his eyes shut again, cursing himself for what he saw as weakness. The hallucinations had been bad enough but now they were going to start flaring up in public? What else could go wrong with his fucked up brain?

"You could flip out one day and cut your little boyfriend's head off."

This time the voice whispered directly in his ear, and as frustration built up inside him, Sin spun around in his seat. "Shut the fuck up!" he shouted angrily.

But this time, it wasn't Emilio behind him. It wasn't even a hallucination. It was a middle-aged man talking on a cell phone, who was staring at Sin in alarm and annoyance.

"Just what the hell is your problem?" the man asked angrily.

Sin blinked at him in confusion before shaking his head and gesturing vaguely before turning around again. He really was losing his mind.

The bus pulled to a stop just outside Willowbrook and Sin pulled himself to his feet, tugging his hood down over his face as he shoved his hands in his pockets and practically ran off the bus. He knew getting away from it wouldn't help anything, his

ghosts would follow him wherever he went, but at least he wouldn't have to deal with a bunch of people gaping at him in the process.

Sin strode down the sidewalk, trying to push what had just happened out of his mind and focused on the matter at hand. He kept his head down, not wanting to look at anyone, especially not the snobs who lived by Willowbrook park and the suspicious way they stared at him every time he came to the neighborhood.

He took a cigarette from his pack, lighting it absently and inhaling deeply as he entered the ridiculously well-manicured park. He felt out of place there, always did, as if the turmoil inside of him was somehow disrupting the peace and the ducks and all of the stupid sounds of nature.

It just seemed wrong to walk past a happy toddler shrieking at a swan when he was agonizing over all the people he'd murdered.

An ironic smirk twitched across his lips. If only these fucks in their little protected bubble knew who they were in such close proximity to.

There was a road that led up to the steep hill that Willowbrook Home sat on and he felt ridiculously winded as he made his way up. His legs felt like lead, and he found himself moving sluggishly as he took longer strides to get through it quicker. He was still moving faster than the average person but compared to his normal self, compared to how powerful and invigorated he'd felt after the coma, it was a frustrating change.

When he got to the top, Sin paused and stared at the building for a long moment as he caught his breath. He found it strange that he always came here when he was in this exact same type of mood.

Depressed, anxious, guilt-ridden, miserable-- and he came here... for what? To see one of the reasons for his guilt? To make himself feel better about finally entirely admitting and owning up to the effect he'd actually had on this woman's life? He'd spent years blocking it out, refusing to speak of it, refusing to look her twin in the face because it reminded him too much of something he didn't want to remember. He'd spent years acting like it didn't bother him when really it made him feel like he deserved to be locked away in the box, far away from other people.

But owning up to it didn't make him feel better. He'd realized that the first time.

It just made him feel worse. It increased that feeling, the feeling that he deserved to be punished, that he deserved to be miserable, but he kept coming anyway and he didn't know why.

Sin pushed the door open and stepped inside, moving quietly over the floor even though his boots were large and steel-tipped.

He'd visited often enough in the past few months to recognize a lot of the staff. It'd been several weeks since the last time he was there, when the sleepless nights began to increase, and the receptionist reacted with surprise when she saw him.

Sin signed in without speaking, watching her and the strange way she was staring at him as he showed her his Jason Alvarez identification-- a souvenir from the Mexico mission. "Can I go in?"

The girl, Beth, looked startled at the words and nodded distractedly. She was one of the regular receptionists and he recognized her immediately although it looked as though she'd lost some weight. "Sorry, you just look really sick," she said in explanation. "You're so pale."

He shrugged, wondering if that was truly why she'd given him that startled look. "Yeah."

"I'll ring up someone from Lydia's wing to escort you," she said, reaching for the phone quickly.

Sin shrugged again, not having much to say about that, and waited for one of the nurses to arrive. He stared blankly at the wallpaper, eyes glazed slightly and felt himself beginning to zone out the longer it took. It was taking longer than usual but he wasn't alert enough at the moment to wonder why.

He sat down in one of the arm chairs, hunching his back slightly as he crossed his arms over his chest. As soon as his body was in the comfort of the overstuffed chair, Sin felt his eyes begin to drift closed.

He tried to fight it--he really did, but he was so weary--so mentally and physically exhausted, that it was incredibly hard. Sin let his head rest against the side of the chair, hood still hiding his face, and gazed blankly down at the carpet. He felt like a zombie-- like someone who wasn't quite alive but was managing to move around anyway. Even so, his mind continued to work and he found himself blanking out and remembering the first time he'd ever met Lydia.

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"He's so cute," Lydia cooed, reaching out to run a finger down the side of his face. "How old are you, honey?"

He jerked back slightly, away from her invasive hand, and lowered his brow over his bright green eyes, mouth turning down into a warning scowl. "Eleven."

She smiled widely, hazel eyes glittering with mischief as she looked over her shoulder at Emilio who was setting up lines of cocaine on the coffee table. "Is he really your son?" she asked skeptically, eyeballing her lover. "He's way too old. Tell me he's your cute kid brother."

Emilio snorted and didn't look up from his work. "I was maybe fourteen when she had him. What's it to you anyway if I have a kid?" He looked up at her, eyes narrowed slightly, suspiciously. "You better keep your goddamn mouth shut about it too. I got reasons for keeping him secret and you shouldn't even be here."

Lydia rolled her eyes and turned back to him, reaching out again to touch his fine, silky hair. "I've got connections too, you know. I can find you anywhere you go."

"Maybe because this is one of my listed address, pendeja," Emilio replied in annoyance, not seeming to have patience for his teenage lover now that she was invading his privacy. "I made the mistake of bringing him here but you better not make the mistake of opening your big fucking mouth or I'll make you sorry."

She didn't seem intimidated at all; if anything, it caused her smile to widen wickedly as if Emilio's threatening tone was turning her on. She tilted her head to the side, wavy chestnut colored hair spilling over her bare shoulders as she leaned closer to Sin. "Can I kiss him?" she asked teasingly.

"Don't," he said, disturbed by the notion, and backed away.

"Leave the fucking boy alone," Emilio said irritably and shook his head, muttering in Spanish.

"Have you ever kissed a girl?" she continued, leaning even closer. "Huh? Maybe if you did you'd actually put a smile on that--"

===

"Mr. Alvarez?"

Sin's eyes snapped open and he looked up wildly at the nurse, disoriented and still stuck in a memory that was nearly twenty years old. His eyes dropped to the hand that was hovering near his shoulder and knew that it was a very good thing that the poor girl hadn't actually touched him.

Judy, another staff member he was used to, snatched her hand away at the sight of those wild green eyes. She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came out so she swallowed thickly before trying again, "I can take you to Lydia's room if you're ready..."

He stood up wordlessly, still not quite in his right frame of mind, and followed her out of the waiting area and down the hall.

It was very good that Judy hadn't touched him... It would have been very bad if he'd physically reenacted what had happened next, Sin thought numbly.

He'd forgotten about that part... Or at least, had pushed it aside in his mind. Sin couldn't figure out, even after all of this time, why Lydia had volunteered to be his doctor after getting her nose broken by him when he'd been just a child. It was strange and just another thing he didn't understand about the woman.

"Are you okay, Mr. Alvarez?" Judy asked quietly, watching him from the corner of her eye. She always watched him like that, from the very first day, but now she looked anxious about something, worried.

"I'm terrific," he replied dully, wanting everyone to leave him alone already.

"Okay..."

Sin sighed softly and kept his head down, not looking up again until they reached Lydia's door. He reached for the doorknob and hesitated only briefly before quickly entering the room, shutting the door behind him.

He leaned against it for a moment, staring at Lydia from across the room before finally pushing himself away and walking closer.

She looked as she always did; thin, pale and completely void of all intelligent thought. But this time instead of sitting in the arm chair, she was laying on her bed, propped up against the pillows. She looked dead in a way and he supposed it wasn't like she was really living anyway.

Sin retreated to a corner of the room where the lamplight didn't quite reach and leaned against the wall as he stared at her from the shadows. Because that's all he ever did when he went there; just stared.

He didn't speak to her, didn't touch her, didn't go near her. He just stared at her calm, expressionless face and wondered why.

Why she did the things she did... Why he had to respond the way he did... and wondered if he could ever forgive himself for ruining a young woman's life.

He asked himself the same questions every time he came but he couldn't find any answers, and instead of feeling better about it all... he just felt worse and then he tried to understand why he was coming here at all. It accomplished nothing except making him feel more like a monster but maybe, deep down, that was the point. Maybe the point was self-punishment. Seeing the results of his insanity, his violence, firsthand because she was the only person left who hadn't died as a result of it even though her life was over.

Maybe, deep down, he'd started coming here because then he couldn't pretend that everything was okay. Then he couldn't brush off the increasing instability that was getting worse every day. Then he had to accept that something was fucking wrong with him and if he didn't understand it, if he didn't admit it, it would get worse and then he would lose Boyd. Possibly even do something just as bad to him one day.

But it hurt. Remembering hurt. But if he didn't remember, how could he ever understand?

===

Sweat dripped off him, sliding down his forehead and along the side of his face before pooling on the table next to his arm. His heart was racing and he felt very strange. Very out of control, even of his thoughts.

Images swam together in his mind, things from the past? The present? Maybe things that didn't exist at all. But Lydia's voice was there in the background, coaxing, cooing,

encouraging him to keep talking as her slender hand massaged his arm slowly, comfortably.

"Tell me about..."

It hurt to think about that. It hurt to see those things. He didn't want to. But he couldn't control himself, and so the words kept tumbling out as she prodded him for more details, more information.

What had she given him? What was in that shot?

"And you say she gave you lessons?" That liquid voice purred in his ear, going from mildly professional to husky in a flash, hands sliding up and down his arm slower. "What did she tell you to do?"

He didn't want to tell her. He couldn't control himself. His thoughts were blurring together as images drifted across his mind and he felt himself beginning to get angry, frightened, at what was going on. By the memories of his mother-- and the lessons, and everything that had happened next.

But the words kept pouring out in a mindless ramble, and he wondered what she'd given him that was making him react this way. So out of control.

And she was touching him-- her face was so close to his-- it was disturbing him, alarming him, making him really mad. He wanted this to stop, he didn't want her to touch him. It was mixing with the memories of being eight years old and alone in a whore house, being taught how to make money since it was decided that was what he was going to do--

And he just wanted to be left alone. He hadn't wanted that. He didn't want this.

Just stop. Stop. Don't make me remember. Just fucking stop.

And then she asked, flippantly, almost as an afterthought, as her hands slid down his pants, body pressed against his as she practically sat on his lap, body thrumming with pent up desire as she listened to the point blank details of sex acts he'd experienced as a child.

"What exactly was it that killed your mother, anyway?"

And he snapped.

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Heels clicking against tile drew him out of his reverie and Sin glanced towards the door as the sound moved closer. He was surprised that he'd noticed at all through the heavy door and he absently wondered why women chose to wear such obnoxiously noisy shoes.

Sin looked away from the door and focused on Lydia, almost glad that his thoughts had been interrupted once again before they took him down a road he really didn't want to revisit. He ran a hand through his hair, then shook his head at himself and his inability to remain fully conscious for more than ten minutes at a time.

Sadly, he now saw Carhart's point. There was no way he could ever go a mission like this. He could storm a base with three bullets in his body, but despite the fact that some people claimed that made him seem impervious, inhuman, he felt that this was more than evidence that he was nothing but a man who would die without getting the basic and simplest of necessities in life.

The sound of the door clicking closed was startling. How the hell was it possible that he'd heard shoes way up the hall but not the sound of someone coming in the room? His reflexes were shot to hell.

Sin looked over and was completely surprised at how utterly unsurprised he was to see Ann.

It was strange to see her and Lydia side by side. Despite the fact that he'd known them both for quite some time, he realized he'd never actually seen them together, not that this was a stunning example of twin interaction.

Ann stared at him, hazel eyes afire with what seemed like anger and confusion. For a moment it seemed that she was going to say something but she turned her face away abruptly and stared silently at Lydia.

Sin watched her, waiting for the shouting and the insult hurling and all the angry words he knew she was going to say. He'd anticipated this for some time and by the way the staff had acted earlier, it wasn't really shocking that it was happening on this day.

He'd wondered if she'd recognized him that evening all those weeks ago. Obviously she had.

But Ann just stood there, hands still resting against the closed door, looking like she'd come rushing from work as she stared at her twin and lost every shred of her most likely prepared speech now that they were face to face.

Sin straightened from his tired slouch and started for the door, intending to just brush past her and leave without the big dramatic confrontation that she'd most likely planned out in her mind. He'd given her a chance, stood there in anticipation for it, but she'd let the moment go and now he was done here. He'd had enough verbal abuse for one day anyway.

She tensed up as he drew closer but she didn't shrink away, didn't even let an ounce of fear creep into her eyes. It was almost commendable but he didn't really feel like handing out mental awards at this point.

Sin paused in front of her, giving her the opportunity to get out of his way but she just stood there with her back and palms pressed against the door. Impatience started to slip through his defeated, weary state and he reached out, fully intending to push her out of the way.

But Ann's angry gaze snapped back to his face, drilling into his eyes. "Don't you dare lay one finger on me," she said, voice steady and stern.

Sin exhaled slowly, meeting her gaze evenly. "Then get out of my way."

She swallowed hard, licking her dry lips; she seemed nervous, determined and forgetting everything she'd hoped to say. "No."

His eyebrows drew together, irritation bleeding through. "Move or I'll move you."

Ann narrowed her eyes slightly and lifted her chin stubbornly. "You wouldn't dare."

Sin grit his teeth in frustration and flexed his hands. "You think so?"

"Do it then. But you'll have to drag me and tie me down if you think you're getting out of this room without explaining to me what exactly you think you're doing with my sister." Her voice was tight and controlled.

He raised his hand, fully intending to shove her roughly out of his way but turned away at the last minute with an aggravated growl. "What the hell do you want from me? Just fucking move."

"I thought you were going to move me," she replied challengingly, eyes focused on him intently, as if she were trying to figure him out. "What's stopping you, Agent Vega?"

"Oh, that's right," he snapped, sarcasm thick in his tone. "It's so shocking that I don't want to hit you, is it? Because I'm an abusive, misogynistic, raping, murdering fucking monster, right? I'm not even a real human. I bleed green blood. Are you happy? Is that what you'd planned to say?"

Sin turned to her again and glared. "Because now it's been said so I suggest you get the hell out of my way."

Ann met his glare for a long moment before looking at her sister again. "Why would you ever think it was a good idea to come here?"

"It was an idea. I never said it was a good one," he replied flatly.

"But you've been coming here for three months now," Ann exclaimed, throwing her hands up and finally moving away from the door. "What are you thinking? How could you think this was okay? I know you think since my father is dead that you can do whatever you damn well wish, but I'll have you know that this--" She pointed at her sister. "Is not okay!"

Sin's eyebrows drew together in confusion, annoyance. "What's not okay? What the hell do you think I'm doing to her? Touching her inappropriately? Offering my services at bath time?"

"No, you goddamned idiot, I'm not saying that at all!" she snapped, self control slipping through her fingers as this confrontation went in a direction she hadn't planned. "I'm saying, you put her here! Who knows if she can see behind that blank stare! Who knows if seeing you could push her further into this goddamned dream world that she's been trapped in since you put her there! Why would you ever think it's okay for you to visit her after what you've done? Don't you have any sense at all? What the hell are you thinking?"

Sin opened his mouth to say something, anything to get her off his back and out of his way, but all he could manage was, "I don't know!"

Ann stopped, stared at him in genuine surprise, maybe that he'd actually said something honest instead of sarcasm and witty retorts. "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I mean--" He broke off, and shook his head, finally moving to the door and jerking it open. "I mean, leave me the hell alone. I'm going anyway, that should make you happy."

Sin stormed out of the room, taking long strides down the hall and shaking his head in annoyance as he heard her heels running surprisingly fast behind him.

"Don't you walk away from me!" she barked at him, all sense of protocol and propriety forgotten even though they had an audience of staff members staring at them from every corner as they passed the nurse's station.

He ignored her, walking faster but she caught up and grabbed his arm just as they reached the receptionist's desk at the waiting area, where Beth stared at them with wide-eyed alarm.

"Get off of me," Sin growled from between clenched teeth, not looking at her or Judy.

"You're not walking away from this. Not again," Ann said stubbornly.

"Let it go, Annabelle!" he shouted finally, yanking his arm away violently, just as the other nurses and Magdalene came hurrying around the corridor. Great. Just what he needed. They'd probably call the police. "Please, just let it go."

She didn't grab him again and he walked away, slamming the front door open as he strode quickly away from the entrance and down the winding path that took him down the hill. His mind was racing as he tried to light a cigarette with ridiculously unsteady hands, striking his matches several times before he could get it lit.

It was just too much.

Too much shit all happening at the same time-- too much shit being thrown at him when he could barely deal with his own neurosis and hallucinations yelling at him, let alone other people. The frustration, the anger and anxiety-- he knew where it would lead if it kept building inside him and he didn't need to be around other people when it finally exploded and sent him into a blind, seething, psychopathic rage.

He just wanted it all to stop. Maybe he'd actually take those sleeping pills tonight, consequences be damned, because he couldn't go on like this anymore.

It began to drizzle slightly and he shook his head, thoroughly unsurprised with the way this entire day was going. And to make things even better, a silver Bentley came cruising down the road and screeched to a stop beside him.

Sin stopped walking and stared at Ann in disgust. "Jesus Christ, you just don't fucking stop."

She got out of the car and pushed the door closed, leaning against it as she stared at him evenly. "Why are you running away from a very simple question?"

He exhaled slowly, blowing smoke in her pretty face. "Who's running?"

Ann narrowed her eyes at him, her dislike for him clearly evident in her features although she appeared to be trying to maintain her calm demeanor. It almost seemed as though she was trying to model her behavior after Vivienne and was failing miserably. There was too much going on in her expression to ever be able to maintain the frigid, icy Vivienne stare. "What do you expect from me? How can I trust that you don't have bad intentions? How can you think this is good for my sister's health? How could you think that I would be okay with this?"

"How could you think that I give a damn what you think," he snapped, taking another drag as he locked gazes with her.

It was a standoff that was quickly going nowhere and he wasn't quite sure what she wanted him to say. He knew she had the right to know what was going on with her only remaining family member but he also knew that anything he said would just make her ask more questions and that she'd never believe anything but the worst possible scenario.

"Why?" she repeated, crossing her arms over her pinstriped blouse. Once again she met his gaze unflinchingly, and this time it seemed that she was trying to make more of an effort to seem less confrontational.

Sin ran a hand through his now wet hair in aggravation. "I told you," he said slowly, voice low and angry. "I don't know why. I don't mean her any harm, even though you won't believe me. I just--" He broke off, unsure of why he was even attempting to explain himself to her.

Ann leaned forward, brows drawing together as she tried to understand. "You just what? What even made you decide to come here after all of this time?"

Fine. Fuck it. Brutal honesty it was then.

"Because I finally fucking remembered that day... what happened, and I had to fucking see her with my own eyes!" he yelled, voice echoing in the silent roadway. "I just-- I had to see her. And it makes me feel fucking horrible, it makes me feel like all of the bad things everyone says about me and it makes me feel like I don't even deserve to fucking live!"

Ann studied him for a long moment and this time there was something else behind her gaze. This time it really did seem as though she were trying to figure him out; figure out if he was being honest and what it meant if he actually was. "What do you mean you finally remembered?"

Sin chewed the inside of his cheek, glaring down at the cigarette that had finally been sufficiently soaked by the rain. "Forget it."

"And if it makes you feel that bad-- why keep coming back? As some kind of penance?" She seemed honestly curious now even though there was distinct skepticism in her voice.

He'd had enough.

Sin looked up at her and this time he didn't try to mask anything. He didn't try to hide the exhaustion, the depression and pent up aggression, the raw misery that was soaking into every fiber of his being. He just stared at her for a long moment before finally turning away. "Just leave me alone."

And she did.

She didn't ask him any more questions, didn't call after him and even though he could feel her gaze on his back the entire time he walked down the hill-- it was only after he was walking through the park that he saw her car whizzing by.

===

Boyd wiped dust off his forehead and stood up to catch his breath, surveying his work so far. He didn't think the attic had ever been so organized in the twenty-one years he'd been alive, although of course he couldn't vouch for when his parents had first bought the place.

He had somewhat sad, somewhat endearing memories of the attic. Endearing, because this was an area where his father used to entertain Lou and him, telling them ridiculous ghost stories, painting pictures of haunted castles and vengeful ghosts, of nights when the sky had been clear and the eerie moonlight could shine clearly on bleached bones and pools of drying blood. Sad, because the only two people who could have shared that memory with him were both killed long ago and the room had sat, wasted space that was avoided until only recently.

He wouldn't have had the proper presence of mind to come to this area before; he'd been too imbalanced, incapable of separating haunting memories with the simple loneliness of an empty house. He'd feared and run from everything that may have made him remember anything, even if they were bittersweet memories, even if in the correct frame of mind they made him smile. Now, after months of working on coming to terms with parts of his past that had destroyed him for a few years, he could walk into the attic with only a faint feeling of apprehension.

Now, he could look around and feel nostalgia more than anything else.

It was likely only due to the fact that he'd been working so hard on remembering the good parts of his father and Lou's lives and not just the disturbing parts that had led him to get the urge to reorganize the room in the first place.

Earlier that day, after Sin had left the training room following his argument with Kassian, Boyd had stopped by the medic wing, once again, to try to visit Ryan. Every time he stopped in he hoped that Ann would have lifted that stupid family-only rule, that he'd get the chance to see his friend, that he'd have the ability to verify that Ryan looked as okay as he insisted he was via messages.

Boyd worried about him; the last time he'd seen him, Ryan had seemed near death. It had been months since he'd been moved to the medic wing and as much as Ryan insisted he was fine, Boyd wouldn't believe it until he saw it.

Unsurprisingly, he'd been turned away. He'd wanted to leave something for his friend; a book, some music--just something tangible to show that he'd been there, that he cared. He ended up leaving a manga volume he'd found in a secondhand bookstore nearby.

He had no idea if it was a series Ryan even liked but it was all he'd been able to find that he was fairly certain Ryan may be interested in. He knew Ryan liked anime so he hoped that was close enough.

Returning to his empty house and silent rooms, he'd stopped for a moment beside the kitchen table, looking at the worn wood grain and familiar chairs for a moment as he'd abruptly remembered that haunted, crazed and lost look in Sin's eyes glinting from the shadows the first time he'd appeared here, after he'd killed Lou's murderer.

He'd thought also of Ryan sitting there, thin and cold and warming a cup of tea between his hands, smiling knowingly while they talked about topics both inane and leading toward revelations.

He'd thought of Lou, grinning at him cockily and expertly avoiding explaining where that money had come from that was sitting on the table by grabbing Boyd's hand to pull him in and distract him with a kiss. And he'd thought of his father sitting at the table, newspaper crinkling as he turned one large page over, a furrow between his eyebrows as he studied the local news and drank his morning cup of coffee, followed by the sincere grin and twinkle in his eyes when he would look over to see Boyd watching him.

There was a feeling that had accompanied the memories and he hadn't known what to name it, except perhaps restlessness and a feeling of impotence. He'd wanted to do something tangible, something to get his body moving in order to distract his mind and he'd remembered several boxes in his room that he'd been meaning to take out for a long time. They'd been cluttering the corner for no reason for years and it had finally seemed like time to remedy that; to clean up a piece of the house that had been languishing for longer than it should have.

The actual act of moving the boxes had not taken long but once he'd spent all that energy hauling them awkwardly up the stairs to the second floor and then up the drop down ladder to the attic, he'd been overcome with the idea of cleaning and reorganizing. Maybe it was just a physical manifestation of what he'd been doing in his mind; purging the unnecessary, shifting and rearranging the clutter, trying to find meaning and order in otherwise languishing chaos.

Whatever the case, he spent hours moving items around, stirring up clouds of dust as he pulled sheets off boxes and assorted items that, in most cases, hadn't been touched for two decades. He realized very quickly that this was not the sort of task he could fully accomplish in one day or even several, but in a way that was somehow comforting.

Now he knew that if he came home feeling restless, he had a project; something tangible, something useful, something that would remain there waiting for him even if it took him months to return. There were too many boxes with too many random, assorted items within to properly organize without looking through everything so he'd settled with getting a general feel of what may be contained by taking one part of the attic, glancing inside, and arranging accordingly. There was one corner of the attic he hadn't touched at all but that was a project for another day.

By the time evening rolled around, his jeans and black t-shirt were coated in grime and sweat, the bandanna he'd tied over his hair to keep it out of his eyes was full of dust and cobwebs, his arms and back had a pleasant ache from all the lifting and shifting, and there was enough dirt on his hands that small whorls of his fingerprints seemed especially visible in certain places.

He finished moving an especially heavy box and accidentally hit the single bare bulb in the center of the room; it swung back and forth freely, causing shadows to roll disconcertingly across the floor as if he stood within the cabin of a ship, rocking with the movement of the sea. He was just turning around to stop the bulb when something out of the corner of his eye made him look down.

A shadowy figure stood downstairs near the hole that led to the attic and for a brief, confusing moment it made him think of a ghost chained to the past in one place, eerily watching the living world pass around it. He nearly jumped at the sight but the more logical part of his brain kicked in almost immediately, telling him that he knew that silhouette, that he recognized that presence, that this was a living person he was looking at and not something supernatural.

He let out a breath that was only slightly shaky and finally stilled the light bulb, which cast stark relief across Sin's face, still half-hidden by the shadows of his hoody.

"The day you learn how to knock will be the day my chances of heart attack decrease by a good thirty percent," Boyd said, giving his partner a half bemused, half exasperated look.

Sin gave him a wan smile and leaned against the wall, staring up at Boyd and making no move to climb the ladder. It was possible he just didn't feel like making the effort when he looked increasingly haggard but it was also very likely that he was unsure of how big the attic was and he didn't feel like having his claustrophobia flare up on top of everything else. "The day you upgrade your security system is the day... well, I'd probably end up getting in anyway."

"My security system?" Boyd echoed, dusting his hands off on his thighs.

He clicked off the light bulb next to him with a tug on the string hanging nearby, then walked through the sudden darkness of the attic to the hole. He'd left a light on in the hallway on the second floor and another one down on the first floor, so it wasn't completely dark where Sin stood but it wasn't very bright either. It was unusual for him to leave any lights on that he wasn't using; but then, it was unusual for him to touch the attic as well.

He climbed down the ladder a few rungs and dropped to the floor near Sin, turning to him with a teasing smile. "What's wrong with it? Do you want me to get a moat with alligators? Because I will, but only if you say please."

Sin rolled his eyes and shoved Boyd's shoulder lightly. "Dumb ass. Anyone could just get in here with the way it is now. Your windows aren't even bulletproof. The only thing you have going for you are the radiation shields."

"And my charming good looks," Boyd reminded him. He reached up, sliding his hands along Sin's shoulders and pulling him down for a kiss, almost as if welcoming him home. Instead of pulling away at the end, he grinned against Sin's lips, a hint of that familiar mischief in his eyes. "The only one who's burgled me so far has been you, and all you've stolen is my time, energy, and inclination to get out of bed. But you're right; I'll look into it."

Sin leaned his forehead against Boyd's for a moment, the same tired smile on his face. "You'd better or else someone will bust in and kidnap you-- then I'd have to go rescue you and I don't really have the energy right now to be an adequate hero."

Boyd laughed. "You can be my anti-hero and make someone else do it."

Sin snorted softly. "Yeah, we'll just call Kassian over since he's your new best buddy." He turned and walked towards the staircase to go back downstairs.

Smiling to himself, Boyd followed him, pausing only to flip off the hallway light before he went downstairs. "Good idea," he said, going along with the joke. "It'll give him an excuse to pull out his Captain America costume."

Sin headed toward the living room and sprawled on the couch, kicking off his barely laced boots as he stared up at Boyd. "I'd laugh but I'm too tired at the moment."

Boyd bypassed the couch to close the living room curtains. He often left them open during the day to get more light into the otherwise dark room but ever since the time he'd had agents sitting across the street watching him 24/7 he'd had times when he'd become paranoid about people looking in at night, when the light inside the house made it especially easy for them to see him but not vice versa. There was no reason for anyone from the Agency to be watching but that didn't mean the neighbors couldn't be staring out their windows as well, and it was no one's business what he was doing inside his home, even if he was just talking to his partner.

Once they had a modicum of privacy and he wasn't feeling quite as paranoid, Boyd walked over to the living room table that was next to the couch. Moving a few items aside, he sat on the edge of the table facing Sin. He could have chosen one of the chairs but they were too far away for proper conversation and anyway he'd never thought they were all that particularly comfortable.

"That's a shame," he said finally, studying Sin's face in the dim light from the hallway. "I like your laugh."

Another half-smile as Sin gazed up at him with tired green eyes. "Well, you're the only one who makes me laugh so it would be unfortunate if you didn't."

Boyd smiled, feeling pleased and a bit proud. For some reason it was gratifying to know that he could make Sin laugh even when others couldn't. It wasn't that he wanted Sin to only be relaxed enough to laugh around him; maybe it was because it was a result of their history together, of all the time they'd spent going from two strangers who antagonized each other to what they were now, whatever that was exactly. It made him feel like it had all been worth it.

"So tell me," Sin drawled, eyebrows raising slightly as he turned on his side to better stare at Boyd. "What made you seek out Captain America anyway?"

"I didn't seek anyone out," Boyd said mildly. "We ran into each other at the grocery store during the summer."

Sin thought about that for a moment as he mentally went through the information he had stored in his brain of the people that he'd always felt the need to watch out for; people he trusted even less than usual. "Yeah, I guess he does live around here."

"You know where he lives?" Boyd asked with an eyebrow raised. "What is that, preparation for last minute slumber parties?"

"Years ago I memorized the information of people who I feel could someday be a danger to me. I know where a lot of people live," he replied. Jeffrey hadn't been too thrilled about that fact.

"Makes sense," Boyd said, considering that. "That must've been how you knew where to find me the first time you showed up here."

"Sí," Sin replied, closing his eyes. "But I guess it just turned out that you were a threat to my chastity."

Boyd grinned rather wickedly and slid off the table, coming closer to the couch. "I'm up for threatening you again, if you want."

Sin opened one eye and looked up at Boyd again. "Sadly, and I know this will shock you, I don't think I have the energy."

"What if I do all the hard work and you just get to enjoy?" Boyd asked, kneeling next to the couch with one hand supporting him past Sin's far shoulder and the other absently pushing hair off Sin's forehead.

He hovered over his partner, golden brown eyes a shade darker in the shadows cast by the couch as it was back-lit from the hallway, blond hair held back by the bandanna and low ponytail. "Would you want to then?"

"I think..." Sin trailed off, leaning into Boyd's touch with a slight shuddering breath. He would have never thought that such a simple thing-- being touched by another person with tenderness-- could make him feel so good, could momentarily wash away all the bad things and he could just *feel*. Just feel normal. Like a normal man that someone could touch without fear and hesitation. "I think I'd be down for that," he said softly.

With a satisfied smile, Boyd pulled Sin to his feet, pressing their bodies together as he led them backwards to his bedroom. His slender hands wrapped around the collar of Sin's hoody, tugging Sin's face down as they navigated the house; he took Sin's mouth again as he slipped his tongue inside with a slow, languid kiss that deepened gradually until they finally pulled apart to pant against each others' lips.

Despite Sin's claims of having no energy, his hands moved over Boyd's body, sliding down his back and squeezing his ass as they halted just inside Boyd's bedroom. He only took his hands away to unzip his hoody. Sin's breath came faster as he ripped off his t-shirt to reveal his finely muscled arms and chest.

Boyd took in his lover's body with barely concealed lust, having seen Sin naked dozens of times before but never quite able to get over just how beautiful he was. Even as tired as his partner was, as weak he felt, Sin was still the most exotic-looking and gorgeous man he had ever met. The fact that his body looked like it was carved out of stone made it even better. The combination of high cheek bones, brilliant green eyes and a remarkably masculine physique was incredibly striking.

Swiping his tongue over his lips quickly, the taste of Sin on his mouth making him even hotter, Boyd pushed Sin backwards on the bed and stripped off his own dust covered shirt-- tossing it on the floor before doing the same with his underwear and pants.

He stared down at Sin, at his low hanging ripped jeans and the hipbones that protruded temptingly; Boyd was almost uncomfortably hard as the anticipation of what they were about to do made him even more excited.

Boyd knelt on the bed, unbuttoning Sin's jeans and tugging them down, unsurprised to see that he wore no underwear at all. Boyd dragged his eyes away from his partner's body to stare into his eyes, lips turning up into a hungry smile as Sin gazed up at him with a mixture of lust and impatience.

Boyd's smile just widened slightly as he ran his hands down Sin's chest, shifting so that he was kneeling between those muscular thighs, fingers barely touching his skin.

"Stop making me wait," Sin chastised, voice low and husky.

"Stop being so impatient," Boyd teased, leaning down to press his mouth against the hollow of Sin's throat, lips wrapping around the Adam's apple that bobbed violently as Sin swallowed hard. Although it had not been that long since they'd last had sex, he loved the taste of Sin's skin and the feel of his warm body moving against him; each time it felt as intense and arousing as the first time they'd been together.

His lips brushed against Sin's skin as he moved between the spots he knew Sin loved the most, paying special attention to the sensitive spot near his ear. Boyd took great pleasure in the feel of Sin moving beneath him, of the way he could make such a strong man lose any sense of control in a positive way.

As he worshiped Sin's lower ear with hot, sucking kisses in a way that drove all coherent thought out of Sin's mind, Boyd reached blindly for the almost-empty bottle of lubricant that sat on the night stand. He squeezed a generous amount into his hand, applying it to himself first and then reaching forward to graze his fingers along Sin's dick, finally pulling away from kissing him.

"Although it's a good sign that you can't get enough," Boyd added belatedly, half-lidded eyes pleased and intent on Sin's slightly glazed eyes and lustful expression.

And it was a good sign. Actual penetration for Sin had been a delicate subject a little over a year ago as Boyd had tried to understand the boundaries of this new aspect of their relationship but they'd come a long way since then. Now, he knew Sin's body almost as well as his own and he felt no hesitation about doing what he wanted with it, including taking his turn to fuck his partner's brains out when previously he'd always been the one getting fucked.

Sin hissed softly as Boyd's lube covered fingers began to run up and down his erection, stroking it with just enough pressure to be satisfyingly rough but not uncomfortably so. He spread his thighs apart further, almost unconsciously, and raised one knee as Boyd's hand slid down to fondle his balls-- massaging them in a way that made him shudder violently.

Sin's breath came in short, abrupt spurts as Boyd slid his fingers up again and began to jerk him off fast, milking his cock as the beginning of clear semen began to leak from it. Sin's eyebrows drew together as he slid his eyes open and stared down at Boyd's slick hand and the way it flew over his swollen erection.

He dragged his gaze from the erotic sight to instead stare at Boyd's naked body, at the pale limbs that were slender and toned, at the strong shoulders and flat stomach and finally at the lube covered dick that was pressing slightly against Sin's ass.

"You gonna do it or what?" Sin managed, voice slightly strangled as he felt the burning in his gut intensify and his toes curled in the sheets. He dug his fingers into the bedding, eyes rolling in his head as Boyd made a low sound in his throat without actually answering the question.

But the burning was getting hotter as his body tensed and Sin thrust into Boyd's hand violently as he came hard, semen covering Boyd's hand as Sin swore breathlessly, heart hammering wildly in his chest.

Boyd's eyelids lowered as he gazed down at Sin with an intense expression that was libidinous, carnal. Without giving Sin any warning at all, Boyd shoved his painfully throbbing erection inside his partner with one swift thrust, no resistance given at all since Sin's body was now completely relaxed.

Boyd nearly shouted in pleasure -- never quite prepared for how amazing it felt for his cock to be surrounded by all of that tight, hot muscle-- and wrapped his fingers under Sin's knee to lift his leg slightly. Boyd's veins raced with blood and lust as hot as the body that surrounded him, and all thought left his mind as instincts took over. He fucked his partner wantonly and with abandon, slamming his hips against Sin in the process.

Sin's fingers clawed at the bed, arching his back with a guttural cry of pleasure, all coherent thought gone from his head as Boyd's cock pounded him roughly, the pressure on his nerves causing him to slam up against Boyd violently, dick stiffening once again as he begged for more without comprehensible words.

Boyd responded without hesitation, thrusting faster, slamming harder, as his head fell backwards and his mouth dropped open. He grabbed the underside of Sin's other knee with his free hand and lifted Sin partially off the bed as he moved in and out of Sin with animal-like instinct that banished everything from his mind except for the need for more.

"Ah...ah...oh fucking--" Sin stammered, breaking off with a loud groan as Boyd's erection began to grind against his prostate with mind-blowing precision. It was something that had only happened to him a couple times since they'd begun to explore this new path and as usual the pleasure it caused him was indescribable as it scoured through his body and erased any hope of coherent thought.

Sin orgasmed for the second time almost instantly, causing his muscles to contract wildly around Boyd's cock. Boyd cried out loudly, leaning forward to pound into Sin increasingly harder and faster. It wasn't long before he shouted in ecstasy as he came inside of Sin while experiencing a white-hot pleasure that made his entire body feel like it was on fire.

Boyd released Sin, collapsing on the bed beside him as he panted harshly, soft moans escaping his mouth as his eyes closed almost immediately. They lay side by side for several long moments, regaining their bearings after an almost unusually intense bout of sex that had left them both sweaty and exhausted.

After awhile, Sin shifted on his side, rolling over in the now wrinkled sheets so that he could face Boyd. After watching him for a moment, staring at his peaceful, sated face, Sin scooted down slightly and rested the side of his face against Boyd's chest.

He could hear the other man's heartbeat slowly returning to normal and for some reason it made something in him churn uncomfortably. He'd never felt this close to another human before, never had someone who wanted to be close to him and touch him and make him feel good, but there was still a space between them. There was a gap that was filled with Sin's secrets and his new talent at lying, a distance between them that he'd been trying so hard to keep Boyd from noticing and it made the entire situation feel somehow incomplete. He wanted the closeness of their bodies to be reflected in the rest of the moment, yet he was the one who was making it this way.

A frown marred his face, the nagging thoughts coming back to harass him now that the pleasure was gone, now that he wasn't consumed by overwhelming desire. It was frustrating and it made him wish that he could just go back to walling off certain parts of his memory so that he could enjoy his partner the way he had so easily in the not-so-distant past.

But Sin couldn't because of the dark shadow that followed him around constantly and wouldn't let him be.

"Hey," he said quietly, knowing that Boyd hadn't drifted off just yet.

"Hmm?" Boyd murmured, lazily bringing a hand up to run his fingers gently, absently through Sin's hair.

"I've been--" Sin broke off and frowned slightly. "What would you say if I told you, I've been thinking about... maybe going to see Lydia?"

"Lydia?" Boyd echoed, waking up a little in surprise. His fingers didn't stop but his eyes slid open as he looked down as best he could. "Why would you want to?" There was nothing judgmental in the question; merely baffled curiosity.

Sin raised his shoulder slightly, staring down at the winding scars on Boyd's pale skin as he struggled to find the words to come up with an explanation. But it was hard when he couldn't even explain to himself why he continued to go. "I'm not sure," he admitted finally.

"Well," Boyd said slowly after a moment of waiting for Sin to continue. "I suppose I would say that you could if you wanted, but I don't think she deserves that attention from you."

Sin's gaze focused on the mutilated tattoo on Boyd's hip, reaching up to place one hand on it. "Why not?"

"Because she hurt you," Boyd said simply. For a moment it almost seemed he would not explain further but then he shifted slightly and rested his hand over Sin's, continuing more sincerely, "She wasn't a good person, Sin. She purposefully drugged you so you couldn't fight back, knowing damn well what she was doing to you, and asked you about things that would upset you. She took advantage of the situation and her role as your therapist to gain power over you, to use you. Frankly, it's disgusting to do that when a person is so vulnerable and I think she got exactly what she deserved."

Sin said nothing for a long moment, not entirely sure how to respond. He didn't disagree with Boyd, he wasn't blind to what had happened... he knew Lydia had knowingly exploited him and had put herself in a very dangerous situation.

But... it didn't make him feel any better about any of it. It didn't make him feel justified in completely destroying the woman's life and it didn't ease the guilt as the scene replayed over and over again in his mind. All that knowledge did was make him feel hopeless, impotent. It just showed how weak he was, how little control he had over himself when he felt threatened and how dangerous he could be.

"No one else has that point of view," Sin ventured finally. "Most people think it's an example of why I should be locked away forever. Because of how dangerous I can be, because of how... out of control I can get."

Boyd's fingers tightened briefly on Sin's hand comfortingly, in contrast to his somewhat derisive tone as he spoke about Lydia. "What would've been a better scenario? Lydia got to do whatever the hell she wanted just because she's Connors' daughter? Because she's 'normal'? She didn't have to take responsibility for her actions or deal with the consequences because she wasn't 'crazy'? It's okay for people to do whatever they want to someone who's supposedly mentally unstable? That's fucking stupid and illogical."

He seemed annoyed on Sin's behalf and the idea that Sin had to keep dealing with the same bullshit. "The reason that happened is a direct result of the way you were trained to defend yourself. It's not indicative of some overwhelming psychological illness on

your part that can never be fixed like people seem to think. It's simple human behavior and conditioning. If any of those holier-than-thou idiots had been in your place with your history they probably would've done something far worse. They just think they can judge you because they don't know you and aren't in your shoes. You're no more a monster than anyone else."

Sin said nothing because really, what could he have said?

He'd been on the verge of telling Boyd everything, of confessing that he'd already been going to see Lydia, that he'd been racked by overwhelming guilt ever since these nightmares and hallucinations started and that he felt very close to the edge of insanity.

He'd wanted to tell Boyd the truth; that he really was losing his mind like everyone always said. That something was wrong with him, with how his mind worked; that it caused him to see and hear things. That when the darkness woke within him, he had an almost unbearable thirst for blood once he felt those familiar stirrings of an out-of-control temper.

He wanted to tell Boyd that he was wrong.

But how could he?

How could he ruin it? How could he take the faith that Boyd had in him and crush it, proving that Sin really was psychotic, dangerous, capable of monstrous things? How could Sin correct him, change that viewpoint and take away that comforting touch forever? How could he take the chance of losing his only friend, the only person who'd ever cared about him or taken the time to understand him? How could he potentially scare away the only person who'd ever made him smile?

He couldn't.

So he just intertwined his fingers with Boyd's and closed his eyes, squeezing Boyd's hand in an unspoken 'thank you for trusting me, thank you for having faith in me' and hoped, for Boyd's safety, that he wouldn't fall asleep.

Chapter 5

"So what the hell are we doing here, anyway?" Cade asked in annoyance, lounging with his arms resting on the back of his chair, which coincidentally showed off his muscles more.

Although it was cold outside, Cade had already removed his hooded sweatshirt to reveal a white wife-beater beneath. He wore sweatpants and a pair of tennis shoes, and had a duffel bag which he'd dropped to the floor next to him. As he spoke, he tilted back precariously on the hind two legs of his chair, rocking back and forth as he looked at the others.

Boyd suspected that everyone in the room was wondering the same thing although no one immediately responded. The initial letter that had alerted them to their nomination had also given them a set of instructions for the two weeks before training started. The last set of instructions had said to meet at this room at a specific time and to bring enough clothing for the next three months but it had said nothing about the reason for the meeting. Like the others, Boyd had assumed that Douglas, Carhart or someone else involved in the training would have been there to explain what was happening.

But it was already twenty minutes after they'd been told to gather and they hadn't seen or heard a thing.

"Maybe he got delayed," Andrew offered from his seat nearby.

Cade snorted derisively. "Yeah and maybe your fairy godmother'll give you a set of brains, Torres." He tipped his chair back so far it nearly overbalanced and, irritated, added, "Dude probably forgot. Seemed fuckin' nuts enough to."

"Right, because that makes sense," Andrew said sarcastically, although there was no bite to his words. "Day one and the instructor already forgets about us?"

"Well, they did say we'd be tested on physical and mental prowess," Emma said helpfully, pulling a long lock of dark brown hair behind her ear. She was sitting in the second row of seats and looking around curiously as she crossed one leg over the other. The brown gauchos she wore rode up slightly and exposed more of the scant amount of flesh that was visible above the top of her tall wedged boots. "Maybe this is part of it, some sort of test?"

"I'd like to test *your* physical prowess," Cade said, leering at her leg before his eyes slowly moved up to stare at her chest. It almost seemed as though he were trying to determine whether or not he could see Emma's bra through the white button-down she wore.

Emma studied him a moment thoughtfully then just shook her head silently. Judging by her expression, she didn't look offended or surprised but she also didn't seem to want to address the comment in front of everyone.

Toby, who had taken a seat closer to Boyd than was necessary, leaned forward slightly. "I have trouble understanding why anyone would nominate such a hideously mentally inadequate Neanderthal," he said quietly.

Boyd looked over, mildly surprised that the other man was speaking to him. After Toby had seemed so thoroughly unimpressed with him before, it was beyond him why Toby felt the need to be anywhere near him, let alone talk. Boyd just shrugged noncommittally, not really caring enough to bother to comment.

One reason he suspected Cade had been nominated was because General Willis would have been in charge and, of all the generals Boyd had seen, he seemed the type to be most persuaded by the idea that muscles and power were the best tools for the job. Even so, there had to be something that Cade was really good at for him to have been Level 9 at all, let alone nominated for Level 10. Underestimating him because he looked like a steroid junkie would be as foolish as underestimating Boyd or Toby because they looked weaker.

"He's good at storms," a low voice chimed in suddenly. It was Patrick, who was so quiet that Boyd had almost forgotten about him since he was sitting further back from the group this time. "I've been on teams with him a few times. He gets the job done."

"Storms?" Toby asked skeptically.

Patrick's dark eyes moved from the front to focus on Toby as if he was surprised to hear such a question. "When teams storm a city... or a base?"

"Oh," Toby said simply and looked away, not appearing pleased that he hadn't grasped it on his own.

There was a brief silence in which no one said anything; it was almost uncomfortable and the only sound was the noise of Jonathan flipping the pages of a book he was reading.

As if using it as an excuse to get conversation going, Emma turned in her chair and looked at Jonathan amiably. "I'm sorry; I was sitting in front so I couldn't see your card very well. Did it say you're in Special Ops and Intelligence? I don't think I've seen you there before. Who's your captain?"

Jonathan looked up at Emma and seemed quite startled to find her speaking to him. He closed his book, marking the page carefully and studied her before replying to the otherwise straightforward question. "I report to Captain Singh for Intelligence and General Hughes directly for Spec Ops."

"Oh, Singh?" Emma asked, smiling pleasantly. "I worked under him for a year. He's a good Captain; lets you do your job and doesn't micromanage. I had a Captain before him who constantly expected updates on anything I was working on here; it made it way difficult to get anything done. Do you know if they ever had a baby? He and his wife were hoping for one before."

Harriet shifted in her seat to stare at Emma from under the brim of her black cadet style hat. Although she didn't actually say anything, the expression on her face made it known what she thought of Emma's chatter.

But Jonathan just nodded briefly, hands idly caressing the cover of his book as he stared directly into Emma's eyes. "I believe his wife is with child now."

"That's great to hear," Emma said, and she seemed to actually mean it.

"Who do you work with?" Andrew asked her curiously although it was possible part of the reason he joined in was just to keep the conversation going. The silence had been rather boring and seemed to just make the time go slower.

"Captain Mathis," Emma said easily, turning her attention to him.

"He any good? I heard he was a discriminatory asshole." There was nothing rude in Andrew's tone; he simply seemed to be making an observation.

"He has an interesting work ethic," Emma said diplomatically, "but he's always had my back."

"Isn't he the one who likes to fuck goats?" Cade piped up from the side.

Andrew gave him an incredulous look. "The hell are you talking about, Carter?"

"Just repeating what I heard," Cade said with a helpless shrug. He paused, then acted as if something had just occurred to him. "Wait, my bad. I heard he likes to fuck dudes." He pointedly looked at Boyd, his expression languidly mocking. "Same diff."

The tension in the room heightened as several of the trainees went very quiet. Boyd felt some of the others look toward him; no doubt not only due to Cade's comment but also in part because it was the first time he'd actually been addressed. After everything that had happened following the trip to France, it probably would have been more surprising if they hadn't heard the rumors about his sexual orientation. There was little doubt that they also knew who his mother and partner was.

As ridiculous as Cade's comment was, Boyd wasn't impressed. Cade would have to try a lot harder to offend him, like making a comparison that actually made sense. He almost didn't bother to respond to such a stupid comment but with others watching him he felt like if he didn't say something it would just prolong the time before their attention was off him again.

Besides, the comment was probably offensive for Andrew too. He was gay as well but in the closet and likely would not respond even if he wanted to. Boyd glanced over briefly and noticed that there was indeed a certain amount of tension in Andrew's shoulders.

"I suppose," Boyd said mildly, casually looking at Cade without much expression. "In the same way an elephant and a monkey are the same because they're both mammals, or lightning and a chair are the same because they both involve electrons. You could make a lot of baseless comparisons if your criteria is generic enough."

Cade smirked. "And people can do some weird ass shit if their standards are low enough."

"Carter..." Emma started to say, looking uncomfortable, but she trailed off as if she couldn't quite form the sentence in her mind.

"Why is this even being talked about?" Harriet cut in, staring at Cade with an irritated look on her face. "Why do you care who's having sex with whom?"

"I care when I gotta spend the next three months around some pansy ass faggot who's probably gonna spend half the time trying to cop a feel," Cade drawled, dark brown eyes glinting coldly as he eyed Boyd. "And the other half jerking off thinking about it."

Something about Cade's posture was stiff despite the languidness of his tone and when he looked at Boyd, the dislike he clearly felt seemed disproportionate to the way he acted toward the others. It was almost as if homosexuality was a topic that especially offended Cade and he wanted to make damn sure that Boyd was aware of it.

Boyd couldn't imagine anyone-- a gay man or a straight woman-- who could possibly be attracted to Cade after he opened his mouth.

Boyd felt that other peoples' opinions of him were of very little value and meant about as much as the jokes about how young or thin or even effeminate they felt he was. If anything, in Boyd's mind, Cade's belief that Boyd would ever find him sexually attractive enough to even want anything to do with him underscored how completely full of himself the man was.

"You don't belong here," Harriet replied flatly, her expression stony. "And don't take this as me acting as anyone's defender or being offended by your ignorant comments. It's just very obvious that you have no respect for this whole operation, the promotion, the current Level 10 agents or our superiors and it's almost insulting that someone thought you were on the same level as me and some of the others in this room. You will fall flat on your face and get booted the hell out and I can't wait until it happens."

"The fuck do I need respect for?" Cade scoffed, giving her an incredulous look. "We've got some crazy bitch running the show who don't know what the fuck she's doing, half the people in charge are douchebags who got grandfathered in on dumb ass choices from the past, and most of us here kill people for a living. What, you want me to listen to those bullshit after-school movies they make us watch about loving our coworkers and making everyone feel happy inside?"

She shook her head, appearing almost amused with him. "You obviously have no idea how this organization is run, Carter. If you did, you'd know why your attitude guarantees you failure. This isn't the military; it doesn't matter how well you pull the trigger or how badass you think you are in the long run. What matters, and what will get you promoted, is how reliable you are, how intelligent you are and how much you can be trusted. And referring to our current leader as a crazy bitch pretty much rules you out of all three."

Toby nodded in agreement, eyes narrowed at Cade in obvious hostility.

"Don't you fuckin' judge me before you know me, bitch," Cade growled, giving her a narrow eyed, unimpressed glare. "You wanna buy into all that shit, fine. But Bulldog ain't here right now so I've got no reason to say how fuckin' great she is when she's done jack shit for us. And it's not just her-- the admin never knows what the hell they want. Connors was as retarded as the others but at least he had cred."

Cade leaned back in his chair, his expression somewhat mocking. "You wanna act like all that matters is how much 'respect' we show, then what the fuck. Let's just all pack up and go home 'cause they've already got it figured out who's going forward and who's not. Me, I know it don't matter what shit I say here, how much I'd suck up to her or anyone else-- you wanna talk reliable, intelligent, trustworthy? *That's* the shit you find out on missions, when we're doing our actual jobs. That's the shit I can do. You could fall over yourself trying to get in her pants and it wouldn't mean shit if you can't hold your own on a solo. So don't you fuckin' tell me I've got no chance just because I'm not coming from joy just thinking about her."

This time Harriet laughed outright, sounding genuinely amused and not at all offended by him. "Have you even been on an undercover solo assignment? I doubt it and I doubt you have what it takes to successfully complete one."

She crossed her slender arms over her chest and raised one arched brow. "Could you go undercover in Russia for two years like Agent Trovosky? Or handle weeks of intense torture and still bounce back like Agent Vega? Could you even fit into a local community and make contacts, no matter how bizarre, like Boyd? Do you even know what you have to be able to do to be trusted with those sorts of assignments, boy? This promotion is not just 'oh look! Bad guy! shoot!' It's espionage, it's blending in with a crowd, it's knowing how to use your brain. And," she began, not letting him speak just yet. "If you can't even respect your current leader, no matter who she is, how do you ever think she will promote you or trust you to follow her orders? You're a fucking idiot, Carter."

Toby, not seeming capable of holding it in anymore, snickered loudly but it came out more like a hysterical giggle than anything else and he cleared his throat quickly.

Jon, who had actually followed the exchange instead of returning to his book, gazed at Toby for a moment before looking at Cade expectantly. His expression gave nothing away other than the fact that he was mildly interested in the bickering of his peers but not interested enough for him to put in his two cents again.

Boyd looked at Harriet sidelong. 'No matter how bizarre?' She must have been referring to *los perdidos* and *lo más chingón*. He was half surprised that she'd used him as an example at all, let alone grouped in with Kassian and Sin; had she referred to him only because he was sitting there and Cade would know who she was talking about, or was she actually trying to defend his capabilities, pointing out that he was more than just a gay man?

It was also surprising that she'd called him by his first name since before he'd always just been 'Agent Beaulieu.' He suspected that was just due to the fact that this was a more casual setting and he was her peer.

Regardless, he was mildly amused that she'd given him such a backhanded compliment. She'd seemed to think he was incredibly incompetent and pathetic when they'd been on their only mission together in Monterrey. It was beyond him why she'd changed her mind now, months after the fact, but he wasn't about to complain.

Cade narrowed his eyes at Harriet, seeming unaffected by her words but somehow more intent, and he appeared to ignore Toby for the moment. "Don't act like some holier-than-thou shit before you even know anything about me, Stevens. There's a lot of shit I'm good at or I wouldn't be where I am. Save your bitchy little lectures 'till training, when we see who can do what. Until you prove you've got any skills other than acting like the bitch in charge, you're just a tomboy with tits to me and I don't give a fuck what you think."

"You are beyond help," Harriet said, shaking her head. She began to say more but was interrupted before she could.

"I don't think he gets it, darling," Jon offered finally. "It's pointless to continue this argument."

"It's pointless anyway," Patrick said, looking disappointed in the two. "We're not here for this. Save it for the trash that attacked this base and killed our comrades."

Apparently, bringing up the attack was the best way to end the conversation. Cade looked sidelong at Pat but sat back in his chair with crossed arms and didn't comment further.

Boyd noted that this was the second time Pat made a comment that had caused Cade to back off. Obviously, the two had worked together before. He wondered if that was the

reason or if they were friends, although their personalities seemed too incongruous to really get along for long periods of time.

For all that Cade thought it would be a pain to be around Boyd because he was openly gay, Boyd felt that the rest of them were thinking more that they'd have to deal with Cade and his attitude for several months. It didn't really bother Boyd, but he could tell by Andrew's tense shoulders and set mouth that he wasn't pleased, and Toby and Harriet had already made their own opinions pretty obvious. He doubted Jonathan or Emma particularly cared for Cade, either. He noticed Emma looked displeased although whether it was because she hadn't intended for the conversation to turn the way it had or if she found the wording and topics to have been distasteful, it was hard to tell.

Cade had said he was good at many things; alienating people was apparently one of his natural talents, Boyd mused.

Before anyone could comment further, Doug came striding in and looked just as tousled as he had the week prior. He was whistling something casually under his breath and didn't even look at them as he stopped before the table at the head of the room and placed a few papers on it.

After a moment he finally glanced at the group and raised his eyebrows. "What are you girls looking so uptight for?" he inquired casually, not seeming a bit interested in the reply. "Never mind, don't answer. I don't honestly give a shit why you've all simultaneously acquired PMS."

Cade shot Harriet a sidelong look, as if to silently say it was her fault but he didn't say anything aloud. Andrew was watching Cade with an unusually hard set to his expression but when he realized Boyd noticed, he glanced over once with a bit of a grimace. Andrew leaned back in his chair and kicked his feet out in front of him, visibly trying to relax. No one said anything in response to Doug's comment.

"I've got your room assignments all right here, so take some time putting your delicates away before meeting in Media Room 1 at 1100 hours," Doug said with a nod at the papers.

"And no need to dress like you're off to play some b-ball," he added, glancing at Cade. "No physical stuff today, got it? Good." He turned and walked out as abruptly as he'd entered.

Several of them exchanged looks but in the end it was Emma who stood up first and approached the desk. She leaned over, one manicured nail moving down the page as she presumably looked for her name, then with a bemused smile she looked up at Harriet.

Harriet just sighed and stood up, grabbing her duffel bag as she walked over to see the room number they were assigned to.

Boyd grabbed his bag and stood at about the same time Andrew did but they ended up behind several of the others once they made it down to the desk to check their names on the sheet. Andrew and Jonathan were assigned room B5; Andrew seemed somewhat relieved and Boyd suspected it was because he didn't want to room with Cade. Pat and Cade had room B8, which was fortuitous given the fact that Pat was the only one who seemed to have any chance of keeping Cade in line. Harriet and Emma had room B10; it was unsurprising that the only two women were grouped together. That left Boyd with Toby in room B3. He wasn't particularly happy to be with Toby, mostly because the man seemed a little odd, but anyone was better than Cade.

They'd all been in the barracks at one point or another because this was the building where all major training occurred at the Agency. When Boyd had been living on compound in the six months before he'd first met Sin, he'd spent some of his time in the building. It was well-equipped and specifically created for training purposes; there was a large gymnasium, multiple training rooms, a few hallways of compact, faceless bedrooms, communal showering areas and even a cafeteria, although the food was pretty basic.

The barracks were somewhat removed from the other buildings and the place was designed to be self-sufficient so trainees could spend months there without needing to step outside even once. Typically, the building would have had people wandering around and several of the rooms filled as people trained but now the place was deserted. The people in charge had probably canceled everything else for the duration of the Level 10 training, which made sense since part of the directive was that the trainees were not supposed to have contact with anyone else.

As a result of their prior training, none of them had trouble finding the area they needed and they split into groups of twos as they walked toward their respective rooms. Boyd was the first into the room that would be his living space for the next three months.

The room was small, boring, and Spartan, just as he remembered the barrack rooms being. Two small single beds sat apart from each other against the far wall. The sheets

were plain white and looked scratchy and the only comforter they each had was a thin, lint-ridden blanket, the color of which had apparently faded with numerous wash cycles until it was hard to say whether it was grey, blue, green, or even an incredibly pale brown.

There was a single closet in the corner; thin, not very wide and barely deep enough for the handful of hangers on the metal pole and there wasn't a door to cover whatever they would hang there. The floor was cool, concrete, and dusty along the edges of the walls. A single nightstand sat next to each bed and along two opposite walls was a small wooden dresser for each of them.

Nothing lined the bare white walls, not even the implication that others had been here before, had hung pictures or other effects to make the room seem more livable. There were no windows because they were underground and toward the center of the building which meant the only light came from the occasionally flickering fluorescent lights, casting a sickly look to everything.

Boyd paused inside the room then half turned just in time to see Toby enter behind him and shut the door. Boyd didn't really care which bed he took but had no idea if Toby was the sort of OCD person who would take offense. Since he'd have to live with the man for the next three months, he was in no mood to start on a bad note.

"Do you have a preference?" he asked, tilting his head toward the beds.

Toby surveyed the room, a slight look of distaste flickering across his expression before dropping his suitcase off on the nearest bed. "Not really. They're equally boring and uncomfortable looking." He sat on the edge of his bed and winced slightly as he tested it, confirming his assumption. "I wish we at least had a window."

"It would provide too much of a distraction," Boyd said, dropping his bag by the other bed. He glanced up briefly at the light. "I would prefer better lighting at least, though."

Toby sighed and lay back, intertwining his fingers and resting his arms behind his head. "You'd think they could afford us better accommodations considering we're competing for the highest rank field agents have got. For all that employee housing looks like five star hotel suites, the barracks look like a prison."

"The point of the competition or even the promotion is not the luxury of it," Boyd said reasonably as he sat on the edge of his bed. It certainly wasn't that comfortable of a

mattress but he'd slept on worse during missions. "Right now the point is to put all our focus on the training."

"I suppose," Toby relented, and rolled on his side to watch Boyd intently. He was a strange looking man, now that Boyd was looking at him closely. He was incredibly thin and there wasn't even a hint of muscle beneath his clothing. He also had very sharp, bird-like features and pale skin that contrasted so starkly with his dark hair that he looked almost sickly.

"What do you think of the others?" he asked suddenly, blue eyes narrowed at Boyd.

Boyd shrugged unconcernedly. "I hardly know them."

Toby rolled his eyes. "Oh cut this nonsense act already. If we're going to share a room for three months, at least don't be annoying. You're trying to tell me no thoughts crossed your mind at all during the last two meetings?"

"Why do you care?" Boyd asked, raising an eyebrow. "It's not as though my opinion will change anything."

Toby rolled onto his back again, gazing up at the ceiling. "I suppose I'm curious."

"Maybe that can keep you entertained in this boring room, then," Boyd said. There was no bite to his tone; he just didn't see why he should have to bother talking to someone he hardly knew about a group of people he barely knew as well.

"And people say I'm a snob due to *my* connections," Toby said, tone mildly amused if not a little irritated.

"What?" Boyd asked, mildly startled by the implication although his expression and tone remained neutral. "That has nothing to do with this."

The other man snorted and shifted on the bed, trying to find a comfortable position.

"You think you're too good to talk to anybody else. It's obvious and not only to me. You think you don't have to respond to anyone because you're so far above on the Beaulieu plateau of greatness and can only deign to respond to someone you think is worthy."

He turned his face slightly to glance at Boyd again. "It's quite alright though. The rest of them are pretty inferior."

Boyd stared at him and felt incredulous; what the hell was with people and constantly assuming that his actions had anything to do with his mother? The woman had birthed him, used to give him money and had put his name into a pool to be considered as Sin's partner; that was about the extent of their relationship. It was mildly annoying to have her continually brought up as if he even cared that she was in charge, let alone let that dictate how he acted. Beyond that, how could Toby be so certain that the others were 'inferior' before he even knew them?

"I'm not 'deigning' to do anything," Boyd said pointedly. "My mother has nothing to do with any of this; we would be having the same conversation regardless of if she even existed at the Agency. I just don't see the point of talking about the other candidates. Why does something so simple have to involve her?"

"It's just the general consensus about you here," Toby replied easily. "It's not just this particular conversation."

"At the Agency?" Boyd knew that others felt he was using his connections but he'd never had anyone outright tell him what people generally thought about him. Now that they were having the conversation, even though it would probably irritate him, he felt that he should probably ask to at least know what stereotype he was up against. "How so?"

"I just explained it," the other agent said patiently. "Ever since you arrived here, you walked around and acted as though you couldn't be bothered to look twice at anyone but the others in your elite unit. Even before that ridiculous nonsense smear campaign that those peon guards thought up about gay sex and other foolishness, people resented that you acted the part of the stuck-up boss' son."

It hadn't even occurred to Boyd that people would view him like that and it was a little frustrating that his quietness and tendency toward introversion was being interpreted in such a way. Under other circumstances, no one would have probably even cared how he acted; it was everyone else who was obsessed with his 'connections,' not Boyd himself.

"I'm just a quiet person," Boyd said simply, deciding to take the time to actually talk about this more or it would only perpetuate the stereotype. "I don't think I'm better than anyone else, and even if I did it certainly would have nothing to do with my mother. The reason I've interacted with my unit more than others is just because they're the ones I know and who I'm constantly around."

"They're the only ones you know because you don't deign to speak to anyone else," Toby repeated with a condescending smile. "Even if it's not true, you can't blame people for thinking that way. They think the same way about me to an extent but in my case it's true, although even I don't act as superior as you do."

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly; he didn't see why he had to talk to all these people he didn't even know or necessarily like just because they might think he felt he was superior to them. Having others think that was the only logical reason seemed to him like they were jumping to conclusions.

As far as that went, he thought Toby acted a lot more superior than he did. The man kept showing expressions of distaste and outright called other people inferior whereas Boyd just didn't bother to talk in the first place.

At the same time, he supposed that his circumstances pretty much guaranteed that the others would continue to think that way as long as he acted the way he did. He just didn't know yet if he cared enough to combat it since people would believe whatever they wanted regardless of what he said or how nice he suddenly acted. If anything, if his personality suddenly changed toward more talkative, they'd probably start thinking he was being obsequious or trying to get information for some ulterior motive. He had little faith that anyone would interpret anything he did in a manner that was complimentary.

"What connection do you have?" Boyd asked, changing the subject to get it off himself.

"General McAvoy in Intelligence," Toby replied, pride obvious in his voice. "He's my grandfather."

Boyd hadn't heard that General's name yet. So Toby got in directly under his grandfather's division; he could see why people may think he got that only due to connections. Especially since he seemed a little bit of an odd choice for Intelligence; Toby didn't seem the type who would excel at espionage. Then again Boyd wasn't ready to make any judgments until he saw him in action; he got enough preconceived judgments aimed his way to feel like doing the same to others.

Regardless, he thought it may be better to keep asking Toby questions so he wouldn't claim that Boyd was acting superior. "How did you join the Agency?" he asked, leaning back on his hands to get more comfortable on the bed. "What made you choose Intelligence?"

Toby's eyebrows rose slightly and he gave Boyd another condescending look. "I know you don't understand how *typical* procedure works given your circumstances but even I was forced to work my way up in the ranks. You don't typically *choose* your division-- it's assigned based on the areas you excel in and if you excel in none, then you are disposed of."

He looked at the ceiling again and smiled to himself. "Although, I suppose they assigned me to Intelligence based on my education. I received two Masters from Yale in Linguistics and European Studies, so I am quite adept at assignments which require the use of foreign languages or specific European cultures."

Boyd nearly raised his eyebrows. That was some impressive education, although partially just in name; Yale was one of the upper-class universities that had survived the war and now only housed the supremely wealthy. In a way, it kept the positions of power in the hands of the wealthy; in order to politically rise through the ranks in the government, most of the time one needed a good education. But the colleges available to the lower classes did not have the same resources or programs.

Boyd had gone to a local college that wasn't particularly expensive but even that had been far out of reach for many of the people who lived inner city. That population had access to community colleges that operated on such shoestring budgets that they were constantly cycling through employees and shutting down specific programs and departments.

If Toby's family was well-to-do, it wasn't surprising that they'd chosen to send him to Yale rather than risk him mingling with the 'common folk.' Boyd decided not to offer the information that, although he had started to attend college early, he'd never finished and never got a degree.

He'd never thought before about what others did and whether that should have precluded him from being able to rise to a higher position within the Agency. Obviously it hadn't, and there were many others who probably had no college background at all, but he wondered if there were certain positions that he wouldn't be able to go into if he didn't have the correct qualifications.

With the insult hanging in the air that he didn't know how the Agency usually worked, he didn't want to give Toby more information to use against him by mentioning college. Instead, he decided to keep asking Toby questions since the man obviously had no qualms with talking about himself and, to an extent, Boyd was actually curious about how their pasts differed since they were otherwise somewhat in the same position.

"What languages do you know?" Boyd asked.

"Many," Toby replied. "I specialized in Slavic Languages and am fluent in two but have a working knowledge of a couple of others. I also know some Sino-Tibetan and am able to converse in both Japanese and Italian. I speak Spanish as well but *everyone* speaks Spanish."

Boyd did raise his eyebrows a little that time. He could definitely see how that background would be of use in the Intelligence division. If it were him, he didn't think he'd be able to keep all those languages clear in his mind; it was enough for him with French and a bit of Spanish.

Still, the scope and number of languages surprised Boyd and made him wonder why Toby had ended up here; why, with that education and breadth of knowledge, he'd chosen to become a field agent rather than going straight into other areas of government. Or maybe the question was, where had the Agency seen him and known to recruit him?

"What were you doing before you joined the Agency?"

"Well," Toby began, obviously very impressed with himself, "I was selected for the Pickering Fellowship at the Department of State and after that was finished, I decided to apply for the Fascell Program, which I was also accepted into although it is very prestigious and I actually had doubts. You need very high clearance for it," he said, looking over again to make sure Boyd was paying attention. "I was sent to the Ukraine where I was given various diplomatic and consular responsibilities and upon completion of the program, I was intending to apply for a permanent position with the State but was offered a position here, undoubtedly at my grandfather's suggestion."

Although Boyd hadn't heard of either program, he decided to take Toby's word at how prestigious they were. For someone only a few years older than himself, Toby's background was extensive and clearly showed off his intelligence.

"That's impressive," Boyd said, partially because it was true and partially to appease Toby. "Do most of the field agents in Intelligence have similar backgrounds?"

"I imagine so," Toby replied. "It seems as though a lot of the guys in Insurgency and Counter-Terrorism have some kind of military background, but Intelligence seems to be 65% comprised of, well, the intellects of the upper tier political world; or people who

seem to be heading in that direction and individuals from other agencies such as CIA, NSA, etc."

Toby paused for a moment before his brows furrowed and he glanced over at Boyd. "Why? What's your background?"

"Primarily psychology," Boyd said casually, expecting Toby to give him shit for not being impressive enough. At the same time, he didn't feel like lying or evading because Toby would probably just keep asking in different ways over time and that would be more irritating in the end.

"So you *did* go to college?"

"Yes."

Toby nodded, as though it made some sense to him. "Well, I doubt you have any actual experience in the field or you would have said so, but perhaps having that as a background at all is why they thought you would be able to handle a partnership with that individual."

"Perhaps," Boyd said in vague agreement, not mentioning that he'd been told that part of the reason had been his personality. While everyone else seemed to think he felt superior to the others, the people in charge had felt that his apathy and lack of fear had been desirable qualities for pairing him with Sin.

"Whatever the case may be, I think having an insider plays a large role in any promotional process and because of that, I feel you are the only real contender aside from myself," Toby commented with a shrug.

"Then what about Agent Trovosky? Or General Carhart? Or Connors?" Boyd asked, thinking that Toby wasn't entirely right. He doubted it hurt to have someone on the inside but he could think of plenty of individuals who seemed like they had risen in ranks purely by their own merit. "Who did they have working as an insider to get them promoted?"

"Well if it were an equal playing field, they were likely promoted on skills and merit alone, but having people in the fray who do have such connections will give a nudge in the right direction undoubtedly." Toby sat up partially, eyebrows raised. "What about your partner? Why did you choose to leave him out?"

"I assumed you would have considered his father to have been his in," Boyd said, shrugging lightly. "It's not that I don't believe he has the skills to be here on his own, but you seem to think that the moment someone has a connection then the rest of their skills or their actual merit are not as important."

"It's different for Hsin Vega, though," Toby said as though he knew Sin very well. "Whether or not his father had existed at the Agency at all, he has phenomenal skill as a fighter and a killer and he *deserves* to be here and to have such a rank because of what he can do. Honestly, can you say the same? I'm honest enough to admit that I cannot. I was merely an intern before coming here and if it weren't for my connection," he raised both eyebrows at Boyd, "I wouldn't be here at all. Can you deny it's not the case for yourself? If your mother didn't work here would they have come knocking at your door seeking out your piddly psychology degree? Would they have hired you or someone with a degree in psychology and who also has relevant experience?"

"Of course not," Boyd said easily. "They never would have known I existed. My mother was the one who suggested me. My point, though, is that even with that suggestion it doesn't mean much. Carhart is the one who hired me and he told me that he'd only seen me to humor my mother; he'd had no intention of actually considering me. Sin had a say in who his partner was as well, and he probably had no idea or didn't care who I was."

He watched Toby as he continued idly, "Even if those two had been under my mother's sway, Connors had the final say on Sin's partner. I'm sure you're at least aware that my mother and Connors did not exactly get along? He probably would've delighted in telling her I wasn't worth it but he hired me anyway. The whole thing started because my mother mentioned me, that's true; but it doesn't mean that it ever would've gone anywhere beyond that if someone hadn't felt I was the correct choice regardless of my background or last name."

Toby studied him for a moment before nodding his agreement. "I suppose you have a point. But it's somewhat different here, don't you think? That dyke woman was quite right when she said trust is the key. Who better to trust than people of close relation?"

Boyd gave Toby a flat look. "Harriet, you mean?" he asked pointedly, thinking that was a poor way to refer to her for several reasons, including the fact he didn't believe she was a lesbian. He didn't know why he felt the need to say her name but she'd somewhat defended him to Cade so he may as well return the favor, even if she wasn't there to see. Aside from that, Toby did have a bit of a point as far as it went in his family. After

all, his mother had known when she suggested him that he would have likely done whatever was asked of him.

"That's probably true," Boyd conceded. "But just because a person is related to someone else doesn't mean they're reliable." He paused. "Then again, they wouldn't have suggested them in the first place if they thought that."

Toby rolled his eyes. "You're slightly ridiculous when attempting a conversation. No wonder you don't speak much."

Boyd stared at him. The man would never be satisfied, he decided in mild exasperation; he was superior when he didn't speak and ridiculous when he did. "What do you mean?"

"You neither want to agree with me nor yourself. You ju--" Toby paused and shook his head. "It doesn't matter. How did you ever become so familiar with Hsin Vega with these social skills?"

"Call him Sin," Boyd said, not liking that Toby, who didn't know Sin at all, kept calling him by his real name. For some reason, it felt like the only people who should use the name 'Hsin' were people like Carhart, Ryan, or himself; people, he supposed, who were on Sin's side or could see him as a person beyond what many believed to be a monstrous persona. "I don't know; it just happened." He shrugged, not feeling like talking about this. "Probably because I wasn't afraid of him."

Ignoring his last comment, Toby stared at him strangely. "Why should I call him some bastardized version of his name because people don't understand pronunciation? I *did* tell you I knew Sino-Tibetan languages, didn't I?"

"Because you don't know him," Boyd said bluntly. "And Sin is his Agency name. Should I call you by your first and middle name just because I figure it out and know I'm pronouncing it correctly? You'd probably feel as though I'm being too familiar with you."

Toby shrugged. "Well, my full name is Tobias and nobody calls me that so I suppose everyone is too familiar anyway."

"What do you introduce yourself as typically? Tobias or Toby?"

"Tobias." Toby made a face, presumably because no one seemed to listen to him when he called himself by his full name; they all called him Toby regardless. "Doesn't it sound more respectable?"

It sounds stupider, Boyd thought, but he suspected that the opinion was colored by his dislike of the man. "Then I'll call you Tobias if you call him Sin," he said reasonably. "He introduces himself as Sin so that's what he should be called. Otherwise, you're doing the same thing to him that others are doing to you."

"It doesn't matter, I'm used to it by now. And anyway, if he spoke more, I'd be more aware of that," Toby replied. "I was curious about him for so long and he barely said a word."

"Were you trying to talk to him like he's a normal human being?" Boyd asked mildly.

"I didn't say anything to him. I meant during the orientation. I've no idea what I would say during a one-on-one conversation."

"He doesn't talk much around people he doesn't know." Boyd paused then added pointedly, "I suppose that means he thinks he's superior."

Toby rolled his eyes and stood, going to his suitcase. "He's psychotic, he has an excuse. You don't even respond when people attempt to engage you."

"He's not psychotic," Boyd said firmly, standing as well to unpack his bag. The conversation was starting to annoy him. "He's just Sin."

Toby lifted his shoulders as if to say he didn't care one way or the other and they continued to put away their belongings in relative silence.

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"Allen, what are yo-- dude, are you crazy?"

There were light sounds of fabric ruffling and one of the voices said, closer, "What?"

"Just leave him alone, man. Seriously, this isn't a good idea," the first voice said, sounding anxious and worried.

"We can't just leave him here, Chris. Did you hear the way his head slammed against the wall?"

Both voices were close now and seemed to be coming from above him.

"Yeah-- because it's as hard as a rock most likely so I bet he's fine, now let's get the hell out of-- dude, don't touch him, what the hell Al..."

A hand brushed against his head hesitantly, fingers threading through what felt like wet hair.

"He's bleeding. Maybe he has a concussion. We should call for a medic."

"Okay-- fine, but we can do that from across the room. Who knows how he's going to freak the fuck out when he wakes up? I know you were training to be his partner and all for awhile but weren't you the one all friggin' relieved when you didn't make it?"

"Yeah but-- look, he's coming to."

"Let's just get out of here."

"No, he didn't just leave the Bulldog to die so why should we leave him when he's injured?"

A hint of green could be seen through Sin's long black eyelashes and he winced slightly, closing them again before opening them entirely. He stared up at the two men who were staring down at him and vaguely recalled one of them, Allen, as having been one of the agents who'd trained with Boyd to potentially be his partner.

For some reason Allen looked moderately concerned with his well-being but the other man looked understandably uneasy. Sin didn't care either way; his mind spun in circles as he tried to figure out what had happened to him and why he was on the floor. Throbbing pain emanating from the back of his head was Sin's only real clue.

Seeing the question in his eyes, Allen cleared his throat slightly. "You fell."

Sin pushed himself to a sitting position, hand pressing against the back of his head briefly before coming away slightly smeared with blood. "So I gathered."

"You were..." Allen tilted his head slightly and studied Sin, perhaps wondering if the man even wanted his help but extended his hand anyway after a moment.

Sin found it baffling; he didn't remember this guy being very sympathetic to him during the initial interview and he had no idea why Allen would be inclined to act friendly now.

"You were running at max speed on the treadmill-- it was amazing, really. Everyone was kind of... watching," Allen told him hesitantly.

Sin reluctantly accepted his hand and stared cluelessly at Allen, mind still unable to focus specifically on the events that had led to this. "Why was it amazing?"

"Because you weren't out of breath and hadn't even broken a sweat," Chris put in suddenly, tone mildly disbelieving even as he said it. "It was strange."

"But you looked really pale and uh, I guess... weak? So I guess, I don't know, it caught our attention," Allen explained further, as if he had to make his intentions known to Sin. "So when you fell, we noticed right away and came over. Your head cracked against the wall pretty hard."

Sin stared at the treadmill, then looked back at the wall which had a rather conspicuous blood smear on it. He stared at it blankly for a long time before the events of the last several moments finally came back to him.

Two times the recommended dosage of the homeopathic sleeping medication had done nothing more than put him to sleep for two hours the night before, both of which had been spent restlessly and full of bizarre and oddly vivid dreams. But it was more than he'd gotten in weeks so, feeling mildly energized, he'd decided to go to the gym.

The once relaxing and meditative pastime hadn't really agreed with his still-exhausted body. After several moments of exhilarating strength and agility, his body wore out at a disturbing speed, proving that the more powerful something was-- the more maintenance it needed.

Double vision, dizziness, nausea-- it'd all hit him at the same time and as he'd struggled to fight it, to fight the weakness, something had caught his eye.

A second look with squinted blurry vision had told him that he had seen correctly; a disturbing phantom of Jessica was sitting perched on a nearby stationary bike, smiling at him like a personal cheerleader as blood oozed from twin bullet holes in her head.

Everything after that was a blur.

Sin blanched and swallowed hard, feeling a strong urge to vomit.

"Dude, are you okay? You don't look good at all," Allen said, eyes narrowed slightly as he stared at Sin's ashen face. "We were going to call the med--"

"No," Sin interrupted, shaking his head and regretting it immediately. "Just forget it."

The other guy made a face as if he were mentally calling Sin an asshole and bumped Allen's shoulder with his own in a clear 'let's just get out of here' gesture. But Allen studied Sin stubbornly, obviously taking his loyalty to the Agency to new heights as he determinedly tried to rescue the guy who'd rescued his new boss. "You should just get checked out, man. Really. You probably have a concussion or worse."

Sin nodded distractedly, trying to blink away the mental image of his hallucination, and started away. "Right," he mumbled more out of desire to end the conversation than actual gratitude and made his way towards the entrance. His head was pounding and whatever energy he'd regained from the brief nap had been expended twice over already, leaving him dangerously fatigued and disoriented.

He could vaguely hear conversations behind him as he left, most likely the other people discussing his behavior but he couldn't bring himself to care. After years of being accustomed to four hours of sleep at night, he felt like he should be able to handle this better but his spinning head made it clear that that wasn't the case.

The walk back to his building was a blur; he couldn't help but think that this was exactly how he'd felt the first time he'd gotten drunk. His steps were uneven, thoughts a confusing mix, and he had to put extra concentration into his every move to ensure he actually made it properly.

Sin could only hope that he didn't look as out of it as he felt; people loved to take advantage of weakness and right then he was at the weakest point he'd been in a long time while on the compound. Of course, this had to happen while he was making a long trek across the entire Agency campus.

Each step seemed slower than the last until he worried that he was literally dragging his feet but didn't have the awareness to figure out whether or not he actually was. The stairs in front of his building were nearly the end of him and he could barely make out

the voices of the guards at the entrance as they began to speak. It sounded like they were talking underwater for some reason and it was more trouble to decipher than it was truly worth.

For the first time in two years he completely bypassed the stairs and collapsed into the elevator, sweat trickling down his brows as he sagged against the wall and waited impatiently to get to his floor. The ride seemed endless but after a moment he reached his floor and he stumbled down the hall, completely ignoring his guards as he burst into his apartment, shut the door behind him, and dropped onto the couch in a heap.

A part of him felt mildly exhilarated to be this naturally tired; surely this meant he would fall into an exhausted and deep sleep. Surely he would attain the kind of sleep that only mind blowing orgasms typically caused, and it would last for hours until the restlessness and nightmares finally set in. It had to happen that way.

But it didn't.

He lay there for nearly an hour, heart still pounding rapidly and ears ringing as his headache intensified; he felt off-balance and disoriented, as if the walls were swaying, and for several minutes he honestly couldn't say whether he was the one moving or if it was just the room around him.

Yet as exhausted as he felt, he couldn't fall asleep. His mind continued to race from thought to thought, re-hashing Jessica's death in Monterrey even though he continuously tried to push it out of his mind. He unconsciously kept zeroing in on the blood and bits of brains that had exploded from her head, only now he saw the moment more clearly than he ever had before, maybe even with more details than when it had actually happened.

Now all he could see was the vivid spray of her blood, a bright red arc that splattered across Hale's startled face. He saw the way her expression had been caught forever in desperation, denial and surprise; the way her head had snapped back and her body had fallen backwards with it, landing on the floor in a pool of her own blood. The dead dullness of her blue eyes, her lips slack and open, her limbs crumpled at awkward angles. The creeping red of her blood slowly staining her shirt.

It was as if that split moment in which he'd been frozen, before he'd been knocked out--all of it played in slow motion repeatedly before his horrified gaze and he couldn't make it stop.

And he couldn't sleep.

Over an hour later, with a growl of frustration, Sin got to his feet and stumbled to the bedroom. He found himself squinting down at the little bottle of sleeping pills without the actual ability to read the tiny words. After a moment of trying to figure out a dosage that would actually work on his ridiculous tolerance to all things related to sedatives, he downed more than half the bottle dry and threw himself face down on his bed to wait for the effects to kick in.

It took long enough to cause him to have doubts but fast enough to make up for the wait. His limbs suddenly felt weighed down with lead; his racing thoughts slowed down to a dull trot as a thick fog seemed to surround him and muffle all sound, all coherent thought.

The effects were almost disturbingly powerful and it was only as his eyes finally began to slide closed that he realized there was no way he'd be able to drag himself out of a nightmare now...

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Emilio didn't look surprised at all-- in fact there was a near-smile gracing his aristocratic features and his expression was almost smug; even as the sound of footsteps grew louder towards the door.

Hsin thought his father would have been more alarmed. No one was supposed to know where this place was. It was supposed to be safe. Secret. It was a place no one knew about; not Emilio's employers, not the enemies of his employers. It was where he left Hsin when he was gone.

But when the door was kicked in, Emilio didn't even blink.

Instead he graced them with a raised eyebrow and stood calmly in the kitchen, leaning against the island seemingly without a care in the world. "You're the fuckin' noisiest assassin I ever met, bro."

There were two more behind the first guy and Hsin's first impression was that they were all American, all well prepared as they spread out across the apartment in well versed unison, and that they were obviously planning to kill his father.

Two of the men looked so similar to each other that it was obvious they were brothers. They both had the same oily black hair, hooked noses and wide-set brown eyes. They strode through the Spartan loft, eyes narrowed and faces grim as they began rifling through the wide open space.

As they presumably searched for something, the first man, redheaded and tall with sharp features and an angry scar across one cheek, stared at Emilio. His pale blue eyes never flickered and his gun never wavered as he aimed it at Emilio; his gaze tracked Emilio's every move although there was something about his expression that showed clear displeasure about his task.

But Emilio continued to flash his smart-ass grin and didn't seem intimidated at all. "You really think you're gonna find anything here, Peter? Be smart."

"Shut the fuck up, Vega. You're a fool for letting it come to this," the redheaded man snapped.

"I didn't let it come to anything," Emilio replied airily. "It's not my fault he can't clean up after himself. If he'd been more careful, I never woulda found out."

"It doesn't change anything now, you idiot. You should have learned to keep your goddamn mouth shut. Now I have to do--" Peter broke off in obvious frustration and jerked his gaze away from Emilio. He ended up staring at Hsin and the displeasure on his face grew in its intensity. "Who the hell is this?"

"God's new gift to women?" Emilio offered with an innocent smile. "I guess he figured since you're going to kill me, the world needed a replacement."

Peter snorted in disgust as his eyes bore into Hsin; they swept over his skinny body and took in his unflinching gaze. "A smart ass 'till the end, huh?"

"You know it, babe."

"Too bad your kid or brother or whatever the fuck he is has to die too," Peter replied with a slight frown. "I hate killing kids. You should have gotten him out of here when you got yourself into this shit, Vega."

"This place is clean, Peter," one of the brothers yelled as they moved to the kitchen again.

"I guess let's get down to it then," Emilio suggested with a serene smile, not at all appearing concerned with his impending doom. "My will is in the safe, by the way. You can be my executor."

Hsin shifted slightly, moving closer to them, tension clear in his thin frame but Emilio shook his head sharply. "Not until they finish with me," he said rapidly, in Mandarin. "Don't touch them until I'm down."

Hsin's eyebrows drew together, replying in the same language. "Why? I--"

"Just do what I say," Emilio snapped impatiently, still speaking in the Chinese dialect.

"This guy's ridiculous," one of the other men muttered. "Shoot his fucking kid. Maybe that will shut his ass up."

Emilio's smile faded abruptly but he automatically looked at Peter as though anticipating the man's reaction. Peter hesitated and a deep frown etched into his face as he glared at Hsin, anger radiating from his tense body. "Just finish this," he snapped finally. "Do the kid after I leave."

"Aw, what a softy," one of the brothers drawled flatly and he whipped his gun out, aimed it at Emilio's head and started to pull the trigger without a moment of hesitation.

Emilio spun out of the way of the bullet which slammed into one of the plain white walls. The man's eyes narrowed and his brother came in from the side, kicking Emilio violently in the stomach. Hsin's eyebrows drew together in confusion; he knew his father could have easily deflected the attack. He knew his father could easily kill both of these men.

But for some reason Emilio allowed himself to be taken down. The two men attacked him viciously but efficiently, using their hands instead of weapons; their expressions were identical with an intent look of pleasure mixed with professionalism. Unlike Peter, they seemed to relish in the task and were enjoying the fact that, as far as they knew, Emilio was at their mercy.

They worked in tandem; when one wasn't hitting Emilio, the other was and it almost seemed like unspoken messages were passing between the two of them as they moved around each other fluidly. They wasted no excess energy or time; they simply chose the most violent, crippling moves and didn't let up.

Emilio fought back but he wasn't even using a quarter of his full fighting ability. He moved slower and didn't react or attack with the proficiency that he was capable of. He took every violent attack without once crying out in pain even as blood exploded from his mouth, as his head was slammed against the floor. Instead, he mocked them through bloody, grit teeth, and when he truly began to slow down, when the pain of the attack began to finally become too much, he hissed at Hsin not to move. Not to do anything yet.

Hsin's heart was racing; he was afraid, he was angry and he could barely breathe as he watched, frozen by his father's orders. He didn't understand the game his father was playing; he didn't understand anything that was happening but Emilio's commanding glare kept him from moving.

Emilio crouched on the floor, surrounded by the two men but the fire was still in him even if he wasn't showing that with his actions. He stared challengingly up at the brothers, ignoring Peter who refused to even look at the scene. "Do it. I dare you. Show me what you got." A mocking smile despite the obvious pain in Emilio's green eyes, bloody fingers beckoning them although he didn't seem physically able to put up a fight even if he wanted to at this point.

The attack continued; the brothers were growing angry with Emilio's taunts. Everything became a blur as Hsin's breathing became more erratic, as his father's knees finally buckled and he once again slid to the floor.

Hsin could only stare blankly at the blood that was splattered across the floor, at the bloody imprints of his father's hands on the walls. Hsin felt light-headed as he watched one of the brother's grab a handful of Emilio's hair and drag him to his feet once again, staring down at him with a cruel smile.

Emilio wasn't quite dead yet but seemed to be getting there as he stared wildly at Hsin, looking less self-assured but just as determined as ever.

"You'll know when to do it!" Emilio managed to gasp out raggedly, once again in Mandarin. He released a thin laugh followed by a choking cough. "Don't let me down, boy."

And then, abruptly, one of the brother's picked Emilio up effortlessly and threw his battered body against the far wall. Emilio's head slammed into the wall with a disturbing, resounding crack and he crumpled lifelessly. He fell awkwardly, like a broken doll; his limbs twisted in uncomfortable ways and his head struck the floor with no resistance. He

didn't move at all-- not a hint of breath, not a twitch of a finger; his skin was ashen from the blood loss that coated him like a second skin and his eyes were closed, unmoving.

Peter didn't look at Emilio's body. He just continued to stare at Hsin with the same grim set of his jaw. "I'm going to report in," he said stiffly. "Kill the kid and meet me at the base."

Darkness seemed to seep around Hsin's vision, blurring everything, making it shadowy-- and it was very difficult to breathe. He pressed his back against the wall, unable to understand what had just happened, unable to understand why his father had told him to watch him die, unable to understand why he'd listened...

And as the other two assassins moved towards him and he mindlessly listened to Peter exit the building, something in him snapped.

Just like before, he wasn't in control anymore-- his body had a mind of its own and all he could do was watch.

He launched himself at them with shocking speed, shocking strength, and as they stumbled backwards in surprise, Hsin lost himself in a mindless, blood thirsty daze. He yanked a knife from the block on the counter and killed them. Savagely.

He didn't stop until their blood pooled on the floor with his father's as he stabbed them over and over, losing himself in the violence, relishing the sound of the blade going in and out of the ravaged meat...

He didn't stop until someone weakly grasped his shoulder and Hsin mindlessly snatched one of the men's guns, spinning around and pulling the trigger without seeing, the red haze consuming him as he took out the new threat.

"Hsi..."

Having neutralized all the enemies, the gun fell from Hsin's hand and the sound seemed to echo in the room. He watched Emilio without emotion, who stared back at Hsin in confusion, shock...

Emilio had barely been standing, already weak and nearly dead from the barrage of abuse he'd taken but now he fell backwards as blood blossomed across his chest. Their gazes locked until those permanently sleepy-looking eyelids slid closed and Emilio slammed against the floor once again, his body now completely limp.

Afterimage

Hsin stood in the middle of the room, the spreading blood soaking into his sneakers, the hems of his too-long pants. He stared blankly at Emilio's body, unaware of what had just happened, what he'd just done; still completely lost in the midst of his out of control haze.

Body parts littered the floor around him, fallen from where he'd haphazardly hacked them off; fingers and parts of hands from when the men had held their arms up for defense, had ultimately cowered away in fear. The stench of blood and the body fluids that had been released from the corpses was suffocating, overwhelming; arcs of blood spread across nearly every surface in the apartment-- the floor, the furniture, the ceiling. Hsin.

Just minutes ago, the room had seemed filled with the sounds of boots and fists against Emilio's body, then the startled shouts of the brothers as they'd fought but realized they had no chance, and the following screams of pain that had cut off abruptly as they'd died.

Now, oppressive silence surrounded him.

Silence and death.

Chapter 6

There were too many people.

Too many people bustling through the compound, scurrying around scaffolding and fenced off construction zones; Agency employees mixing with private contractors and the noise was nearly too much to bear.

The constant buzz of a drill, the pounding of a jackhammer and that overpowering din of overlapping voices, of conversation and loudness and whispering all at once.

It was making Sin anxious; the closeness, the noise, the clutter of humans pressing so near when all he wanted was to be left alone... It was putting him on edge and it was obvious from his posture; the hunched shoulders, face dropped to stare only at the floor as he wrapped his arms around his torso...

He probably looked like a crazy person.

But with ghosts pointing fingers at him everywhere he turned... he couldn't exactly prove anyone wrong.

It'd come to the point where Sin couldn't decide if these phantoms were actually hallucinations or if this was proof that the supernatural really did exist. It was difficult to say when they were so real.

But sometimes he could feel Lydia's breath on his ear as she whispered to him, telling him how worthless her mutilated body was; how her soul had escaped long ago and that he visited nothing but a corpse that hadn't quite decomposed yet.

Sometimes he could smell the blood leaking from Jessica's head; slightly metallic as the skin around the bullet holes peeled back, blackened and ghastly as she smiled her unnecessarily self-conscious smile and gazed at him with dead eyes.

And then there was his father...

That laugh, that ridiculously loud laugh, booming and deep and infectious as a million reflections of Emilio's shade surrounded him, pointing and laughing... Always laughing.

But why was it so funny?

Was he pleased that Sin finally remembered? That the guilt he'd already felt for so long had finally manifested itself entirely-- that he'd finally realized that this sudden onslaught of remorse wasn't entirely about Lydia and Jessica... It was about the secret that he'd kept from himself for so long; that he'd repressed for years even as it'd tried so hard to push to the surface.

But who could blame Emilio if he was pleased? Why should Sin get to forget? Why should he get to go on like nothing happened? Why shouldn't he be plagued with guilt; with the memory of dragging his father's limp body through a field as if he'd been in a trance, moving on autopilot as he listened to the old instructions to always clean up evidence before dumping his father in a ditch with the two assassins that had come to kill them.

Why shouldn't he be tormented by the memory of sitting in a darkened pool of blood until something in his mind cracked and shuddered and gave out, and left him an empty shell of a boy with big black canvases where memories should have been?

What ghost wouldn't want to torment his murderer?

Sin shuddered slightly, unable to mask it from the people around him and tried to ignore the stares that were consequently aimed in his direction. It was closer to impossible than he would have hoped; the end result was an ever increasing rise in the very short temper that he possessed in the days since he'd made the mistake of taking half a bottle of pills that were apparently known for giving very vivid dreams.

Ever since that night when he'd woken in a cold sweat, panting with a racing heart and having hallucinations more frequently than usual, he'd forced himself to stay awake, not that that was a very big feat. He didn't think he could handle knowing anymore, remembering anything else... But most of all, he didn't want to relive that night again.

He didn't want to feel like he was in his thirteen year old body-- simultaneously traumatized and prepared, knowing what to do while feeling a nonstop overwhelming sense of helplessness.

It was strange that he'd been able to move on as a child; he'd just blocked it all out and followed his father's long prepared instructions to carry on his assignments before reporting in if anything ever happened to him. But as an adult, Sin could barely get through the day without feeling like he was on the edge of a black hole.

The guilt was one thing but the inimical hallucinations and impossibility of coherent thought made it difficult to move on from the idea that he was going to be sucked in, finally and completely, to the chaos of his mind. It was disturbing, frightening and it made him wonder if he would ever see Boyd again and if he did, would he be in this state or would it have worsened by that time?

Or maybe he would have already committed suicide because that idea had been plaguing Sin night after night and it was such a seductive thought sometimes...

"He looks so strange," someone whispered, but not low enough for him not to hear.

Sin's fingers tightened around his arms, feeling simultaneously frozen and hot as he grit his teeth and tried to ignore the voice as his anger rose slightly in response. He could practically feel the stares, like ghostly fingertips treading down his spine.

The thought made him shiver again and for a moment it was hard to remember whether or not that had been an idle thought or if he really had felt fingers touching his back. The thought disturbed him so much that Sin had a physical reaction; straightening abruptly and looking around sharply, eyes zeroing in on the people who were walking up the stairs to the Tower and saw nothing. Other than a couple of people who immediately looked away, most people were not paying attention to him at all and no one was touching him.

Feeling confused and disoriented, Sin shook his head and pushed his way into the doors, anxious to get away.

It would be nice to go back to the seclusion of his apartment where he could console himself with the fact that he really was alone and that the things he saw couldn't possibly be real. After all, the guards would notice if a parade of dead people came to the door, wouldn't they?

But here he had no such luxury. Here, there were agents everywhere, people everywhere and everyone noticed him, everyone stared; it made the situation so much worse, the confusion and feelings so much more overwhelming.

But he'd been ordered to go by Carhart; the General had finally realized that Sin had never fulfilled his promise and today was the day that all of his examinations were supposed to take place.

Sin wasn't very optimistic about the course of either. He was physically weak, emaciated and suffering from sleep-deprivation. The mental aspect spoke for itself.

Sin approached the elevator bank, eyeballing the cramped corridor before finally picking his way around people and quickly entering the first elevator that arrived. Several people pushed in after him and he went back to staring at his boots, not wanting to look at anyone and hoping that no one would notice him.

"He looks like he's going to flip out any minute..."

"I knew he hadn't changed."

Sin's head snapped up and he looked around for the source of the comments but once again no one was looking at him--no one was talking.

Frustration mounted and his head began to throb. He willed the elevator to go faster but it seemed that it would make a stop on every floor and each time it dinged, his anxiety mounted as the low whispers started to increase and he couldn't help but cover his ears with his hands, squeezing his eyes shut as he willed it to stop.

But it didn't stop and when he finally opened his eyes, the agents and civilian staff weren't in the elevator anymore.

Emilio stood there, leaning against the door and grinning at him but the smile didn't quite reach his cold stare. He tilted his head back, gaze accusing and Sin felt like he was going to gag as he stared at his father's ravaged torso.

"I should have left you in that whore house to rot," his father said sullenly.

Sin stared at him, not knowing how to respond to that and suddenly got the odd feeling that he was watching this happen. He was watching himself and his father stand off; how pathetic he looked in comparison to the strapping image of young Emilio Vega as his own body practically cowered, malnourished and pale, in the corner.

And then he saw all of the other specters begin to pop up; Jessica, Lydia, Anderson McCall, Prime Minister Cigliuti, Captain Stevens, Agents Sutherland and Collins; his two former partners, Agent Hitchens; the agent at that first meeting with Boyd, even Jared Strickland and *her*...

Faces he knew mixed with blank faces of the random civilians and cops killed during the melee, the guards and doctors he didn't know who'd been killed on the Fourth, they all filled the elevator, pressing against him, staring at him and he really couldn't handle it anymore.

Something in him snapped as the anxiety, as the fear, heightened and suddenly he was screaming. He was vaguely aware of himself moving, pushing out of the tiny crowded space, pushing through his victims, and they were touching him, reaching for him as Sin watched himself swing out wildly in response.

Hysteria heightened; the feeling of being so completely outnumbered and threatened increased but as suddenly as the hallucination had come-- it abruptly wavered and disappeared.

As reality slowly came in to focus again, Sin saw the terrified and confused Agency staff surrounding him, staring at him, not knowing what the hell was wrong with him or what to do. And he really wanted to run, just leave, get away from them all, deal with this in the confines of his own home and fuck Carhart if he couldn't accept that.

But Sin couldn't move. Or he couldn't make himself move. And he realized abruptly that this was a very bad sign.

It hadn't happened in so long... So long...

Ever since Boyd had come into the picture it had happened less and less.

The feelings of hysteria, of out of control rage, of nerve wracking fear, they were still there but the difference was that he now felt detached from them. And he watched himself; watched how his body moved backwards from the crowd, as his eyes narrowed and his face changed from disturbed and frightened to threatening and dangerous.

And with a strange dullness that typically associated his complete lack of surprise at unfortunate events in his life; Sin watched stupid, ridiculously helpful Allen Carson appear out of nowhere and advance on his body.

But Sin couldn't do anything; it was too late.

He distantly felt Allen touching him and the response was immediate. But as the taste of blood filled his mouth and screams echoed in his ear; everything began to fade away until his vision was completely black.

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"Get it the fuck off of him!"

There was a mad dash as several of the agents pounced on Sin, grabbing at his arms and chest as he mauled Agent Carson. The man had gone limp after the first few moments where everyone had just stared in frozen shock and it wasn't clear exactly what his injuries were..

Two agents tried to twist Sin's arms behind his back and pin him to the floor but he kicked backwards, boot slamming hard into the bottom of one man's chin. The agent screamed, covering his face with his hands as blood poured from the sides of his mouth, having savagely bitten his own tongue.

Sin rolled out from under the other one and sprang to his feet, slamming an elbow into a throat as he mashed the heel of his hand square into another man's face.

"Ow! Ow! *My eyes!*"

Rebecca covered her mouth with her hands, eyes filling with tears as she backed away, back pressed against the closed elevator door as she slammed her fist against the down button repeatedly and watched Sin go completely berserk.

"Fuck! Don't touch him any--just stop! The more you go at him, the more freaked out he's getting!" Someone shouted, a civilian staff member who was completely ignored by the agents who were determined to get Sin down.

But he wasn't going down-- they were.

A tall, dark-haired woman traded quick punches with Sin, ducking and spinning out of the way of his relentless attacks and expression quickly going from determined to hopeless as she realized there was no way she could escape such ridiculous speed.

His long fingers wrapped around her wrist in a grip that seemed as though it would surely snap her bones in half, before Sin lifted her effortlessly, spinning around and sending her flying into the two men who had come running in from the crowd once they saw that the woman, a high ranking field agent, was in trouble.

"You morons!"

"Kill him!"

"Get the guards!"

The elevator just wouldn't come and Rebecca stared at a panting and bloody Sin as he crouched in a corner of the hallway and stared at his attackers like an animal that refused to be tamed.

Now he didn't look like the antisocial but outrageously attractive agent with the cute smile who'd come to Payroll that day-- now he looked like something else.

He moved almost too fast to follow, dropped men with an efficiency that was frightening and it seemed no one stood a fighting chance against him.

But then footsteps pounded down the hallway of the medic unit as guards flooded the area, stepping over unconscious agents as they swarmed in on Sin. They were outfitted in riot gear even though Sin was unarmed but as she watched him fight, as she watched his shocking strength and speed, it wasn't hard to see why they felt they needed it.

"Just fucking blow his brains out!"

Rebecca's head snapped towards the man who'd yelled, a blond lower ranked field agent, and she felt an inexplicable defensiveness over Sin even though she was terrified of him at the moment. "Shut up!"

"You shut up, stupid bitch!"

There were the sounds of fighting again and this time she looked over and saw six guards overpowering Sin brutally, half strangling him as he fought and struggled nonetheless, as a needle was jammed carelessly into the side of his neck.

But he kept fighting, kept going, and no one saw it coming when he braced his feet against the wall, using the support of the guard's chest who was trying to detain him and flipped backwards, landing behind the group before moving in to attack again.

"It didn't work! Get an--Fuck! Ahh!"

"Do it again!"

"Fuck, give him more! Jesus Christ just give him all of it!"

Rebecca felt like vomiting.

But then the struggle began to slow down and Sin collapsed to the floor, completely motionless and appearing almost lifeless.

Everyone stared breathlessly at the two laid out guards and five injured agents who had been taken down by one unarmed man. But then the moment broke and one of the guards glared at the crowd as he panted and wiped blood from his brow. "What the hell happened here?"

Everyone began talking at once and the guard, Lieutenant Gerant, whistled sharply to shut them up. After a moment he swept his gaze across them and for some reason, his gaze settled on Rebecca. Maybe because she'd removed herself from the group, maybe because she wasn't in a seething, foaming, indignant rage like the majority of the mob-- she couldn't be sure.

"You," he barked. "What happened?"

In cases like these, the guards had more weight than the agents and no one disagreed with his choice. While the agents were in charge of missions and classified information, the guards were in charge of the security and order of the compound and when it came into question, no one had the right to disagree with them.

"I..." She looked at Sin's pale, unconscious form and in the back of her mind tried to equate his slender figure with the powerhouse that had just taken down seven men. "Agent Vega was... he was in the elevator and, I mean you could tell something was wrong. He was pale and sweaty and shaking, but people kept making stupid comments anyway despite the fact that he was obviously in distress of some sort."

"Oh cry me a goddamn river," someone spat in disgust.

Lt. Gerant glared at the agent before nodding at Rebecca to continue. In the background, the other guards were shackling Sin as the medical staff finally exited their wing and came out to inspect the injured men.

"I'm not sure what happened, but he started yelling and talking to himself, and he ran out of the elevator but... I don't know why, but people started grabbing at him. I don't know why. They should have just left him alone in that state. And that guy--" She

pointed to Allen, who was being transferred to a stretcher. No one seemed to have been killed or very seriously injured. "He insisted on trying to 'snap him out of it.'"

"Yeah, that damn idiot we told him not to!" The civilian staff member, a guy with thick round glasses and a name tag that placed him in Research, snapped. "He had to play the hero or whatever. Stupid field agents are all the same."

"Fuck you. Go back to your laboratory, pussy," the blond agent growled.

"Blow me," was the quick response.

"And then Agent Vega just went crazy," Rebecca finished, ignoring the commentary. "They kept pouncing on him and he kept fighting. It was a mess."

"Is he dead?" someone asked.

One of the guards sent a swift kick to Sin's ribs; he neither made a sound or moved. "Could be."

"That's enough," Lt. Gerant growled. "You people go back to whatever the hell you were doing before this happened."

Rebecca nodded weakly and backed away, pushing the down button insistently, not wanting to see anymore, to hear anymore, to find out what was going to happen next. There was a resounding 'ding' and she backed into the welcome cavern of the elevator thankfully, praying for the doors to close so that she would be forced to take her eyes off of Sin.

Finally they began to slide shut and just as they did, she heard Lt. Gerant say, "Someone inform General Carhart."

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Footsteps echoed down the hall before anyone could be seen.

The stride was swift, purposeful, and Carhart didn't stop for anyone or anything as he made his way down the long corridor of the fourth floor detainment center. He passed the cell that had housed Thierry for weeks, one of the very few that could possibly be described as humane, and didn't even look twice at the dank cube where Detainee #359

was kept in between trips to the interrogation room. She was holding out surprisingly well and so far hadn't given them any information on the group that raided the Agency.

Right now something, no, someone more important was on his mind; someone who always wound up in the worst of predicaments because nothing could ever go right when it came to him. Someone who was always in the back of Carhart's mind even when he tried so hard to tell himself that he had to let go.

But he couldn't; even through the years when Sin had rejected him entirely; even when Sin had been sentenced to life in a cell; even when he'd finally seemed happy; and even after they'd told Carhart that he was dead.

Through it all, he couldn't let go. He couldn't stop himself from checking up, from thinking of ways to get around the complexities that made up the three-ring circus that was the Agency's policies, from telling himself every night that the death of such a completely tragic individual was all his fault.

And this new mess that Sin was in-- Carhart couldn't begin to understand how it had all started, where it had all come from and of all things, why was it rearing up now that Sin had finally seemed happy and almost marginally accepted; not as one of the pack but at least as the outcast who wasn't going anywhere no matter how hard they tried to drive him away.

But, Carhart supposed as he approached the cell that housed the box, there was no doubt in his mind that there was way more to it than Sin just losing his temper.

Lt. Luke Gerant stood by the entrance waiting for him, dressed smartly in his uniform and saluting Carhart immediately. "General Carhart," he greeted respectfully.

Carhart nodded a greeting, blue eyes not leaving the 6 foot by 4 foot container that could be seen through the long window along the wall of the cell where Sin was currently locked up. "Enjoying your promotion, Lieutenant?"

Luke gave him a wan smile and turned his gaze onto the cell. "I was until now."

"How many men did you lose?" Carhart turned his gaze back on the man, sizing him up and watching his facial expressions carefully.

"Two were injured, no casualties though." Luke seemed very grateful if not a little surprised by that fact. "As odd as it sounds, he was surprisingly easy to subdue even though he took out seven people on the way."

It wasn't surprising to Carhart. "He's been in a poor state lately, Lieutenant. Mentally and physically." He wasn't about to go further but he felt that Luke at least deserved a mild explanation. Without one, people would never make an effort to understand, even if they so seldom did.

But Luke didn't seem to be one of the people who came to an instant judgment over Sin; instead, he just nodded in silent understanding before saying with some hesitation, "I think I should warn you, General... a couple of my men panicked and administered an extremely high dosage of the tranquilizer. I've already dealt with them discipline-wise but he isn't in a coherent state at the moment, if he's awake at all. He may need medical attention but I wasn't given clearance to enter yet so I'm not entirely sure."

"The Acting Marshal hadn't come to a decision on how to handle this situation at the time," Carhart said in explanation, mouth drawing down into a frown slightly.

"Has she now?"

"Yes." Carhart approached the door and started to input the long string of code but paused and looked over his shoulder at Luke. "If you are ever interested in the possibility of a career as a field agent, come to see me."

Luke's eyebrows shot up, the corners of his mouth twitching slightly in a smile. "Thank you, Sir."

Carhart turned back to the door and finished inputting the code, entering the cell and approaching the box with a dull feeling in the pit of his stomach.

When would this end?

Sometimes he really had to wonder if Sin surviving Monterrey only to be brought back to an institution that drove him crazy and tortured him was very much better than dying and finally getting peace.

It was a depressing thought, but one that he couldn't help ponder as he stared at the box.

Carhart input the next two codes and tugged the door open, ignoring the IV set up and ducking down to enter the box, unable to stand entirely inside of the thing. A part of him had hoped that the vile creation would have been destroyed right along with Connors but that had been nothing but a pipe dream. Vivienne would keep it as long as she saw it necessary but at least her decision on this particular matter had been the most intelligent one regarding Sin that had ever been suggested before.

The only problem was Sin himself and whether or not he would go along with it.

Carhart crouched down and stared at the young man before him; at the way Sin was crunched in a ball in the corner, his hands over his ears as he pushed his face into the crook between neck and shoulder.

"Sin," Carhart said calmly, reaching out to touch the younger man but stopping short at the last moment.

There was no immediate response and Carhart finally clasped his hand around one muscular forearm. "Sin, look at me," he said, louder.

A low groan emanated from where Sin hid his face and Carhart took this as encouragement to lean forward and wrap his arms around Sin's torso, hauling him around and forcing him to uncurl from the fetal position. "Can you hear me?"

Sin's eyes remained closed, the sockets shadowed by dark circles that contrasted starkly with the paleness of his skin. His eyebrows were drawn tightly together even in sleep and under his eyelids, his eyes moved rapidly as he dreamed. Sin's mouth tightened in a line even as distressed sounds made their way through and he shuddered violently after awhile.

Carhart rubbed his chin, unable to decide if he should interrupt or let the man get much needed rest but he also knew that the rest was anything but natural and that the dream Sin was having was obviously disturbing in some way.

After a moment of watching Sin, Carhart shook his head and reached out, hitting the other man hard in the face. "Wake up."

Sin's eyes didn't open immediately even though his body tensed up at the assault. However, Sin's mouth moved slightly as he tried to wake himself. It took several long moments before he could even crack his eyelids a third of the way open and even then, his green eyes were glazed heavily by the drugs and lacked any real recognition.

"Sin," Carhart tried again, leaning forward to lift Sin's head forcibly, checking him for injuries and finding nothing but a few bruises and scratches. "Are you aware of your surroundings right now?"

"Mmm."

Sin's head thunked back down to the floor when Carhart released it and the General winced slightly, unprepared for Sin's complete lack of gross motor skills. With a soft sigh, Carhart felt resigned to the fact that there was no way he would be able to talk to Sin before the arrangement was finalized, which also meant there would be no way for him to finagle an alternate deal if the unpredictable young man disagreed.

"Fuck." Carhart stood up, but not before running his fingers lightly over the side of Sin's face, and started to turn.

"Leave me," Sin rasped suddenly.

Carhart stopped abruptly and stared down at him, eyebrows drawing together. "What?"

Heavy eyelids slid up with great difficulty and Sin very obviously struggled to look at him, to focus. "Just... Just leave me here."

"What? No." Carhart crouched down again. "Why would I do that?"

Sin's eyes drifted closed again and he exhaled as Carhart shook his head in confusion. "Sin, wake up," he ordered, voice stern as he smacked his hand against Sin's cheek insistently.

A brief glimpse of green could be seen through Sin's eyelashes and he gazed up at Carhart vacantly, the drugs in his system suppressing whatever he was trying to think or say.

"Sin, listen to me. You didn't even--"

Sin's eyes closed again and Carhart shook him awake once more. "You didn't kill anyone, no one was maimed or seriously injured-- you don't deserve to be here. You need help and that's what you're going to get."

Sin blinked slowly, lips parted as he breathed heavily, fingers twitching as he fought to regain control of his body and fight the sedation. "Just go," he said weakly.

Carhart glared at Sin for a moment before standing up again. "Stop trying to push me away. I'm trying to help you. I've always tried to help you."

A smile briefly ghosted across Sin's full lips and his hand curled into a loose fist as his breathing deepened, once again falling under the power of the drugs. "Because... of my father," he mumbled almost deliriously, his words sluggish and slurred. "And I killed him..."

Carhart went very still and he stared down at Sin, his face losing its typical stoicism and gaining an expression that for one moment made him look like the boyishly confused young agent that had been paired up with Emilio all of those years ago. Carhart's eyebrows rose slightly, mouth falling open as he gazed down at his best friend's son and felt like a very heavy weight was settling firmly on his chest and shoulders.

But then the moment passed as Sin fell fully back into unconsciousness and Carhart cleared his throat, exiting the box as he pushed Sin's words far to the back of his mind. He couldn't deal with the ramifications of that comment just yet. It wouldn't be good for either of them.

Carhart ran a hand through his hair as the door automatically shut and locked, wondering how he was going to handle everything that was happening. Between his work as Director of Field Operative Activity, over-viewing a constant influx of information for the unit, the level 10 training and now Sin, he didn't know how he was going to deal with the other issues that had popped up recently without developing a bad problem with alcohol.

He exited the cell and began striding down the corridor again as his cell phone chirped briskly in the pocket of his slacks. During the past year, Morgan had managed to convince him that he should dress more professionally than he had in the past but he felt uncomfortable in the black button down shirt that stretched a little too taut across his broad shoulders and wished for his fatigues.

"Carhart," he answered briskly.

"This is Dr. Gabriel," a low, slightly nasal voice said into the phone. "Are you tied up with something at the moment, General?"

"No. Have you selected a doctor?" Carhart exited the floor and headed for the elevator, planning to go directly to the psychiatric unit.

"Dr. Annabelle Connors, Sir. She will need to be brief--"

"*What?*" Carhart's finger froze before he hit the elevator button, eyes narrowing as he shook his head in denial. "No. That's a bad idea. Get somebody else."

There was a long pause on the other end and Carhart could practically picture the skinny, bird-like man rolling his eyes as he entertained himself with thoughts of why field agents and upper ranked officers were hardheaded and prone to be illogical. "The Marshal made the decision in the end, General. You'll have to take it up with her."

Carhart flipped his phone shut with so much force that he was surprised the screen didn't crack. He jammed his thumb against the 'up' button, shaking his head as aggravation built inside of him.

What could she possibly be thinking? Why would she even entertain the idea of having Ann as Sin's doctor?

When the elevator arrived, the General took it directly up to the 17th floor, shaking his head the entire time. His mouth was set into a disappointed frown that felt as though it was permanently locked into place and he didn't bother to get rid of the unpleasant expression even as he stepped onto the executive floor.

Carhart nodded briefly at the security detail in the main lobby, newly instated after the attacks, and went directly to Vivienne's wing. In addition to the guards, Vivienne also had new bulletproof doors put in as an extra barrier between the main lobby and the two wings so he had to swipe his card once again to gain access. The clearance regarded to get into her specific wing was even higher than the level needed to gain access to the floor itself.

Carhart walked down the hallway and approached the inner lobby, stopping at the desk of Vivienne's new assistant. He didn't know much about the woman other than the fact that her name was Aisha Patel, she appeared to be Indian, generally went out of her way to show him great respect because of his position and had a much better disposition than the consistently cool disdain of Ann.

"Is she in?" he asked brusquely, not having the patience for niceties at the moment.

Aisha looked up from her work, likely still unprepared for people who didn't have to use the intercom to gain access. "Good afternoon, General Carhart. The Marshal was on a conference call but I'll see if she can see you."

Carhart nodded and crossed his arms over his chest, staring down at the girl as she dialed in to Vivienne and waited. It seemed odd to him to hear people calling Vivienne the Marshal; he didn't know if he'd ever get used to it.

A few moments passed in which he stood and continued to stare at the girl with increasing impatience until she finally looked up at him with a smile. "She'll see you now."

He nodded shortly and approached the door to her office, waiting for her to buzz him in. Once the light turned green, he turned the doorknob and entered, shutting the door behind him as he stepped further inside.

Vivienne's office looked much the same as it had when Connors had been alive except far less organized. The window along the far right wall was closed against the cold air but the curtains were open, revealing a phenomenal view of the city and the compound laid out below them; the perks of being on one of the upper floors of the Tower.

Her desk was low and heavy, a pale wood grain that fit nicely with the decor in the room. She didn't have many personal decorations; there wasn't even have a single picture up. The main thing of note was that, on the bookshelf lining the wall behind her, there were a few books including one that looked a little beaten up and had handwriting on the spine. It was partially hidden but seemed easily accessible and it hadn't been there the previous times Carhart had visited her office.

Vivienne appeared to have been in the middle of writing information down when she'd received notice that Carhart was there. Several printed sheets of paper with flowing handwriting and highlighting were scattered in front of her. Piles of paper sat in mild disarray across her desk, a stark contrast to the previous order in which she'd kept it. It made sense though; Vivienne had been very busy since taking on Connors' duties as well as her own. It was obvious by just looking at the amount of paper and folders she had around her office.

Despite this, Vivienne looked as cool and collected as when she'd had only the Inspector duties. Wearing a gray pant suit and cream colored blouse with her hair swept back in a loose bun at the nape of her neck, Vivienne looked as impeccably

professional as always. Her ice blue eyes studied Carhart and her expression remained as unreadable as ever.

She set the pen aside and folded her hands on the desk. "Zachary," she greeted him calmly but she seemed to be questioning why he was interrupting her.

"Why would you assign Annabelle Connors to be his doctor?" he asked abruptly, cutting to the point. She was obviously busy and there was no point in dancing around the topic.

Something about the way she looked at him made it seem as though she'd been anticipating this conversation. "She is the most qualified psychiatrist we could assign to his case," Vivienne replied simply.

He stared at her for a long moment before rubbing his chin with his hand as he finally answered, "How could that be?"

Vivienne studied him, perhaps debating how much she would tell him, but then she leaned back slightly in her chair and spoke more frankly. "It's no surprise that Agent Vega is not well-regarded on the compound, especially not after his latest stunt. I ordered Dr. Gabriel to find the most qualified psychiatrist we had on premise and assign them. There are certainly more qualified candidates than Ann Connors--Dr. Jenkins or Dr. Osland, for instance--but they all refused."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. "Some even said they would prefer termination from the Agency before they would be put in the same room as Vega."

Carhart frowned at that, shaking his head in disgust. It wasn't surprising considering how people generally acted around Sin but he found it more than a little ridiculous that allegedly professional doctors behaved this way. If anything it should have been them of all people who would be intelligent enough to make an effort to understand.

Vivienne paused briefly to let that sink in. "She was the only one who volunteered to take him on as a patient. After studying her records I see that she had good progress with her previous cases and although she has only recently started practicing again, she has already worked with Agent Trovosky upon his return from Russia. She has the clearance necessary, experience with the issues surrounding Level 10s, and is willing to take Agent Vega as her patient. Although we could have taken the time, money, and manpower to deal with the insubordination of the other psychiatrists and force one of them to take him as their patient instead, I don't believe that's the best course of action."

Carhart released a long, heavy sigh and slid his hand up to tangle in his short dark hair. It wouldn't be the best course of action at all; there was no way someone who'd been coerced into working with him would be objective. But still... "How do you know we can trust her to be objective given the history of her family with him? How do we know she didn't volunteer as some revenge scheme and plans to deliberately sabotage this thing?"

"Although it is plausible, I don't feel it's likely," Vivienne said calmly. "Ann is an intelligent woman who performs well in her job. She understands how seriously I take this issue; it may be Agent Vega's last chance but this is a high profile case that will reflect very clearly on the psychiatrist as well. If she wants to continue practicing with such high clearance at the Agency, she will not deliberately destroy her chances. Beyond that, she had already taken an interest in Agent Vega after years of not acknowledging him. Months ago, she viewed the video surveillance of Agent Vega's attack on her sister and anyone who watches that can see that the incident was not unprovoked. From her personal apartment, she even attempted to access Agent Vega's files but was denied clearance. It appears as though she was trying to gain more information about him not in regards to a vendetta but perhaps simply to understand."

"Hmm." Carhart hadn't counted on that information and it did make things look slightly less diabolical but it was difficult to be optimistic when all he knew were her actions and not her intentions. "Do you have any idea why she would suddenly take such an interest in him?"

"I imagine it has to do with Lydia Connors." Vivienne paused, then leaned over and pulled out a drawer with several files in it. She continued to talk to Carhart as she appeared to search for a particular folder. "When Ann was my assistant, I was aware of her disgust toward Agent Vega. In essence, she felt him to be remorseless and inhuman due to the treatment of her sister. However, for the past several months, Agent Vega has been covertly visiting Lydia Connors. It seems as though Ann was initially unaware of this."

She located the folder and pulled it out, flipping through several sheets before she laid the folder open on her desk and slid it over to Carhart. "At one point she encountered him. I found this; surveillance footage from outside Willowbrook. The video did not have audio but I captured several stills. Judging by expressions it appears as though Agent Vega may have expressed some sort of doubt and remorse in front of her. I have not heard of any arguments between Agent Vega or her since then. I currently have no

reason to believe she has any stronger ill will toward him than before; if anything, it is possible given the facts that she is sincerely interested in working with him."

Carhart's eyebrows drew together and he leaned over her desk to view the photographs. In one, Sin seemed angry, his posture tense as he spoke to Ann but as Carhart looked at them in order, Sin's expression gradually changed. Sin went from being angry and likely lashing out at Ann to looking disturbingly anguished; it was an expression Carhart hadn't seen on the younger man's face before and it caused something in him to twist.

"Why on Earth would he be visiting her?" he said out loud although he knew Vivienne had no way of knowing the answer. His eyes moved to the still that had captured Sin's retreating back and Ann looking after him, appearing somewhat bewildered but thoughtful.

"That's one answer my network hasn't determined. I can find any surveillance video I'd like, but as useful as it would be, I've yet to gain access to the human mind." Vivienne's even tone made it unclear if she was joking or if she was actually serious. "Perhaps he believed that visitations would repent some of his sins. You would know better than I what his motivations may be."

Carhart wished that was the case but there were very few times when he actually understood Sin's thoughts or actions; sometimes he wondered if Sin understood entirely himself. "It's difficult to say," he admitted finally and leaned against the wall.

"His personality, his stability, has fluctuated constantly in the past two years," Carhart continued. "He goes from highs that I've never seen in him before, vast improvements in his disposition and interaction with others, to severe lows that are also unusual. Unlike in the past where he simply accepted his lifestyle and position with a bad attitude, now his lows involve... extreme depression and hopelessness."

He was silent a moment as he remembered Sin's behavior on the rooftop before raising his eyebrows at Vivienne. "I'm sure you know the reason behind these changes in him. Or at least what started it all."

Vivienne sighed and leaned back in her chair, briefly closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose as if she had a headache. "I'm quite aware of their... relationship, yes." She did not sound particularly pleased.

Carhart studied her for a moment and debated whether or not he wanted to actually discuss this. He'd known about them for quite some time but he'd never spoken of it out loud, never talked of it with anyone else and he wasn't sure whether or not doing so now would be a good idea. But his concern and his indecision prompted him to want another opinion on the matter of his two agents. "What do you think of it?"

Vivienne considered the question for a moment, watching him with her unreadable cool blue eyes. "I think it is unstable, illogical, and that it will not last," she said frankly. "I've yet to understand why my son decided to become how he is and why, of all people, he chose Agent Vega as the current person he clings to. I don't understand what Agent Vega thinks he is getting out of this. Even aside from the fact that becoming involved with a close coworker is a poor decision, their personalities when in conflict with each other seem prone to causing high profile cases which cost great time and energy to clean up. They can be a nightmare for PR."

Carhart briefly debated disagreeing with her about whether Boyd had a choice in the matter of homosexuality but he didn't think he felt like going down that road. Instead he shrugged and told her the conclusion he'd come to long ago. "I think they're confusing obligation with something more. Sin was the first person Boyd likely opened up to, or at least that's how it seemed, and Boyd was the only person who made an effort to understand and treat Sin kindly. It seems to me that ever since these factors came into play, they decided that it should lead to more or perhaps in their minds it made them want more because it wasn't something that was possible with anyone else. But you can't build a normal, stable relationship on 'But he was the first,' 'But he was the only.' Obligation doesn't equal love."

Carhart paused, gathering his thoughts as he tried to word the thoughts that had been floating through his mind for months. Vivienne watched him silently, seeming to sense that he wasn't quite through with his analysis.

After a moment Carhart shook his head with a frown, correcting his last statement. "Not that I know that's what they're feeling or claiming for sure; but they both seem quite desperate to defend and rescue the other at times and it seems at least that they care for one another. However I don't know if that should necessarily mean they should attempt any kind of relationship outside of partnership, friendship. Their relationship can be harmful to each other as it is, and for someone like Sin who has never had any real social interaction, let alone romantic, he has no idea what he's doing anyway and it's likely to drive them into more problems than not while rushing into this thing the way they are."

"Obligation," Vivienne repeated thoughtfully, seeming to consider that. "Perhaps that is it. Unfortunately, Vega is not the first person Boyd has exhibited this obsessive behavior around. He has a tendency to cling to one person and become entirely unreasonable in the process. He was unusually attached to a little ruffian from the neighborhood when he was younger and he has been acting the same with Vega. The behavior seems to have escalated, however."

Carhart raised his eyebrows at that and tried to envision Boyd clinging to a 'ruffian.' He idly wondered what Vivienne's idea of a ruffian was and waited for her to explain her views on Boyd's behavior.

Vivienne's eyes narrowed in a contemplative manner. "Do you know when my son first told me no? Certainly, he may have said the word in front of me or to express doubt about my decisions when I was not there. But do you know when he first deliberately and repeatedly defied me to my face?"

Carhart didn't respond, assuming it was a rhetorical question; she didn't give him the chance to answer even if he wanted to.

"It was not due to his childhood friend, which I suppose would have been explainable given the amount of time he had to brainwash himself into thinking the child mattered. It was when I came to collect Agent Vega to return him to his punishment after my son freed him. Whatever it may be that Boyd thinks he feels, and I would not be surprised if he thought it was love, he truly believes it. There is no other explanation for the irrational behavior. If you ask me, what he truly feels is fear of losing the person he has become dependent on. It's incredibly troublesome; neither would be reasonable about ceasing this charade even if they were ordered to."

Carhart sighed and rubbed his forehead idly with one hand, pursing his lips together tightly. Although he and Vivienne's reasoning may be different, their thought processes were pretty much the same and he found that somewhat comforting.

He'd tried hard to see the situation differently; he'd tried to tell himself that Sin should be given a chance to be with someone like a normal person, to have companionship. But no matter how Carhart looked at it, there was something about their relationship and how it started that made him think nothing good could come of it at this point. It was a dreary, disheartening thought and he wished he could see it differently but right now there was nothing pointing to any other sign that he was wrong.

"Well," he said finally. "For the moment there's nothing we can do for them aside from splitting up the unit and sending them to opposite continents on undercover stints."

"I'm not certain it would do much other than delay the inevitable," Vivienne replied. "It's possible they would get over the infatuation but it's also possible it would do little other than temporarily disable the efficacy of your unit."

Carhart stared at her for a moment before finally asking the question he'd wanted to ask since the conversation began. "You seem incredibly composed about this whole thing. It's surprising... Really surprising. I figured you'd have found a way to keep them apart by now or at least be more disturbed by the idea that it seems to be impossible. Do you not object as much as you did initially?"

Vivienne was silent for a long moment and Carhart figured she wasn't going to answer such a directly personal question. However after nearly a full minute she sighed quietly and said, "I object primarily on the basis of how troublesome and illogical this is. I'll admit, however, that I was briefly swayed by the strength of Boyd's conviction. Even if I did not agree with the relationship, the determination with which he faced me made me want to give him a chance. A reward, I suppose, for actually gaining a backbone."

She quirked an eyebrow slightly. "He deserves a chance, as does anyone, but he is stubborn and obsessive. My concern would be that even were he to be shipped to the other side of the world, he would still be preoccupied with this. Perhaps it would work better for Agent Vega. At least for the moment there should be some respite due to the training."

"Ha." Carhart couldn't help but feel pleased by the fact that Vivienne trusted him enough to confide in him this way. He knew for a fact that she would never speak to anyone else about this. "For some reason I doubt it. When he awoke from the coma the first thing he did was come banging on my door, demanding where Boyd was."

There was a certain fondness in him as he recalled the memory and he had to admit, he liked the positive changes that Boyd had made in Sin, that fiercely loyal defensiveness being one of them. It reminded him of the way his own partnership with Emilio had been in a way. They'd been thrown in many horrifying assignments and situations together and despite how often they'd fought, how many times they'd disagreed, they'd always been loyal to one another. Or, at least, Carhart had always thought they were anyway.

Vivienne watched him, her expression unreadable, and she seemed unmoved by the idea of Sin searching for Boyd immediately, most likely because it just proved her point.

Carhart frowned slightly, looking away and turning his gaze out the window. "Anyway, I don't know what to do about them but Sin made it clear he didn't want Boyd to know what's going on and so far I've granted him that. It would only distract from Boyd's training anyway."

"It would," Vivienne agreed. "There are far more important topics for Agent Vega to be focused on now, as well. If he does not consent and cooperate with treatment, he will lose his chances. He's a valuable asset to the Agency and looking in the long run at time, cost, and energy management, it makes far more sense to keep him alive as long as he is usable and relatively stable. Marshal Connors was very short-sighted in that regard; he did nothing but increase the instability of an already unpredictable man."

Vivienne raised her eyebrows and laced her fingers together, setting her hands on the edge of the desk.

"But," she continued firmly, "I will not continue to risk the success of other missions, the health or lives of the other employees, or the secrecy of the Agency simply because one man cannot seem to control himself. It would be extremely wise of him to focus solely on himself and forget about my son who is entirely inconsequential to the issue truly at hand: whether or not Agent Vega can function in a normal society or if we need to stop wasting time and money and just be rid of him. I would prefer not to need to find a replacement for him but I will if that's what is needed. I trust you to impress upon him how serious this is."

Carhart nodded seriously. "I will. And hopefully, if their relationship is trouble elsewhere, at least here it may provide him some incentive to try his best to cooperate with the Connors girl."

Vivienne tilted her head down in a slight, graceful movement, as if she was silently agreeing with him or at least conceding that he had a point.

He stood up finally and straightened his shirt, tension seeping into his shoulders as he replayed Vivienne's words in his mind. 'Just be rid of him.' It was a disturbing thought and such a real possibility that it frightened him. Even if Sin had battled him constantly since the day he'd stepped foot on the compound, Carhart had never and probably wouldn't ever stop trying to look after him.

"Anyway, I've taken enough of your time. I'm sure you're busy with things being the way they are."

"I am," Vivienne agreed. "And considering some of the," she paused slightly, "guests who may be joining us in the future, I anticipate continuing to be so."

Carhart looked at her for a moment before nodding in agreement. "Yeah, I imagine you're right about that." He smiled briefly at her. "It's good to see you, Vivienne. I hope the position is treating you okay."

"It is." She paused then gave him a slightly more amiable look. "Thank you. You're dismissed." There was nothing rude in her words; it was simply a formal acknowledgment that he could leave.

Carhart nodded at her once more before exiting the office, not even bothering to send a wan smile at her new assistant before he strode out of the wing. The weight of the conversation increased the already heavy load on his shoulders.

Despite her assurances and the logic behind the decision to choose Annabelle Connors, a part of him still dreaded the idea and he couldn't help but think that it would lead to trouble somehow. He just had no trust in the Connors family at all; he thought all of them had a hereditary gene that made them want to exploit Sin in some way.

Maybe he was wrong, maybe he was right... whatever the case was, Carhart hoped that things would turn out well in the end because this was their final chance before the debate was ended permanently for Agent Hsin Liu Vega.

Chapter 7

Doug stood at the front of the room the trainees had all first met in, although this time there was no one else at his side. He fiddled for a minute with a projector that looked rather high-tech and sophisticated, then he turned to the trainees.

His hair was as wild and unkempt as ever but despite that he cut a rather impressive figure in the casual clothing he'd decided to wear for the day; he was obviously an incredibly fit man although his body wasn't an almost overwhelming mass of muscles like Patrick and Cade.

"Since most of you did phenomenally shitty on the communications portion of this week's training, I feel like I should warn ya that we aren't going over any of this again." He looked over the group sternly, thick eyebrows lowering over his eyes. "We ain't in uni-- there's no review before finals. No reading week, ya hear? So get it now or don't get it at all and expect to get fucked in the end. No lube either."

Boyd nearly raised an eyebrow at the wording but was more worried by what was said. Although it made sense that they wouldn't review, some part of him had hoped they would. So far he hadn't done as well as he would have hoped, which was disappointing.

It had been five days since they'd started training for the Level 10 position. On the first day, they'd received a sheet which had outlined in general what the schedule for the next three months entailed. Boyd glanced down at it now, trying to gauge ahead of time which weeks he would especially have to pay attention.

There was no set pattern to the schedule other than the fact that after the first month, there was a twenty-four hour break every two weeks which meant he would receive four opportunities in three months to actually leave the training barracks.

Other than that, the schedule was a combination of weapon, combat, and strategy training as well as undercover techniques, the last two of which he felt confident he would excel at. There was nothing really surprising about what they would be doing except for something that would occur in weeks five and six called "All-Terrain Survival and Evasion" and something in week ten called "R2I." Boyd had no idea what either entailed.

Earlier in the week, they'd already had training on intercepting, sending and receiving messages and communications, as well as basic encryption and decryption. They learned the terminology, such as the difference between ciphers and codes, as well as

learning that there were a number of encryption and decryption techniques that ranged from simplistic to more sophisticated. Although they hadn't been given an in-depth lesson on encrypted communication, it was pretty obvious that techniques spanned the world and timeline of human history.

Although Boyd was good with puzzles and figuring out plans, he found that he was not as inherently gifted at actual decryption without any real knowledge of the sender or a good idea of what the key could be.

He didn't have as many troubles when he knew the sort of mindset of the person who would have encrypted the information-- such as when he'd been able to figure out what Hale's password had been to enter his private office. But that only worked when Boyd already understood the target's profile, when he'd had background information and knew the sort of mind he was working with. When he was simply given a mess of letters and was told to decrypt it without any knowledge of the background, he realized that a lot of his previous success had been based on having additional information.

He had a bit more respect for Jeffrey after even the scant three days of training; they'd been looking at very simple encryptions and he knew that Jeffrey worked on a phenomenally higher level.

Boyd had ultimately been able to decrypt the cipher text well enough but it was a somewhat discouraging start to the training. Once he started to learn the formulas for searching for the keys to decrypt information, he did a little better. But without the instant understanding of the material he automatically felt like he was moving too slowly.

He was used to learning new subjects quickly; the main effort he felt he'd had to put into training at the Agency since he'd started had been the physical training of combat and weaponry, and since he'd never been a very athletic person he'd felt that was acceptable. But the mental aspect of learning had always been where he'd excelled and he hadn't anticipated to have even the comparatively simple start of Level 10 training cause him troubles in any way or to go more slowly than anticipated.

At least he'd done quite well in the strategy exercises that had followed. It had all been very general information they'd been working with, like being told scenarios and asked what their reaction and plan would be, or going over multiple strategies and determining which was the most appropriate for the circumstances.

Now, five days into training, he didn't know if they were still on strategy but it was possible they were transitioning to 'perception,' whatever that meant. Apparently it entailed watching some sort of video.

Doug surveyed them all to see if they sufficiently grasped the weight of his comments before moving on. "Good." He gestured at the projector. "Now we'll see if you can redeem yourselves or at least show you're not completely stupid. This next segment includes watching some films."

"Oh goodie," Cade said sarcastically, acting as if he were muttering but it was loud enough for everyone to hear. "Is it Little Mermaid? That's my favorite."

"Which version?" Emma asked, looking over with interest. Although she seemed to realize he was being sarcastic, she still looked curious. "The one where she kills herself or the one with the happy ending?"

"There's kinds?" Cade asked incredulously. "How many movies they need on some selfish fish-bitch anyway?"

"Well technically," Emma pointed out, "in the one where she commits suicide she's not really very selfish. She loved the prince and physically suffered to be by him, to win his heart, but he married a princess instead. Then, when presented with the chance to kill him to save herself from completely ceasing to exist, she chose to die instead."

Cade snorted. "She sounds like a fuckin' retard to me."

"Why are we talking about mermaids?" Andrew asked in mild annoyance, giving Cade a look. He had been irritated with the man since earlier in the week when Cade had taken it upon himself to relentlessly mock Andrew for failing to correctly decode a message in time. "Unless we're going to Atlantis or wherever the hell on our next mission and need to strategize how to get around their mer-guards, I don't see how this is related."

Boyd amused himself briefly with imagining how that strategy would even go; distract them with automated sharks while the scuba-diving stealth team swam in from above? Somehow, he felt certain that Cade would have found a way to introduce explosives to the plan.

One thing Boyd had grown to learn so far that week was that sometimes the meetings went rather like the briefings with Carhart's team; reminiscent of how Owen, Jeffrey and sometimes Ryan would get into pointless arguments that ate up time unnecessarily.

Cade somehow managed to incite someone into an annoyed comeback at least once daily. Although some of the trainees seemed very irritated by this, Boyd felt that Cade was pretty much an obnoxious, harmless idiot and Boyd wasn't too concerned when they briefly digressed. It was only a problem when they couldn't get off the topic.

"Oh, mer-guards?" Cade taunted with a smirk. "That the official term?"

"I don't know, Carter," Andrew said in irritation. "You're the expert on Little Mermaid movies. You tell us." There was the unspoken question of, 'Why the hell have you watched that movie anyway?'

"Hey, I got some dumbfuck nieces," Cade said, raising his hands in a defensive manner as if to say it wasn't his fault. "I can't help it when they bring their girly shit over and blast it on TV. At least then I can work out without having to watch 'em."

"If you worked out your brain cells you'd have probably done better in comm," Doug interrupted, looking none too pleased with their digression. "Do you people want to get on with this? If not you can continue your conversation outside of this building and this training."

Emma and Andrew looked suitably chagrined but Cade just gave a rolling shrug and settled more fully in his chair. "I'm all about getting on. Pop that motherfucker in, Teach. I got some popcorn right here."

Doug stared at him, clearly unimpressed, and he rocked back on his heels. "Ya know, it's fully within my right to dismiss any of you from this operation whenever I decide that you don't belong. It's in my duties, part of the job. Narrowing down the list and what not."

Cade looked as though he was about to make another smart ass retort but, perhaps sensing that Doug wasn't bluffing, he just leaned back and raised his eyebrows, as if to say he was now waiting patiently for training to commence.

Doug watched Cade a moment then seemed to dismiss him entirely. "Let's move on then."

Doug turned to the computer; in the time they'd been talking, he'd had the chance to get all the equipment ready. He hit a button on a small remote and the projector screen went black as the movie started. He didn't say anything at all about what they were going to be watching or why, despite a few curious and questioning glances various

trainees sent him. He dropped back into a comfortable-looking computer chair and, rocking back and forth slightly, watched the trainees closely and disregarded the movie.

The screen remained blank briefly before a video appeared.

For a moment it wasn't obvious what exactly they were looking at but then Boyd realized they were watching a video of another video being played. A projector similar to the one Doug was using but not as sophisticated was flashing grainy images of death and war across the white backdrop.

In one image, a completely razed countryside was displayed and scorched bodies were tossed about carelessly. In another image, a small child was sitting beside the body of an adult female. The child was staring at the corpse in what appeared to be numb despair.

The pictures flashed through incredibly quickly, lingering briefly on some but mostly flipping through them almost too quickly to recognize.

There was silence for a moment as the trainees stared in confusion and this time it was Toby that spoke up. He sat up a little straighter in his seat, raising his hand politely. When Doug didn't seem interested in looking over, he decided that he should just talk. "Sir, what is it that we are watching for? I'm confused as to the relevance of these videos."

Doug gave him a look and leaned back in his chair, putting his feet on the desk. "If I was gonna say somethin', McAvoy, I'd have said it already."

Toby looked suitably chagrined and turned to the screen again.

Just as their exchanged finished, a voice began droning on in the background of the video. It was a male's voice, monotonous and without accent or distinguishing qualities other than the fact that he was American and he didn't sound particularly old. The man began informing the audience of the dangers of being a sheep. His toneless voice spoke plainly about the atrocities of what he called 'a pointless third world war brought on by the Western greed for power' and he called on the 'intellects of society' to see through the media facade and stop viewing the world through rose-tinted glasses.

The video went on for a few more minutes and Boyd stopped paying complete attention to the words once he realized that it was essentially the same anti-Western dialogue that any number of post-war rebel organizations would have believed in.

His eyes focused on the images as he listened absently to the words and he tried to look for a pattern in the pictures, specific things about the ones that hovered longer than others; it was only then that he noticed a very faint mixture of letters on the backdrop. They were only visible in between flashes of the images and although he tried to make sense of it, Boyd just didn't know what it meant.

The images stopped moving and froze on a photo of the mushroom cloud that had consumed New York City. The man stopped speaking and the photo remained for nearly a full minute before the video ended.

The trainees glanced at each other and then at Doug but he didn't speak and the projector whirled to life once again.

The screen abruptly displayed what looked to be footage from a rather sophisticated surveillance camera. Unlike the grainy footage typically associated with the devices, this one was sharp, clear, and despite the fact that it was in shades of grey, it captured everything else in detail.

The camera appeared to be attached to the side of a tall building and was aimed down at the street below. It took a moment for Boyd to realize why the scene seemed familiar; this was a shot of the midtown Theater District and there were no doubts in his mind that this must have been taken before the bombings had destroyed that section of the city.

The Theater District now was nothing but an empty shell of itself; the officials hadn't deemed it important enough to rebuild since tourism was nonexistent after the attacks. Not to mention that the plummeting economy hadn't allowed much room for recreation for the struggling city-dwellers who'd actually survived. But the image in the video showed a time Boyd had never experienced; it almost seemed like an entirely different world.

Skyscrapers soared up from the ground and out of view of the camera, gleaming in the bright sunlight; the kind of golden sunlight that Boyd had never seen before, even in Monterrey where it'd been dulled by the ever-present smog, although it had been slightly thinner there.

Shorter buildings with colorful banners advertising different productions lined most of the street that was in view. Each building possessed painstaking architecture that seemed like it was straight out of the scenery of the individual shows. The entire block

was impressive; it looked like the kind of place people would want to go to just for the ambiance, the flair for life that seemed evident in every corner.

The street reminded Boyd of the beautiful kind of metropolis displayed in old movies; a bustling hub of business, where young people would want to go to start their lives and where older people would want to go to start their lives over. The entire scene screamed prosperity, commerce; it was something that had died along with the bombings of 1999, which had left the city a crumbling skeleton of its former self.

Now death and decay were thick in the streets. The only areas that had avoided the sad demise were the Financial District or a few wealthier neighborhoods; some had remained unscathed and others were promptly repaired by its residents and the city officials who wanted to keep the rich people happy and uninterested in moving away, taking with them the desperately-needed wealth to continue making the economy grow.

Now the city wasn't a place where people wanted to go; it was a place that was virtually non-existent in the media and, therefore, in people's minds. In a country that was trying to rebuild its image, showing the world the places that had been destroyed and never quite rebuilt was not a good way to represent the state of things. So the city, along with the other areas that had been ravaged by the war, were virtually forgotten by everyone except for the people who still lived there.

It was surreal for Boyd, who had lived in the city his entire life but never knew what it was meant to look like. Since he'd been born within a month of the war commencing, he'd never seen the world the way others who were older than him had.

The video appeared to have been shot in the winter if the coats and scarves people wore were any indication. A scrolling marquee on one of the buildings broadcasting headlines displayed one which read, 'Storm of the century to blow in; NFL fans panic.'

The streets were crowded with cars and the sidewalks were full of people. Most were hurrying in one direction or another but some were stationary and those were the people Boyd focused on.

There were teenagers doing tricks with skateboards near the wide staircase of one of the theaters and a middle-aged man sat on the staircase on the far right eating some kind of sandwich. A younger woman in her mid-to-late twenties stood nearby, also watching them as she chatted on a large clunky cell phone with a serious expression.

After a moment a younger kid, probably twelve or thirteen, burst onto the screen from the left side. He was holding a bag in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He looked quite proficient at inhaling although he twisted his mouth at the taste. He bounded up the steps of the same building and sat on the top one, digging through his bag idly.

The older man seemed startled and more than a little annoyed by his presence and stood abruptly, moving away from the pre-teen and leaving his discarded bag of food and wrappings as he did so.

The older man disappeared from the screen and two young white men appeared. They were carrying a large radio, which they sat on the floor and presumably turned on, and began discarding their personal belongings. Hats, glasses, cigarettes and even wallets were dropped onto the pavement before they also dropped their heavy coats on top.

Despite the fact that everyone else was shivering in their winter clothing, the two men seemed impervious to the weather. The older of the two even went so far as to discard his sweater, exposing a sleeveless undershirt which displayed a muscular torso and arms as well as a tattoo of scrawled words that snaked down one of them.

After a moment they addressed the crowd and burst into an athletic street performance that appeared half dance and half gymnastics, likely the reason they'd put all of their effects in one place in advance. Several people stopped to watch; some tourists began to film the spectacle, and the pre-teen kid dug a camera from his bag as he began to take pictures of the talented men.

The performance went on for several minutes, the wild movements and jumping taking them on a wide arc around the sidewalk, until finally it seemed as though they were coming to an end. However, at the very end one performer lost his footing and slammed into a pedestrian who had been walking through the quickly growing crowd. The man, who appeared to have been angry already anyway, began to curse and the two quickly became engaged in an altercation.

Before long the fight became more violent and two cops came running into the screen to break it up. The skateboarders quickly took off and the young kid tossed his cigarette, scrambling to get himself together, but looked so in a rush that he ended up leaving his camera and bag behind.

The picture suddenly went dark before flickering on again. This time it was the exact same street and the exact same camera but within seconds of the video playing, the camera shook violently.

The people in the shot all froze, looking around wildly with expressions of confusion. Several of them looked to the East, out of view of the camera, and pointed off in the distance as horror quickly overtook their faces.

A few turned, as if they intended to run, but before anyone could do anything else two more explosions went off in quick succession in the area the camera was recording. The explosions presumably killed or maimed everyone who had been on screen standing there; parts of the buildings buckled and cracked in the background seconds before the scene was completely obscured by a huge cloud of smoke and debris. The camera abruptly went black.

None of the trainees said anything at first but after a moment, Doug leaned over and shut off the projector before folding his hands in front of him and raising his eyebrows. "What was the significance of the first video?"

There was silence in the room and no one seemed very sure of what to say in response to the question.

"If possible, can you give us some background information on it?" Harriet asked, eyebrows drawing together. "I mean it seems like some kind of obvious anti-war rhetoric but can you tell us more or is that what we're supposed to figure out?"

Doug stared at her and Harriet shifted her gaze as the moment grew awkward but then Doug shrugged and said easily, "This was distributed on the Internet in 2007 following the sabotage of the Rose Parade in California."

"So the creators were the perpetrators?" Harriet narrowed her eyes slightly. "I guess their explanation as to why they did it?"

"Yes." Doug leaned against the desk and folded his arms over his chest, eyeballing them all. "It wasn't exactly a violent attack; they just fucked it up, hacked into networks and had televisions playing images of the bombing of New York City instead of the parade, set off some gas bombs and sent people running-- nearly caused a stampede but no one got seriously injured. Overall belief is that these kids wanted to remind people that just because New York was across the country, don't fuckin' mean the West Coast was safe."

"So they were trying to tell people to stop putting on rose-colored glasses at some stupid parade and pay attention to the events of the world and not what the media is

trying to distract them with," Toby said, looking somewhat impressed by the way the message was carried out.

"Right."

"Hey, wait. I remember this now," Emma said, pointing at the screen with a pencil. "My brothers were talking about how ironic it was that two weeks after the incident at the Rose Parade, Los Angeles was attacked."

"But that doesn't answer my question," Harriet said impatiently. She looked frustrated about her lack of clear understanding of the situation. "Are we meant to figure out who they are or something else?"

Doug snorted. "Well obviously you're not gonna figure it out if you're still asking me that, sweetheart. If you don't know what the point of it was, you obviously missed what you were supposed to see or you got no clue about what it meant."

Harriet scowled and said nothing in response.

"The reason we kept this video is because it's a radical group that spawned circa 2007," Doug continued. "There were a lot of anti-government groups that spawned during that time, including Janus. We keep information on every possible organization that could have clues to Janus's origins because as I'm sure everyone knows, no one fucking knows the identity of the leaders. If you ask me, I doubt these kids in the video have anything to do with that but the video is in the archives and it happens to include a pretty sophisticated code."

"Actually, it would make sense to me if this is related to Janus' beginning," Boyd said thoughtfully. "It's already assumed that the founders were college-aged, which the voices seemed to fit. I don't know when exactly the Rose Parade occurred in 2007, but it was obviously after the beginning of the second wave and I'd guess that alone infuriated them. I could see it being at least the inspiration for Janus; the rhetoric they used has the right amount of idealism and resentment combined with an organized, intellectual execution. And Janus has used sophisticated encryption in the past."

Emma looked mildly impressed by Boyd's knowledge. She raised her eyebrows a little when looking back at him but then she seemed to remember that it was his job to work with Janus.

Doug arched an eyebrow. "That's interesting insight, Beaulieu. But can you or any of you tell me what's encrypted?"

Jonathan shifted, crossing one knee over the other as he seemed to ponder carefully whatever he was about to say. "There was something about the backdrop of the projector, some scramble of letters that needed closer inspection, but I was unable to properly analyze it."

Doug seemed neither pleased or displeased by the answer, but that was typically the case. He had a unique style of training that involved very little encouragement or suggestion so that the ensuing mockery always seemed abrupt.

"I'd vaguely had the same thought," Toby interjected and one had to wonder if he was being truthful or just attempting to sound more aware than he actually was. "I also thought those letters were strange. I'd associated the video with the training earlier this week and hypothesized that it was a code of some sort."

Doug raised his eyebrows, leaning back on his hands. "Which sort?"

Toby faltered, face dropping slightly. "I'm not sure."

"It's not possible to decrypt it at a glance or even know specifically what kind it is without seeing the cipher text more clearly," Boyd said with a shrug. "Especially since the letters changed at least once as far as I could tell; either as a decoy or because the cipher text is so long it fills more than one screen." He paused thoughtfully. "Will we get a written representation of the cipher text?"

"Nope." Doug raised his eyebrows, giving nothing away. "Is that it, then?"

The trainees stared at him silently and that pretty much was an answer in itself. Nobody from Counter-Terror had commented at all and Boyd was the only person from Insurgency to have contributed. It was either a coincidence or a clue that agents from different divisions tended to be more analytical than others.

"Okay, then how about the second?"

Boyd realized that Doug had no intention of explaining the first video, which bothered him a little. The onus was on them as the trainees to figure it out but Boyd didn't want to leave it as an unsolved mystery; he was curious what the point of it had been, especially since it seemed like it could be connected to Janus.

He wasn't positive what type of encryption would have been involved, primarily because their teachings on coded communication had been very basic and overarching; there were probably more codes and ciphers than he knew existed. He decided that he would have to make sure he followed up on the first video later, at the very least to figure out what the cipher text had been.

"Someone was planting a bomb or scoping it out in the first part," Andrew said without a hint of hesitation.

It'd been a fairly obvious observation and once again Doug didn't seem too impressed.

"That had to have been Thanksgiving weekend, '99," Cade said lazily. "'Cause of the words in the background. That blizzard blew the shit outta the game. I remember 'cause it was canceled and I was pissed."

Boyd realized that meant the video had happened around the time he had been born. It was an odd thought, knowing that while those people were dying, across the city his mother may have been giving birth to him. He'd always known he'd been born around the time the war hit his city but he'd never thought about how close it all happened.

"There was something off about those kids running off so fast, I thought," Patrick spoke up hesitantly.

"I think they may have run off because they were being truants and a cop was coming," Emma said helpfully. "But the younger boy was suspicious. I think he deliberately left the camera behind."

Boyd agreed with her. Truants or not, there was no way a kid that age would accidentally leave his camera and bag behind; those items would be stolen immediately or could give clues to who he was.

"That performer got in a fight on purpose, too," Andrew said, apparently trying to make up for saying something so obvious at first. "He went right for the angriest guy he could."

Harriet glanced at Andrew and seemed to think about something for a moment before saying, "Well if we're implying the performers may have been involved somehow, it would make sense since they were Russian and we were hit by Russia. There's a tattoo

on one guy's arm in Russian, some kind of phrase that I couldn't translate but I recognized the language."

Boyd considered that. "The kid must have been in league with them. He had the same cigarettes as the performers and it wasn't local. Judging by his expression, I'd suspect he doesn't usually smoke or that it's a new brand for him. Maybe they gave him a cigarette and possibly money to do something for them with their camera, which could be why he left it behind. They could have picked it up after the police left."

After having spent a lot of time around Sin, who had taken to smoking even after his Jason persona ended, Boyd was becoming accustomed to the types of American packs and cigarettes that were available. Sin typically smoked one brand but Boyd had seen other kinds at stores and on the streets.

He'd noticed that the cigarette in the kid's mouth had looked different; judging by the long brown filter and black color it didn't even appear to be a local brand. There had been a small logo on it that hadn't been easily visible from that distance but was fairly distinct. In the moments before the coats had covered the cigarette packs the performers had dropped to the ground, he'd noticed they had the same type of logo.

"Is that all?" Doug asked once again, neither confirming or disagreeing with anything they said yet.

"No," Jonathan spoke up again. "I'm positive they were in league. I paid attention to the kid from the beginning since he and the performers arrived from the same direction only a few moments apart, and I also noticed the cigarettes so it was obvious that he at least bummed one from them. However, if you pay close attention to the way the performers move-- the directions they turn, where they pause, with their backs facing the East, and so on-- the kid is taking pictures of each new position before leaving the camera behind."

"There's a large bridge to the east," Boyd said thoughtfully, going over what he'd seen in the movie and the directionality of the explosions. "It wouldn't have been visible from the kid's angle but that was probably where the first explosion happened. They could have done the same thing over there. The other explosions that happened on screen seemed to be in directions the camera was aimed. They must have been staking the place out, getting an idea of traffic flow and visibility, while also acquiring seemingly innocuous pictures of what the area looked like so they knew where to plant the bombs."

Doug tapped his fingers against the desk. "Do any of you know why two Russians would be going undercover to stake out this city?"

Boyd considered that but had no idea; the only reason he could think of was the obvious answer of wanting to plant bombs, but why would they choose this city in particular, and why were they planting the bombs in the first place?

This would have been the beginning of the war, one of the moments that started the next few decades of the degrading economy and society in the United States and other global superpowers. The only thing he could imagine was if it was somehow related to the Agency, but if that was the case, why not target the compound directly?

"I've never understood why this city was targeted," Toby admitted finally. "Unless they were targeting that military base just outside of the city? But there are military bases all over the country-- I always found it curious that we were one of the first targets above everywhere else."

There was a brief moment of silence while Doug waited for someone else to answer before he finally spoke. "Because of us, smart guys. Because of this organization. The US and Russia were up each other's asses for decades before finally getting down to serious business, and between all of the spy games, Russia somehow got wind that this city was a major source of information output. Fuck knows how-- but fuck knows how they knew anything they knew about. These two countries were all over each other like flies on shit."

"So they targeted the military base thinking that's where the intelligence operation was based," Jonathan suggested. "If they knew there was actually an espionage agency here, I highly doubt we would have stayed in this specific location."

"Precisely," Doug agreed, staring at Jonathan for a moment before standing upright. "But the fact that they got wind of this at all was discouraging. It showed us that we needed better trained agents, better trained staff, more protected network frequencies-- it changed the way this organization was run."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "So if any of you think you're gonna just coast through this with bullshit answers, half-assed effort and a complete lack of respect for what we're doing here, you're wrong. The reason for this long period of training, the reason why we take the time to do this when we know most or all of you won't even make it, is because we have to be careful now. We have to make sure we have people who can do the job and not fuck shit up the way it was fucked up back then."

He turned towards the door halfway, eyes drilling into them. "Think about that real hard before we progress any further, got it? This week was a pathetic failure for the lot of you."

If Doug's words hadn't been a clear enough dismissal, the fact that he walked out made it obvious. The trainees stayed silent for a moment even after he'd left; most of them seemed to be considering what he'd said.

Boyd gathered his things and walked out, thinking about the training so far and what Doug said. He had to admit that it was rather intimidating; thinking about the fact that it could have been people in the Agency who'd been careless or traitorous enough to let information slip to the enemies. That people he knew, possibly even people of high authority, could have indirectly caused the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians. He hadn't considered the Agency's role in the start of the war.

He was well aware of the fact that there were a vast number of important secrets stored within these walls, that he couldn't give away any information if he was ever caught, and that he had to take his job very seriously because of what he knew and what they did. Although the Agency's main goal was ensuring that the government kept power, they also protected the lives of the American people.

He was aware that his own fuck up could potentially have catastrophic consequences. After Monterrey he'd realized the negative affect his actions could have on others; the fact that innocent people had been detained in Monterrey while the government searched for him had been evidence enough of that. The repercussions of his actions had rippled all the way up to the governments in the other countries.

It was stupid but he hadn't really connected the two before; how normal people could have been the catalysts or excuses needed for the politics of the war to shift, crack, and roll forward inexorably. The realization was rather sobering.

Boyd was just about to head down the hallway to return to his room when he stopped and frowned thoughtfully. For some reason Doug's words had an actual profound effect on him and it made him want to do more; work harder. If he was going to go through with this training, he was going to do it right.

In effect, he had to do homework.

Boyd was accustomed to just getting things right away, to not having to put much effort into anything academically because what he was learning was easily understandable to him. Although he had understood the concept of coded communication, of the differences between encryption, decryption, enciphering and deciphering, he hadn't been as adept as he wanted to be at figuring out the message.

If they weren't going to ever visit that topic again, he absolutely had to know how to improve. Even as a Level 9 he could receive communications that were encrypted or he may need to encrypt something himself.

Besides, it bothered him to leave the first video unsolved.

He turned down another hallway instead and followed a circuitous route to the supplies room. Although the trainees were not allowed to have outside contact, there were still people who needed to come into the building to restock supplies and clean the area. There was a room off to the side where the trainees could order supplies while they were on lock down in the building.

Granted, Boyd could wait for his first break but that was three weeks from now and he wanted to start working on the code sooner than that. He was positive that his request would be sent through the proper channels and have to be accepted by Doug before they would send him anything, so he wanted to get a head start.

When he walked into the room he found a man behind the counter, looking bored as he idly flipped through a hunting magazine. He was older, probably in his late fifties to early sixties, with white hair, brown eyes and a loosely fitting dirty white shirt and blue jeans. His feet were kicked up on the counter as he leaned back as far as his old office chair would allow.

It was unclear whether he was on his break or was just lazy because when he looked up and realized he wasn't alone, he didn't look guilty; he simply set the magazine in his lap and raised his eyebrows. "Yeah?"

"I need a book," Boyd said as he approached.

The man stared at him, probably waiting for Boyd to say more. When Boyd didn't immediately embellish the man said slowly, drawing the word out, "'Kay. Want me to randomly choose one or you got something in mind?"

"I don't have a particular title." Boyd stopped near the counter and watched the man thoughtfully. "Do you have a list of inventory or can I just give you the topic?"

The man, whose name tag upon closer inspection read 'Robert,' gave him an odd look and considered him. After a few seconds he shifted and dropped his feet to the floor with a heavy sigh, as if this was too much work he was being put through.

The magazine nearly fell to the floor so he tossed it onto the desk in front of him and laboriously wiggled the mouse on the computer nearby. The screen was black and didn't change at first, although there was a little green light on the base of the monitor that indicated it was on; he'd probably been sitting there so long that the computer had put itself into hibernation.

"It don't work real fast," Robert said as a belated explanation. He looked at Boyd sidelong and seemed to study him closely. "Gotta wait for it to load."

Boyd found Robert's scrutiny of him to be a little strange but decided that the man probably hadn't expected to get any customers during the Level 10 training period. The Agency had to keep the position staffed, though, for reasons like this and probably also so Doug and the other instructors had someone to easily contact about replenishing supplies.

"That's fine," Boyd said and leaned against the counter so he could see the screen more clearly.

A log on window appeared, white against pale blue, and Robert gave Boyd a suspicious look as he started to type in his user name and password. Boyd was mildly amused by that; what, did Robert think he was going to break back in there and use his information to order crazy things like his own personal jet fighter and eighteen cases of toilet paper?

A little hourglass replaced the mouse arrow and they stared at the screen a moment as the computer slowly loaded. It was worse here than some of the older areas of the Agency's Tower. And Boyd had thought the computers they wrote their reports on were bad.

After a few minutes the operating system kicked in, the profile loaded, and Robert double-clicked an icon labeled "Inventory Mgmt." The mouse arrow was replaced with another idly turning hourglass. The two of them watched the screen, waiting for this to load as well.

"Hey," Robert said rather casually after several seconds of silence. "I know you. You're that... one guy's partner, yeah? Vega?"

Boyd noted the pause before 'one guy' and wondered if Robert had almost said 'freak' or 'monster' like so many others chose to. Boyd watched him neutrally but with the slightest quirk of his eyebrows, as if to ask why that mattered. "Yes."

Robert raised his eyebrows and whistled slowly, looking away almost as if he was rolling his eyes. He didn't say anything further, though.

Boyd stared at him blankly. What the hell was that? How was he supposed to interpret something like that?

It was mildly annoying that Sin's infamy never quite seemed to leave him; not because it bothered Boyd what people thought about his being Sin's partner, but because so many people seemed set on just assuming the worst of Sin.

That must have been Robert's way of saying he'd heard the old rumors about Sin and thought it must be difficult being a crazy person's partner. Boyd had hoped that after Sin had saved Vivienne and things had quieted down that some of the blatant slurs on Sin's character would slow down but that was apparently not going to be the case.

"Why wou--" he started to ask but Robert cut him off.

"It's up," he said, either not noticing that Boyd had been talking or not wanting to acknowledge it.

Boyd stared at him a moment then at the screen which was finally showing a program that had several tabs, one of which appeared to be a complicated search engine. He didn't really feel like getting into another conversation about Sin's supposedly questionable mental status and instead decided to drop it.

It wasn't worth the aggravation and it wasn't as though the conversation would change anything. Boyd believed in Sin and knew he wasn't what everyone else made him out to be and Robert probably wouldn't listen regardless of the evidence Boyd could present.

"So what do ya want, then?" Robert asked, looking at him.

There was something careful in Robert's expression, as if he didn't dare give away too much, and it was at that moment that Boyd knew even if he'd tried to push the topic Robert would not have said a word about what he was thinking.

It wasn't surprising; the Level 10 trainees weren't supposed to have access to the outside world so it was technically a breach of protocol to allow them to interact with even the maintenance crew. But the building needed maintenance and even the trainees needed personal supplies during that three month period so the staff had probably just been told not to interact more than was absolutely necessary.

"I need a book on codes," Boyd said simply, then reconsidered his explanation.

"Cryptography. Search for that instead of 'codes,' maybe; I need it to cover all forms of encryption and decryption, not just encoding or decoding."

Robert made a thoughtful humming noise to himself, his eyebrows raised once more although he said nothing. Boyd found it mildly off-putting that the man clearly had a lot of thoughts about this conversation but was not taking the time to explain it. He would have preferred he hadn't given any indication of his thoughts at all if that was going to be the case.

Several long minutes passed in which Robert typed multiple versions into the computer and Boyd watched different books and other items flash across the screen. Most of them did not appear to be what he was interested in but then one caught his eye.

"Try that," Boyd said.

Robert opened up more pages on it and together they both skimmed the summary, table of contents, and other information. He looked sidelong at Boyd after a moment. "Want it?"

"Yes." Boyd pulled out his ID card and set it in front of Robert. "Here's my information."

It was another few minutes for Robert to type in the information needed on the screen, which was a surprising amount given the fact Boyd was just trying to order one book. By the time Boyd got his ID card back and he was informed that he'd be alerted when and if the book arrived, he was quite ready to get out of the tiny room with the man who kept giving him sidelong, scrutinizing stares.

It was as if Robert was searching for something in Boyd, or maybe just trying to get an idea of who the person was who was partnered with probably the most notorious field agent in the history of the Agency.

Boyd barely took the time to thank Robert before he left the room. He felt better knowing that the book was potentially on its way; if he'd gotten any type of grade for the first week he knew it would have been failing or close and that bothered him on a level he hadn't expected. He supposed it was because it implied he wasn't good enough, that he didn't have the strength or ability to actually contend with the upper level agents.

Truth be told, after the discussion with Toby, part of him was paranoid that he couldn't even stand equal with his own peers. He'd thought he was a decent Level 9 but maybe he wasn't; he hadn't worked directly with Level 9s as partners or peers except in Monterrey, which was its own anomaly.

There had been a time he'd thought maybe he had gotten the position due to his mother's influence and at that time he'd accepted it. However, for all that Boyd had once been ready to accept that possibility, now the idea just rankled him. He wasn't just his mother's son any more than he was just Sin's partner. He was tired of being defined by the people around him, as if he was such a blank, boring slate that there was nothing that identified him as himself.

At the same time, Toby had seemed to be saying that he was the problem as well; that even regardless of his mother or Sin, Boyd was unlikable, distant and removed. If he knew Boyd hadn't even graduated from college, would Toby feel even more like Boyd didn't deserve this position? That he didn't deserve this chance at promotion?

Had the Agency been so desperate for more Level 10s that Carhart had nominated him without believing he could make it? Was this all just one big political move on his mother's part, to put him in the running for something he was far too weak to achieve but she expected him to succeed anyway?

It all bothered Boyd on several levels.

He didn't want this to be about connections, about his proximity to notorious and infamous people on the compound, or about his past accomplishments or lack thereof. He was here now, at this moment, and regardless of how he got there he wanted to prove himself. He wanted to be taken seriously on his own, he wanted to be strong and capable without needing anyone else around.

Even after all that had happened between Sin and him, there were still certain things that were very evident. He was not Sin's equal in any regard; not on missions and sometimes, it seemed, not even when they were just hanging around.

Boyd couldn't identify why or how but it was something he knew on a deep level. It was like how Sin had mocked him in Canada by saying that Boyd needed to do things like sleep with informants in order to get by. It was in the way that Sin could go empty-handed into a building full of enemies and come out the other end barely touched and the only one alive.

And it was in their interactions; something there but indefinable, especially lately.

As if there was something else on Sin's mind, something Boyd wasn't privy to because he wasn't quite equal to him. It wasn't that he thought Sin was deliberately being cruel to him but sometimes it seemed as though something was missing; something unsaid or unacknowledged, especially during and after sex.

At first, Boyd hadn't even really recognized it or realized it was there. But little things over time had started to build and, for some reason, being disconnected from Sin for a week and going to bed every night alone with a racing mind had made certain things click.

In Monterrey, he'd felt closer to Sin than ever before and it hadn't been the same since. Maybe it was just because they'd been removed from the Agency and they'd had time to just enjoy each other.

When they'd had sex then it hadn't seemed as desperate as it did lately. Back then they were as close to affectionate as either of them would ever likely get. Back then, it was a lot more likely that Sin would fall asleep in the same bed as him, that Boyd would wake up and he'd still be there, sometimes not even awake yet. When Sin had lain there, breathing evenly with a relaxed face, the scars of Sin's life hadn't seemed as prominent then. Sin had seemed somehow... content. His smile had been genuine.

Lately, everything was different. Sin was tense, strained, his attitude was different and even if he didn't take it out on Boyd deliberately, it was evident in his behavior regardless. Boyd knew that Sin was having nightmares again but that had been the case all along, especially when they'd first become friends and the sexual tension between them had been high.

So why were things so different now? Why was Sin so distant when he'd never been before?

Having time to think about it made Boyd realize that all of it worried him. Sin was his friend and his lover but lately it almost seemed as though they had sex for the sake of having a frantic exhausting fuck and everything else was left behind. They still hung out but even that wasn't as relaxed as it had once been, even before they'd become lovers.

Boyd had a feeling that something more had to be going on but he had no idea what it could be. It was entirely possible that it was trauma related to Janus's torture techniques but Sin never gave the slightest indication that it had a lasting effect on his psyche. Even if it had, Sin had been through so much in the past, it seemed strange that this particular event could have damaged him so much; especially when he'd gone hunting for Boyd immediately upon awakening from the coma only to slowly withdraw in the following months.

None of it made any sense to Boyd. It was difficult to understand someone as complex as Sin and all of these new things, all of these new changes and revelations, just made it worse.

For a long time Boyd thought he'd had his partner figured out but now he wasn't sure. Just when things seemed as normal as they would ever be something new popped up to change it. He didn't even know how to soothe Sin anymore; in the past, sleeping next to Boyd had been calming during a nightmare but now Sin just seemed to want to be alone during those times.

What did that mean? Was it simply recovery from the coma? Did it mean Boyd wasn't as comforting to him anymore? Did it mean Sin didn't need him as much? Did Sin still resent Boyd somehow for things he had said or done, like his actions regarding Jessica? Why had it shifted to more desperate, intense sex, but fewer moments of simply leaning against each other?

There had been times before, especially when Sin hadn't wanted to think about a personal question Boyd had asked, that he'd grabbed Boyd and used sex as a way of avoiding answering or maybe forgetting the topic. It seemed lately it was more like that, only this time Boyd wasn't asking questions or getting answers. This time they weren't often really talking about things the way they used to. This time, they fucked and fell into a state of exhaustion and that was it.

There was a distance between them that hadn't been there before, and it was out of his control because he didn't even understand why it was there so he couldn't do anything to fix it. Sin was the person he could rely on, the person who would have his back in a fight, the person who made him feel like everything had been worth it. The person he trusted and believed in above all others. The person he loved.

But this all just went to show him that Sin still wasn't someone he completely understood.

With everything that had been going on, Boyd hadn't stopped to ask himself the questions of why their interactions had changed and what it meant. He hadn't stopped to analyze his own relationship with his partner. Maybe he hadn't wanted to.

But now that the thought was there, he couldn't make it go away.

It had slid into his mind insidiously the other night between self-conscious moments of staring at the ceiling worrying about how poorly he was doing in training and the lazy self-analysis of deconstructing his day. Listening to Toby's breathing had made him very aware of the fact that he was in the same room as another person but it wasn't Sin; it wasn't the person he wanted to be there.

He'd wished Sin was there. He'd wanted to hear Sin's breathing instead and feel his warm body next to him; he'd wanted to idly run his hand along that muscular body and tangle his fingers in that soft hair. He'd wanted that hot breath to be puffing against his bare skin cooling with sweat from their latest bout of sex and the intense orgasm that followed.

He'd wanted to fall asleep next to Sin and wake up with him still there, to feel the comforting weight of another human being who wanted to be around him for more than just events or actions, like their missions or sex.

But then a small voice inside him had whispered, "And how often has that happened lately?"

Resounding silence had been his only answer.

Chapter 8

There were voices around him but they sounded like they were underwater; distorted and uneven while coming from different directions at varying distances. It was disconcerting, confusing and it made Sin not even want to open his eyes.

His fingers twitched, tingling and feeling oddly numb and he tried to move his entire arm to regain the feeling but he couldn't. Eyebrows drawing together slightly, Sin's eyes opened into slits and he found himself staring up at a pale yellow ceiling. It seemed unfamiliar to him and as he turned his head, he stared at the rest of the room with a strange sense of dullness and apathy.

He was obviously in a medical facility outside of the Tower but this one seemed different than any he'd ever been in before. The room was larger, there was a window and there were pieces of furniture in it even if it was nothing more than an armchair and a small table. It almost looked like an actual hospital room or even like Lydia's room at Willowbrook; it lacked the Agency sterility that was always so cold and impersonal.

Sin flexed his hands, testing the restraints around his wrists but not really caring enough about the situation to break them. And he knew he could, quite effortlessly in fact. He felt stronger and more well-rested than he had in months, yet despite that he still felt oddly sluggish.

Green eyes flicked up to the IV bag hanging by the bed and he closed them after a moment of staring. He was likely being drugged in some kind of way but it wasn't the standard fare; he wasn't completely incapacitated and delirious which was typically the case so that they could control him better.

It was something that usually made him angry but now he found that he just couldn't be bothered to care.

He didn't really know what had happened after he'd left his apartment; he didn't even know how long ago it'd been. All he knew was that ever since remembering what had happened in his past, he'd sunk further into a downward spiral of pathetic depression and delusions that had caused him to truly believe he was losing his mind and that he would never get it back.

Sin was sure that whatever had happened to put him in this particular room, restrained and drugged, was probably pretty bad and he idly hoped that they'd just keep him there

forever. It wasn't something that he wanted necessarily but it was something that he felt was important.

He'd killed his father unintentionally in a completely out-of-control, self-defensive rage and his father had been the only person back then who could mentally ground him. There were no indications, especially now that things were worse than ever, that the same thing couldn't happen again. And this time to someone who meant everything to him; to Boyd.

He sighed, low and shuddery, and felt a knot form at the back of his throat. The apathy about his current situation obviously didn't extend to what was going on in the bigger picture. It was rare that he felt this emotional about anything but it was difficult not to be.

After everything that had happened in the past two years; after all of the ups and downs of his partnership with Boyd, after finally getting to experience life as a normal man with a lover and a friend and reaching what was really the pinnacle of his entire existence-- It was mind-shattering to realize that it was all a lie.

He wasn't just a product of his current environment, he wasn't damaged because of the Agency; he'd been that way from the start. And everyone here, everyone who'd shuddered at him and cringed away since the day he'd set foot on the compound had every right to have reacted the way they did.

Even before he'd opened his mouth, somehow people just knew that something was off about him. Something wasn't quite right; he was someone dangerous that needed to be avoided. Even before he'd accumulated all of the accolades as the youngest senior agent ever, people had turned away from him in fear and shunned him.

He wondered now if they'd been so wrong to react that way; after all, they hadn't been mistaken. Now that everything was in his full view, now that he could look at the entire puzzle and not just pieces, it was easy to realize that people were right about him.

He was crazy; he was a freak. He'd been damaged since life as a small child and the things he'd learned over the years, the prowess and strength, allowed him to become a monster when that damaged part of his brain took control.

Now that his memory was completely open, he saw all of the things he'd done before even arriving at the Agency and it left him completely aghast. It was no wonder that he'd blocked it all out; it was no wonder that he'd never been able to handle the idea of

remembering. But now that he did, now that everything seemed to be catching up to him; the years of physical and mental torture at the hands of the guards, of Shane, of the box, the guilt of the sheer number of lives he'd destroyed... he felt completely helpless about the situation.

And he didn't want to be free anymore. He didn't want to pretend to be a normal man who could live a normal life, or at least as normal as it would ever get for him. Not when he was capable of turning on the one person in his life that he felt he could trust, not when he was capable of murdering that person in cold blood.

That was what his father had been to him back then despite all of the punishments and training, and that was what Boyd was to him now.

And he wasn't going to let that happen to Boyd. Just the thought made him feel violently, physically ill.

His eyes closed again and he listened absently to the low hum of a conversation outside his room. There were two male voices and one female but he couldn't properly identify any of them with how slow his mind seemed to be working.

After a few moments he felt himself begin to drift off again, succumbing to whatever was being pumped into his veins, but before he could fall asleep entirely an image of a young man with curly blond hair, darkly tanned skin and big green eyes flashed through his mind. In one moment the man was smiling, joking, and in the next his face was stiff, blue, dead, and Sin saw another version of himself hiding the body.

His eyes snapped open and he stared blankly into space, instantly recognizing the man as a friend of his father's, someone whom Emilio had trusted with the knowledge of Sin's existence, someone who knew Emilio from his days on the streets of South America. Someone Emilio had trusted to check in on his son while he was away on an extended assignment and someone who had been stupid enough to try to force the claustrophobia out of Sin by locking him in a closet and making the mistake of opening it when the child assassin had worked himself up into a blind out-of-control rage.

Sin grit his teeth and shook his head back and forth, wishing that there was a way to just close off that part of his mind again; to forget everything again. He didn't know what he felt about that sudden memory, about once again seeing that man's face, but now all of the faint memories of his own father being wary of him suddenly made sense.

Sin took a long, deep breath and tried to put it out of his mind but it was impossible. It would haunt him, just like everything else. The image would stay with him forever and at night the entire scene would play over and over again in his mind.

The door opened but he didn't turn his head to see who it was, didn't really care. Even so, he couldn't help automatically tensing when someone touched him.

There was a slight pause and he looked up finally, meeting the steady gaze of an older male physician. The man didn't seem as startled by him as Sin would have expected, and after a moment of acknowledgment and apparently allowing Sin to adjust to the fact that he would be attending to him, the man spoke.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Vega?" he asked, voice low and smooth, no traces of emotion in it at all. He began to wrap a cuff around Sin's arm before taking his blood pressure, all the while studying him clinically.

"Sluggish," Sin replied, voice hoarse.

The man nodded, taking the reading and recording it on his chart before flashing a light in Sin's eyes briefly. "A mild sedative. Well, mild for you at least. Your tolerance level is quite extraordinary."

Nodding, Sin swallowed, his throat dry and scratchy. "Who are you, anyway? Where am I?"

"I'm Dr. Schwartz and you're in the Psychiatric building. You were moved here from the Fourth Floor Detainment Center two days ago." Dr. Schwartz walked around the bed and examined the half-empty IV bag.

Sin was simultaneously disturbed and unsurprised by this information. He'd known something bad had to have happened but now he could only imagine what. "Why was I there?"

Dr. Schwartz stared at him for a moment, eyebrows raising slightly. "You don't remember?"

Swallowing again, Sin shook his head wordlessly.

There was a brief moment of silence before the doctor headed to the door again. "I'll let the General explain that to you, Mr. Vega."

The door closed and Sin shut his eyes, taking a deep breath as he tried to regain a higher level of alertness. He supposed that days of being heavily sedated had at least allowed his body to catch up with the exhaustion and he wondered if that had something to do with the fact that he didn't feel as unbalanced as he had in the days prior to whatever incident had occurred. It wasn't that he was cured of anything, that was evident enough by the mental images that flashed across his mind every time he felt himself fall asleep, but perhaps he could at least maintain some level of control now.

Once again Sin heard voices outside the door. This time he recognized Carhart's right away but he still couldn't make out the exact conversation. After a brief moment, the General entered the room and shut the door quietly behind him.

Sin gazed at him silently, watching the older man's face as he stood next to the bed. "So what did I do this time?"

Carhart tapped his finger against the metal railing, face intent as he searched Sin's expression. "You don't remember anything?"

"I already told the other guy that I didn't," Sin growled impatiently, eyes narrowing slightly. "I never remember anything when this happens. The last thing I remembered was making a poor attempt at going to the medical wing just like you ordered and feeling really..." He trailed off for a moment, hesitant. "Sick."

"Sick how?" Carhart demanded, a frown on his face. "From sleep deprivation?"

"I don't know-- I guess. Maybe." Sin looked away finally, staring at the yellow ceiling again.

The General sighed and ran a hand through his dark hair, looking incredibly wearied. "Witnesses said that you'd been talking, arguing with yourself. That you appeared frenzied and frightened by something."

"Witnesses," Sin echoed blandly.

"You went berserk in the Tower, Sin," Carhart said finally. "You injured five agents and two guards."

A mental image of himself backing away from a crowd as Allen Carson followed suddenly assaulted Sin and he winced, flexing his hands again. "Did anyone die?"

"No. But there were some serious injuries and Agent Carson is going to be out of the game for quite a few months now. You nearly destroyed his arm."

"Fuck." Guilt swarmed up to the surface, buzzing in his ear and stirring up the paranoia that the phantom of his father would pop up now to mock him. "Just leave me here," he said finally, voice resigned, depressed. "Or put me back in the box. Just don't bother with me anymore."

Carhart's eyebrows drew together. "Do you really want that? To be tortured for the rest of your life? To never see Boyd again?"

Sin's mouth turned down slightly in a frown. "No. But at least I won't hurt him that way."

"You think knowing that his partner is locked up for the rest of his life won't hurt?" Carhart asked sarcastically.

"Well at least he'd be in one piece," Sin replied flatly.

There was a brief moment of tense silence before Carhart sighed in disgust. "You need to stop feeling sorry for yourself and man up, Vega. You finally have someone who can tolerate your bad attitude and your response is to stay away from them because you're too afraid of what could happen otherwise? You don't even want to try?"

"Try what?" Sin demanded, a sardonic laugh in his voice. "What the fuck am I going to try, Carhart? I'm fucked up. I'm completely and utterly fucked in the head. I hear things, I see things, I can't fucking sleep without my brain being completely shut down because of it and I randomly lose my mind and hurt people that I have nothing against. What the hell am I supposed to try to do? Tell my brain to work properly and stop making me into a fucking psychotic basket case?"

"No," Carhart said calmly. "But you could listen to what I have to say and not respond in the usual way you do when these moments have occurred in the past."

Sin stared at him blankly for a moment before making a face. "I thought we already decided that therapy was a huge waste of time. It doesn't work on me."

"Because you never give it a chance," Carhart said sharply. "You don't give your doctors a chance. You don't do what you're supposed to do to make a difference and if you don't this time, it's all over. This is your last chance before Vivienne cuts you loose,

Hsin. She's not Connors. She's not going to keep a liability around just because he's a good killer. Not when you're a danger to the people around you, to the assignments-- not when the loss is potentially much bigger than the gain."

"I don't care anymore," Sin said dully. "I really just... don't."

Carhart took a deep breath, fingers curling around the side of the bed. He looked tired, physically and emotionally. The general was well known for his youthful good looks but at the moment his eyes looked even older than his actual years. "So I guess Boyd isn't important enough for you to even make an attempt at this? You'd rather be dead than possibly waste your time seeing a psychiatrist? Trying out some medication?"

Sin said nothing, eyes moving to study the window and the expanse of steel grey sky that promised another several days of stormy weather.

"Because that's all Vivienne wants of you," Carhart continued. "The terms of this agreement are simple. You get intensive psychiatric help, sessions once or twice a week, you take the medication and do whatever tests are required, and if your condition improves you go back to your regular status as an active field agent. Until then, you're considered unavailable for any assignment no matter how important, especially if it's important, and Kassian will cover for whatever tasks have been assigned for you."

"Goody."

Carhart began to massage his temples, squinting down at Sin. "This is your last chance, Hsin. It isn't a joke. And it's not just about you anymore. Now you've gone and made that poor damn kid care about you some kind of way. What happens to you affects him. Don't be selfish enough to not take that into consideration, especially when you have nothing to lose by at least trying. Don't throw your life away."

It was hard to disagree when Carhart framed it that way. He was essentially saying to Sin what Sin had said to Boyd all of those months ago when Boyd had tried to push him away.

But Sin knew he didn't believe in it; he knew he couldn't trust any doctor they sent his way and he knew how hard it would be for him to expose every vulnerability of his character to someone like that. He'd never honestly given medication a chance, had never believed that something was wrong with him that medication could cure and even now he had doubts. But it was either make the effort to try or allow himself to be terminated.

A part of him didn't mind the thought so much; a part of him looked at termination as a chance to rest finally, to just be free of everything this shitty world threw at him constantly, free of his past, of his demons. But as soon as those thoughts crossed his mind, he also reminded himself that termination was final, that he'd never see Boyd again and like Carhart was saying, it could possibly even harm Boyd just as much mentally as other actions would physically.

No matter which way he looked at it, it always came back to Boyd and he had to admit to himself that caring for someone, having a friend, was a lot of trouble. But it wasn't more trouble than it was worth; or at least it didn't seem to be with Boyd. Everything that had happened in the past and whatever he would have to do to make Boyd happy in the future, it would be worth it. After everything that happened in the past two years, Boyd had never given up on him and if Sin disagreed to this now, he'd be the one giving up on Boyd.

After awhile Sin looked at Carhart. "I'll try."

Relief flooded through Carhart and he visibly relaxed. "Good."

Sin shifted slightly, the restraints digging into his skin as he did so. "At least that Schwartz person didn't seem to completely loathe me in advance."

Carhart cleared his throat, sliding his hands into his pockets. "Actually Dr. Schwartz isn't a psychiatrist."

"Great." Sin shook his head, dark hair falling into his eyes. At least Schwartz had appeared to be halfway professional, unlike what happened to most doctors when they were in his presence. "Can you unstrap me now?"

"That's not my call," Carhart said apologetically.

"Then wh--"

The door opened before he could finish his sentence and Ann walked in. She closed it behind her and leaned against it for a moment, much like she had that day in Lydia's room, and allowed her gaze to fall on Sin. They stared at each other for a moment before he turned his head to glare at Carhart.

Sin could feel anger building inside him as all of the false hope slowly drained away and for a moment he had to simply be silent so that he could regain his composure.

After that long spiel about trying and not giving up, Carhart was sticking him with a woman who despised him and who had every reason to. Why make him even have the slightest bit of hope that he could change his situation if they were just going to damn it to failure right off the bat by giving him a doctor who likely wanted to see him terminated or locked away forever?

"Before you say anything," Carhart began as Ann walked across the room, heels once again clacking against the tile. "I want you to know that Vivienne came to this decision very carefully and after having my own doubts, she also convinced me that Ann is the best possible choice."

"Hello, Sin," Ann said finally, her expression neutral.

"You and Vivienne are stupid fucks," Sin ground out finally and turned his head, looking out the window stonily.

Carhart exhaled slowly, looking simultaneously angry and frustrated although he didn't seem very surprised.

After a moment, Ann cleared her throat and looked up at the General. "Why don't you give us a minute?" Carhart gave her a doubtful look and she raised an eyebrow. "How do you expect me to work with him if you don't even want to leave us alone?"

Carhart shrugged. "Suit yourself. I'll be outside talking to Dr. Schwartz." He looked at Sin again, shook his head, and strode out of the room.

Ann stood there for a moment, simply looking at Sin, before walking around to the other side of the bed so that she could sit in the armchair. She crossed her arms over the pink blouse she wore and observed him for several long moments, appearing entirely uncaring that he wasn't acknowledging her at all.

Her hazel eyes studied him very carefully, taking in his pale skin, gaunt unshaven cheeks and the dark circles under his brilliant green eyes. "You look like hell."

Sin still didn't look at her. "Thanks, doctor."

Ann crossed one knee over the other and swung her foot idly. "I'm going to be completely direct with you, Sin. I'm not going to treat you like every other patient and if I did, you'd have reason to believe I was up to something. We have a history-- everyone who knows what happened to my sister knows we have a history, so I'm not going to play make believe and pretend that we don't already have some form of relationship, as dysfunctional as that relationship may be."

Sin said nothing and still refused to even glance in her direction. She leaned back in the chair and continued to stare at him, settling into silence. The minutes ticked by and when Ann showed no intentions of leaving, Sin finally dragged his gaze from the window and drilled his angry glare directly into her face.

"Leave."

"No."

Sin narrowed his eyes at her. "Leave now."

Ann raised both eyebrows this time. "Or what? How will you make me leave?"

"You seriously think that I can't break these restraints?"

One of her shoulders rose in an unconcerned shrug. "Maybe you can. But if you really wanted to, you would have already. Just like you would have thrown me out of your way in Lydia's room." She paused for a moment before speaking again. "As much as you threaten me, I don't really believe that you'd actually hurt me in your current state. I don't think you even want to."

Sin made a face and looked out the window again. Why was she acting like she knew him so well? Why was she even here? It didn't make sense-- she didn't make sense.

"What do you want, Annabelle?" he asked finally. "I'm not going to go along with this charade. I know you hate me, you've made it obvious on more than one occasion and I honestly don't blame you for it. I fucked up your sister for the rest of her life-- it's your right to want me dead or locked up or whatever you're thinking. But don't insult my intelligence by thinking I'm actually going to be stupid enough to let you be the deciding factor in whether or not I get terminated. I'd rather just get the shit over with now."

"So you'd rather die than allow me to be your doctor?" Ann asked skeptically.

"Somehow I doubt that, Agent."

"Because you don't know me. You don't know me the fuck at all."

Ann stood up and moved closer to the bed, standing in front of the window so that he had no choice but to look at her for the moment. "You must have told General Carhart that you would be going along with the agreement Vivienne offered, otherwise he wouldn't have left me alone with you at all."

"I didn't know it would be you," Sin replied glumly. "It's not an agreement anymore. It's a set up for inevitable failure."

"Why?" she challenged. "I'm a good doctor, I know I am. Why are you doomed to failure because it's me? Because of my sister?"

"Because you loathe me," Sin snapped.

"Perhaps you should be the doctor," Ann said calmly. "You're apparently quite adept at telling me what I'm feeling and why."

"Just go away," Sin repeated, testing his restraints again and resisting the urge to break them. He didn't feel comfortable being restrained with her standing there watching him. It was strange, irrational, but for some reason it made him feel vulnerable even though she could do him very little physical harm.

Ann sighed and looked away for a moment, pursing her lips. "You decided to do this for a reason, Sin, and you must have had a very good one to have agreed to it at all. You are well known in the psychiatric department for being the most difficult person to even attempt to work with and that you think our work is pointless, a scam."

She tilted her head slightly, crossing her arms over her chest again. "But a moment ago you decided that you wanted to do this. You decided to fight termination and try, really try, to come to terms with your mental instability and to see if we can possibly figure out if we can do anything to improve your situation; so that you can be functional all the time, even when someone makes you feel cornered, threatened. Are you telling me now that the reason you made that decision is no longer important to you?"

Sin's mouth turned down in a frown and after a moment he sighed, closing his eyes. He didn't want to give up; he knew that Carhart was right, he knew that his decisions affected more than just his own life, but what could they really accomplish? He couldn't

trust her, he had no reason to. As far as he knew, going along with this would just end in her damning him anyway, so why bother at all?

"It's important to me. You don't know how important it is," he said finally, quietly, allowing the anger to slowly bleed out of him because really he was too out of it to deal with it for long. "But I can't trust you. I don't even know why you'd think this would work."

Ann was silent for awhile before speaking again. "I did hate you, Sin. For a long time, I also hated my father for ever letting you off the fourth floor and for not caring about my sister enough to properly deal with the person who put her in the situation that she's in now. But that was then, and things are different now."

Sin's eyebrows drew together. "Why would they be different? Just because I haven't been as much of an outright cruel asshole to you doesn't change what I did."

"You're right," she agreed. "But it was a change in myself that makes the deciding factor in this."

"A change in yourself," he repeated flatly, eyes narrowing. "What's that supposed to mean."

Ann gazed down at him for a moment before walking over to the window and looking out. "Do you remember that day in the Tower? When we ran into each other in front of the elevators in the psychiatric wing?" She went on before he could reply. "Typically when you saw me, you were mocking, cruel, and seemed quite unrepentant for what happened. Because of that I believed you were a psychotic sociopath who had no regard for human life and didn't care about the consequences of his actions."

Sin said nothing but his frown deepened. If that were true, he was pretty sure he wouldn't be getting eaten alive by guilt every single waking day. He was pretty sure hallucinations wouldn't stalk him everywhere and drive him even more insane than he probably already was.

"But that day your words and actions made me think twice about that rather ignorant diagnosis," Ann continued. "That day you looked at me and I saw genuine remorse, I saw vulnerability. I saw a man who was very sorry for what he did and for whatever reason, was choosing to finally express that to me. I have no idea what happened to change your mind, your behavior, but it had a large impact on me," she admitted.

He remembered the day clearly-- it was the day that he'd been forced to see a psychiatrist to deal with whatever issues he may have derived from his capture and torture. It'd been the day that his flashbacks had really begun eating away at him and the day that he'd started to focus so much of his attention on Lydia, thinking she must be the reason behind all of it.

"So I finally decided to take the plunge and access the video of the incident." Ann turned away from the window and leaned against it. She looked grim at the mention of the video and her slender hands balled into loose fists. "It was difficult to watch but at least I finally saw the truth. I saw that you were in an incredibly disoriented state, a state that she put you in with the cocktail of drugs she was giving you, and then while you appeared to be at your most frantic and desperate point, she took advantage of the situation."

Ann sighed and shook her head again. "It's difficult for me to say this but it's the facts. She used her obsession with your father as an excuse to take advantage of you and you reacted violently which is not a surprise given the circumstances. So I came to terms with that, with those facts, and I came to the decision that if you'd been in your right mind, if she hadn't poked and prodded and exacerbated your already disturbed state, you wouldn't have harmed her. Which is why I believe that even if you broke those restraints, you wouldn't harm me now."

Sin dropped his gaze, breaking her intense stare. A part of him was glad to hear her say the words; glad that she knew he'd never intended to hurt Lydia. It didn't change anything, but for some reason it made him feel slightly more at ease to hear Lydia's sister stand there and tell him that what happened hadn't been his fault entirely. That if anything, the situation made him seem less like a complete cold-blooded monster.

She wasn't the first person to say it but in reality, her word was the only one that could make him believe it. "Okay," he said finally, voice still doubtful. "But why would that make you want to help me?"

She considered the question for a moment before answering. "I pity you and I know that is the last thing you want to hear, but it's the truth. I pity you the way I pity my sister. You are both severely damaged individuals who are nothing more than a product of bad parenting and this wretched organization. She was just as mentally unstable as you are, the video is evidence enough of that, and I feel that as a doctor I should have seen that sooner."

Sin still didn't meet her gaze and as indignant as the idea of her pity made him, he couldn't help but admit that her words had a strange effect on him. He didn't know if it was because he was still half drugged and weak or because he was just desperate to reach any shred of hope, but for some reason he believed her. He believed what she was saying and it made him feel better; less hopeless, less evil.

It was nothing that Boyd hadn't told him before but Boyd always supported him, sometimes before he even knew all of the facts. Sometimes he thought Boyd was somewhat blind to his flaws, to the situations that surrounded him, and that bothered Sin as much as it inspired him to be better.

It made him feel like he had to be a certain way to match up to Boyd's ideal image of him as the victim who was always just put into really bad circumstances; that was a large part of his fear about telling Boyd the truth. Telling Boyd that it wasn't always just about the circumstances and the people around him; there really was just something wrong with him. The fact that Boyd couldn't see that already made Sin wonder if Boyd would change his mind about everything when it finally came to light.

But having someone who had every reason to hate him understand that and not condemn him for it; to actually use that knowledge as a basis to excuse the actions that made everyone else think he was a monster... It was a relief. It made some of the heaviness lift from his shoulders.

Ann reached out and touched his chin lightly, forcing him to look at her although he instantly jerked away from her touch. "But it's not entirely for philanthropic reasons, either. I don't want to be your doctor simply because I want to make your life better. I want to be your doctor because I want to understand you. I want to understand your illness and how to possibly control it or reverse it. I've never seen anything like it before or even heard of it during my years in school and no one at the Agency has ever been able to diagnose you for whatever reason. My professional curiosity is driving me to find out more."

Sin raised his eyebrows at that and gave a dismal smirk. "So I'm your guinea pig, is what you're saying," he said finally.

Ann's mouth moved upwards into the faintest of smiles. "Yes. I suppose. Although, it isn't just about that either. I should be honest with you and tell you that it does have something to do with my sister, but not in the way you'd expect."

"Oh?"

Her face became serious once again and she clasped her hands behind her back. "I couldn't help my sister. I failed to see what was going on, I failed to see, even as educated as I was, that she had a real problem; I just failed her and now it's too late. And it may not make sense, it hardly does to me, but for some reason I feel that... by understanding you, by understanding the events that led up to that moment, somehow it will make up for my shortcomings as a doctor and as a sister."

Sin considered her for a long moment, going over everything she'd just said to him. For some reason he felt a lot calmer than he had at the beginning, a little more like they were on equal footing, possibly because she'd told him way more than was necessary and made the effort to explain.

But even then, he didn't know if he was entirely convinced.

"And if it helps," Ann began, voice dry, "no one else will do it anyway, so it's me or nothing."

Sin scoffed at that. "Of course."

Ann shrugged and waited for his answer, continuing to study him just as intently as she had since first walking into the room.

This time however, he held her gaze. Did he have anything to lose by going along with this if she was his only hope? No, not really. Saying no was a guaranteed termination while agreeing could either draw out the inevitable or go in his favor. It wasn't a difficult decision but even then, it was difficult to agree.

Once again, he thought about Boyd and the last summer in Monterrey; he wondered if things could ever be that calm, that peaceful, again. He thought about the possibility of never seeing his partner again; of dying and having his body shoved in the incinerator, of Boyd finding out and shutting down just as he had before.

But the worst part was the possibility of losing control around his partner, of hurting Boyd when he was in that state, and that was the deciding factor in it all.

"Fine," Sin said finally, nodding. "I'll do it."

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Boyd slammed onto his back on the mat so hard that the wind was nearly knocked out of him. Cade was on him immediately, one hand holding him down before he quickly and repeatedly punched Boyd in the face. Cade didn't use as much force as he could have and the blows weren't nearly as damaging as they would have been otherwise, but that was likely only because they'd been instructed to avoid disabling each other completely during take-downs.

Boyd had no doubts that Cade would have otherwise enjoyed actually pounding his face into the floor for whatever reason he felt like at the time.

Boyd lay still, momentarily stunned; even with half of his actual force, Cade was still incredibly powerful. After a second, Cade gave him an annoyingly self-satisfied look.

"Gotcha," he said smugly before he stood up and backed away.

Boyd didn't bother to reply with the obvious answer of, 'That's the point.'

They were supposed to take turns subduing and being subdued and at the moment, Boyd was the aggressor. The aggressor was expected to put up maximum resistance to being subdued but the techniques they'd learned were incredibly efficient and it wasn't too surprising that Boyd had been taken down. In any case, it still wasn't exactly a competition between them but Cade enjoyed feeling superior and Boyd didn't care enough to argue at the moment.

Even so, the man had been surprisingly quiet and serious during the last three days of intensive hand-to-hand combat training in Krav Maga; perhaps because fighting was his forte, or perhaps because he was still somewhat cowed by Doug's warning from the week before. Although he still made the occasional comment, it was mostly just to Boyd who was lucky enough to be partnered with him for the day.

For just a portion of a second longer than necessary, Boyd stayed down. He was exhausted; his body ached in places he'd forgotten could even hurt and every hour that passed made it that much harder to react on time.

He didn't consider himself to be in poor shape but he was becoming quite aware of the fact that he hadn't properly worked out in probably over a year. Although missions kept him active and he occasionally went to the training room, it was becoming apparent that

he hadn't been going nearly enough. He was definitely going to have to rectify that even after all this Level 10 training was over.

Boyd could hear the sound of the other trainees, who were also paired off, sparring with each other. He had no time to rest; if Cade had really been the enemy he would have attacked again already.

Boyd pushed himself up to his feet and watched Cade a moment to be sure he was ready. Cade didn't look away from him and, silently, they cued each other for the sparring to renew.

Cade walked up to him and aimed a high side kick at Boyd's waist. Boyd caught Cade's leg and held it firmly against his side, using his own leg as a stable support. He kneed Cade in the groin then swept his leg behind Cade's thigh and knee, knocking his support out from under him.

Cade fell to the mat on his back but Boyd didn't let go of his leg; he bent his knees and used his free arm to punch Cade in the face before he shifted and twisted Cade's leg as Boyd turned around, moving too quickly for the man to properly defend himself.

The move forced Cade to flip onto his stomach as Boyd bent Cade's leg at the knee and sat down on his back, holding him there. Cade tried to twist to attack, but with Boyd sitting on his lower back and holding his leg firmly, the best he could manage from that awkward position was a weak punch to Boyd's back that didn't do anything to deter him. As soon as Boyd knew Cade wasn't going to resist, he stood and backed away.

Watching Boyd a moment, Cade smirked then turned his back. "Come at me," he ordered.

There were several moves they'd learned, some of which they'd seen specific ways of reacting and others in which they were piecing together information they'd learned so far. Boyd didn't know exactly what Cade had planned but he didn't question it.

Boyd approached him and reached up toward his throat, intending to get him in a headlock from behind. Cade immediately elbowed him in his side, kicked him in the groin, then twisted his body so he could grab Boyd's arm while at the same time slamming one leg behind the side of Boyd's. The move was so fast that it completely threw both of Boyd's legs out from beneath him. Cade used Boyd's momentum and twisted him into the air by his arm; Boyd flipped upside down and slammed onto his back on the mat.

Cade hadn't let go of his arm and twisted it, forcing Boyd to his side on the floor so Cade could get one leg on either side of his body. Cade moved quickly and ended up with his feet on the floor, his knees in the air, and his back arched off the mat with the back of his head down. Boyd's arm was twisted and held between Cade's legs, reaching ineffectively nearly up to Cade's chest.

Boyd panted for breath and stayed still; he couldn't have moved very much even if he hadn't been exhausted, not with the hold Cade had him in. Pain radiated through his body and his eyebrows drew together as he tried to regain his senses, still not entirely over the kick to his crotch.

Training in Krav Maga usually had standards that included not injuring a person's training partner, but this was the Agency and it didn't work that way here. They'd been instructed not to disable or kill each other but they had still been ordered to apply as much force as possible.

Despite the fact that they weren't to intentionally permanently damage each other, it was very easy to see how it could happen anyway and now Boyd understood how so many people had been injured or killed during this training even with the rule. It'd been the same way during Level 9 training but here it was far more intense.

Level 9 training had shown them a variety of fighting styles and introduced them to a range of weapons and usages that had been a step further than the basic training of Levels 1 to 3 when initial field training commenced. It was intensive but Level 10 training was even far beyond that.

Doug had explained that Krav Maga was their preferred method of training style in Level 10 because unlike Level 9, which focused on a lot of self-defense techniques and combat survival, Krav Maga focused on lethality, neutralizing the enemy as quickly and efficiently as possible, and on primarily offensive close combat. Essentially, they were learning to do what Boyd saw Sin do so frequently; to subdue, disable or kill with one or two quick blows to avoid a drawn out fight, and to then keep moving. Because of that, it would have been unsurprising to have Sin at the training to co-instruct them, but instead it was Kassian who'd been assigned the task for the week.

Boyd could hear Cade breathing heavily above him; they were both sweaty and he could feel the moisture cause Cade's fingers to slide just a little on his skin. It was slightly disturbing to have the man's hands on his bare arms but despite the fact that he'd worn a t-shirt, Boyd still wore thick wristbands to cover his scars. He'd debated

simply wearing a long-sleeved shirt like he used to; the first two days he'd even tried it. But with how intense their training was, wearing something that added unnecessary discomfort wasn't worth it; not when it just made him feel even more like he was overheating.

Between the clothing he'd had to wear in Monterrey and the months he'd spent more intimately with Sin, he was starting to feel less paranoid about the idea of people seeing his bare skin. At the same time, he had no desire to show his scars off to random people and didn't want strangers he didn't really know or like to touch them.

"You better not be getting wood from having an arm between my legs, Beaulieu," Cade said with a mixture of disgust and taunting.

"Don't be ridiculous," Boyd said mildly, jerking on his arm to signify he was subdued and wasn't going to fight back. He couldn't believe the man's sense of self-importance; it was almost impressive. Cade let go of his arm and they rolled apart from each other and stood. "I'll never be that desperate in my life."

Cade snorted. "There's nothin' more desperate than a dude turning to dick," he said matter-of-factly. "And nothin' more nasty than him actually liking it."

Before Boyd could reply, Kassian clapped his hands loudly from where he'd been monitoring progress across the room. "Alright, that's enough everyone!" he called out. "We're moving to the last few techniques."

The other trainees stopped, although Andrew had been in the middle of flipping Toby who slammed onto his back with a pained groan. "Sorry," Andrew said quietly, reaching down to help him up.

Without needing to be told, the trainees gathered into a large, loose circle around Kassian. They were already starting to learn unspoken cues after the two weeks they'd been training, despite the fact that they often switched from topic to topic quite abruptly.

It was very obvious that they were expected to be able to absorb everything instantly, to take it all in and hold it, remembering it for later use on the final testing. It was somewhat frustrating but it made sense; they wouldn't be taught everything here after all, this was only preliminary Level 10 training and the chosen candidates would go through an even more grueling training after being promoted.

The first three days of the week, they'd spent time working with explosives. They'd spent several days learning about the physical properties of explosives, including how and why they worked. They'd gone over the general topics of sensitivity, stability, brisance, density, volatility, hygroscopicity, toxicity, and power. They'd been given a quick overview of a variety of tests used to determine the power of explosives and what usage they should have, including information on cylinder expansion and air-blast tests.

At one point, Cade had asked why they were being told all that "academic shit" when all they really needed to know was what pin to pull or button to push and where to throw. He'd been given an unimpressed look by Doug and informed that if they didn't even know how the explosive worked, how were they supposed to use it properly? The last thing the Agency needed was a bunch of idiot agents blowing themselves up because they were too stupid to read the manual or have any idea of what they were doing or how to store things in less-than-ideal locations.

Their second day of explosives training had been in a room designed for detonations; thick, shatterproof glass had walled them off from a large room which was heavily reinforced. They'd been told that ideally they would have gone to an outside location and detonated higher powered explosives but it was too difficult to do that near the city without drawing a lot of unwanted attention. They'd spent the day with heavy headphones to protect their ears as a variety of explosives were detonated in different scenarios in the reinforced room while they watched to see the varying damage.

After that segment had ended, they'd begun combat training. It was now their fourth day training in Krav Maga. It had started out with simple pad work, attacking each other with padded torsos and fists, and had moved to learning how to efficiently take down opponents using their bodies as well as sticks. They'd also had training in handgun disarming, but today they'd started again with forcing their partners to the floor in different scenarios.

Krav Maga was very eclectic; it drew from a variety of sources to create its own type of combat; the moves were simple, hard to forget, and fast, but they were also very effective. The first day they'd gone slowly as Kassian had shown them different ways to use their body as a weapon and how to offensively take control back from the enemy.

After the last few days, it was easy to see how Kassian could be Level 10 and also why they'd made him a team leader. His explanations were clear, concise and understandable, and he was a very patient instructor. He started out moves by showing in slow motion what he was doing and explaining each step, but when he went full speed he was incredibly quick and efficient.

He didn't quite have Sin's speed, but then, nobody did. There were moves Kassian had done where his body had seemed like nothing more than a blur and if Boyd hadn't seen ahead of time what he was doing, he probably would not have been able to identify how exactly the enemy went from standing in front of Kassian to on the floor at his feet.

Today, Kassian had been directly training more than usual. His body was covered in a sheen of sweat that made his fitted black t-shirt cling to him even more, showing off his well-defined muscles. With loose black sweat pants and bare feet, he somehow seemed even more casual than the day Boyd had seen Kassian at his home during the summer, yet here he was in Senior Agent Trovosky mode.

It was an interesting combination between the way he'd looked at his house and the way he acted at work. Regardless, Boyd idly had to admit that Kassian had a nice body. It wasn't that Boyd was actively checking him out, but he could appreciate an attractive build when he was presented with one. Kassian's shoulders weren't as wide or hips as narrow as Sin's, but he had a lot of strength in his upper body and he knew how to use it.

Kassian put his hands on his hips and stared down at them, eyes moving to each trainee before he spoke. "Before we move on, I think I need to stress exactly what the point of this is. This week's training is about learning to engage offensively and to quickly and efficiently take your opponent down, not to engage in a drawn out fight where you turtle constantly. If you don't get that soon, you don't belong here. It's really as simple as that and Doug will tell you the same thing only in not so nice of a way." He gestured over to where Doug had been observing them the entire time as he occasionally wrote something down on a chart. The Instructor's face was relatively expressionless although one of his large black eyebrows was cocked slightly as he shook his head.

Kassian wiped a hand across his sweaty forehead. "That being said, Harriet, Jon, Cade, Boyd-- good job. Andrew and Toby-- you need some work. You need to stop worrying that you're going to hurt him, Andrew. That's the entire point. And Toby, you're completely out of shape. I suggest you spend your off time and nights in the gym during these three months if you want to catch up."

Toby looked down but didn't seem too surprised by the criticism; he was probably one of the weakest people there physically. After a moment, he looked at Kassian and nodded seriously. "Thank you, Senior Agent Trovosky. I'll improve."

"Good." Kassian looked at Patrick and Emma, who'd been paired. "And you two-- what were you doing, Patrick? You're supposed to fight her, not teach her how to dance. I want to see actual combat, not make-believe."

Patrick coughed quietly and otherwise didn't respond.

"Same goes for you as I told Toby, Emma. You need to get into better shape if you're going to stand a fighting chance."

Despite the fact that Pat and she apparently hadn't been working as hard as the others, Emma was breathing heavily and she was drenched in sweat. Her hair was held back in a messy ponytail and she was slouched forward over her crossed legs as she tried to catch her breath.

She nodded after a moment, giving Kassian a bemused smile. She didn't seem upset or surprised by his words; if anything, she looked as though she'd already been thinking it herself. "I understand. I will, Senior Agent Trovosky."

"Alright then," Kassian said more amiably. "The next area we're going to focus on is disarming an opponent who has a knife. We already talked about disarming a gun but this is just as important; knives can be just as dangerous when someone skilled enough is using it. A lot of this stuff you all have probably already used on assignment, but the point of this week is to fine-tune it-- to learn how to do it quickly in a couple of motions, while minimizing damage to you, minimizing time you're going to take with this one guy when you probably have a bunch of other guys around you, and so on."

He surveyed the group for a moment before pointing at Toby. "You can be my volunteer. Take the knife."

Toby looked more than a little pleased by this and quickly got up, eyes locked on Kassian; he was acting like most of the other agents who looked up to Kassian. He grabbed the knife and stood in front of Kassian, feet slightly apart.

Kassian grabbed Toby's hand and positioned the knife under his own neck. "In a lot of scenarios people freeze when they have a blade at their throat. The key here is speed and timing to get the knife out of play and your opponent on the ground so that you can subdue him."

He kept his hands at his sides, partially held up as if telling Toby that he was momentarily giving up and willing to surrender as long as the knife was poised above

his jugular. Yet after a brief second he moved his entire body to the side so that he was out of range and at a ninety degree angle to the knife. Once he was out of the line of attack, he raised his right arm, grabbing Toby's wrist and then extended his left arm as if to punch Toby in the face.

Kassian forced Toby's arm to bend, pretending to strike his face again, before sliding away and securing the knife. He simultaneously extended his leg in a mock kick and used his other hand to twist Toby's right arm, the arm that had originally held the knife, downward and back so that Toby was flipped over onto the floor.

"If you don't strike fast enough, you're dead. You want to move fast and hit hard, surprising him so he doesn't have the chance to react," Kassian explained. "The first thing you want to do is get out of the way of the knife and apply all of your power against it, blocking. Then you stun, secure the weapon, and take him down."

Kassian nodded at Toby as the other man climbed to his feet. "Let's do it again."

This time his hands moved as fast as a cobra and he struck Toby for real. Toby's eyes opened wide as Kassian's fist connected with his face and his knees buckled when the kick, even at half the power, slammed into his side. Toby was on his back before he could even think of how to defend himself, even though he'd been aware in advance of what Kassian had been planning to do.

"It's very effective." Kassian grabbed Toby's upper arm and hauled him up. "You okay?"

Toby nodded jerkily, panting slightly as he tried to regain his breath using the techniques he'd learned in Level 9 training. "Yes, I'm fine."

Kassian looked at the other trainees. "In real life, it won't go down that way, you'll be facing opponents with unexpected skill and power. That's why they have you fight for real during these trainings instead of mock attacks. The key to really getting any of this down is knowing how to alter and use these moves on the fly. You have no idea what your opponent is thinking or what they're capable of, so you're forced to learn spontaneity in a fight by training this way. It might seem harsh, but it's for the best. Out on assignment you're facing guys who want to kill you or take you as a prisoner and torture information out of you. You want to be prepared to not let that happen."

Kassian turned to Toby again, gesturing. "Let's say you're not fighting some novice and you're fighting a really formidable opponent. Instead of Toby, let's say we have Agent Vega standing here. Now a lot of people underestimate Vega because he's so thin

looking but it's deceptive-- his height makes him look skinny, but he's really very strong, maybe even stronger than I am depending on how he's applying pressure and where."

Kassian slipped into fighting stance again, nodding at Toby to do the same. "The thing about this fighting style is that anyone can do it. It doesn't matter how bulky or skinny you are-- so even though I look stronger than Vega, it doesn't mean much. The fact that he's leaner makes him faster and meaner and as Doug and I have been stressing, speed is essential here. Speed with lethal force and knowing where to target your enemy."

Kassian raised his hands again. "So in this case, I know Vega is a superior fighter so I'll really go for the most merciless attacks. On assignment, you should pretty much be doing that anyway because you have no idea what you're up against."

He slid to the side again so that he was at an angle to the knife and grabbed Toby's arm slowly, demonstrating. "So I'm going to focus on a triad of vulnerable points to do maximum damage. Instead of punching, you're going to gouge his eyes or go for the throat." He mock slammed his fist into Toby's throat before spinning out to kick. "And instead of kicking in the side or stomach, you're going to slam your foot into his groin."

He twisted Toby's arm gently, slowly taking him down. "Finally, instead of just twisting, you'd apply enough force to actually break the arm."

Kassian got to his feet, grabbed Toby's shoulder and pulled him up again, patting him on the back. "Got it?"

Boyd didn't particularly relish the idea of using Sin as the person to imagine when trying debilitating moves. It was probably a good way of demonstrating the concept to the others but for Boyd it was odd and somewhat distracting because he couldn't imagine himself ever seriously going after Sin like that. So, for him, it worked better to think of a faceless enemy.

At the same time, Kassian made a very good point in that Sin was strong, fast and incredibly formidable, and going into a fight as if every enemy had those qualities would be better than underestimating them. After all, how many times had he himself won a fight simply because someone had underestimated him?

He'd fought before but never quite like this; never like Krav Maga, with such intense, almost frightening efficiency. After even just a few days of training, he was incredibly aware of how lucky he'd been so far that no one he'd met on missions had been trained

quite like this; that they'd given him the chance to be underestimated, that they hadn't just killed him instantly.

After a moment Kassian nodded and then selected a new volunteer for each technique that he demonstrated; showing them a variety so that they could use each for disarming a knife while being given the opportunity to mix and match different moves. Each attack was decisive, merciless, fast, and extremely effective. It really was no wonder why Krav Maga was used as the model for how Level 10 agents should fight; if mastered, it was incredibly deadly no matter the size of their opponent.

About thirty minutes later, Kassian turned to the trainees once more. "Okay, pair up again and practice what I showed you. You'll do that for a couple of hours and spend the rest of the evening practicing *retzev*."

Retzev was a form of conditioning that they'd been taught in the very beginning of the Krav Maga training. It meant 'continuous motion' in Hebrew and was used as a conditioning routine that allowed them to practice Krav Maga alone while also keeping themselves in shape.

The idea was to use all of their moves, kicks, punches, and other strikes, in a constant continuous motion for periods of time. It was the ideal way to practice Krav Maga since the basics of the style was to start with a defensive move and then quickly shift to the offense where the trainee made several decisive, flowing strikes so fast that their opponent had no possibility of figuring out what to do next.

It was hard work and Boyd's body was still aching from the previous day's long session of it.

Their pairings were switched up a bit, probably to ensure that they didn't get too used to one person's style or reflexes. Kassian appeared to be trying to put the people who'd done well with the people who hadn't, and Boyd ended up with Patrick as his next partner.

Patrick had been the one to retrieve their knife, while Boyd idly watched the others. He'd turned just in time to find Patrick nearly on him, aiming the knife at his chest. Patrick was getting into the scenario immediately, probably trying to make sure Kassian and Doug knew he was taking things more seriously this time.

Even so, Boyd nearly jumped backward; partially in surprise and partially to get away from the knife. It wasn't even real but it was a well-constructed fake; he wasn't sure

what material it was except that it was possibly hard plastic and it looked real enough that for the barest part of a second he thought it had been.

Boyd had an intense dislike of knives and so far in his career as an agent he'd always done his best to avoid using them whenever possible. There were plenty of other weapons out there that didn't make him feel as uncomfortable so he generally opted for those.

He recovered quickly, annoyed with himself for the initial feeling of alarm, and reminded himself that this was just training. Well, as 'just' as this training got. But if he was going to be jumpy at an ally's fake knife aimed at him, he would just get himself killed in reality. It wasn't as though he had an extreme reaction or that Patrick likely even noticed his hesitation, but it irked him that he felt it in the first place.

He'd been working so hard on trying to get over his old fears and phobias, to face his demons and move on; dwelling on the past did little but accentuate the bad parts of his life and make it harder to prepare for and enjoy the future. At the same time, no matter how much he'd been trying to come to terms with different issues, no matter how logical he tried to be about certain topics or circumstances, he still had automatic reactions and reflexes that were a lot harder to contend with.

Boyd supposed part of it was that when he saw knives, he still remembered that first clear view of Jared's blade, and the feeling of horrified certainty that his life was about to change forever. He remembered that terrible knowledge that he had no control over even the most important aspects of his life; he remembered watching the murder of his best friend and the feel of that same knife sliding into his stomach, still slick and warm with his lover's blood.

But Lou was dead and there had been a lot more about him than the way he'd died; obsessing about that sort of thing now didn't do himself or Lou's memory any favors.

Although Patrick had apparently been hesitant to fight seriously with Emma, with Boyd he had no trouble. For the next two hours, they traded turns being the aggressor with the knife and the intended victim who disarmed the other instead.

Patrick wasn't bad at Krav Maga; he wasn't quite as fast as Cade but he was strong. Unfortunately, he seemed to rely on that too much. Instead of managing a continuous flow of motion, he tended to rush in; he would do only part of the move then try to overpower his opponent. It left too many openings for Boyd to exploit because Boyd was quick and accustomed to changing his strategy with little warning.

In that regard, Boyd found Krav Maga to be very accessible and, in a way, something he liked; this was a style he would work with, something that went in line with his natural thought process, although on his own he wasn't as brutal as the moves could be.

The training was exhausting and painful. He was thrown onto his back, punched in the face, kicked in the groin, and all around abused more in this week than it felt like he had in a year's worth of missions. The fact that they weren't putting their full strength into the moves was little comfort, especially since that day he kept getting paired up with the strongest trainees.

By the time Kassian called out for them to take a thirty minute break before they started on *retzev*, Boyd was nearly swaying on his feet and it was only pure stubbornness and determination that kept him from dropping to the floor to pass out. At least the others appeared to be in the same predicament; Emma and Toby especially looked like they were dying.

Boyd walked over to his bag and sat on the floor with his legs splayed in front of him, leaning his back against the wall. Opening his bag took more energy and brought out more aches and pains in stretched muscles than it should have, but he was eventually able to extract his water bottle. He drank heavily; the water was warm and tasted mildly of plastic but at that moment it was like ambrosia to his dehydrated body, even though he was drinking it too quickly and could make himself sick.

With the water bottle empty, he set it on the floor next to him and leaned his head back against the wall, sliding his eyes closed for a few precious moments to just rest. The overworking nearly made him feel ill and with his eyes closed and no point of reference to focus on, he felt like the world was twisting around him.

At the same time, despite the way his entire body ached and burned, it almost felt good. He hadn't worked himself this hard in a long time and there was something almost grounding about it, as if he was getting reacquainted with his body while knowing that he was improving his strength and agility. Despite the fact that it hurt like hell now, he was being productive and helping himself out in the long run.

There was relative silence for several long moments as the other trainees sat down to take the much needed break, but after awhile Boyd could hear Kassian's voice across the training floor.

Boyd's eyes slid open halfway and he watched idly as Kassian spoke to Toby and Emma, off to the side from everyone else. Kassian spoke low enough for only those two to hear his actual words but it seemed obvious that he was demonstrating something to them, likely going over moves they'd performed poorly and giving them tips on how to improve.

After awhile Kassian gestured to the floor and Toby followed whatever instruction he was given, stretching out on his back. Kassian picked up the fake knife, holding it in his right hand and crouching above Toby, a knee on either side as he hovered above his face. Boyd recognized the move that he was demonstrating; it involved Toby blocking the knife with his right hand and using his left to grab Kassian's neck before flipping him over and disarming him while stunned.

It was one of the simpler moves and Boyd assumed that Toby had trouble with the flipping aspect of it, but even as Kassian slowly explained and demonstrated, Toby hesitated constantly, appearing mildly overwhelmed as he lost his concentration. Boyd wasn't sure what the problem was but he figured the man was just really exhausted and unable to focus anymore. It was understandable, given the circumstances.

After a few more minutes, Kassian shook his head and stood as Toby mumbled something that from Boyd's distance was completely inaudible. Toby quickly left the training area.

Boyd watched Toby go, wondering what that was about. Maybe Toby was embarrassed that he hadn't done as well as he'd hoped. Especially since the instructor was working with him one-on-one and he'd already been called out in front of everyone, he probably felt uncomfortable with the fact that he couldn't seem to do the moves correctly.

Whatever the case, as Boyd saw that Kassian was moving on to working one-on-one with Emma, he decided that this was probably a good point to refill his water bottle and walk around a little to loosen his muscles before their break was over and they switched to *retzev*. He pushed himself up and walked out of the room, trying to recall where the nearest water fountain was. The only nearby fountain was broken and the only other was in another wing but there was a bathroom in the other hallway so he headed toward there.

As he moved away from the training room, he was quickly made aware of just how eerily quiet the rest of the building was since they were the only ones inhabiting it. His footsteps seemed unnecessarily loud and, annoyed by this, he began purposely walking

to minimize the amount of sound he made. It was difficult to not think in terms of missions and what he would do on them when he was in this building.

Boyd approached the bathroom, fully intending to just fill his bottle from the faucet, but as he entered a strange sound caught his attention. It sounded like someone was gasping for breath and when he turned the corner to approach the sinks, he saw Toby hunched in the corner with his hand down the front of his sweatpants. Toby's eyebrows were drawn together, mouth slightly open as he panted. His eyes were shut as his hand moved furiously between his legs.

The silence of the area only made his breathless noises seem more prominent and it seemed that just as Boyd became fully aware of what he was seeing, the sounds grew louder and more urgent.

Surprised by the sight, it took Boyd a second to realize that he should probably get out of there to spare Toby the embarrassment of realizing he'd been caught. Boyd backed out of the bathroom and silently shut the door behind him, staring blankly at the opposite wall of the hallway for the briefest moment.

What... the hell?

He didn't even know what to think about that immediately, but he did know he didn't want to be standing there when Toby came out.

He quickly headed back down the hallway the way he'd come, as quietly as when he'd left the training room. He didn't really want to think too clearly on what exactly had been going on there but his mind wandered toward trying to figure it out.

Given Toby's bright-eyed look toward Kassian earlier and the fact that he'd just been training with him one-on-one, which included a move where Kassian hovered over him, Boyd suspected that had to be the reason Toby was now masturbating in the bathroom. Boyd hadn't known that Toby was gay, or bisexual, or whatever he was. Although it was possible that there was another explanation, the circumstances just seemed too coincidental for it not to be the case.

Boyd didn't care if Toby was gay but this was an incredibly awkward way to find out something personal about the man who also happened to be his roommate and a rather arrogant one at that. They certainly weren't close and the last thing he wanted to have as a memory was Toby masturbating in the bathroom. It wasn't that Toby was

unattractive but right then, Sin was the only person Boyd would want a mental image of masturbating.

Whatever the reason, Boyd was surprised that Toby hadn't tried to hide a little more... like go into a stall or something. Likely, he hadn't expected anyone to show up. After all, the place was deserted except for the trainees and the others had been distracted with training. But this was also their break time so, of any time that one of them could be wandering around and stopping by the bathroom, this was probably it. Boyd was just glad he'd been the person to walk in and not, say, Cade, who probably would have given Toby shit regardless of if he guessed who Toby could be thinking about.

When Boyd arrived in the training room again, he saw that Patrick and Andrew were missing but everyone else was collapsed in their own self-appointed areas as they took the chance to relax briefly. Or, in some cases such as Emma, look near to passing out. Doug was nowhere to be seen but Kassian was sitting off to the side. Boyd glanced toward him automatically and was about to look away when he noticed Kassian waving him over.

Boyd hesitated briefly, taking just enough time to, nonplussed, drop his empty water bottle off near his bag. He'd completely forgotten to refill it on the way back, which was unfortunate because he was thirsty. But he didn't have time to run back out there and Kassian wanted to talk to him, so he turned to walk toward him.

For a moment, a paranoid part of him thought maybe Kassian knew, that he was going to ask where he'd been and whether he'd seen Toby. Boyd wouldn't say anything even if that were the case, but there was no reason that Kassian would actually call him over for that; it had to be something else.

Boyd moved closer, giving Kassian a questioning look.

"Can we talk for a couple of minutes?" Kassian asked, nodding to the spot next to him.

"Of course," Boyd said, sitting down next to him. His body ached furiously during the process but once he was seated it felt better to just stay still for a bit.

Kassian was silent for a moment as he observed Boyd before speaking. "I know this isn't really the time to talk about this but there won't be a good time for a couple months, so I just wanted to apologize now."

"Apologize?" Boyd echoed in confusion. This seemed to happen with Kassian and him a lot; when Kassian said he wanted to talk, the first thing he did was apologize for something Boyd wasn't expecting. "For what?" The only thing he could imagine was that Kassian and Sin had argued last time they'd all been together.

"For that day when you came over," Kassian said with a shrug. "For pissing you off. It's really none of my business what you think about your partner and I'm sure you know him better than me so, yeah. I wanted to say sorry."

Boyd had no idea why that had occurred to Kassian to say now. It had been months since Kassian had in essence said that despite whatever change Boyd saw in Sin or how nice Sin was acting, Sin still had severe psychological issues that could potentially not be fixed. Boyd had been irritated by the implication that Boyd didn't know Sin or that Sin couldn't change; he'd felt that Kassian was labeling and dismissing Sin just like everyone else and it had bothered him.

In the end, Boyd had defended Sin to the detriment of their casual conversation and the otherwise surprisingly comfortable atmosphere had become very distant and cool. It had quickly become apparent that the best thing for Boyd to do at that time was leave, which he had.

Granted, it would be several more months from now until they were through with the training and Kassian could talk more freely with him. But Boyd hadn't realized that the disagreement had been bothering Kassian during that time, at least enough for him to still think about it. Boyd certainly hadn't thought about it much afterward.

"It's alright," he replied, leaning back against the wall and studying Kassian. "I don't have the same opinion as most people do, so it's not unusual for a disagreement to start over him. I'm not angry with you."

"Good." Kassian gave him a half smile and raised his eyebrows. "Although, I'm pretty angry at the moment myself."

"Are you now?" Boyd asked in faint amusement, because Kassian seemed remarkably calm. "Why?"

"Because this is what became of my alleged downtime," the other man said wryly. "And your partner is supposed to be here for this, not me."

That was true; Boyd hadn't thought about the fact that this was supposed to be Kassian's time off. "I wondered about that; he seemed like the first choice to make for this type of fighting style. Why isn't he here?"

Kassian shrugged. "Beats the hell out of me. They didn't tell me why but I figured he just refused to do it. Honestly, he wouldn't be a very good instructor anyway. But I don't really want to be here myself."

Boyd considered that. Honestly, he couldn't imagine Sin not refusing; after the disdain he'd shown for the entire process and with how tired he'd been lately, it probably would have been more surprising if he'd actually shown up. And it was true that Sin wouldn't have been as patient and clear an instructor as Kassian, anyway. Mostly because Kassian was polite and calm with everyone and by default Sin tended to be mocking or impatient with people he didn't know. He would probably be impatient even with Boyd.

"That's understandable," Boyd said, tilting his head thoughtfully. "I'd be upset too, if I were you. You're probably right about Sin. Although," he added with a slight smile, "assuming he refused and they couldn't force him, I'd prefer you as our instructor over Doug any day, so in a way I'm glad to see you."

"Doug isn't so bad once you get through that layer of brash obnoxiousness," Kassian said mildly. "Unfortunately no one ever finds that out because he's determined to be the most asshole drill sergeant type instructor ever. He even told me I wasn't hard enough on you all just a minute ago."

"I'm sure he did." Boyd smiled a little wider in amusement. "Did he also tell you to swear more and try to make one of us cry? If so, I think you should target Cade; he seems an easy pick."

"I think Doug has already mentally taken Cade out of the running for anything," Kassian admitted in a low voice. "He hates the kid. He's just waiting for him to actually do something to merit being kicked out."

Boyd inconspicuously glanced over toward Cade, who was once again pestering Emma about something. She was smiling and talking to him politely but she seemed as though she would have preferred that he was across the room rather than sitting next to her.

"I'm not surprised," Boyd said equally quietly. "He hasn't exactly been respectful of the process or people in front of Doug. Or in front of anyone, for that matter. But who knows; he was nominated for a reason and he may shock us all."

Kassian scoffed softly. "The day he gets promoted is the day Vega and I kiss and declare our love for one another."

Boyd looked over at Kassian in surprise and couldn't help an abrupt, short laugh. The mental image was as amusing as it was disturbing, mostly because it was such a perversion of their personalities to imagine that actually happening. Besides, for some reason it put him in mind of the two of them at the altar, holding hands in marriage with organ music in the background, and it was just too ridiculous not to laugh at.

"Please don't," Boyd said, trying to sound serious and failing. "I'd feel left out and sad."

Kassian opened his mouth to reply but something caught his attention across the room and he hesitated before glancing at Boyd again. "I'm pretty sure Harriet is annoyed with me."

Boyd looked over at her without being obvious; he masked the movement by mostly moving his eyes and tilting his head slightly as if he was considering something Kassian said. Across the room, Harriet was stretching and appearing to get ready for the rest of the training. She wasn't even looking at them and all Boyd could see in the quick glance was that her mouth was in a tight line and her expression was blank. If Kassian hadn't said anything, he wouldn't have even really noticed anything was wrong other than perhaps she was thinking about something that bothered her faintly.

"I can't really tell," Boyd said. If she was upset, he wondered if it was something to do with that hesitation she'd shown before when they'd been in the room with Sin, as if she'd wanted to say or ask something of Kassian but she hadn't wanted to do it in front of others.

He didn't really know her well enough to say what she was thinking or why, but it seemed to him that something was happening there beneath the surface. At the time, he'd thought Kassian hadn't noticed and, now, Kassian seemed pretty adept at reading her expressions. He suspected it had been a conversation between the two of them that she had wanted to continue or begin in private.

"Why would she be?"

"Because..." Kassian drew the word out and rolled his eyes. "Because I'm sitting here talking to you and not her. I'm not entirely oblivious."

Boyd inclined his head. He'd wondered but hadn't been sure if she really did like Kassian or not. It made sense if Kassian wasn't interested in return, given what Kassian had said at his house, about how he wasn't interested in another relationship and how he couldn't relax around others at the Agency because they expected too much of him and basically saw him as Mr. Perfect. From what Kassian had implied, the only thing he would even be interested in now was something casual, and Boyd couldn't imagine 'casual' ever working out between Kassian and Harriet.

"Aside from the fact that she's a coworker who looks up to you, do you think a casual relationship would interfere with your team's rapport?" he asked curiously. He didn't ask if Kassian was interested in her because it was pretty obvious that he wasn't.

"I just don't think of her that way. She's a beautiful woman but I'm just not really attracted to her in that way. If I didn't work so closely with her it might be different but even then... I don't know. I could never relax around her. She thinks everything is serious business." Kassian waved a hand vaguely. "Besides, she'd probably have a heart attack if she saw me outside of the Agency."

"Maybe," Boyd said, because he did think Kassian was right in that she seemed to take things too seriously and he couldn't imagine her walking into Kassian's home without at least feeling shocked or, possibly, disappointed.

Once again, he thought about how frustrating it must be for Kassian, who basically lived dual lives; the model agent at work and the person at home who he never felt comfortable letting those coworkers see. It wasn't that Kassian was a horrible person at his home; he was simply human, but it seemed that in many ways people at the Agency saw him as above that, above having flaws, the same way they seemed to see Sin as having more flaws than he really had.

"Do you ever want to just be who you are here?" Boyd asked, studying Kassian. "Do you ever feel like telling people to leave you alone or shut up, and stop being so composed? Like Sin does?"

Kassian laughed slightly at that. "In a way, yeah. I wish I could be more like him and not care what people think but it's too late. It would be more trouble than it's worth at this point and I don't even know if I want these people to know that side of me, anyway. I judge myself enough without needing others to do it as well. And Harriet is very judgmental."

Kassian paused for a moment and his gaze strayed over to where Emma was sitting. "I wonder if Emma is," he said with a rakish grin.

"She's talking to Cade," Boyd said dryly. "She can't be that judgmental."

"Ha. Good point. She's probably too nice for her own good. It will only encourage him. And speaking of encouragement-- where the hell did Toby run off to? I was trying to explain how to not be a complete failure even if you're as out of shape as he is." Kassian sat up straighter, eyes scanning the gym as he shook his head.

"I think he had to run to the bathroom," Boyd said casually, not letting anything show in his expression. He definitely had no plans to tell Kassian what he saw, and certainly not what he suspected. "I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"Well he better. Break is over in five minutes," Kassian said as he got to his feet. He studied Boyd for a moment and seemed a little reluctant to say what he was apparently about to say. "You know, Doug got on my case for not singling you out with Emma and Toby. He noticed that you were almost as out of it as they were in the end."

"I know," Boyd said, not particularly surprised that they had noticed what he himself had been thinking. Although, he did appreciate that Kassian didn't say it in front of the others. "Apparently I've been slacking between the missions lately, or maybe they just haven't been as intensive as they used to be. I'm planning to spend as much free time as I can in the gym to get back in shape. I'm going to need it for the training."

Kassian grinned down at him and extended a hand to help Boyd up. "That's the kind of attitude I like to see."

Boyd let Kassian help him up and, for a portion of a second longer than necessary, he held onto Kassian's hand before letting go so that Kassian wouldn't immediately walk away.

"Kassian," he said in a tone that made it clear he wanted him to wait, meeting Kassian's gaze sincerely. "Thank you. For caring. You're probably the only person I've ever met who would actually take the time to apologize for a possible slight several months ago. You're a really good person."

Kassian seemed caught off guard by the comment but he also appeared pleased by it. It was in the way his mouth tilted slightly into a friendly smile even though he tried to hide

it, likely because the other trainees were more alert now as the time drew closer for the end of their break. "I don't know about that but I try to be good to people that deserve it."

He clapped Boyd on the back, winked, and walked back to the center of the room just as Toby re-entered the training area.

Boyd briefly watched Kassian go; when he'd first heard of Kassian and even after he'd first met the man, Boyd never would have thought he'd appreciate his presence as much as he did. He somehow felt comfortable talking to Kassian and it was nice to know there was someone out there other than Ryan who thought Boyd deserved to be treated well. It wasn't that he thought most people treated him poorly; most of them just didn't care either way about him, the same as he felt about them.

The only reason he didn't include Sin in the sentiment was that things were always far too complicated between the two of them to give it a single label.

Toby walked past him on the way back to his spot, looking completely casual and as if nothing had happened. Boyd glanced past him, thinking that if he hadn't seen what he had, he'd never have guessed what Toby had just been doing. Boyd wouldn't have chosen to have walked in on Toby like that, but at the same time he now knew a bit of information about the man that Toby probably didn't want to get out.

He didn't plan to blackmail him or use the information for anything; it was just that Toby acted so smug and superior that knowing something potentially embarrassing about him made Boyd feel a little more on even ground, even if Toby didn't realize he knew.

Moving to a spot where he would have enough space for *retzev*, Boyd resolved to stop thinking about anything else and, for the next few hours, concentrate solely on training.

Chapter 9

Sin hated the psychiatric wing.

It would have been nice if he'd just been able to keep going to the psychiatric center outside of the Tower but he'd been told that was only for in-patients and testing and he would have to come to this wing for actual sessions.

Unfortunately, it made him want to re-think his entire decision to go along with this. The thought had crossed his mind on their first session and it was still there now as he waited for the second.

Not only did he run into the multitude of doctors that he'd threatened and antagonized over the years, but he had to sit in the waiting room outside of Ann's office as she finished up with her previous session. It wasn't that he was impatient, it was more the fact that everyone had gone back to their previous attitudes toward him, if not worse this time around, and he really didn't want to deal with it.

There was something about how the receptionist kept glancing at him, shaking her head and then looking away, that made it seem as though he'd somehow disappointed her. He got the feeling that whatever had inspired people to behave halfway civilized towards him after the raid had shriveled, rotted and died in light of his more recent violent outburst.

Things were as bad as they'd been before the raid, if not worse. Maybe because people felt as though they'd given the dangerous criminal a chance and now they felt foolish for bothering at all? Who knew what went through the minds of Agency staff but Sin didn't really blame them. They'd trusted him not to be completely psychotic and then he'd gone and flipped out in the worst possible way.

Sin leaned forward and put his head in his hands, rubbing his forehead in circular motions as he waited for his turn to go in. He ignored the receptionist's indignant glare and instead willed his headache to go away.

As soon as he'd been released from the psychiatric center his sleepless nights had returned with a vengeance. He'd been given a bottle of benzodiazepines for his insomnia before leaving but after the first few nights of taking it, he'd realized that the pills only seemed to make the situation worse.

Sleeping had been slightly easier but the hallucinations seemed to assault him more violently before he actually passed out. The whispers seemed louder, the images more vivid, and sometimes he'd found himself curling into a ball with his head buried in his arms, trying to block it all out to no avail. After a week of it consistently happening, Sin stopped taking them altogether, deciding that he preferred a sleepless existence over the promise of guaranteed taunting from dead people every night.

It was wearying. And it made him wonder if any of this had a point.

The prescribed medication allowed him to sleep but he still saw things that weren't there and he now knew that sleep deprivation would probably once again lead to the kind of exhausted psychotic melt-down that had led to him being locked up again in the first place.

Really, was there a point? He seemed fucked either way.

"You can go in now, Agent Vega," the receptionist said suddenly.

He looked up at her but she was studiously staring at her computer, her expression seeming to imply that he'd somehow be offended by the lack of eye contact. Sin stood up without speaking and opened the door to Ann's office, glad to be away from the receptionist's constant staring.

Sin closed the door behind him with more force than was necessary and dropped down into the armchair across from Ann's desk. He slouched down, allowing his hood to fall further over his eyes, and stared at her moodily. She appeared to be going through several different folders and as he followed the trail of paper across her desk, he noticed a large box with his name on it sitting next to the trash can.

"How are you feeling?" she asked; the usual question, as if he even knew how to answer it.

"What's that?" Sin asked instead, ignoring her and indicating the box.

Ann closed the folder and sat up straight, observing him carefully. "I retrieved your entire file history from the archives. Sometimes there's a lot more information in hard copies than on the computer."

"Heh. How full was that box?"

She shrugged unconcernedly. "Full to the top. It shouldn't be surprising. You've been here for fifteen years now and you have quite a history with this department."

Sin's gaze zeroed in on the folder closest to him, recognizing the name 'Dr. Samantha Slate' immediately. He smirked humorlessly, wondering what the woman had written down about him. "I want to read them."

She raised an eyebrow. "That isn't necessary or appropriate."

"I can decide for myself if it's necessary," he retorted.

"That's fine but it isn't going to happen. Most of them are useless, anyway. It seems the closest anyone has come to a breakthrough was when you first arrived and with my sister. The rest is a confusion of misdiagnoses. Reading it would not be beneficial to anything and would likely just worsen your mood," Ann replied in a tone that was calm but left little room for argument.

Sin rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

There was a long tense silence and Ann continued to stare at him before she tapped a finger against the desk. "Are you going to be cooperative today?"

He shrugged and turned his gaze to the window. It was raining. Again. "I haven't decided yet."

There was another silence and this time she leaned forward, pointing one long nailed finger at him. "You're not here for me, Sin. You're here to improve your own situation and your attitude is just undermining that process. Either you want to move forward or stay where you are. It's your choice and so far it seems you just want to behave poorly."

Sin scowled, looking at her again. "I cooperated. I filled out your little piece of paper last time, didn't I?"

"You did," she agreed, looking down at the questionnaire he'd completed. It was an experience scale which identified his symptoms based on which answers he replied positively or negatively to. "But your attitude is clearly negative about this. You're not going to get any better unless you make an effort. I'm not just here to give you a bottle of pills and send you on your way. The issues you have are deep-rooted and medication is only one aspect of getting through them all."

"Well," Sin started, making a face. "Your medication fails anyway. Or is it supposed to make me hallucinate more frequently?"

His tone was sarcastic and he didn't really care about trying to nice it up for her. If she wanted him to take this seriously, he wanted to see some results that didn't include making everything worse.

Ann sat back in her chair and pursed her lips. "That is a very rare side-effect," she eventually said. "Did you stop taking them?"

"Obviously."

"Good. We'll try something else then."

Sin stared at her blankly for a minute before shaking his head. "Just forget the pills, okay? I don't like them, I don't trust them and I just don't see it working for me. And you just said that wasn't even a part of the big picture so what the hell is the point?"

"Medication is to control your symptoms so you can function in a manner that allows you to get through the day," Ann said patiently. It was entirely possible that she gave this same explanation to people multiple times a day. "You told me you can't sleep, that you see and hear things randomly-- it's unhealthy and unsafe for you to go on that way, medication can help you with that. But it's this process," she pointed to herself and to him, "that will get to the root of the problem and then we can figure out why it's occurring and what we can possibly do to control it."

Sin shrugged silently. He supposed it made sense to her but he just couldn't see how them talking would ever get anything done. The entire idea of psychiatry made him automatically skeptical and distrustful. He'd agreed to this, yes, but he still didn't like the idea of telling her about his past, about his vulnerabilities.

But he knew he had to. "I just don't see how things will ever change," Sin said finally, voice resigned.

"You have to give things a chance," she said again. "Or there's no possibility of change at all. And you're doing yourself a huge disservice by giving up before even making the effort."

Sin sighed and sat up straight. He was tired of the constant reminders of what would happen if he didn't go along with this all but at least it snapped him out of his default uncooperative mood as he reminded himself why he was here in the first place.

"So what's the process then, Annabelle? Just fill me in on that and then I'll know where this is going because otherwise I don't see a point. I'm going to keep thinking your profession is bullshit."

"The medicati--"

"No," he interrupted. "You already told me that. Explain the--" Sin pointed at himself then at her, just as she had. "That process."

Ann stared at him for a moment, clearly knowing she was being mocked but feeling strangely unoffended by it. She knew how he was, she knew his demeanor, and she also knew that the sarcastic, asshole shtick he was currently putting on was nothing more than him trying to hide the fact that he really didn't understand and that, despite the skepticism, he wanted to.

"Well, the first thing you have to do is take the medication that I prescribe you. We're most likely going to go through several different combinations until we find a good match but that's how it is for everyone, Sin. Different people experience different things while on these drugs, it doesn't mean you're any less susceptible to treatment than anyone else."

Sin grunted, feeling mildly mollified by that explanation.

"Second, we have to figure out what exactly happens before you experience these episodes. The outbursts and the hallucinations. After that, we'll delve into your history and identify the moments when these episodes first began to occur and then we can figure out why. Depending on the scenarios and depending on the incidents, we will then deal with it accordingly and hopefully find a way to reverse or at least disrupt the negative thought processes and feelings that cause you to lose control."

It made sense when she spelled it out that way but Sin didn't see it being that easy in reality. And if it was, it would be a poor day for all of the other psychiatrists at the Agency. After years of bullshitting him with every diagnosis in the history of psychiatry, it was Lydia's sister who finally made the breakthrough.

It was sad and pathetic at the same time.

But even though it seemed slightly more logical now, Sin shifted uneasily at the idea of "delving into" his history with her. He'd known from the start that they were going to go there but he wasn't prepared for it yet.

Ann continued to watch him carefully, to study the ever-changing expressions on his face and how they reflected in his stunning green eyes. She could never tell exactly what he was thinking and what he was going to say but just the fact that he was allowing her to read this much into him at all was mildly gratifying.

Once she put all thoughts of their past, of her sister and father, out of her mind it was easy to see how frustrating it must be for him at the Agency. He was largely considered to be emotionless, just a mechanical killing machine that sometimes defected, but as she stared at him and saw the vulnerability in him, it was impossible to see anything but a man who was damaged and abused.

It made her feel mildly ashamed that she'd once viewed him that way as well; but then again, it wasn't just her fault. She'd had a good excuse for thinking the worst of him and until now he'd never let anyone see this side of himself; the painfully human side. She wondered why things were different now.

"What changed?" she asked finally, breaking the silence that had stretched far too long for an hour session.

Sin looked up at her and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

Ann sat back in her chair and crossed one knee over the other as she tried to figure out how to frame the question. "Your behavior. Your willingness to cooperate with this process. Your willingness to let me see who you really are. In the past I believed you were a sociopath and several months ago I was able to determine that I'd been very wrong about that from a single muttered apology by the elevators. By the guilt in your eyes."

She raised her eyebrows again. "What changed?"

Sin didn't know what to say to that. He wasn't about to discuss his situation with Boyd with her, he wasn't about to out Boyd for the second time, but he knew what the answer was. He ran a hand through his hair as he thought about the question and in the process he knocked his hood off.

"I never had a reason to care about things before," he said finally.

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I figured... there was no point. People expected the worst so I gave them the worst. I had no reason to care about my situation, about how people perceived me or about wanting to improve mentally or socially. I had no reason to care about anything. It was just pointless. I accepted my life as it was because it honestly never occurred to me that there was a possibility of it being any better."

Ann nodded. "And now?"

Sin cleared his throat and chewed on his lower lip, a habit from the days of having a lip ring. "Now I have someone who actually gives a damn about me and whether or not I'm alive. So I don't want to make his life any more complicated by screwing things up that could possibly get better," he replied vaguely.

"You mean Boyd," she ventured, not feeling terribly surprised. Ryan had certainly gushed enough about how 'awesome' Boyd was and how good of a person he was for never judging Sin like everyone else did.

There were also the old rumors that the two field agents had formed a sexual relationship but Ann had never believed them and until Sin confirmed it she didn't intend to change her opinion on the matter. So many people conjured up so many falsehoods about Sin's sexuality; about him being a rapist, a psychopath who relished the idea of torturing young women like his sister and so on, that even mentioning nonsense from the Agency grapevine would only be belittling to his character.

Even before she'd recognized that Sin wasn't the monster that everyone made him out to be, Ann hadn't believed the rubbish spewed and spread by psychotic guards like Harry Truman, a known aggressor and sociopath among the psychiatric department but who'd been allowed to stay regardless because he had actually been good at his job. Harry was another example of her father's willingness to ignore psychiatric instability if it meant a task was still getting done.

"Yeah," he admitted. "He's the only friend I've ever had. So I want to be someone who deserves that friendship, I suppose. I had no reason to care before because no one was ever kind to me so I didn't know how it could affect me. Now that I do, I suppose I want to protect that friendship and whatever he sees in me that makes him want to even consider me someone that deserves it."

It was probably the saddest and most pathetic thing she had ever heard anyone say and Sin admitted it in such a matter-of-fact way that it gave Ann pause. Memories of Ryan's babble idly whirled through her mind and she picked through all the nonsense and narrowed it down to him having said almost exactly the same thing nearly two years ago.

She'd always assumed that Ryan just had a crush on Sin; Ryan was always rooting for the underdog and in this case the underdog was an undeniably beautiful specimen, but it seemed that Ryan had been onto something all along. He'd apparently had Sin's thoughts and attitude all figured out before Sin had himself.

On the one hand it made her want to rush over to the medical wing and demand Ryan take up psychiatry himself; and on the other, it irritated her that someone so untrained could have figured out Sin's character so easily when actual doctors had failed time and time again.

It all came down to the fact that no one had cared enough to bother. The only person who had made an attempt to see beneath the surface and beyond Sin's reputation was Boyd.

Ann didn't know Boyd, had no idea what his reasons for that were, but she mostly attributed it to the fact that he'd been an outsider at the time of Sin and his introduction. Boyd hadn't had a reason to behave the way everyone else had; he'd had no reason to understand why the situation was the way it was and he had likely been able to see things clearly since he wasn't predisposed to instant judgments like everyone else at the Agency. She'd spent the better part of the past two years disliking Boyd, mostly because he willingly associated with Sin, but now that she saw Sin in a different light it was hard not to appreciate what Boyd had done.

No one else at the Agency had wanted to help Sin improve, likely because they wanted to see him locked away. She had been one of those people but now she could see things objectively, professionally, and watching the video of her sister and Sin had been a large part of that happening. Without finally coming to terms with that, it would have been impossible for her to sit here with Sin now.

Despite everything, she'd taken this profession because she'd wanted to help people, to understand people, and now that desire was blooming honestly and determinedly inside her. She hadn't felt this strongly about a case in a very long time, probably ever, and she found it ironic that it was about a man she'd once hated very deeply.

Perhaps it was because he was tied to her sister. Had anyone made a real effort to treat him in the past, the entire situation would have ended a lot differently. Her sister would have still been emotionally disturbed but at least she wouldn't be a vegetable.

Sin and Lydia would always be tied together in her mind and by making even the vainest attempt to help him, she felt that there would be less of a chance of there being more Lydias in the future and less of a chance of future agents being punished repeatedly for a mental condition that no one even bothered to understand. It didn't have all that much to do with Sin as an individual, or it hadn't at first, but now that she was in his presence she found herself intrigued by him.

She opened her mouth to reply but before she could, her receptionist's voice trilled into the ear piece she wore.

"Captain Scott is here to see you."

Ann's eyes narrowed in distaste and she held up a finger to Sin, turning slightly. "Tell him I'm in a session."

There was a pause and then her receptionist, Diane, said hesitantly, "I don't think he'll wait, ma'am."

Ann closed her eyes briefly and tried to fight the automatic anxiety that began to seep into her. She took two calming breaths before swiveling her chair and focusing on Sin again. Thankfully, he wasn't even paying attention to her; his eyes were focused on the brewing storm outside the window. "I have to step out for just a moment."

He gestured uncaringly, slumping down farther in his chair as he stared moodily out the window. "Take your time."

Ann watched him for a moment before exiting her office, closing the door firmly behind her. The interruption angered her but it wasn't the first time Philip had interrupted a session. He made a habit of it anytime she had a high profile client and she had yet to figure out why. During her sessions with Kassian Trovosky he'd made appearances several times after or in the middle of sessions, as if he wanted to involve himself somehow or let it be known that his presence existed.

It was rather ridiculous; Agent Trovosky didn't care about him and wasn't interested at all in anything he had to say. Philip's attempt at seeming important only made him seem foolish and the sad thing was that he'd yet to fully realize that.

Ann's eyes fell on her husband and she had to fight the automatic frown of disgust.

As usual he was all dolled up in a too-expensive suit that barely fit his doughy frame. When they'd first met he hadn't seemed like such a clown but after their marriage and her father's death, he'd quickly become a mean, drunken, greedy sloth. He'd gained an easy twenty-five pounds from alcohol consumption and not exercising, yet he continued to buy the most expensive clothes he could find to give the appearance of wealth and prestige, despite the fact that he looked like an idiot because of how ill-fitting they were.

"What are you doing here now, Philip?" she asked, impatience and obvious irritation in her tone as she approached him.

Philip's eyes narrowed slightly. "Who do you think you're talking to?"

Ann opened her mouth to reply smartly but she closed it, knowing it wasn't a good idea. She met his gaze evenly and not for the first time felt complete disgust with herself for allowing him to get so much control of their marriage, of her. And now that he had it, it was too late.

It had started in the very beginning when she'd foolishly wanted to believe it could turn into a real marriage, that they would someday actually care for each other and that she wouldn't be alone anymore. Giving in to him had seemed the best way to go about that at first, the best way to show that she was going to try to make the marriage of convenience work. Sometimes wanting to love someone was worse than actually loving them; the desire to attain what wasn't there just made a person more desperate, more pathetic, more willing to do whatever it would take to get that love.

So when her father died along with his promises of greatness and even when Philip became hostile, she'd continued to play the part because she didn't want to be entirely alone. After awhile it just became a cycle, an easy way of dealing with his angry outbursts. And now...

Now Ann knew that she did it out of fear. Fear of what would happen if she were to leave him; she had no protection at the Agency anymore and he could be very a violent man. It was a confusing mess of a situation and one that didn't present any easy exit strategies for her.

The dynamics of their relationship were more than a little dysfunctional and even though she despised him with every fiber of her being, she continued to be pathetically submissive to him. It was something that disgusted her but although she could diagnose and treat others, Ann had yet to figure out how to do the same for herself.

So she slid her gaze from his hostile expression and focused instead on the wall. "I'm just busy, Philip. I'm in the middle of an important session and I didn't want to be interrupted."

"With Vega?" he asked, a sneer in his voice.

Ann sighed inaudibly. Philip's obstinacy regarding the fact that she'd volunteered to be Sin's doctor was more than a little tiring. He'd railed on and on about it every night, reminding her of 'what he was' and 'what he'd done,' and Ann had little doubt that his alleged concern for her well-being was nothing more than concern over the state of his livelihood if she were to die. He wasn't foolish enough to think he'd receive a dime of her fortune and she was only useful to him as long as she was alive because of it.

"Yes, with Agent Vega."

"I want to talk to that son of a bitch," Philip said loudly, as if he was going to somehow menace Sin through the door.

Ann couldn't help the annoyance that flashed across her face and this time she couldn't rein in her words. "You're not going to harass my client," she snapped. "What you think of him has very little weight on what I'm going to do and I sincerely doubt he'd care or be impressed by your idle threats either way. You're doing nothing more here than disrupting my work and wasting his and my time by cutting into the session."

Philip's eyes narrowed further until there was just the barest glint of blue between his eyelashes. His face reddened slightly, nostrils flaring, and she had no doubt that she'd enraged him pretty thoroughly. His temper had always been short but his drinking and unhappiness with the lack of a promotion that her father had promised made his demeanor even more miserable.

"You silly little bitch," he said, a quiet rage in his voice. "You're going to disrespect me for him?"

Ann opened her mouth to deny it automatically but she realized that this had been one of the few times since the beginning of their marriage that she'd actually spoken her mind entirely in an argument. And it was over Sin. She allowed Philip to have control of her in their relationship but she wasn't about to let that extend to her work. It'd been more than enough before but the idea of him undermining this process with Sin, a process that was already difficult, made her incredibly angry.

It was a startling revelation but she shook her head anyway. "I'm not trying to disrespect you, Philip, but this is where I work. You're being unhelpful to me and you're causing a scene."

Philip continued to stare at her dangerously and for a moment she felt genuine concern that he was actually going to hit her right there. But then his eyes slid over to Diane and he seemed to slowly cool down, regaining his senses and his temper. But even then, there was still something strange in his expression; he looked suspicious, as if he couldn't quite figure out why she'd talk back to him about Sin.

"Be very careful, Ann," he said quietly.

She had no doubts about his true meaning behind that but she nodded anyway. "That's fine Philip, we'll talk about this later."

"You damn right we will."

Ann stared at him emotionlessly and after a moment he turned and walked away. As soon as he was out of view, she deflated and self-loathing filled her.

There were so many things she could say to the man but she never said them. Instead, she allowed herself to be cowed. She allowed her father's iron grip on her to continue to hold on from the grave. She continued to allow the men in her life to control her because after years of flailing helplessly and feeling lost, she'd wanted someone to give her some direction.

But this hadn't been exactly what she'd had in mind. Everyone had a weakness and her irrational fear of Philip was hers.

"Ms. Conn-- Mrs. Scott?" Diane called, mild concern in her voice.

"It's fine," Ann said calmly. "I don't want to be interrupted again."

Ann re-entered the office and situated herself behind her desk again, looking over and finding that Sin's watchful gaze was trained on her rather steadily. He was picking at a rip in his jeans and appearing mildly intrigued by something although he didn't say exactly what was on his mind.

"I'm sorry about that."

Sin shrugged, not seeming to care one way or the other. The brief break appeared to have given him time to collect himself and his thoughts. "It's fine."

Ann shifted uncomfortably; Sin's intense stare made her feel naked, transparent, as if he somehow knew what had happened on the other side of the door. It was a disturbing thought and one that made her feel even more ashamed than she already was of herself.

She didn't like people to know that she was married and dictated to by a foolish ogre; especially her patients. How could she seem like a credible source of advice about someone else's life when she had no control over her own?

She began looking through Sin's file, extracting the questionnaire. Although, now that she was safely away from Philips's wrath, Ann had to admit to herself that it was extremely satisfying to have finally told him exactly how little she thought of him. His annoyance at her willingness to help Sin and apparently jealousy over her defense of him only made Ann want to work with Sin even more.

It was probably selfish, and it probably seemed as though she was using the situation, but she found that it was something she couldn't quite help. There was something exciting, exhilarating, about defiance and it made the self-loathing turn into empowerment as she regained her composure and focused once again on Sin.

"The first thing I want you to do is explain the thoughts that go through your head, the feelings, right before you have a violent episode," she said finally.

Sin stared at her, caught off guard by the question and cleared his throat as he rubbed his chin. "I..." He trailed off for a moment, eyebrows drawing together. "It's happened several times over the years," he said finally. "I don't know."

"Okay," Ann relented and flipped a page in his folder. Surveillance stills made the file thicker, heavier, and the contrast of the wild man in the pictures and the calm person in

front of her was stark. "Let's pick out three separate known incidences that are considerable lengths apart."

Sin stared at her uneasily. He was confronted with his past offenses every day; his mind wouldn't let him forget. It wasn't something he wanted to get into right now when he felt minimally more unbalanced than usual. "I don't want to talk... about certain things."

"We're not going to discuss the incident," she told him. "Not yet, anyway. We'll get there later. For now I just want you to tell me how you felt."

Still feeling suspicious, Sin shrugged. "Okay."

"So let's talk about what happened in 2012," she said. "When you defended that civilian in the city and everything that happened after. Was my sister correct in identifying that as an incident of you losing control?"

Sin's gaze flicked away from her and he stared out the window again. His mouth felt slightly dry as his mind automatically supplied a bombardment of mental images from that day; of the carnage he'd caused, of the six civilians and four uniformed cops that he'd killed in the street. It was something he'd always remembered, something he'd never felt comfortable with, but now it was a large part of the nightmares he had at night.

And sometimes it wasn't just civilians-- sometimes other people were there too. Sometimes it was Lydia's throat he was ripping into, his father's neck he was breaking as former partners rushed to stop him in a confusing dreamscape that caused him to jolt awake, drenched in sweat.

"Yeah."

"Can you identify the moment when you felt yourself beginning to get angry?"

Sin cleared his throat again. "It was when I saw them hurting the girl."

Ann nodded, eyes completely focused on him, on the obvious agitation he was feeling at the memory. "Why did it bother you?"

Sin glared at her for a moment. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Why wouldn't it bother me? She was just a kid."

"I didn't mean it that way," Ann explained. "In those days most people were used to seeing sex crimes and murders in the street. Things were falling apart and everyone was jaded. Evidence of that can be seen in the surveillance tape; there were many people around scavenging but you were the only one who investigated her cries for help. What did those cries make you feel?"

Cooling down slightly, Sin shrugged. "I guess..." How had it made him feel? "I guess, it wasn't specifically her. I didn't know her, had no reason to care about her. But, now that I think of it and a similar situation that happened recently, I suppose seeing someone completely helpless disturbs me and I want to help them despite myself."

"But why did it make you so angry? Why did it cause you to change so suddenly-- into this entirely different person you appear to become when you go berserk?"

Sin shrugged again, feeling mildly aggravated by the question. "I don't know."

"Look at it this way," Ann said patiently. "You wanted to help because you're instinctively a good person. That's what I believe. However, you could have easily dispatched those guys and saved the girl. Instead, you had an extreme reaction that went far beyond wanting to help-- wanting to get them off of her. My question is, what was the difference then-- seeing this helpless girl-- from whatever incident you're thinking of when you also wanted to help someone?"

Sin shifted in the chair again, chewing on his bottom lip once more. It was disturbingly easy to go back to that place, to put himself back into that mindset at the time of helping the girl, and the only explanation was that he'd relived it so startlingly vividly many times recently. So it wasn't hard to find the answer, even if he'd never really questioned his own motives or actions before. "It made me remember times when I was helpless and being attacked and nobody helped me."

"Did you relive those memories right in that moment before you attacked?" she queried, pen moving across a clean sheet of paper even though she didn't take her eyes off him.

He looked increasingly distressed by what he was apparently remembering now; he was sweating, fidgeting, and his blatant vulnerability had an odd effect on her. It almost made her want to soothe him in some kind of way, to put him at ease, but there was really no way to go about doing that.

"I did," he admitted. "It wasn't the way things are now-- it wasn't... hallucinations or anything. But I felt the way I'd felt in the past and it made me want to strike out-- to defend her because I hadn't been able to defend myself."

"So you felt helpless at that moment, even if it wasn't you being attacked," Ann surmised.

"Yes." He'd never thought of it that way before but he'd never had much of a reason to really analyze it. The revelation wasn't a happy one and he wasn't necessarily pleased about sharing it with her. He sighed and averted his gaze; uncomfortable with this, with his memories, with the way she was absorbing every bit of weakness he displayed.

"So why did that transfer to the civilians?"

Sin frowned, eyes flicking away from the window and back to her, before returning to the window.

"Elizabeth, get out of here! We got this, he's done--"

The shout was abruptly cut short as a broken piece of glass slashed across the man's throat and spilled his blood all over the pavement.

A cold sweat was settling on Sin's skin, moisture dripping down his back, and he felt his heartbeat increasing rapidly. Why did this have to happen now? Here?

He grit his teeth together and focused on the question, on trying to answer it, trying not to lose himself in what that memory made him feel.

But it was hard.

"I don't know. I can't just snap myself out of it when that happens. In most cases, I'll be detained and wake up later on not even knowing what had happened." He paused for a moment, thinking about that. "Actually, in some cases someone has been able to... bring me back to myself. My partner has been able to, I'm not sure why."

Ann seemed to consider that for a moment. "How does he approach you when trying to 'bring you back?' Does he touch you or speak to you in a calming way? Maybe, showing you that he's not a threat?"

Sin nodded briefly but, not wanting to get too far into that, he went on. "But these civilians just-- at the time, I saw them as enemies. They were attacking me, surrounding me, it didn't matter who they were. They were coming at me and I couldn't drag myself out of... out of whatever mindset I was in at the time. I couldn't control myself or stop what was happening."

Ann's eyes narrowed briefly. "You couldn't stop it? Did you want to?"

Sin nodded without hesitation. "I did. I knew they were civilians-- I knew they, even the cops, weren't really a threat to me. They were attacking me but I could have run away. I could have disabled instead of killed. I knew they were weak. But the other part of me just saw them as enemies that I needed to neutralize and that part of me had all of the control at the moment, that part was dictating my actions and I couldn't stop it."

There was a brief silence and Ann stared at him intensely. None of his files had ever mentioned such a thing; this was the first she'd ever heard about this. "How did it seem at that moment?"

He paused for a moment before speaking, trying to think of how to explain. "Like I was watching myself react but couldn't control my actions or what I was doing."

Ann continued to stare at him before writing something else down. "I see."

Sin jerked his gaze back to her, still feeling disoriented but slowly calming down as he focused instead on her sudden interest in what he'd said. "What does that mean? What are you writing?"

"I don't know what it means yet," she replied. "But it's something for me to explore."

They stared at each other for a moment before Ann stopped writing and went back to the previous line of discussion. "So at first you felt helpless and then you felt threatened, cornered, surrounded-- even though a part of you knew that logically you could try to escape, these stresses dominated your senses and dictated your actions. You became completely consumed by it and that's when you reacted both times."

"Yes."

"So how about Captain Stevens?" Ann asked, flipping the page and studying a still of Sin dragging the man backwards into his cell. "What happened then? From your

expression and the look in your eyes, you appeared a lot like you did when you first saw that girl. But the situation is entirely different."

Sin shook his head, eyebrows drawing together as his mouth turned down into a frown. "Why do we have to do this?" he demanded, annoyed. "I don't want to talk about this. I can't fucking deal with it right now, Annabelle. I just don't want to."

"Why? How will we get anywhere without talking?"

"I don't know but this is not getting anywhere right now anyway." Sin hunched forward and rested his elbows on his knees, pressing his face into his hands. "Why do we have to talk about what a horrible fucking person I am?"

Ann's eyebrows shot up. "I don't remember that coming up anywhere in this discussion."

"Yeah, okay," Sin grunted against his hands. All they were doing was talking about all of the people he'd killed. He was obviously a very upstanding citizen.

"We're trying to narrow down the triggers for your outbursts, for your episodes," Ann corrected. "And the fact that you describe having been unable to stop yourself even though you wanted to proves to me at least that this has nothing to do with good or evil. This has something to do with an illness that takes all of the control out of your hands and doesn't even give you the opportunity to make your own choices."

Sin sighed and massaged his forehead again. "If you say so."

"So," Ann began, going back to her previous comments. "You were being escorted back to the Fourth and this was in... 2018-- three years ago. You were being locked in a holding cell after failing to cooperate with any of your assigned partners."

"Yeah."

Ann nodded, studying the picture. "You were heavily secured it seems, with an entire team of guards surrounding you. However, they didn't appear to be physically threatening you. Were there verbal words exchanged?"

Sin shrugged. "Yeah, maybe."

Ann studied the picture and then looked up to consider him thoughtfully. "How is it for you on the Fourth? How are you treated?"

A humorless bark of laughter escaped his mouth and he looked up at her finally. "I'm surrounded by people who hate me, who have good reason to hate me, and they have me at their mercy. Drugged, tied down, completely helpless. How do you think I'm treated?"

"So they abuse you regularly." Ann looked down at the picture again. She recognized Harry Truman in the picture and his sidekick Dennis McNichols. She was very aware of the incidents between them and Sin in the previous year and she had no doubts that they'd been the ringleaders of whatever torture they'd inflicted on Sin. "Was Captain Stevens involved in this torture?"

"Not personally."

"But he allowed it?" She studied Sin, the way he met her gaze evenly, clearly unashamed by whatever they'd done to him. It was a change from her usual clients; men always acted as though any kind of humiliating torture or sexual abuse somehow made them look weaker. It was common and for some reason it pleased her that Sin wasn't responding this way. "Or maybe, he promised it?"

"Hmm." Sin eyed her for a moment, mildly impressed by her skills of inference. "I guess you can say that. He was too afraid of me to get involved personally but when I was surrounded by twelve guys and chained up, he felt safe enough to tell me exactly what was going to happen to me later."

"Ah." She wondered how many other officers of the Agency had cruel and sadistic aspects of their personalities. "So when you were walking, did you have any anxiety about what would be coming soon?"

"I suppose. It made me angry. If they attempted such a thing without completely incapacitating me first, I probably wouldn't have cared as much. But I don't do well with being immobile-- helpless."

Ann nodded and flipped the page again, not planning to make him go down that avenue any further. Not yet, anyway. "And this more recent incident-- the report says that you were delusional, not in your right mind, and kept backing away from the crowd but for some reason many of the agents kept following you. One witness reported that the more they went at you, the more enraged you became, and that if you'd been left alone the entire incident could have likely been avoided."

Sin shrugged, wondering exactly where she was going with this all. "I don't know. Maybe. What's the point of all of these correlations? Is there one?"

"Of course," she replied with a raised eyebrow. "The point is that, by your own descriptions, we've identified the feelings that lead to your episodes. Feelings of helplessness, of being threatened, of being cornered, the inability to defend yourself because you're actually unable to or because you feel outnumbered. And by your own admission, this stems from something in your past, some incident that you relive whenever you're in these situations, and you react strongly, violently, to defend yourself like you were unable to back then."

"I don't care about what happened back then," Sin replied flatly. "It doesn't bother me. I'm not some poor traumatized child. I don't cry myself to sleep thinking back on the things that were done to me. I go to sleep thinking about what I've done to other people."

"That may be true," Ann relented. "But that doesn't mean those incidents, that the strong physical and psychological abuse as a child, didn't have lasting effects on your mind. Whatever happened to you, and I don't know what, caused you to build in yourself a defense mechanism for the future. So whenever you relive those feelings, even if you're not aware of it and even if it isn't something that plagues you at night, that pre-constructed mechanism springs to the forefront and takes control of the situation so that you can protect yourself."

Sin rubbed his chin again, eyeing her thoughtfully as he took this into consideration. "You're not trying to imply that I have DID, are you?"

"No, not at all." Ann shook her head sharply. "I'm not implying you created multiple personalities to handle different situations-- I'm saying when you feel threatened, completely cornered and helpless, your body shuts you out so it can react accordingly to the threat so you don't have to actually feel it, or experience it. I wouldn't ever classify you as DID but I certainly think you have a dissociative disorder."

"Interesting," Sin murmured, eyes narrowed slightly. The description seemed to fit but there were so many disorders to cover so many things that he still had his doubts. "And it can be... fixed?"

Ann sighed and leaned back. "Sin, there are no quick fixes for this situation."

"Fine," he said, disappointed. "Then what about all of the other shit-- the more immediate issues. The hallucinations and insomnia-- if it wasn't for that, I think I'd be fine. I hadn't freaked out in a long time until all of this other shit started hitting me from every direction."

"That may be-- I don't want to say 'easier'-- but something that we can approach right away. I have a diagnosis based on your questionnaire and the things you told me in the first session but you have to have an open mind about it."

"Okay. My mind is open."

Ann stared at him skeptically for a moment before continuing. "I believe you have what is called Psychotic Major Depression."

Sin scoffed automatically, crossing his arms over his chest. "What the hell is that?"

"Don't scoff," she ordered, pointing at him. "Everything fits. The age demographic, the symptoms fit you to a tee-- depression, negative physical changes since the offset of the depression, hallucinations, constant guilt, difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep--" She pointed to his questionnaire. "Frequent thoughts of suicide."

Sin dropped his gaze, sorry that he'd answered as honestly as he had on that stupid paper. "How do you know it's not schizophrenia or something?"

"Because I'm not just looking solely at your symptoms," Ann replied. "I'm taking into consideration the fact that you only began to suffer from hallucinations when you began to suffer from severe thoughts of guilt and depression and that this all occurred for the first time within the last several months, which puts you in the age bracket of people who generally suffer from this disorder. I'm also taking into account the fact that you don't have completely bizarre paranoid thoughts that are seen in schizophrenics as well as the fact that at the moment, you seem completely functional and approachable and don't show constant signs of uncoordinated thought process or confusion. There are also some other factors that can be taken into consideration and because of that you're going to have to get some blood-work done."

Wonderful. Another trip to the medical unit.

Sin nodded anyway, rubbing a hand across his face as he stood. It was drawing close to an hour and he was simultaneously dreading leaving the office while anxious to be out of her watchful sight. On one hand, for reasons he couldn't quite explain, he felt

more in control at her office, as if things couldn't go quite as wrong there because she was so calm and the environment was so isolated from everything else. But on the other hand, the diagnosis, the lack of diagnosis, the questions and penetrating stares... it was putting him on edge.

"Alright well, that's great I guess. I'm officially psychotic and uh, I guess good job on figuring that out."

Ann glared at him and made a face, writing rapidly on a prescription pad. "Okay, smart-ass. I'm giving you two prescriptions. One for an anti-psychotic and another for an SSRI. Take them as directed and make sure you note any side-effects. I already told you, we're most likely going to go through a number of combinations before getting the right one."

Sin shrugged and stuffed the papers in his pocket. "Fine."

"It will take a few weeks for the full effects to set in," she warned. "So make sure you take them properly or it will slow down the process."

He grunted and turned to leave but after a brief hesitation, she called out to him.

"Sin, wait."

Sin paused with his hand on the doorknob but didn't turn entirely. "What?"

Ann hesitated again, eyebrows drawn together slightly and she really didn't know what possessed her to say it but she allowed the words to roll off her tongue. "If you need me, if you get scared or feel like you can't handle something that you feel happening, call me. All of my numbers are on the card I gave you last time."

This time, Sin looked at her over his shoulder, green eyes slightly narrowed in suspicion. "Why are you being so nice to me, Annabelle?"

"I'm your doctor."

"Yeah," he agreed. "But why are you going out of your way to be nice to me? Being professional and being kind are two different things and I'm not sure I deserve your kindness."

Ann faltered and stared at him blankly for a moment, unsure of how to respond when she didn't entirely know the answer herself. She'd taken the job with a grain of salt, unsure of how it would proceed and not really counting on herself to get emotionally involved with it. But now she found that she was becoming emotionally involved, but not in the way that she'd thought.

She wasn't conflicted with thoughts of Lydia or remnants of her anger towards Sin-- instead she found herself attached to the idea of helping him progress and she'd automatically made him a top priority over everything else in her life. It was strange and she wasn't entirely sure why she was doing it but she supposed it had something to do with Philip.

It felt good to defy him, to do something he was so against and, most of all, the idea of turning someone else's life from the negative to the positive, of giving someone else some sense of control, made her feel productive and useful, unlike how she felt about her own life. Of course other patients also gave her that feeling but the depth of Sin's problems, his desperation, the fact that his life truly did hang in the balance-- it was entirely different.

But Ann wasn't going to tell him that. This wasn't about her-- it was about him.

"Because I want to," she responded finally.

"Hmm." He stared at her for a long moment, analyzing every part of her expression and demeanor, before turning away again.

Sin exited the office and shut the door behind him, fingers closing around the prescriptions in his pocket. He closed his eyes and clenched the papers in one fist, doubts and 'what ifs' consuming him for a moment before the receptionist's watchful gaze fell on him and broke him out of the reverie.

He pushed away from the door and turned his head abruptly, once again hiding beneath his hood as he walked away. Keeping a low profile was something he'd taken up lately; it was a lot easier than running into confrontational people who wanted nothing more than for him to get himself even farther on Vivienne's bad side. Normally he wouldn't care; he'd either break a few arms or, depending on his mood, he'd maybe even let them have their fun.

But he didn't want to risk anything else while on this probational time-out from field work and he couldn't trust himself to not lose his cool even after making the decision to not fight back.

Sin pulled a cigarette from his pack as soon as he stepped out of the Tower, lighting it quickly and striding away with his head down. His hood shielded his cigarette from the rain but the wind whipped it about wildly, making it a rather difficult task. After awhile he and the cigarette became so drenched that he just flicked it away with a disgusted sigh.

The concept of depression had never occurred to him but he supposed it fit according to the textbook laundry list of symptoms that went along with it. It seemed odd to think of himself as depressed; it implied that he actually knew what it meant to be happy and was somehow missing that and he wondered if that was actually the case.

There had been times in the past year that he'd been at ease, peaceful, maybe even satisfied, but had any of that ever lasted long enough for him to know what true happiness felt like? He didn't think they had. Brief moments of pleasure between periods of anger, silence and unavoidable problems didn't quite brush the surface of what he imagined true happiness to be.

Yet here he was, diagnosed as depressed.

What a strange predicament to be in.

The walk back to his building was uneventful, the only incident of note being the way Officer Daniels quickly averted his eyes when Sin started up the steps to his building. It was a change from the previous almost-friendly way they'd interacted after the Monterrey assignment, but it wasn't a very surprising one even if it did cause a slight tinge of disappointment to flare up abruptly.

But Sin didn't let it show and he marched up the stairs and into his cold, dark apartment without looking at anybody else.

The guards didn't say anything to him and he pushed the door closed, leaning against it before allowing himself to slide down to the floor. He couldn't understand the things he was feeling; the almost disappointment at once again being the pariah even though it'd been nothing more than a joke to him before.

And he couldn't understand this entire situation or what to make of it. Medication, therapy, dealing with Ann and her attitude and whatever that meant... he just didn't

know how to respond to it all. He didn't know what he was supposed to do to make this all work; it was completely out of his realm and the confusion, the frustration, made him just want to say fuck it and give up.

But Sin knew he couldn't, or he knew that he wouldn't, because he wanted to be better for Boyd. He wanted to be the person Boyd saw when he looked at him, when he smiled at him, when he let Sin touch him. He didn't want to be the walking weapon, the crazy bastard who flipped out and hurt people for no reason. He didn't want to be the pariah anymore.

Being alienated was a lot more difficult to swallow after Monterrey; after having friends and people who would miss him.

But look how that wound up.

"Fuck this," Sin whispered, pressing his face into his hands as the images of Jessica's dead body immediately began to assault him. "I can't fucking do this."

Not alone.

It was too easy to want to give up. It was too easy to hide in his apartment and eye every possible thing that he could turn into a weapon because, Jesus, sometimes he just wanted to put himself out of his misery.

Every time he heard that laugh, that ridiculously charming, booming laugh and he knew the hallucination of his father's shade was behind him, it was so hard not to just end it finally, once and for all.

But he didn't and the fact that he couldn't bring himself to just stop caring about the consequences of his actions frustrated him even more.

And in those moments he really just wanted Boyd. It wasn't until they were completely separated that he realized how much he'd come to rely on his partner, on his acceptance, on the feel of his hands. Just the fact that someone existed who wouldn't shy away from him or talk down to him, someone that would treat him like a normal man and talk him through all of the bad shit that he really couldn't understand or control.

Sin raked a hand through his hair and thudded his head against the back of the door, staring up at the ceiling and after a moment he came to the abrupt decision that he was going to tell Boyd. Just in case anything happened, just in case something went wrong,

he wanted Boyd to know and he didn't want it to come as a surprise. But more than that, he was so tired of trying to keep it a secret and the moment Boyd stepped out of the barracks it would be impossible for Sin to hide it anyway.

The idea excited him and disturbed him at the same time. Either Boyd would understand or he wouldn't, but either way, at least Sin would get to see him again before the inevitable failure of this entire attempt came crashing down around him.

He couldn't ask for much more than that.

Chapter 10

The sound of utensils striking plates echoed loudly in the relatively empty cafeteria. There was a cook who worked in the barracks during the Level 10 training; he was technically available only during specific times of the day but had been known to be around at other times as well.

Boyd knew that a few of the other trainees had taken advantage of this and had asked the cook for favorite foods in the middle of the night, but Boyd had not. The only thing he really missed from home that wasn't being provided was jasmine tea; somehow he'd forgotten to pack some and the only tea available in the cafeteria were little packets of Earl Grey.

There was more conversation happening today than on the previous week's lunch breaks. Everyone had been so exhausted by the Krav Maga training that at that time talking had seemed like too much effort.

This week, their training had been a little less intensive. They were going over undercover techniques which was so far mostly a lecture setting in which they watched video clips and were told the best ways to keep their covers intact. A lot of it was information that Boyd felt like he already knew or had figured out on missions but it was good to go over nonetheless. And for those other trainees who had never truly gone undercover in their careers, it seemed to be intriguing for them.

Even Cade had stayed relatively quiet during the week, although it was unclear whether it was because he was interested or if he was just being mindful of how much he'd already annoyed Doug. But that hadn't stopped Cade from being as obnoxious as ever when Doug wasn't around; it had become a habit for him to go bother Emma as they were collecting their items and for all that she seemed entirely uninterested, her smile remained as polite as ever.

Boyd didn't know how or why she managed to keep such a relatively kind expression around a man who spent all his time trying to see down her shirt and he didn't really think it was the best way to deal with the situation. At the same time, it so far seemed to be working for her; as much as Cade would go over to bug her, over time his ridiculous flexing and preening seemed to slowly be getting subtler.

The day before, Emma and Cade had actually seemed to be having a brief, serious conversation, although Boyd had been too far away to hear what it was about and he

hadn't cared enough to get closer. Of course, that didn't mean Cade was acting like a normal person, but at least he had subtly become less obvious with his intentions.

Although there were conversations happening now, Boyd didn't really care to listen. He'd been one of the last people into the room and had chosen a seat slightly away from the others. Patrick, Cade and Andrew had taken one table and Jon, Harriet, Toby and Emma were at another.

Boyd sat at the long table that Harriet and the others were at but he'd sat a few seats away, mostly because it had been the closest chair to where he'd arrived with his food and he had nothing to say to the others anyway. They didn't really seem to be talking about much; mostly some idle talk about the training and what they expected in the future.

Boyd was staring at his food blankly, idly wondering whether mashed potatoes were going to be part of every meal or if the cook just had a surplus he'd been trying to get rid of so far, when he was surprised by the sound of someone moving a chair next to him. He looked over to find Emma setting her bottle of apple juice down on the table and sitting in the chair.

He glanced briefly over at Harriet and the others but they didn't seem to have noticed that she'd left; he looked back at Emma questioningly.

"You looked lonely over here," she said as an explanation, smiling lightly at him. "Were you?"

Lonely? Bored and tired were more like it. "Not really."

It wasn't like he really needed anyone around him to make his day go well. And it wasn't like any of them had anything substantive to talk about anyway other than the same information over and over about training. Just because they were similarly ranked field agents in the same organization didn't mean they had anything in common aside from work, and even that wasn't always the case since they were in different units.

Emma watched Boyd a moment, as if waiting for him to say more, but when he just watched her blankly she pulled some hair behind her ear and looked away, seeming thoughtful. "This training has been pretty difficult so far, hasn't it? I wasn't even sure I'd make it through last week." She chuckled lightly, either to show she was slightly joking or maybe just in a self-deprecating way, Boyd wasn't sure.

He nodded to show he agreed but he didn't really have much to add to that so he didn't say anything. He'd seen her in the gym when he'd been training after hours so he knew she'd been working just as hard as he had. He doubted she was in danger of getting kicked out this early on and if she kept working as hard as she was, she had a good chance of significantly improving her physical prowess and stamina by the time training was over. But he saw no need to encourage her aloud because none of them truly knew what to expect.

She was silent a moment then leaned against the table with one elbow, her hand supporting her tilted head as she studied him, her other hand idly playing with her apple juice container. "Are you feeling alright?" She gave him a slightly odd look.

Boyd returned her odd look with one of his own, although his was subtler and made it less into his expression. "I'm fine." He had no idea why she'd think he wasn't.

"Okay," she said, although she sounded confused. She watched him a moment and then smiled. "I'll leave you alone then." She grabbed her juice bottle and moved to stand.

Something about her smile bothered Boyd and it took him a moment to realize why. That was the same polite, removed smile she gave Cade when he was being a jerk. The difference was, she was willing to keep talking to Cade despite the fact that he was rude, inconsiderate and extremely arrogant.

This was a woman who was willing to converse with one of the most sexist and misogynistic men Boyd had seen at the Agency, yet she was about to give up on Boyd. It reminded him of what Toby had said; that people thought he was an ass because he wouldn't talk to them, because he wouldn't really answer their attempts at starting conversations.

Because he didn't give them a chance.

And why not? He'd been willing to give Sin a chance despite the fact that most people had felt him to be subhuman, yet Boyd wouldn't even talk to a woman who was kindly smiling at him? He didn't know what the difference had been, except that for Sin he'd felt like it had been illogical to treat him the way everyone else had, and Boyd had wanted to give Sin a chance since no one else seemed willing to.

Boyd was a fairly antisocial person with people he didn't know so without the extreme situation Sin had been in, he doubted he would have bothered to put any effort in. With

the others like Emma, it wasn't like they really needed Boyd specifically to go out of his way; she could talk to anyone easily without him having to get involved in idle chit chat about topics he may not even care about.

But how did he know ahead of time that he was uninterested in what she had to say? How did he know she didn't deserve as much of a chance as Sin had?

It was no wonder others thought he was such a haughty person if he could even get Emma, of all people, to give up on him. In the end, he had to look at it logically; he was about to spend the next three months with a group of people he barely knew. He could stay remote and disliked as usual or he could actually put some effort into this and not always be the one who was alone or quiet on the edges.

She was just pushing the chair in and was about to leave when Boyd said suddenly, "Emma." She turned to look at him, seeming mildly surprised, and she searched his expression for a reason that he'd said anything without being spoken to first.

He realized as she stared at him that he really had no idea what to say. "You... don't have to leave," he said belatedly.

Emma's surprise increased in her expression but she nodded with a half smile and didn't question him; she simply pulled the chair out and tilted it at an angle so she could see him better. She sat cross-legged in the chair and played with her juice bottle's top by loosening and tightening it as she watched him.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you while you were still eating." It was a bit of a random comment but she seemed to be apologizing for bothering him in the first place.

"No, it's fine," Boyd said, looking down at his meal again. The cook wasn't bad; he'd managed to make the chicken nuggets pretty tender and the salad's lettuce was crisp and not wilted, but Boyd wasn't terribly hungry today. "I was just thinking about how often we'll have the potatoes."

She laughed. "We had a bet going earlier on that." She grinned, indicating Toby down the table. "He's convinced it'll change by next week but I told him we'll have them for every meal until the end."

"Even breakfast?" Boyd asked with an eyebrow raised.

"That's all we'll get for breakfast," she deadpanned. "Cold mashed potatoes with a side of coffee."

Boyd made a slight face. That sounded entirely unappetizing.

She saw his expression and chuckled. "Guess that wouldn't be your preferred breakfast, would it?"

"Not at all." There was a pause in which Boyd almost left it at that and she waited for more information. He realized that he was trying to make an effort here and to do so he needed to explain more comments or the two of them would just lose their ability to carry any sort of conversation. "I'd prefer tea at the very least."

"Ahh," Emma said knowingly, "you're one of *those*."

He looked at her sidelong, wondering if she was insulting him, although that seemed odd for her to do. "One of what?"

"One of those people who've managed to avoid any sort of addiction to caffeinated highs." She leaned back in her chair and smiled at him. "I'm impressed, actually. I go into withdrawal if I don't have a pot or three of coffee a day." She held up her apple juice, looking bemused. "Although I've been trying to cure myself..."

"I see," Boyd said, looking at the juice than at her, deadpan. "And how long would you say this affliction has affected your life?"

"Hmm." She seemed to consider that a little too deeply as she played along with him. "Since I was four and my grandpa first gave me a cup of coffee as a joke."

"Did you like it?"

Emma made a face. "Ugh, I hated it. Thought it tasted like bitter water."

Boyd could agree with that sentiment. "When did you start enjoying it?"

"I'm not sure." She thought about it a moment, looking up into blank air as she twirled the bottle back and forth between her palms. "Probably in the next few years, watching how he always had a few cups of coffee a day. He liked to sit out on the porch and stare at the street. He looked so peaceful; I was told that he did it more than usual after my

grandma died but I'd never met her. I guess she got him onto coffee, so maybe it reminded him of her."

She paused, looking back at Boyd. "I think I started drinking it more as I grew older, partially to get closer to him? It seemed to make him happy when I drank with him so I guess I must've somehow slipped in on his ritual, even if it took me awhile to acquire the taste."

"Hmm. So you have a deep-seeded need to please and have dealt with your grief over a grandmother you never knew by replacing her with a drink you didn't like, which you later became hopelessly addicted to." Boyd raised his eyebrows, giving her a mild look. "This is a sad story you came over to tell me."

Emma threw her head back and laughed. "I know, right? So tragic." She opened her juice and took a long drink, her eyes sparking with amusement. "Look, though. Getting better."

She shook the bottle to show that she'd drank a third of the juice at one time. She grinned and didn't give Boyd a chance to answer, or not answer as the case may have been. "Contrary to popular belief, I didn't actually come over here to regale you with stories of Gramps Walker."

"Why *did* you come over here?" Boyd asked, actually curious about her motivation. To his knowledge he hadn't been acting any differently than he had so far in training and she hadn't stopped by before so he didn't understand what made her change her routine today.

"I wanted to talk about the training." She seemed to get from his expression that he was uninterested in this line of conversation but she just waved a hand, now unwilling to let his reticence push her away. "No, this week you've seemed on top of things and I thought about your unit. I mean, I don't know much about it-- It's top secret and all, even for those of us in Intel. But I wondered if you'd been on many undercover missions."

Boyd thought about whether he could answer that and whether he wanted to, but ultimately decided that it couldn't hurt. She was in the Agency so it wasn't like she was some random person he was talking to, and he wasn't going to give her details. "A few."

She made a thoughtful noise and smiled at him trickily. "You like them." She said it in the pleased, smug tone a person would usually observe that another had a crush on someone.

"What?" He hadn't been expecting that as her answer and gave her a strange look.

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you've been looking so stressed or bored with most of the training." She waved a hand as if to fend off rumors. "I mean, not that I've been watching you like a stalker or anything. I just noticed it whenever I glanced over. But this week you've seemed more interested, or at least like you understood what was happening. It was more expression than you usually have, so I figured you liked undercover missions."

Did he like undercover missions? He didn't know if he'd ever thought about it clearly before.

He felt that he was pretty good at them in general but truthfully he hadn't been on many. Most of the missions he'd been on tended to have some sort of undercover aspect to them, in that he was infiltrating a base and needed to pass through unseen. But the only true undercover mission he'd been on had been Monterrey and his role had been quite atypical of missions in that case. Not to mention that it had all gone to hell at the end.

Aside from that, had he enjoyed it? Did he enjoy the concept of undercover missions?

"I guess I do," he said after a moment.

"Why?" she asked curiously.

He had to think about that to get the answer but when he realized what it was, it clicked.

"I like the challenge. The uncertainty. I like the puzzle and improvisation." He paused.

"And the adrenaline rush."

"Spoken like a true field agent," Emma said with a grin.

It was true that field agents did seem to have that type of mentality. It was a little strange to realize that somewhere along the line in the past few years he'd become a typical field agent in his own way. For most of his life he'd had no idea that the Agency existed as it did and even when he'd first received the invitation to test as Sin's partner, he'd fully expected to die before he ever got to this point. He never would have thought that he'd get to a place in life where, despite everything, he truly enjoyed certain aspects of this job.

He didn't care about the Agency's mission statement but he had to admit that parts of the job, like that adrenaline rush and the way he was able to challenge his mind to work around issues, made him feel truly alive in a way he hadn't since before Lou had died. That feeling of being alive was only otherwise there in Sin's presence, with the knowledge that there was someone out there he was connected to and who he could trust without hesitation.

Boyd studied Emma with mild intrigue; she'd recognized something about his preferences even before he had and he wondered if part of that had been due to her own experiences. "Have you been on any?"

"Undercovers?" she asked and he nodded. "Hmm. Well, not so much in the strict sense, but I've been on a lot where I had to walk around unnoticed. That part of it I like. I've found I actually enjoy being underestimated; it makes it easier to take advantage of the situation."

She gave him a wry look. "And most people think a sweet, cute woman like me couldn't have an ulterior motive in her bones aside from slipping a little extra cinnamon into her homemade apple pies."

Boyd actually smiled very slightly at that, amused by the analogy, which caused Emma to look pleased. He hadn't talked to anyone who had the same mindset as he had when it came to taking advantage of the situation. He was often underestimated as well, especially by the type of people like Cade, who thought brawn was all that was needed to be a good agent.

"I can understand that," he said mildly.

She smiled and seemed to understand what he was thinking without him having to say it aloud. "I'm sure you can."

They fell into a period of silence and Boyd glanced around, realizing several of the others had already left. She looked around as well, eyes tracking Cade as he walked over to the garbage to dump his leftover food, talking loudly to Patrick about one of the storms they'd been on and how great it had been. A slightly troubled expression passed across her face and she returned her attention to Boyd, looking more serious.

"Listen," she said, "I know it's not really my place to say this but I want to now in case I don't get the chance in the future. I don't think you have anything to be ashamed of."

Boyd blinked at her and for a moment he had no idea what she was talking about. "What?"

"For being gay." She said it bluntly, seeming unapologetic and not shy about saying what a lot of people hedged around. "There's nothing wrong with it and what Cade said the other day was completely, disgustingly inappropriate."

He frowned at her slightly. He didn't ask how or why she knew he was gay; aside from the rumors that had been rampant, he hadn't really denied Cade's unspoken assertion at that time. What he didn't get was why she cared.

"Why do you feel the need to tell me this?" He asked it mostly out of curiosity.

"Because I don't want you to feel alienated," she said with a shrug. "Obviously not everyone agreed with him but I guess I just wanted to be another person on your side as far as that goes."

"Why do you care?" Boyd didn't really understand her; why she went out of her way to talk to people who were rude to or uninterested in her. It wasn't like her life really depended on what he felt. He'd somewhat joked before about her having a need to please; maybe that's all it was.

"Mostly because I have several gay and lesbian friends," she said, leaning back in the chair and frowning. "I've never understood why they should have to be ostracized by society simply because of who they're attracted to. It's not right."

She paused and for a moment he thought she'd leave it at that but there seemed to be something else on her mind so he didn't say anything. She chewed her lip then gave him a slightly guiltily look. "And also because when all those rumors were going around about you before, I kind of feel like I didn't do enough to tell people around me to shut up. It's not like everyone was being stupid about it, but a lot of people were. I told them to stop a few times but I always felt like I could've done more, like the times I just stayed silent made it seem like I agreed. I didn't like that, so I guess when I realized you were in training I thought I'd have a chance to apologize." She paused, bemused. "For something you didn't even know I did, or didn't do."

He considered that. Although at the time he would have preferred to have more people speak out on his behalf, by now he didn't care anymore. Even so, it was nice to know she cared enough about him, even as a complete stranger, to want to support him.

"You didn't know me so you had no reason to care," he said with a shrug, then paused. "But it's okay."

She smiled at him more sincerely, seeming pleased that he'd given her some sense of closure on the issue. She opened her juice bottle and drank the rest all in one breath; to Boyd, it seemed like that was a very good way of making herself feel sick, but she seemed to be fine with it. She set the empty bottle down loudly against the table and grinned at him, then pushed herself up to stand.

"We'd better get going; training starts again soon." She tilted her head significantly toward the clock on the wall, which showed they had about five minutes to run back to their rooms to gather any items they needed and return to the classroom.

Boyd nodded and followed her as they dumped the leftover food and wrappings before leaving the cafeteria. About half of them headed straight toward the classroom, but Cade, Toby, and Jon all headed toward the rooms like he did. He'd left a few items in his room that he needed to grab before they started on the next several-hour lecture.

He trailed behind them, digging through his bag to determine whether he'd lost his pen or if it was just buried. At first he didn't realize anything was out of the ordinary until he heard Cade go quiet in a very significant way.

Boyd looked up and was thoroughly surprised to see Sin standing in the middle of the hallway. When he looked at Boyd, it was obvious that he'd been waiting for him.

Boyd slowed and stared at Sin briefly.

His first reaction was one of alarm; if there was a mission Carhart would have been the one to inform Boyd so there was no professional reason for Sin to have come by. It was possible that something bad had occurred but as a number of increasingly unlikely scenarios rushed through Boyd's mind, he realized that Sin's expression didn't show any true urgency about the situation.

Feeling eyes on him, Boyd glanced at the others. Cade was looking at him with a rather smug expression and Toby seemed to be considering the significance of Sin's presence although Jon didn't seem to care as he headed toward his room.

Boyd knew the others well enough to understand what was going through their minds; Toby would be thinking about how Sin represented Boyd's connections and Cade would

be formulating some way to mock him for this, probably trying to find some way to link it to Boyd's homosexuality.

Regardless of Sin's reason, Boyd knew that especially with the rumors in the past, Cade was going to make at least a few sniping comments about Sin suddenly showing up at his bedroom. Boyd could care less what Cade thought but it was one more stress and frustration he didn't want to deal with along with everything else.

Boyd couldn't help feel frustrated and annoyed; he was doing his best to prove he could finish training on his own merit and the last thing he needed was a reminder of one of the peoples' shadows he was trying to get out from under.

The fact that they would all have to fight Sin later for final testing only complicated the situation further; this would remind the others that Sin and Boyd had a history, enough for him to most likely sneak or break into the barracks in order to visit. Given Sin's infamy for being unwilling to put effort into social interactions, the idea that he'd do that for Boyd was going to seem more important than it was.

It was entirely possible that this would instill doubt in the other trainees and cause them to wonder if Sin would fight Boyd fairly or if he'd pull punches because he felt differently in some way toward Boyd than he did toward the others.

The worst part of the whole thing was that they were allowed absolutely no interaction with the outside world and Sin was essentially forcing Boyd to break that rule. The reality of that and the possible consequences caused Boyd's irritation to peak.

He didn't have time for this anyway; if he got to the lecture room after Doug started, the door would be locked and he'd miss the training and be docked points as well as mocked unrelentingly by Doug during the next bout of training. Boyd had thus far escaped Doug's wrath but the man was probably just waiting for an opportunity to pick on him like he seemed to with everyone else.

All of these realizations moved quickly through Boyd's mind and he found himself wondering what on Earth had possessed Sin to come. Given Sin's personality, it honestly made the most sense to Boyd that Sin just decided the rules didn't apply to him and he followed through with whatever made him feel like visiting, not caring about what the consequences or inconveniences could be for Boyd in the process.

Boyd walked closer until he was in front of Sin, the entire time feeling extremely aware of Cade and Toby's stares, and asked quietly, "What are you doing here?"

Sin stared at him for a moment, not really seeming to care that they had an audience. Now that they were up close, Boyd could see that he looked much better than the weeks prior. He didn't look as pale or fatigued and his green eyes seemed far more alert.

"I need to talk to you about something," Sin said vaguely.

'Something?' The way he said it didn't seem particularly urgent which made it even more annoying that he had showed up out of nowhere with absolutely no regards to the rules to talk about something that probably could have waited for a time that was convenient for both of them.

Or, better yet, Sin could have actually showed up for Krav Maga like he was supposed to and then Boyd could have talked to him all he wanted during the breaks. As happy as Boyd was to see that Sin seemed to be looking better, he wished Sin would have more consideration for other people and not just his own whims.

"Unless it's two sentences or extremely urgent, I can't talk now," Boyd said bluntly, still keeping his voice down so the others wouldn't hear.

Sin watched Cade and Toby disappear into their rooms before returning his gaze to Boyd. "Why?"

"I have to be somewhere soon and you're not even supposed to be here," Boyd said, matter-of-fact. "Can it wait? I have a break in two weeks."

Sin's mouth twisted slightly, eyebrows drawing down. "Two weeks," he repeated flatly. "Why can't you just wait a damn few minutes now?"

"Because you gave me no warning at all and have bad timing." Boyd glanced briefly down at his watch; he really needed to get going. He looked back up to meet Sin's eyes, feeling rather impatient. "Do you remember the part where I'm in Level 10 training and am not supposed to have contact with outsiders? Well, I need to head to a lecture now and Doug isn't very forgiving with tardiness."

There was another pause and Sin shifted his weight slightly, eyes narrowing as he stared at his partner. "How was I supposed to give you warning, Boyd?"

It annoyed Boyd that the conversation was still happening; that Sin couldn't just accept 'I'm not available right now' and compromise by saying he'd come back at a better time or they'd figure something out. Instead, he turned it around to make it seem as though Boyd was being the unreasonable one.

"I didn't mean that literally, like you should phone ahead," Boyd said shortly. "I just meant that in some situations it works if you suddenly show up and expect me to be able to talk but that doesn't work well here."

Cade reappeared from his room and stared blatantly at the two of them as he passed but Boyd ignored him.

Sin ran a hand through his hair, looking thoroughly frustrated with the situation and Boyd's condescending tone. "You're unbelievable. You really are."

Boyd stared at him incredulously. How the hell was *he* the unbelievable one? Just because Sin had no respect for just about any rule laid in front of him didn't mean Boyd had the luxury to drop everything whenever Sin felt like stopping by.

Boyd didn't want to snap something back without thinking and get into a prolonged argument so he just narrowed his eyes and walked past Sin without replying. He headed straight into his room and started digging around for the pen, notebook and book he needed.

His movements were jerkier than normal and in his peripheral vision he barely noticed Toby watching him before grabbing his bag and walking out of the room. Boyd quickly searched on his table, not caring when he knocked a few items over, and tried not to get too angry but it was difficult.

It was a very strict rule that during the time they were in training they weren't supposed to have any outside contact; they'd already been informed that doing so would result in some sort of punitive action. Doug hadn't been very clear on exactly what it was, which could have been because it entertained him to leave it so ominous. But that meant Boyd had no idea whether this counted, whether he could get in trouble, and what that punishment would even be.

He didn't think they'd kick him out for talking to Sin but he didn't know. He broke the rules just by seeing Sin, let alone taking the time to even talk to him as briefly as he had and he wasn't exactly on strong enough standing to feel like he could afford anything that could compromise him.

Sin *knew* the situation. He'd been through this training before, he'd been there when Carhart had told them the rules, he was even on the fucking training panel. He should have had a damn good idea that he was potentially screwing Boyd over just by showing up like this yet he didn't seem to care.

If anything, he seemed to think Boyd was being an asshole by not stopping to listen to whatever he suddenly felt like saying. It was as though Sin thought Boyd should just defer to him, that nothing happening on Boyd's end could be important enough to interrupt his plans.

It was the same way Sin had treated Boyd since they'd met, since they'd started to grow closer-- like those late night phone calls when he'd demanded candy and had been very insistent that it occur immediately regardless of what Boyd was doing. The same way Sin would suddenly decide he wanted sex from Boyd because he was in the mood and, granted, the vast majority of the time Boyd was too but it all morphed together at that moment to annoy Boyd.

It was possible that whatever Sin had to say was imperative but then why hadn't he seemed more insistent or said 'yes it's urgent, we need to talk right now' instead of wasting time questioning him?

Part of Boyd wanted to just find out what Sin wanted and get it out of the way but another part of him was annoyed and felt like regardless of what it was, unless Sin had been stopping by to say that he'd had a psychic vision that Boyd was going to die tonight, then it could have waited for the appropriate time.

But Sin seemed pathologically incapable of being willing to follow procedure and always acted as though Boyd was the idiot or jerk for doing so, which was incredibly frustrating. Sin had once told Boyd 'whatever makes you happy' and when Boyd had jokingly asked if that went for everything, Sin had said it did. But too often, Boyd felt like what really dictated their relationship and interaction was whatever made Sin happy.

Whatever the case, Boyd was too annoyed and in too much of a hurry to deal with this right now. He finally found his materials and shoved them into his bag then strode out of the room quickly. He intended to tell Sin that they could deal with this later and let him know what day he had a break but when he got into the hallway he found it was empty.

For some reason, it irritated him even further that Sin had disappeared without giving any warning or any sort of closure. He just showed up, made things worse for Boyd,

acted like Boyd was the one out of line, then disappeared before anything could come of it.

Although it was probably good since Boyd may have otherwise stupidly been drawn into an argument, he still felt especially tense as he rushed to try to get to the training room on time.

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It was more than a little obvious that Sin was highly upset about something; something other than the obvious problems that he was there to discuss and figure out. The tension in his shoulders, the way his hands constantly balled and unballled into fists and especially the way he stared into space stonily made it a pretty obvious concept to grasp.

And because of his foul mood, the first thirty minutes of the session had been a lot like pulling teeth.

His current attitude was a stark contrast to the mildly agreeable, albeit miserable temperament that Ann had become accustomed to in the past few weeks. Noting the change made her realize that she'd actually become somewhat fond of the intelligent, humorous at times, and incredibly misunderstood man that Sin had turned out to be.

It was a surprising realization; getting along and working together was one thing, but the fact that she actually found herself liking his personality was a different thing entirely. Ann wasn't sure what she thought of that yet but she idly wondered if her newfound desire to see him and talk to him had something to do with Philip's constant ire over their continued sessions. The more he told her not to see Sin anymore, the more she wanted to do it. It was sad and childish all at the same time but the mild rebellion raged inside her regardless.

Ann sat back in her chair and looked down at the notes she had on the desk, dragging her eyes away from Sin's gloomy expression. It was a combination of her own ideas and observations as well as Lydia's and she was currently trying to tie together certain events in Sin's past. The only way she would ever understand and be able to properly diagnose his 'episodes' would be if she knew everything that happened to him as a child.

Lydia had rather sloppily jotted down 'child abuse' and 'sexual assault,' with question marks and had circled the word 'mother' several times in red ink, but other than that,

there weren't any real hard facts recorded. Ann had planned the session with the intention of getting to the bottom of all of that but Sin had come in with such a poor attitude that getting information out of him had proved increasingly difficult.

So far all Ann had was that his mother was a prostitute who died suddenly and that his father had mysteriously and inexplicably shown up to rescue Sin from China after her death. It was nothing she hadn't already guessed and Ann was frustrated because she really needed to know more.

Ann scratched her pen against the notepad idly and looked up at her patient again. His dark eyebrows were drawn together, green eyes glaring intensely off into the distance as he sat with his shoulders thrown back and arms crossed over his chest.

He looked really pissed off. Even his posture was confrontational and it reminded her of the way he'd acted in the past when they'd encountered each other. He'd expected the worst from her so he'd put on his meanest face to hurt her in advance; she wondered what had happened to put him back in that frame of mind.

"Are you ready to talk yet?" she asked calmly, drawing lines on the paper. "Your time is almost up and we got nowhere quickly today."

Sin shrugged, not looking at her. "I guess."

Ann pressed her lips together slightly, mildly annoyed by his lack of caring. They weren't here for her sake, after all. This was about him and he wasn't doing himself any favors at the moment by behaving this way. "What happened to get you this upset?"

Another shrug, this one with fake indifference, the flicker of annoyance in his expression giving it away. "Doesn't matter."

"Really." Ann raised one unimpressed eyebrow at him. "For you to be this angry, I imagine it must have been something that mattered to you a great deal. We already established that the medication hasn't gotten into your system entirely yet, so even if it was about hallucinations, you would have brought that up already so it's obvious to me that this is something entirely different."

Sin looked at her finally, eyes narrowed at her persistence as his mouth curled down in an annoyed scowl. "If it's entirely different from the shit we're here to fix, then I don't see how it even concerns you."

"Everything you think or feel concerns me," she replied automatically. "We've already deduced that high stress and anxiety has a tendency to lead to episodes, so whatever made you this angry is something that needs to be discussed."

Sin rolled his eyes, handsome face skeptical. "Trust me, this isn't something that would lead to me having a psychotic melt-down."

"When you first walked in, you were so angry you were practically shaking. I thought something was seriously wrong with you; that you were having an episode of some sort or experiencing hallucinations." Ann dropped the pen finally, ceasing her random scrawls. "If something had the ability to upset you that much, it's an issue. You're in such a high level of stress that if any other negative actions were directed at you at the moment, it wouldn't be surprising if you did have an episode."

Sin looked like he wanted to disagree, but faltered just as his lips parted and wound up falling silent again. He looked very troubled by something and after another wasted moment of silence, he just ran a hand through his unruly hair.

"I don't know," he mumbled finally, sounding almost dejected.

It was an outrageous comparison, but Ann had to admit that at the moment he looked very much like a kicked puppy. His expression was a mixture of confusion, forlornness and anger; as if he was upset about being so angry with whoever had upset him.

"Does it have something to do with Boyd?" she asked finally, tapping her long nails against the desk. Sin shot her a largely unreadable look and she spread her hands slightly. "You seem to value his partnership and friendship. I can't imagine you've recently struck up a relationship with anyone else who would put that look on your face."

"What look?" Sin asked defensively, automatically slipping back into tough guy mode as his eyes narrowed at her again. He sat up straighter, broad shoulders hunching forward in an unconscious and almost self-conscious way.

"That abused red-headed stepchild look," Ann replied dryly.

Sin gave her an odd look and finally looked out the window again, seeming uncomfortable with her close scrutiny as he slumped down further in the chair. "Something unexpected happened," he said finally.

Ann nodded, studying him closely, trying to deduce what that could have possibly been. "Did you go to see him in the training hall or was he allowed out?"

Sin shrugged moodily. "I went to talk to him. I thought it was important but I guess not."

She paused briefly before speaking again. "The General told me that you didn't want Boyd to know about your condition."

"Well, it doesn't matter anymore anyway," he said, voice low, almost angry sounding. "I wanted to tell him before something bad happened; I didn't want him to be caught off guard in case something did... and your pathetic excuse for medication hasn't done a thing for me thus far so I can only assume I'll keep going crazier..."

"Yes, and?" Ann interrupted, having enough of that spiel already. He reminded her of that every session, even if she always told him that it would take several weeks before there was a complete turnaround in symptoms.

"And he didn't want to hear what I had to say. This bullshit job is more important to him so that's fine. I'm not going to try again. Whatever happens happens, and I'm not going to worry about anyone else anymore." Sin shrugged both shoulders and didn't look at all convinced of the last part of his declaration.

"It wasn't exactly appropriate for you to show up there without clearance," she reminded him. "Maybe he thought there would be a penalty."

She had no idea what Boyd's reasons were for whatever had occurred but she knew Sin would never go into detail and it was important to talk him down from his current state before turning him loose on the rest of the compound. She knew him well enough now to know that he became very self-destructive when angry enough.

"He thinks I'm an idiot or something," Sin replied tonelessly, although his body language made it clear that he was quite unhappy with that idea. "I suppose he thought I broke his rules to drop by and say hi? Or maybe just to upset him?"

He scoffed, shifting in the chair. "I wouldn't have gone if I hadn't felt it was very important but it doesn't matter. If he doesn't want to concern himself with my problems, I won't burden him with them and he can focus on his ridiculous training and think of more ways to condescend to me in front of people, which has always been a specialty of his anyway."

Ann wasn't entirely sure what to say to that. She didn't know the situation and she wasn't going to make excuses for Boyd when she had no idea what his real thought process had been. So instead, she settled back in her chair and took another tactic. "I think you're working yourself up over things he didn't actually say to you. Unless those words actually came from his mouth, it's unwise to project your own assumptions onto him and will just make you angrier. We talked about this, remember? It's just another way of managing your temper."

Sin didn't respond and seemed quite ready to be through with the topic. He never seemed comfortable discussing Boyd and Ann wasn't ready to push him about it unless it was a situation that really was imperative to his recovery. She found it intriguing that he was this upset over what appeared to be a misunderstanding, but it made sense in a way. Boyd was likely the only person he associated with or could consider anything close to a friend and even the feeling of a slight betrayal or rejection from him was likely very upsetting for Sin.

"Well if you're done talking about it, then we can get back to my original question." She looked at her notes again and went back to the topic at hand, taking a different route this time. "How old were you when you had your first episode?"

"Eight."

Ann glanced up at him, not having expected him to respond quite so quickly. "Can you identify what caused it? Or the events that were happening at that moment?"

"One of my mother's johns was sodomizing me," Sin replied with little inflection, still seeming more focused on his annoyance with Boyd than the actual words coming out of his mouth.

It wasn't surprising, but the unmoved quality of his tone and expression was. She hadn't expected him to be ashamed by it, but he said it as simply as if he were discussing a day at the park.

Sin looked back at her, raising an eyebrow. "Did you expect me to cry?"

"No, not at all. I'm wondering if it makes you feel anything to admit that. I'm wondering what you felt at the time."

Sin sighed, seeming quite fed up with the discussion of his feelings and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he threaded his fingers through his hair. "I couldn't

control what happened. I was only a child. I don't feel shame or guilt or anything about it now. It doesn't bother me to remember it at all. What I feel guilty over has to do with things I should have been able to control or stop and couldn't, not some overweight Russian raping me when I was barely 40 pounds."

Ann fought a grimace. "Was that the first time you'd be sexually assaulted there or just the first time you had an episode?"

"It was the first time I had an episode," Sin replied blandly, looking away again. He began pulling at a loose thread in his pants, a constant habit she'd noticed over time.

Ann looked at him closely. "Had you been sexually abused before that?"

He shrugged, seemingly unconcerned. "I guess. My mother had taken it upon herself to teach me how to service clients. She decided I'd go into the family business. Honestly I think it was just an excuse to molest me since I reminded her of my father. She had this ridiculous obsession with him, that he'd come back and take her off into the sunset or some nonsense. He had that effect on women, as you should know."

Ann's pen froze against the pad and she looked away for a moment. So Lydia hadn't been the first person to use Sin as a way of reliving her Emilio fantasies.

The realization made Ann feel ill.

How many women had been so sucked into Emilio Vega's web that they'd become completely twisted and sick beings because of it? There had to have been something wrong before he'd come along but even so, Ann couldn't understand how the man had had such a powerful effect on women to the point of one abusing her own child.

Ann felt ashamed that she'd ever even had sex with Emilio even if she knew in reality it wasn't his fault. But she did feel guilt that she hadn't made more of a conscious effort to snap Lydia out of it.

Ann shook her head slightly and refocused on Sin, on his mother. Ann was sick at the idea, at the mental image that it put in her mind, and she fought the urge to shudder. There were very evil people in this world; people who truly deserved to be tortured and alienated from society like Sin was now. "How did you feel when your mother did that?"

Sin made a vague gesture with his hand, appearing very uninterested in the discussion although she did notice that he refused to look at her. His eyes were narrowed slightly

and he was practically ripping at the string in his pants now. "I don't know. I didn't know there was anything wrong with it at the time. I saw people having sex all the time and I didn't know any other children. I didn't like it though but if I complained, she would lock me in the cellar."

"How big was the cellar?"

Another shrug and Sin ripped the string out, dropping it and opting to tap his fingers against the armrest instead. His eyes were still trained on some point out the window. "I don't know. It was dark. They would lock me in a shipping crate."

Ann stopped writing and really stared at him now. She took in his stiff posture, narrowed eyes and the deliberate blankness of his typically expressive face. She watched how his fingers clenched and unclenched, at the way his strong jaw was set and how restless he suddenly looked.

"Sin, does the Agency know this?"

He smiled humorlessly, the expression almost frightening as his eyes narrowed and a dangerous glint appeared in his eyes. But he still didn't look at her. "I may have mentioned it when I was first recruited. Before I knew better than to trust you psychiatrist people. Why do you think they chose the box as a punishment?"

"Sin, I would never use anything you said===

Sin scoffed and waved his hand sharply to cut her off. "Don't bother. Even if you didn't want to, they could still get the information easily enough. I'm aware of it and it doesn't matter. I don't even blame the doctor I saw upon my arrival here. She was kind enough - it was too early on for her to truly fear me like people do now."

Ann nodded distractedly, disturbed by the possibility of Vivienne using her notes as a way to further torture Sin if he were to get out of line. "Doctor Pegrino?"

"Yes. She died of radiation poisoning shortly after."

Ann nodded and pursed her lips, noticing that Sin's shoulders seemed to almost visibly relax when the topic shifted away from his mother. Instead of pressing the topic further, Ann went back to the original line of questioning. "How did you feel when the Russian assaulted you?"

"I felt helpless and very angry at the time. But I wasn't scared and I didn't cry."

"Do you know exactly when the episode began to occur? Were you aware of what was happening to you mentally?"

Sin seemed to think about that for a moment before shrugging. "I suppose I was. I knew it should have hurt but during the act, I felt no pain. I was just watching it happen, or that's what it seemed like. It hurt afterwards, I was unable to move for days because of the damage, but while it was happening all I felt was anger."

Ann scribbled things down rapidly, although she didn't take her eyes away from him. "Would you consider that a negative or a positive? The fact that you experienced an out of body situation during that time?"

Sin stopped fidgeting and looked at her seriously. "I would have previously said it was a positive but now that I think about it, it was just a catalyst for all of the things I would do in the future as I got older."

She nodded. "And despite the fact that, in essence, your mind separates you from your body to protect you or shield you from the threat it perceives is in front of you, you consider it now to be a negative?"

"Of course." Sin's eyes slid away from her and focused on the window as they had so many times in the past but this time something dark crossed his expression. "Back then I was just a helpless boy. Now I'm a killer. Now I'm a threat when I'm in that state and now people can die who aren't supposed to. People that I'm actually close to."

Ann paused in her writing. There was something about his tone; about his expression as the conversation progressed... It made it clear that this was a very raw topic for him, and she got the feeling that he was implying something he didn't plan to say outright. Given how forthright he was about most other things, Ann could only wonder what he was holding back.

The way he danced around the topic, the way he'd danced about it in previous sessions, it seemed as though Sin almost wanted to tell her but couldn't bring himself to do it. She could sense a kind of desperation in his gaze when the topic came up, as if he was wallowing in this misery and he really did want to tell someone so he wouldn't have to face it alone, but Ann doubted he trusted her enough yet to let her in that far.

And suddenly it made sense why he was so upset about the failed discussion with Boyd. He'd wanted someone to talk to about this whole thing; had likely looked forward to not having to deal with it alone anymore, and he'd been turned away.

Sin finally looked at her again, likely drawn out of his reverie by the extended silence and she locked gazes with him for a long time, trying to read him, trying to understand him and figure out all of the vague clues he let go every now and then, but it was too hard. His gaze was intense, it drew her in and didn't allow her to look away, but even then Ann couldn't grasp whatever was on the peripheral. And she had no doubt that whatever it was, it likely was the direct link between the episodes and the psychotic depression.

A shrill buzz from the phone startled her out of the shared moment and she ripped her gaze away from Sin's face abruptly, feeling unbalanced and mildly guilty, even if she didn't know why.

"Yes, Diane?" Ann cleared her throat, turning away from Sin slightly.

"Captain Scott is downstairs," the receptionist informed her.

Ann resisted the urge to roll her eyes and noticed Sin standing up out of the corner of her eye. "Well he's early and I'm not--"

"It's ten after, ma'am," Diane corrected her. "Should I tell him you'll be a while?"

Ann glanced at her watch in surprise. "Ah, I see. Tell him I'll be down in a moment."

Sin zipped up his sweater, throwing the hood over his head as he started to leave the office, likely preparing to trek out into the never-ending rainstorm. She wanted to say something to him, but she had no idea what to say. So when he nodded at her and quickly strode out of the office, Ann couldn't help but feel unsettled.

She hadn't meant to end the session on that note; she hadn't meant to clam up completely when he looked so lost and vulnerable. But she had and now God only knew what the hell he was thinking about her reaction.

Frustrated and annoyed with herself, Ann closed the folder and tucked it into her bag, intending to peruse it later as she researched a preliminary diagnosis.

A series of self-realizations seemed to come hand in hand with being Sin's doctor and as Ann threw on her black trench coat and exited the office, she made yet another one.

It'd seemed as though they'd connected in that moment, when he'd stared at her so intently as if willing her to figure it out, to understand, to tell him that it was okay. Or it'd seemed as though they'd been about to connect; she had no idea where they stood now. For all Ann knew, Sin had taken her silence as a negative judgment of some sort and would back away from that line of discussion in the future.

It frustrated her on a professional level but also on a more personal level. It was disturbing but after they'd been interrupted, Ann realized she'd wanted that connection.

But then again, why wouldn't she? Her patients were the only people that she really spoke to anymore and the fact that Sin of all people had seemed to want to let her in further, had wanted her to know what he'd gone to tell Boyd, it'd made her feel something.

If it were anybody else the moment wouldn't have been as striking but it was Sin. Sin, who didn't trust psychiatrists or take them seriously; Sin, who picked and chose what he wanted to share with her because he saved his darkest secrets for the people he truly trusted.

The fact that he was starting to edge away from his skeptical doubt of her, that he was letting her in deeper, was almost thrilling, satisfying, and a number of other feelings that likely fell in line with the fact that having someone like Sin trust and confide in her felt like an incredible privilege.

Ann took the elevator downstairs and stepped out of the Tower, opening her umbrella as the wind blew her hair around wildly. Rain battered the flimsy shield mercilessly as she hurried down the stairs and towards Philip's car.

"What took you?" he asked, eyes sweeping over her before he took off down the road and towards the gates, barely waiting for her to buckle her seat-belt.

"Session ran long," Ann replied shortly, uninterested in the way he kept glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes. His reluctant attraction to her didn't flatter Ann in any way at all.

"I saw your little boyfriend," Philip said with a sneer. "Every time I see him, I have to wonder why everyone runs around so scared of him. The boy's barely a featherweight."

Ann leaned her head against the window and rolled her eyes. "Well, thank you for picking me up."

She wasn't actually glad about it but it was a safe non-sequitur to get the topic away from Sin. Her car was temporarily out of commission until fuel was resupplied in their area but she'd planned to take public transportation to her own apartment in the city that night. Philip arriving to rescue her from the rain was hardly a good thing and likely only meant that he wanted to fuck.

He grunted noncommittally and continued the long drive out to the mansion in West Cunningham Terrace. Ann detested the place and had since she'd been a child but Philip had demanded they move in rather than sell the inheritance. She'd liked the fact that he hadn't cared about the massive amount of money they'd likely get from selling it but now it was nothing but a royal pain in the ass to commute there. Not only was the ride depressing because of the destroyed suburbs they had to pass through in order to reach the affluent community, but the fuel used every day was outrageous.

It would have been prudent to switch from fuel based vehicles to electric like most people had done already but Philip thought having fuel-based cars was a sign of wealth and demanded she keep the old one. It was silly and she planned to switch anyway.

With gas as scarce as it was, she had to re-fuel her car constantly, something she'd neglected to do recently because of her constant distraction over the case. But one good thing about the long drive was that it gave her a good excuse to stay alone in her old apartment in the city from time to time.

A hand on her thigh caused Ann to jump and she looked over at Philip to see that his eyes continued to travel up and down her body as he drove over long expanses of deserted road. He squeezed her thigh and slid his hand up her skirt slowly, shifting in his seat as he likely grew aroused from the contact.

Ann closed her eyes and didn't deny him; she despised him, but at least sex was something she understood and something she could remotely enjoy even if she wasn't anything close to attracted to him anymore. She'd used sex as an outlet since she'd been a pre-teen; she'd used it as a way of escaping her life, her family and she'd used it as a way to temporarily feel wanted by someone. Not much had changed since then and even though it was unhealthy, Ann found herself doing the same thing now.

She hated Philip, despised him and everything he stood for but they had such a miserable existence that she figured she may as well get some form of pleasure out of it, even if Philip had never possessed the skill or desire to get her to orgasm. And in the very brief moments when they were intimate, it was easy to forget everything else and just feel.

Her lips parted slightly as his hand groped up her thigh, settling between her now spread legs and brushing against her underwear. She kept her eyes closed, lashes resting against her cheeks as she felt thick fingers push aside her underwear in the awkward way that Philip typically went about these things.

She knew what was coming and she knew why he was doing it; fucking her was a lot easier when she was actually wet and this was the only way he could get her aroused enough for that to happen; seeing him naked certainly didn't do the trick.

But she wanted to feel good; she wanted to be aroused and it was a damn good thing she had an imagination or she'd probably never be able to lose herself in sensation.

As his rough fingers shoved inside of her and a callused thumb clumsily massaged her clit, Ann imagined a hard body and not the soft, pudgy one Philip possessed. She imagined strong hands, long fingers, sleek muscles and a low, deep voice that growled her name.

Ann exclaimed softly, losing herself in the fantasy, not even vaguely aware of Philip pulling the car over with one hand as he continued to fuck her with the other.

"Yes," she uttered quietly, eyebrows drawing together as her fantasy continued, not even opening her eyes when she felt herself being moved around roughly, legs slamming against the center console as she was yanked down on Philip's lap moments before fingers were replaced with his cock.

Her fingers dug into his shoulders, imagining that they were broader, stronger, that his heavy blazer was smooth tanned skin. Philip panted heavily in her ear, grunting with effort, sweating profusely, but when Ann opened her eyes into slits, she didn't even see him.

She saw high cheekbones, silky black hair, full lips and the most intense green eyes she'd ever seen. And it was then that Ann realized, as Philip came as quickly as he usually did, that she'd been imagining Sin.

Chapter 11

The sound of something sizzling on the stove-top dominated the otherwise silent kitchen; the aroma of cooking sausages accompanying the sound pleasantly. Every now and then there was a sharp pop as grease crackled in the pan, causing little splatters of oil to assault the nearby pots and surface areas.

The kitchen wasn't large but it was a good size and gave an almost overwhelming sense of neatness and order. There was a well organized spice rack, although it looked barely used, and it was very obvious that every dish and every utensil had a place and was currently sitting in it.

Carhart leaned against the wall opposite the stove, barefoot and wearing faded jeans with a beer in one hand and a dish towel thrown over his right shoulder. He didn't look as wearied as he had lately and for the first time in what seemed like months, worry lines didn't crease his forehead. He looked more relaxed than he had in a long time but it was too bad the same couldn't be said for the younger agent sitting slumped at the kitchen table.

Sin looked like someone who was getting very close to his wit's end.

He had his face half buried in one hand while the other had a death-grip on his too-long black hair. Sin didn't look nearly as exhausted as he had that day on the rooftop but he also didn't appear to be too far off from it.

But his obvious sleep deprivation wasn't the only problem; an aura of unhappiness surrounded him and that, combined with the usual air of danger and intimidation that followed him, was a toxic mix. Just standing across the kitchen from Sin at the moment was enough to put the General in a state of anxiety; it wasn't possible for anything good to come of his agent's current state.

But more than that, it was nearly impossible to hang onto his previously good mood with such a miserable creature in close proximity. The black cloud that was following Sin seemed to infect the people around him as well.

Carhart swilled the beer idly, glancing at the stove briefly before refocusing on Sin. "Do you want a beer?"

Sin shrugged, not taking his face out of his hand. "Have any whiskey?"

The General raised an eyebrow at that. "No."

"You're useless to me then."

Carhart shook his head slightly and set his beer down on the counter, walking across the tiled floor to check on his food. The sausages looked just about done, the edges darkened and slightly crispy just like he liked them. He turned off the burner and opened the lid of another pot, eyeballing the rich red sauce for a moment before closing it again.

"What are you, some secret master chef or something?" Sin asked finally, not really sounding too interested in the answer. "This is the second time I've been here that you had some grand meal all ready to go."

Carhart opened his freezer door to reveal an assortment of microwave meals. "I don't actually cook very often."

Sin snorted and looked up finally, although he just dug both hands in his hair this time, massaging his scalp. "So it's just when I'm around. Fattening me up for Thanksgiving?"

"It'd take a lot more than spaghetti and spicy Italian sausage for that, Sin," Carhart said dryly. "For awhile you weren't more than skin and bones. I'm surprised Boyd likes that kind of thing." He took another sip of beer, eyes not leaving Sin's face.

Green eyes narrowed and Sin scowled darkly. "Who said he likes anything?"

"Your internal tracker did," Carhart said simply.

Sin just shook his head. "What are you talking about?" His voice was tired, as if he couldn't be bothered to put it together on his own.

"It tracks your vitals, Agent. So every time your heartbeat speeds up, decreases... whoever is currently watching can see. That's how we knew something went wrong in Monterrey; the people monitoring your heartbeat saw it rapidly accelerating before decreasing." Carhart finished the beer and tossed it in the trash can.

"That's a nice story." Sin closed his eyes again, the smell of food causing his empty stomach to protest violently even though the idea of eating made him feel nauseated.

"You used to be such a bright boy," Carhart commented idly. "What happened?"

"I woke up from a coma with an open Pandora's box for a brain and now all of the crazy has been let loose," Sin replied tonelessly. "Kind of hard to concentrate on your little riddles at the moment when my mind is racing nonstop about things I'd rather not think about."

Carhart thought back to that moment in the box and what Sin had confessed to in a delirious stupor before quickly banishing it to the back of his brain. He couldn't think about that right now; it had likely been nothing more than incoherent ranting anyway.

"Every time your heartbeat accelerated for an extended period of time, there was an alert," Carhart said casually. "The analysts who monitor it then report to me and, back then, Connors. But they're well trained and can usually deduce what scenarios would cause momentary or extended accelerations like that. So after the first dozen incidences of a specific pattern, they stopped reporting in, but they keep a record."

Sin shook his head again, opening his mouth to denounce the General as insane, but he froze.

Every time his heart sped up...

Sin opened one eye and stared up at the General. "I see."

"So unless you found a steady sexual partner in Monterrey who then followed you back here," Carhart went on with an amused expression. "I'd say Boyd is rather fond of your physique."

Sin scoffed slightly, not really impressed by Carhart's skills of detection. "Good job."

Carhart shrugged. "I thought it would amuse you. Maybe not."

"It's kind of difficult to be amused at the moment," was the wan reply.

Carhart frowned down at him for a moment before turning back to the stove and turning off burners before he knelt down and pulled another large pot from a cabinet. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. It's not like you."

"What do you know what I'm like?" Sin retorted, but there was no real bite in his tone.

"I've known you for fifteen years, kid. And I've spent every single one of them trying to do right by you-- I think it gives me a slight bit of authority on what is typical Sin behavior."

Carhart stood up and rinsed the pot thoroughly before filling it halfway and setting it on the stove. He looked over his shoulder at the way Sin was practically slumped face first into the table and frowned slightly, flicking on the burner and waiting for the water to boil.

"You've been through hard times before and you always did it with a shit-eating, smart-assed smirk on your face. It was probably fake-- probably just to show everyone that you didn't give a damn about what they did to you, but I've never seen you feeling as sorry for yourself as you do now. Not this blatantly anyway. It's not a good thing to see."

Sin waved his hand vaguely. "Sorry I'm letting you down," he muttered sarcastically.

Carhart sighed and ran a hand through his hair, feeling very unsure of what to do. He wanted to ask Sin what was really wrong with him, what was so bad that it could put him in this sorry state, but at the same time he had a feeling what the answer would be and he really didn't want to go down that road.

So he changed the subject entirely. "Is this therapy thing with Annabelle not helping at all?"

Sin shrugged but the motion was so weak that it was barely noticeable. "I don't know yet. It helps and it doesn't help. Some things just can't be helped, I suppose."

"Nice answer," Carhart replied dryly, turning the heat up under the water as he watched it impatiently.

Sin sighed and pushed himself up slightly, turning to look at the General. "I don't know if it's helping. Sometimes it's.... good to just have someone to talk to who won't, or is not supposed, to judge me for what I say. So it's easier, I guess. Just... to talk. It surprised me at first; I didn't expect that whining about my troubles would take some of the weight off my shoulders but sometimes it does. And she already thinks poorly of me so I don't have to worry about maintaining some kind of standard like I do for you and Boyd."

Carhart raised an eyebrow at him. "I understand Boyd, but me? My opinion of you hasn't changed and I've seen you at your worst."

Sin looked at him evenly. "No, you haven't."

There was a brief, tense silence and Carhart cleared his throat, feeling mildly uneasy by the response. "So, you trust her?"

"Of course not. How could I?" Sin leaned against the wall behind his chair, thudding the back of his head against it as he closed his eyes. "But that isn't really important anymore. She doesn't seem duplicitous so far and for some bizarre reason seems very keen on curing me, if that's at all possible."

Carhart frowned slightly, never having really understood the business of psychiatry. "It isn't possible? Then what the hell are you there for?"

Sin made a sound at the back of his throat as if to say, 'you tell me' but actually said, "She gave me medication but it takes some time to kick in, so... I've been sleeping slightly better but the other stuff is still the same. Maybe not as extreme, but it's still going on."

"The hallucinations?"

"Yeah."

Carhart opened another cabinet and pulled out a box of vermicelli noodles as he seemed to consider that. "What do you see when you hallucinate? Or hear?"

Sin paused briefly. "People I've hurt. Killed."

There was another stretch of silence as Carhart broke the long straws of noodle in half and dumped them in the boiling water. "That must be hard," he said quietly.

There was a low, humorless laugh across the kitchen. "Out of everything I've been through in my entire life, I think this is the hardest thing yet."

Carhart watched the noodles soften in the boiling water, eyebrows drawn together slightly as he listened to Sin. Very rarely did the younger man open up to him-- in fact he couldn't think of a time when he really had. Not like this anyway.

"When you were a field agent," Sin began slowly. "Did you ever... did you ever regret killing someone? I'm sure you regretted killing in general, especially if you were ever in my line of work, but did you ever regret killing a specific person?"

Carhart answered without hesitation. "Yes. And I'll regret it to this day."

Sin stared at Carhart intently, eyes narrowed. "Did it ever haunt you? Afterwards?"

A chill went down Carhart's spine and he had to resist the urge to shiver. Just the question, just the fact that he was remembering, it haunted him even now. "Yes. I had dreams-- nightmares, for a very long time afterwards. I had a lot of guilt over that person. I still do, although it's easier to forget about it now."

Sin nodded, not looking away, still pinning Carhart in place with that intense stare. "Imagine being haunted by not just one person that you regret killing-- Imagine being haunted by about thirty, or more. Imagine hearing their voices whispering in your ears, seeing them in front of you bleeding, dead, but still talking to you, accusing you. Imagine... dreaming of them every night and reliving what happened in vivid detail."

Carhart had to look away; it was hard, especially with those extraordinary green eyes trained on him, but he managed. He swallowed briefly, feeling very strange, almost guilty, for ever having made light of Sin's situation. "I don't think I would be able to live with myself."

"Sometimes I don't want to. Most of the time, at least these days, I really don't want to."

Carhart finally looked at Sin again, this time in concern. "You can't--"

"I need to tell you something," Sin interrupted suddenly, one hand gripping the side of the table. "I really need to tell someone. I think I'm fucking losing my mind here and it's all because of this one thing, Carhart. And I need someone to put it in perspective for me or, to tell me it's all in my head or maybe I'm wrong or--"

Before he could finish the sentence, there was a loud knock at the door. Carhart hesitated, eyes trained on Sin, but then there was another knock and he took the opportunity to interrupt the direction of the conversation.

"Just a second," Carhart said, clearing his throat. He'd already told Sin that Morgan would be arriving shortly but he'd hoped, after telling Sin to come over to discuss his progress with Ann, that the two wouldn't be there at the same time.

Sin's eyebrows drew together, frustration obvious on his face, and he sighed inaudibly as Carhart opened the door.

Anyone who looked at Morgan Chase would not expect her to be the Captain in charge of field agent training. If anything, with her sleek black bob, clear blue eyes and almost delicately slender looking frame, most people would probably assume she was an agent in Intel or a possibly even a valentine operative. But people who did know her also knew that she was more deadly in hand to hand combat than most people were with an actual weapon and that she was a complete hardass when it came to how training was handled.

She slipped into the apartment past Carhart, standing only a couple of inches shorter than the General, and removed her damp jacket as she shook rain out of an umbrella. "Smells good," she commented with a smile, but before Carhart could reply, the smile froze on her face when she noticed Sin.

He was already getting up to leave, zipping his hoody all the way up and shoving his hands in his pockets, movements stiff and tense. "I'm going," he muttered quietly, starting for the door.

"Wait," Carhart said, holding out a hand. "Just a second."

Morgan looked from Sin to Carhart, not appearing very pleased in the slightest but despite that she turned her attention to Sin. "Hello, Agent Vega."

Sin shrugged, glancing at her. "Hi."

"We were in the middle of a discussion," Carhart explained. "And--"

"Can I speak to you for a moment in the other room?" Morgan asked, her tone giving nothing away although the way her slightly narrowed blue eyes did.

Carhart frowned and looked at Sin again. "Just give me a minute."

The other man said nothing, opting instead to just stare at the carpet, and Carhart followed Morgan to his bedroom. She closed the door behind them and folded her arms across her chest, shaking her head at him disapprovingly. "Why is he here?"

"I asked him to come," he replied, exasperated already with the conversation.

Morgan looked away briefly, blue eyes focusing briefly on the storm raging on the other side of the window before she looked at the General again. "Why would you do that?"

"Because I wanted to see how things were progressing," Carhart replied shortly. "I don't see how this is relevant to you."

Morgan put her hands on her hips, face indignant and annoyed. "Are we not in a relationship?"

Carhart shrugged, sighing. "Some kind, yeah, sure."

"Some kind," she repeated, making a face but not seeming surprised. "It's relevant, because you're important to me, regardless of what kind of relationship we have. And what's best for you, and your safety, are my concerns. And you bringing him to your home is a bad idea."

"Okay, I'm done with this," he said flatly, starting for the door.

Morgan grabbed his arm, fingers digging in tight. "If you wanted to discuss his progress, you should have met him in your office. You're too goddamned personally involved with that man and it's not good for you. It's not good for you to always be so stressed out over him, it's certainly not good for your career and it's not good for your safety. He's dangerous."

Carhart shook her off, a frown etched onto his handsome features. "He's not dangerous to me."

"He's dangerous to everyone around him," Morgan corrected him sternly. Carhart opened his mouth to speak but she cut him off again, this time with a sharp shake of her head. "I'm not trying to villainize him like everyone else does, Zachary. I know the deal-- I know his story, I know why he's so messed up, but that doesn't change the fact that he is really messed up! When he snaps, he's a danger to everyone around him and by bringing him to your home, you're putting yourself in a position you don't need to be in."

There was a long stretch of silence and for several moments, the only sounds were a branch slamming against the window as the wind howled outside.

The tension in the room was thick, almost tangible, as Morgan and Carhart stared at each other and finally the General gave a long suffering sigh and opened his mouth to

reluctantly agree that she may have a slight point. But before he could even get the words out, there was the distinct sound of a door shutting firmly and he looked over his shoulder, eyebrows furrowed.

Morgan blinked in surprise and glanced at Carhart in concern. "You don't think he heard me, do you?"

Carhart frowned again, his good mood all but gone, and shrugged. "He shouldn't have been able to but I wouldn't be surprised if he did."

They looked at each other again, neither of them appearing very happy with the idea of their conversation having been overheard, but all Carhart could do was shake his head and leave the bedroom in annoyance.

Although the idea of Sin hearing Morgan's comments bothered him, Carhart couldn't deny that a part of him was selfishly relieved that he'd been given an out. He'd known where the conversation was going and he didn't want to deal with it just yet.

So all he could do was hope that Sin would follow his orders, take the medication, and move past the issues that were plaguing him.

===

Becoming emotionally attached to people, trusting people; all of it was a scam.

Sin had allowed himself to become dependent on Boyd as a friend, as a confidant, as someone who could make him feel good when he was at his worst, and now they were all but estranged. The Agency was the priority; something that was both ironic and almost inconceivable considering Boyd's past claims that he was loyal to individuals and not the organization.

And now Carhart; Carhart had always wanted Sin to trust him and now that he did, now that he was willing to confide in him and wanted to, it was impossible. He got the strong impression that Carhart didn't really want to hear what he had to say, that he wasn't comfortable knowing whatever Sin wanted him to know.

And then there was Morgan; it was hard to be offended by her complaints when he knew she had a valid point.

He wasn't really angry at any of them but at the same time, he couldn't help but feel as though they were disaffecting from him after going through great lengths to earn his trust. Sin couldn't help feeling more alienated than ever.

People, he decided, were deceptive and very unreliable. He didn't know if they meant to be that way or if it was just inherent in humanity, but that was the way it was. He'd gone well over twenty-seven years being self-sufficient, living a solitary life where he kept everything inside, but then these people came along and convinced him to open up, to let them in.

And where was he now?

In need of the companionship he'd been offered and more alone than ever. It wouldn't have bothered him if he'd never had the chance to feel friendship, trust, to know that someone gave a damn about him; that there was someone who didn't fear him, even if that fear was felt rightfully.

It was oddly dehumanizing but Sin wasn't sure if he didn't deserve it all. After all he'd done, after all of the lives he'd ruined or ended, why should he get to live life normally or have people close to him?

But even knowing that didn't make it any better. It was a paradox, because even though he knew he didn't deserve those things, he wanted them badly. He needed them and the fact that he was being denied made everything seem ten times worse.

So he walked through the rain with his head down, hands stuffed in his pockets, and didn't look at anyone around him. By the time he reached his building he had an aching headache, a chill straight to the bone, and he was pretty sure that the flicker in the corner of his vision wasn't entirely real.

At first it'd seemed to be something blowing in the wind, maybe a discarded umbrella or a jacket that had fallen from someone's bag. But one direct glance at the object exposed it for what it was; a scrawny excuse for a corpse, practically torn apart and bleeding on the ground. The man's limbs seemed to be completely dislocated or ravaged from his body, but one hand still clutched a thin golden chain, an offering to his murderer, a plea for his life.

The chain was battered and blood stained, the symbol a well known family crest that anyone who'd followed politics back in the day would recognize; likely the reason no pawn broker would accept it and involve themselves in the murder of the Krauszer boy.

And a part of Sin, as he stopped in his tracks and stared at the ghastly image, could only wonder why his subconscious was showing him this. Jared had deserved to die. To pay for what he'd done.

But then again... he'd been a weak man, sickly, a junky in withdrawal. He'd been no match for Sin and his killing had been nothing more than cold-blooded, thoroughly savage murder.

Sin turned his head and quickly sped by, ignoring the fact that the image seemed to follow him home.

Officer Daniels didn't make eye contact with him as Sin jogged up the stairs but that was typical lately. Sin didn't give him a second look, accustomed to the behavior now, but as he disappeared inside the building Daniels finally looked at his retreating back with a slight, almost guilty frown.

But Sin didn't notice; he was already going up the stairs. The trek was a lot easier now that he was getting more sleep; he supposed the medication was at least good as a sedative even if they hadn't done much else so far.

Distracted by his thoughts and the image of Jared, Sin strode down the hallway without even glancing up at his guards. It was only when he swiped his card and stepped into his apartment that he realized something was wrong.

Eyes narrowing slightly as he finally looked up, Sin allowed the door to shut behind him as his gaze swept over the apartment.

He wasn't alone.

Sin looked at the four men calmly, his posture loose and unassuming as he automatically put names with faces. Agents Lester and Dupuis, Level 7 field operatives who he'd seen around the compound with Agent Carson. The other two were mildly familiar but less important; both guards, only one of which he recognized as Officer Thomas, a guy in Lt. Gerant's squad.

It was obviously somehow related to revenge; they probably thought he deserved a real punishment other than playing doctor with Annabelle since he'd inflicted grievous injuries on their friends.

Sin didn't really blame them.

So when the second guard came up behind him, wrenching his arms behind his back and forcing him to the floor, Sin didn't even resist. He didn't know if it was his depression, or the fact that he was currently very apathetic and uncaring about his own well-being; maybe it was even because he really felt that this was well deserved. Whatever the case, there was no anger inside him, no helplessness or fear.

They didn't speak at first and neither did he; Sin simply let them take their frustrations out on his body and felt oddly calm through the entire ordeal.

===

Sin was aware of the sharp, impatient knocks but he had no desire to go open the door. He had no desire to drag himself off the bed where he was sprawled and limp his sorry self into the living room.

He was in more pain than he'd intended to be in but he'd let the fun go on for a little too long. His four friends had really gotten into the act of it, beating on him zealously, and the fact that he hadn't done a single thing to defend himself hadn't derailed them.

And now, after the fact, he realized that the only thing the game had gotten him was a few fractures and a mess of bruises, with no lack of guilt to show for it. What was the use of repenting and atoning if it didn't make him feel any better?

Fun stuff. But mostly he just felt pathetic. His father's shade had dropped in repeatedly to inform him that he was just that. That his poor attempt at squaring things with the agency staff was idiotic, in vain, and that they would never accept or forgive him.

Sin wasn't too surprised by this information and he hadn't needed a hallucination to tell him about it.

The knocking continued and he closed his eyes, intending to drown it out, but before he could even make an attempt there was the distinct sound of his door opening. It came as a surprise but he couldn't bring himself to care, and for a brief moment his spirits lifted as the possibility of his visitor being Boyd crossed his mind.

But then he heard that familiar click-clack of heels and his spirits sank again, mouth pressing into a firm frown.

He didn't open his eyes, even when he felt her presence in the room, and she stood there at the foot of his bed for a full minute before speaking.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Well, that got his attention.

Sin cracked open one green eye and stared at her for a moment. "Pardon?"

Ann had her arms crossed over a black and pink tuxedo blouse as she glowered at him ferociously, mouth pressed into a tight line. "Just look at yourself," she complained, shaking her head. "Lying there all beat up and defeated."

Sin closed his eyes again and briefly debated flipping his pillow to the cold side. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated," he muttered.

"What?" Her tone was sharp, impatient, and she was clearly in no mood for random quotes.

"Hemingway," he replied flatly. "You know," Sin went on, tone almost condescending. "The writer?"

He could practically feel her glare. "Yes, I know who Hemingway is," she snapped. "But frankly I'm not too interested in him and what he has to say at the moment. I'm interested in finding out why you let those four idiots wail on you. Just look at yourself!"

Sin frowned again and opened both eyes this time, sitting up partially to stare at her. "How do you know about that?"

Ann took a deep breath and dropped her briefcase down on to the floor, moving closer to his side of the bed as she eyed the bruises on his bare chest in disapproval. Although at the same time, she couldn't help but absently note the hard lines of his body, the lean muscle and the way his caramel complexion poured over it temptingly.

It was a distracting thought but it didn't surprise her as it had previously. She was now very well-aware of her attraction to him; that night in the car made it impossible not to be. And even though she'd found it startling after the fact, it didn't disgust her at all. He was beautiful, sexy, dangerous, intense... What woman, especially an emotionally and physically unfulfilled woman, wouldn't be intrigued and attracted?

Returning her gaze to his eyes, Ann gestured vaguely. "An 'anonymous' person informed General Carhart that there was some kind of plot to ambush you in your apartment. Of course, they informed him after the fact but I suppose if it wasn't for him, you wouldn't have told anyone."

Sin raised an eyebrow skeptically. "An anonymous caller."

"Yes, well he tried to be anonymous at least but then he called from the security phone in this building so it was likely one of the guards stationed here during the attack," she said, not seeming very impressed with this individual.

"Ah." Sin wondered idly if it'd been Daniels. "Don't call it 'the attack,'" he muttered, sitting up entirely, not showing any visible signs of pain even though it seemed as though he should be in some. "I'm not exactly a traumatized victim."

"Yes, whatever," Ann said, impatient with his attempts at wit. "Why would you let them do that to you?"

He shrugged. "First of all, why 'let?' I was outnumbered."

It was her who was condescending this time. "Spare me. You took out twice that number during your episode in the medical unit."

Sin sighed wearily and rubbed a hand across his face. "Annabelle, what exactly do you want? Why are you here?"

"I'm here because you skipped a session," she replied with an arched brow. "And you were about to miss another today but instead of sitting in my office for another hour of waiting, I called General Carhart and asked him what was going on."

Sin hadn't even been aware that he'd missed any sessions; he'd completely lost track of the last handful of days. Although, he supposed, he had no idea how long he'd been unconscious after his four visitors were through.

"It was only a coincidence that I called him just as he was receiving information on the att-- the incident. He was due for a meeting with Vivienne and asked me to check on you, so here I am."

Ann shook her head again as she stared at the angry bruises on his chest and torso. Although now that she was closer, she could tell that they looked a lot worse than they

actually were. The most serious injury they appeared to have inflicted seemed to be a sprained or fractured ankle, if she went solely by the way fact that it was swollen. "And I suppose you don't want to start an investigation about this."

Sin scoffed at her, eyes moving over the room as he tried to locate a cigarette. "Why should I? It's not as though I didn't deserve it. Why should they get punished-- I didn't when I flipped out on their friends."

"But you're sick! There's a difference between being sick and planning an attack like some bloodthirsty vigilante!" Ann protested loudly, looking really indignant now. She frowned at him but in the back of her mind, the professional part of her brain was noting that his excessive and misplaced guilt was just another huge part of his PMD.

"Sick," he muttered. "Yeah. Right. Honestly, the only reason this charade is going on is because I'm too good a killer to give up on and they're grasping at straws trying to find a way to not get rid of me. If this were the real world--"

"If this were the real world," Ann cut him off sharply, "you would not be in jail, or executed, or whatever nonsense you were about to say. If this were the real world, you'd be sitting in a mental institution as you recovered and rehabilitated, because believe it or not-- you have severe issues and shouldn't be punished because no one in your entire childhood or adult life ever cared enough to understand them. In fact, in the real world, the fact that they lock you up like a dog in a cage whenever your instability flares up would have *them* in the hot seat."

Sin faltered, looking at her uncertainly, before shrugging and looking at the carpet. "It doesn't make me feel any less guilty. Or any less like... I don't deserve to be around people."

Ann sighed and finally moved next to him, kneeling in front of him on the carpet. Her gaze moved over him, taking in his vulnerability, his intense sadness, and she couldn't help but want to reach out to him. Even if she'd gone on hating him until this very day, even if she'd never been his doctor, just seeing him in this state would have been enough to make her stop and pause.

Seeing just a glimmer that day near the elevator bank had been enough to make her want to know more, to understand more. And she wished everyone had the opportunity to see this side of him; to see just how painfully human he was.

She also wished he would stop himself from closing up around others, stop playing the part of the tough guy and giving them what they wanted. But none of those things were going to happen any time in the future so for now... For now Ann felt as though she was the one who could try to make the difference. "How do you see yourself, Sin? How do you think others see you?"

Sin didn't look up, staring at her shoes, and this time he didn't hesitate to answer. Expressing himself, discussing this, it'd started coming a lot easier in the past few weeks. "They think I'm subhuman, a monster, someone who destroys lives. I'm starting to agree."

Ann shook her head, hesitantly reaching out to touch his chin, forcing him to look up at her. His eyes looked hollow, empty, and despite what he'd said about not being defeated, it seemed as though Sin had already given up the fight. It was almost disappointing; he was always so unflappable, never changing, never backing down or allowing himself to be taken out and now it seemed as though he just wanted to stop making an effort to even go on. But, Ann supposed, she could understand even if her situation was entirely different.

After the death of her father, after her marriage had proved to be a complete disaster, she'd felt almost the same. It didn't seem as though anything would ever improve, ever go right, and that was why for so long she'd given up and simply allowed herself to become completely submissive to an abusive ogre.

"You shouldn't," she said firmly, finally. "I know this sounds hypocritical coming from me. I used to think you were the same way to an extent, I thought you should be locked up as well."

She frowned. "But now as a doctor, and as a rational person, I understand. I understand why and I want to help you. I want you to get better. I want them to see that you're not just a killer, some crazy guy who should be locked away. For goodness sake, they should respect you. You've lived your life for this Agency and all they've done is abuse you and make your situation worse, never once making a real effort to help you until now."

"Respect me," he repeated with a humorless smile.

"Yes. You're not just some rank and file agent, Vega. These people should look up to you, just like they look up to Kassian Trovosky," Ann said firmly, really believing what she was saying.

"Heh. Wouldn't it be pretty to think so?" Sin shook his head and backed away from her but she gripped his chin tighter. "Just go."

"I don't understand this attitude. You seemed to be doing better-- what happened?" Ann stared directly into his eyes unflinchingly, searching for a clue.

"I'm just..." Sin trailed off, returning her gaze moodily. "I've never been accustomed to having people be kind to me, be close to me. And when I got that... that concern, friendship, I suppose I became dependent on it. I felt real, I felt... like maybe I was normal, because I had at least two people who believed in me. And now I suppose, it's difficult to believe that I could be when those people who made me want to try at all, aren't around anymore. It seems pointless."

The depression and misery that rolled off him was almost overwhelming, suffocating, and for a moment Ann wondered what would have happened if Carhart had never sent her here. How long could someone go on in this intense despondency before giving up entirely? After all, he'd admitted that he often had thoughts of suicide.

The idea disturbed her and for a moment she had to look away. But then Ann returned her gaze to him and she sighed quietly. On one hand she wanted to appeal to his common sense, make him understand that he wasn't alone, that he wasn't abandoned, that she really could help him or at least she believed she could. But there was also a part of her that just enjoyed their proximity, the feel of his face against her hand, the way his long eyelashes framed his eyes as she remembered the way he'd looked in her fantasy.

Ann swallowed slightly, conflicted with her own motivations and actions. Was she here as his doctor or was she here because defying Philip by embracing her attraction for Sin made her feel more alive? She couldn't be sure.

"I believe in you," she offered quietly after awhile.

"You have to say that," he replied tonelessly.

Ann's mouth turned down into a frown of frustration and she brushed her thumb along his surprisingly soft cheek. His eyes narrowed briefly in suspicion but she extended her fingers, turning her grip into a light caress.

His hand automatically came up to grip her wrist, stopping her from touching him anymore, but she just raised an eyebrow. "I just want you to see that..." Ann trailed off for a moment, gathering her words. "I'm not afraid of you, to talk to you, to touch you. I think you're just as human as I am. Flawed, but human, just like everyone."

Sin didn't respond and continued to watch her skeptically but his fingers loosened almost of their own accord and she continued to lightly stroke his face.

He didn't seem to understand why he was letting her touch him-- but he also seemed almost desperate to feel something, anything, other than the burn of guilt and self-hatred that had plagued him for weeks. The gentleness of Ann's touch, the careful way her fingers slithered along his cheek, it caused him to lean into the touch unconsciously.

Ann knew she should stop; she knew that this was inappropriate, but she couldn't make her hand drop away. Because touching Sin was almost like an addiction-- once she touched his cheek, she couldn't help but let her fingers sift through his silky hair and Ann's heart began to pound. It'd been a long time since she'd actually wanted someone and the fact that it was Sin made her all the more unsure of the outcome.

She paused for a moment, simply staring at him and completely unsure of herself and what she was doing, but then she looked into his intense gaze and was once again completely floored by the sheer vulnerability she saw there. It was guarded but unmistakable and if she ever told anyone that showing Hsin Liu Vega gentleness could evoke such an expression, such obvious insecurity and something that even looked like fear, Ann had no doubts that anyone would ever believe her.

She leaned forward and pulled him into an embrace, hugging him and trying to understand why she felt inclined to do such a thing.

She wanted him to realize that Boyd and Carhart weren't complete anomalies to a standard system. They cared for him because they understood him and if other people saw his true self, they would see that he was anything but a remorseless monster.

They would see him as someone beautiful and damaged and almost fragile despite the unbelievable strength that he possessed and she had no doubts that there would be other people who would want to save him like she and Carhart and maybe even Boyd, did.

So she slid her arms around him and squeezed, unsurprised by his lack of response, of the obvious awkwardness in his posture. She tried to keep herself in a platonic mindset,

to tell herself that even though this wasn't professional, it wasn't for her own purposes. But then his shoulders relaxed and he put a hesitant hand on her back and the feel of his hand on her seared through the fabric of her shirt and nearly made Ann shudder.

She stroked the back of his neck slowly but without hesitation and after a moment he pulled back and stared at her with slightly narrowed eyes. It was just like Sin to be a study in contradiction; he seemed suspicious and grateful at the same time.

He searched her face, her eyes, for something but she wasn't sure what. After a moment he just shook his head slightly, looking confused, and Ann couldn't help but mirror the emotion. She truly had no idea what was going on but she knew that she wanted to touch him again, to hug him, to feel strong hands on her and feel a thrill at the fact that those same hands were capable of such strength and danger but were so hesitantly gentle on her.

So she did hug him again but she turned her face to the side, her nose brushing against his neck. His hands balled into fists and he grew tense again but she nuzzled her face lightly against him and Sin's long black eyelashes lowered.

She unconsciously leaned closer, liking the fact that her touch could make him look that relaxed, could put a halt on the black cloud that followed him. The fact that she could have such a positive effect on him made Ann feel slightly empowered and the fact that she was currently initiating this contact and controlling the situation exalted it even more.

She reveled in the sensation, in the way his skin felt, the open expression on his face, in the genuine awe she felt at how intense her attraction really was. After a moment, Ann mindlessly leaned forward and brushed her lips against his neck.

It was impulsive, reckless, and probably a bad idea, but the rebellious devil on her shoulder that encouraged her to finally do something she wanted, to do something that obviously defied Philip and her father, that showed that she could get some control back in her life-- that devil cheered.

Sin turned his head, eyes snapping open, and gave her an expression of sheer incredulity. But the fact that he didn't actually recoil encouraged Ann and she placed another hesitant kiss against his full lips.

Sin just stared at her, not responding, not moving, even as she covered his face with light and chaste kisses. It was only when she slid her fingers into the hair at the nape of

his neck and pressed a slightly more intimate open mouthed kiss to his lips, did he have a reaction.

He shuddered slightly, eyelids sliding nearly closed, and he didn't stop her when she deepened the kiss. He responded hesitantly but after a moment, his reaction became stronger as he lost himself in the feeling of someone's touch, of someone's kiss, of the feel of hands on him, to the fact that someone wanted him.

Ann couldn't help but tremble and the realization that she was kissing him floored her. Doubt plagued the back of her mind as his hands tightened on her and pulled her closer but it was easy to ignore when all she wanted was to feel alive, to embrace the fact that she was doing something she wanted no matter how uncharacteristic or unexpected it was. All she wanted was to feel something other than the heavy weight of unhappy compromise, failure, and regret and Ann had no doubts that Sin wanted the same.

As they fell backwards on the bed, Ann couldn't help but thinking idly that sex always helped to chase the demons away.

Chapter 12

Almost a week later and Officer Daniels still couldn't look him in the face. The two times that Sin had actually left his apartment, once because he'd been ordered to go to the medical unit for blood work and the second time to order Carhart not to make a big deal of the 'incident,' the guard had refused to even look in his direction.

It was interesting and Sin couldn't help but wonder again if Daniels really was the one who'd made that anonymous phone call. He didn't know why he cared so much; he didn't consider Daniels a friend, not even really an acquaintance, but for some reason the question nagged at him.

So on the third trip from his apartment, on the way to a session with Ann, Sin stopped walking just in front of the other man and stared at him for a moment.

Daniels glanced up at him in mild alarm and cleared his throat, looking a mixture between nervous and frightened. "What's up?" he asked finally, when it became clear that Sin fully intended to stand there in front of him for as long as it took to get a reaction.

Sin shrugged, eyeing the guard critically. Daniels was fidgeting, his eyes sweeping around guiltily. "Not much."

Daniels nodded, focusing on Sin once again, calming down slightly when Sin's tone wasn't as hostile as he'd obviously anticipated it being. In fact, he seemed to search Sin for signs of the attack but since most of the damage had been done to his chest and torso, there was no visible evidence at the moment that it had actually happened.

"This weather sucks, huh?" Daniels muttered, finally dragging his eyes away, obviously feeling awkward and not knowing what to say. "It's not even winter yet but it feels the way January used to feel back in the day, you know? With a lot more rain, anyway."

Sin nodded. "So did you help them organize that little party in my apartment or did you just let it happen?"

Daniels' gaze swung back over to him in horror and he began shaking his head wildly. "I swear, dude, I didn't know about it until the day it was going to happen. They didn't tell me on purpose because they know out of anyone stationed here, I was the only one cool with you before... you know." He trailed off awkwardly with a helpless shrug.

Sin studied him for a moment and decided that he believed the man. Not that it mattered one way or the other; it was still his opinion that it'd been in their right. If someone had hurt Boyd the way he'd hurt their friends, he would have likely done the same thing.

In any case, he now had no doubts that Daniels was the one who'd made the call but he saw no reason to question the man further and most likely embarrass him. It was, however, slightly pleasing.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Sin replied finally. "I was just curious."

Daniels relaxed and studied him for a long moment before speaking again. "Why don't you want them to be punished? I heard something along those lines..."

"Because I believe in an eye for an eye," Sin said, a hint of irony in his tone. "Well, to an extent. But it doesn't matter what I want. They'll likely be punished regardless for accessing restricted housing, as well as the guards at my door for allowing them in."

The shaggy haired guard nodded. "I heard that too. They're swapping us up-- putting me back at your door and bringing a couple of the guys who weren't directly involved down here. Another reason for me to disapprove of their actions. No offense, Vega, but it used to get boring just hanging around up there. Well, until your partner came by..." Daniels said, attempting a half-hearted joke and a weak smile.

Sin lit a cigarette. "I'll be seeing you, Officer Daniels."

"Later," the other man replied quickly, and there was a definite flash of relief in his eyes.

Sin turned away, jogging quickly down the stairs as he made his way towards the middle of the compound; towards the Tower. The cold wind penetrated his thin shirt like a dagger but he ignored it, as unperturbed by the cold as usual.

However, as he glanced around at the agents and civilian staff who were hurrying about, he couldn't help but wonder if he should buy a coat just for the sole purpose of blending in more. Walking around in a t-shirt when it was barely twenty degrees made a spectacle of him and that was something he wanted to avoid these days.

When they'd first begun allowing him to walk freely on the compound two and a half years ago, he hadn't given a damn if people stared, but now... now he didn't want

anyone to notice him at all. It was strange how much things had changed since then; how much he'd changed. Sometimes Sin couldn't help but wonder whether or not the changes were even for the better anymore.

He finished his cigarette right outside the Tower, stomping on it with one boot before jogging up the stairs to the psychiatric wing; he didn't trust elevators anymore.

It didn't take him long to climb the flights now that he was getting generally better sleep, so he arrived at the waiting area to Ann's office a few moments before his session was to begin. As usual, the receptionist gave him a long, disapproving look but he ignored her and stood against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

It was the first time he was seeing Ann since they'd had sex and he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. The entire situation had been extremely bizarre and unexpected; something that had come entirely out of the blue. He'd never thought twice about Ann in that way and he wasn't entirely sure that that had changed even now.

And now, a few days later, after analyzing the situation twenty times in his mind, he'd come to the conclusion that his actions had been out of desperation, not lust. After years of not needing or wanting human interaction, physical contact, it was a little disheartening to realize that he needed those things just as much as anyone else.

After weeks of feeling completely alone, of coming to the conclusion that no one would ever want him or want to be near him if they knew the truth of how fucked up he was, it'd been gratifying to be touched and not have that person cringe away from him. The fact that it was Ann, who had every reason to despise him, somehow made the situation more intense.

He'd been able to temporarily stop thinking, stop worrying, stop torturing himself, and just feel... normal. It wasn't too surprising; Sin had often used sex as a method of escaping his memories but he didn't even entirely remember the physical aspect of his night with Ann. He didn't even know if he'd truly enjoyed it because all Sin could do was focus on the fact that for one night the distraction had allowed him to feel free.

So, if anything, the situation had at least been useful, even if it was the strangest thing to happen to him in a long time.

Several moments passed but finally Ann's door opened and her previous patient stepped out. Sin stared incredulously as Kassian shut the door behind him, walking out into the waiting area and only stopping when he caught sight of Sin.

The two senior agents stared at each other for a long stretch before Sin finally spoke, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Kassian shrugged, black and red jacket rustling as his broad shoulders rose. "I could ask you the same thing."

They stared at each other again without speaking, neither of them ready to admit why they were there. Sin's first thought was that Kassian likely knew everything that was going on but he realized that there really was no reason for him to know. Kassian lived off compound and as far as Sin knew, didn't associate with a lot of people on a personal level.

"You know, you could have showed up for Krav Maga," Kassian said suddenly, reaffirming the fact that he had no idea about the previous month's events. "I had to do it instead of you and now since they saw that I was 'willing,' they're roping me into all of this other nonsense training that I don't want to be a part of."

Sin stared at Kassian blankly. "That sounds like a personal problem."

The blond man glared at him. "You could try to be a little more responsible. People might take you more seriously."

"And you could try to stop pretending to be so fucking perfect. Maybe then people will stop expecting perfection all the time and you wouldn't be sitting here crying to me as usual," Sin replied acidly.

Kassian's eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "You're hopeless."

"Go to hell."

They glared at each other for several more moments before Kassian gave a snort of disgust and brushed past him, striding towards the elevators. Sin couldn't help but notice the way the receptionist smiled and waved at Kassian as he walked by.

Irritation spiking erratically, Sin practically stormed into Ann's office, feeling irrationally angry. Just being in close proximity to Kassian had that effect on him.

He pushed the door shut with more force than was necessary and it slammed loudly, causing Ann to start in surprise as she looked up. "Hello to you too," she said cautiously. "Is there a problem?"

"What was Mr. Wonderful doing here?" Sin demanded, somehow feeling infringed upon because he was sharing a doctor with Kassian. "What does he need to see a psychiatrist for? To agonize over his hero complex?"

Ann sat back in her chair, staring at him dubiously. "Are you speaking about Agent Trovosky?"

"No, I'm talking about Santa Claus," Sin retorted.

Ann pursed her lips together and closed the file in front of her, sliding it into a drawer. "I can't discuss my sessions with Kassian. You should know that. But I can guarantee you that the things Agent Trovosky discusses are not trivial or narcissistic, which is what you seem to be implying."

Sin snorted, not sitting down, and stared angrily into space. It was amazing how his mood could switch so drastically just from being around Kassian. But the other man was so condescending, always belittling him... It made his temper rage out of control every single time.

Sin knew that he probably wouldn't even be so offended by it if Kassian were just another thick-necked idiot field agent. But he wasn't. Truthfully, deep down he agreed with the things Kassian said, with the way people compared the two of them, and that bothered him the most.

Shaking his head, Sin turned away from Ann. The idea of sitting where Kassian had just sat, talking to Ann about his bullshit after she'd just got finished hearing Kassian's... For some reason it didn't sit right with him, like somehow he was suspicious that Ann would be listening to him and internally comparing the two.

And after spending the last month allowing himself to trust the woman enough to speak so freely, the thought really pissed him off. "I'm going to smoke a cigarette."

Ann stared at him. "No, you're not."

Sin gave her a look that clearly told her what he thought of that and walked directly out the office. He ignored the receptionist and bypassed the elevators, once again taking

the stairs as he internally seethed. He'd finally been in an okay mood and Kassian had to come along and ruin it. But mostly he was annoyed with himself for letting it happen.

Sin returned to the icy winds that roared through the compound and walked down the staircase, moving away from the path to stand under a tree as he fiddled with the lighter. The wind kept blowing out the flame and he had to flick it several times to get the cigarette lit.

Once the cherry was finally red and glowing entirely, Sin took a long drag and closed his eyes briefly as he exhaled. Smoking probably wasn't the best idea given the fact that his profession typically demanded a lot of physical activity, but sometimes it really seemed to help him relax. It was likely just a psychological thing but he would take what he could get at the moment.

Sin was halfway through his cigarette when he noticed Ann coming down the stairs, walking towards him with an annoyed expression. She stopped just in front of him and crossed her arms over her chest. "You're wasting time right now, Vega. Mine and your own."

He shrugged. "I'll survive."

The annoyance was clear on her face and she opened her mouth to respond, closed it, narrowed her eyes and then finally demanded, "Is this about the other night?"

Sin made a face. "What?"

Her eyebrows rose and she looked indignant now. "You don't take me seriously anymore because of what happened. You don't think you have to respect me as your doctor."

He exhaled slowly, staring down at her incredulously. "You're an idiot."

"Well I have news for you," Ann snapped, even though he hadn't confirmed her accusation in any form. "I'm not in love with you, I'm not obsessed with you, I don't daydream about you and wish for our sessions to come sooner in the week-- I'm not your Lydia, so you can cut the bullshit now and we can get back to what we're here for."

Sin realized that she was serious about this and decided that women were strange. Where did she get these ideas? "What the hell are you talking about? Who said I thought any of that?"

Ann faltered and considered him for a moment. "Well then why did you decide it was a good idea to walk out in the middle of a session? Do you know how disrespectful that is?"

He shrugged. "You'll get over it."

She shook her head, still annoyed but not as offended. "You know, it's not always okay to follow the rules of the world according to Sin. Following protocol would likely get you further socially and professionally, and would likely not put you in as many high stress situations."

Sin scoffed and finished his cigarette. "Now you sound like Kassian. If only I was as great of an agent as he was..."

"Oh, so this whole temper tantrum is about Agent Trovosky?"

There was a brief silence and finally Sin wondered out loud, "Why is he Agent Trovosky and I'm just Sin?"

She obviously saw what he was getting at and gave an exasperated sigh, as though she were dealing with a child. "If you're trying to imply that I have more respect for him than you because he's 'Mr. Wonderful,' it's not true. First of all, I don't call him Agent Trovosky to his face, and second of all, I didn't have sex with him recently so we're on a less casual level than you and I are."

"I suppose."

Ann motioned at the Tower. "Can we go back inside now that you've wasted about ten minutes of your session?"

Sin shrugged, still not entirely convinced, and once again said, "I suppose."

She looked ready to run back up into the high-rise, shivering in her thin blouse, but she hesitated and just watched him for a moment. "You know, I was serious about what I said before. There's nothing to what happened other than mutual beneficiality. Yes, I'm attracted to you but I was using you just like you were using me. I want to be very clear about that."

Sin raised an eyebrow at her, not denying it or looking at all offended. "Oh?"

Ann studied him calmly for a moment before explaining. "You were using me as a distraction from what was going on in your head, that was clear enough to me. I have no delusions about you actually desiring me or wanting to be with me for any other reason. I doubt you even find me attractive."

He gave her a quick once over and shrugged again. "I hadn't thought about it before."

She didn't look surprised at all. "Exactly. Which means you don't. And that's fine, I'm not offended."

Sin thought about that for a moment. It wasn't that she was unattractive, he just hadn't bothered to pay attention to whether or not she was. It didn't matter to him and there had been no reason for him to notice her looks other than the obnoxious knowing expression she always had on her face when he spoke.

"And what could I possibly have that you're using for your benefit?" he queried finally, genuinely curious by the answer. He'd questioned her motives more than once since that night, never quite believing that she was just lusting after him.

Ann paused, hesitating, and an indecisive expression flitted across her features before she spread her hands in a sweeping gesture. "It's difficult to explain. I know all about your personal problems, well most of them," she corrected herself. "But you don't know anything about my life. The easiest way to explain it would be just to say, for a long time I've let others dictate my actions, lead me down roads I don't want to go, and I've allowed myself to be controlled by them."

"Ah," Sin said, a smirk spreading across his full lips. "So now you're feeling a little rebellious."

"Partly," she admitted, looking sheepish but not ashamed. "But it has more to do with the fact that I'm making a choice that no one else I'm associated with agrees with. I'm doing something I want to do when the people who usually control my choices are completely opposed to it. And it's not just about us sleeping together. I mean taking your case to begin with."

"So fucking was just a bonus on the side?" There was a definite note of bewildered amusement in his tone. The woman was an absolute enigma. Even though he understood the words she was saying, he still couldn't quite figure out why she'd even want him to touch her.

"Yes," she agreed bluntly. "You're an incredibly attractive man and I haven't enjoyed sex for a long time. I haven't enjoyed anything for a long time. And good sex can be quite exhilarating and a good distraction from internal issues. I know it isn't a healthy way to behave but I'm as flawed as everyone else."

Sin almost wanted to say that he could have told her that but he decided against it. "So you used me and I used you. Okay. What's the point?"

"The point," she started, shivering slightly as a particularly strong gust of wind swept through the courtyard. "Is that we're on equal footing, and we know where the other stands. And now we can go back to our professional relationship without any misconceptions or misunderstandings because things have gone unsaid."

Sin stared at her for a long moment before shrugging in agreement; things did tend to be a lot simpler when people just came right out and said what they felt, what they thought. The fact that he and Boyd were absolutely incapable of that at times had a lot to do with why their relationship tended to be so complicated. "Okay."

Ann looked pleased, relieved, but once again hesitated before starting away. She raised one arched brow and stepped closer to him, eyes sweeping from side to side quickly before she lifted one hand and clasped his chin between her slender fingers. Sin's eyes narrowed slightly but he looked more inquisitive than tense by the contact.

"Do you have something to add?" he asked, meeting her gaze directly.

She seemed to consider her words carefully as her fingers extended to cup the side of his face. "I want your guarantee that nothing has changed. I'm still your doctor and you'll treat me just as you did before. I'm not going to go back to the games you used to play, Sin," she said quietly, voice intense. "The way you used to behave when we encountered each other."

Sin briefly debated giving her a hard time before deciding not to bother. "The thought didn't cross my mind until you suggested it."

A slight smile momentarily crossed her face and she started to pull away but hesitated at the last minute. Her fingers slid across his face, brushing against his hair, and she looked at him with a completely matter of fact expression as her fingers brushed along his cheekbone and then paused slightly at his lips before her hand dropped. "I don't

regret anything, Sin. I wouldn't regret it if that happened again as long as everything else stayed the same."

Both of Sin's eyebrows shot up this time but he didn't respond. The statement was unexpected, especially given how paranoid she'd been over the one time, but he supposed it wasn't too shocking considering her reasons.

If she'd gotten that much of an independent thrill out of being with him once, it wasn't unreasonable that she'd want to experience the feeling again. But he didn't know exactly what to say; he had no intentions of seeking her out for sex, it just wasn't something he was interested in. However, Sin supposed, anything was possible and if she was fine with his motivation, it wasn't out of the question.

But Sin didn't say that out loud, he just nodded his head in understanding and watched as she turned and hurried back into the building. After a moment he reached up to rub his chin in bemusement before he followed.

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Boyd was exhausted by the time he left the training complex, even though it wasn't as early in the morning as they'd been waking up lately.

In between training sessions for the past few weeks he'd been pushing himself hard in the gym, trying to get back in shape and follow up with Kassian's advice. His body still hadn't recovered fully from the sprains and strains of combat training and all his intensive, determined working out in the gym wasn't helping matters. His body ached constantly, some areas more than others, but at least he felt like he was starting to show some improvement in stamina.

Along with that, he'd received his cryptography book a week and a half ago and had been staying up late trying to figure out how to break the code they'd been given in the first week.

So far all he'd been able to determine was that it wasn't anything simple, like a Caesar shift or monoalphabetic cipher, which wasn't surprising. But without any clue as to what the key was or even the level of sophistication of encryption, there were a lot of tedious, very involved tests he had to look forward to.

Thanks to the side projects and the rough training, he'd been getting very little sleep and even when asleep his mind and dreams seemed to race confusingly. Probably because of that, he'd been looking forward to today. It was his first break in a month, which he would have been pleased enough about on its own, but it also meant he would have the chance to see Sin.

In the time he'd had to think about anything other than the Level 10 training, he'd been slightly preoccupied with that strange visit of Sin's. It was curious and he couldn't figure out why Sin had shown up when he had. His initial, almost indignant irritation had faded in the following days and by now he was just perplexed.

As he headed toward Sin's apartment, he took in the cold weather. He'd been holed up inside the training building for the past month; they hadn't been outside the building even once and it was rare for him to even be by a window. Even though the temperature had been cool when he'd gone in, it seemed like it was especially cold now, more so than it should have been after just a month. Although it could have all just been in his mind, it felt like time was moving faster outside of the black hole he'd been sucked into.

At least the cold air was waking him up.

He was over halfway to Sin's, well past the Tower and heading across the courtyard, when he noticed a familiar figure not too far in front of him. Kassian was swathed in a heavy black and red jacket and Boyd probably wouldn't have thought much of it except when the crowd parted and Kassian glanced to the side, Boyd could tell from his expression that he was upset.

Without thinking, Boyd quickened his pace so he could catch up with Kassian to see what was wrong. He'd wanted to get an early start to the day so he had more time off for his own sense of balance and because it also meant more time around Sin, but he didn't even know if his partner was home and they had all day so he wasn't in a major hurry.

When he came within speaking distance, he called out Kassian's name to get his attention.

The senior agent glanced back distractedly but came to a full stop when he caught sight of Boyd. His unhappy expression faded a little and he gave Boyd a slight smile. "Hey. They finally let you out of the cage, huh?"

"Only for the day. After that, it's back to slavery and high expectations," Boyd said dryly, returning the smile.

Kassian nodded, studying him quizzically as he pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket. "Are you going to make the most of your time? Don't be like Harriet and spend your free day in the gym."

Boyd had to laugh at that, looking truly amused. "You know her too well; I saw her headed there in her sweats as I left." He shook his head slightly. "No, I'm not quite *that* dedicated, although I have been following your advice. Just now I was headed to Sin's, though." He tilted his head in the direction of Sin's apartment.

Kassian's smile wilted a bit and his eyebrows rose. "Ahh, well I'm afraid you're going in the wrong direction then. Your partner's in the Tower."

"He is?" Boyd asked, surprised. He knew they shouldn't have any missions while he was in training, although he supposed it was possible Sin had a solo assignment. It wasn't that Sin couldn't be in the Tower for any other reason on time off, but to Boyd's knowledge he seemed to generally avoid it unless he was working out. "In the gym?"

"No, he was upstairs," Kassian replied, making a face. "I don't know what he's doing there, though. It wasn't the most productive conversation. He's such a pain in my ass."

Boyd didn't have to ask what Kassian meant; knowing the two of them, they'd probably managed to get into a minor altercation over little more than the conflict in their personalities. That would explain his expression though. "Where upstairs? There's about sixteen floors that could qualify."

"The ninth floor," Kassian said, smirking at Boyd's sarcasm. "Although for all I know he's left by now. I'm not sure what he was doing."

That was curious, since the only thing on that level was the psychiatric wing. Boyd didn't quite know what that meant but then again maybe it had something to do with that full check-up Sin had said Carhart had ordered awhile ago. If Kassian was getting counseling for being a Level 10, it was possible Sin was supposed to check in to determine whether it was needed for him too. He couldn't imagine Sin actually going along with that, though.

Whatever the case, it didn't hurt to go check it out. If it turned out Sin was busy, he'd just come back later and go relax some other way in the meantime. He greatly preferred

spending his time with his partner, especially since he only had a handful of times he'd be able to see him for the next few months, but he hadn't had the chance to tell Sin what day he'd be off so it was possible that he'd be tied up with other things.

"Ninth," Boyd repeated with a nod. "Got it. Where are you headed? Home?"

"Nah." Kassian's expression turned gloomy again. "I have a meeting with Douglas. Guess who gets to go on your off-compound excursions for the next couple of weeks?"

Boyd winced sympathetically. "They're really making use of your 'downtime,' aren't they?"

"Yep," the other man sighed. "Seems they're taking the fact that I agreed to the fighting training as a sign that I would agree to everything they ask of me. And who the hell am I to say no?"

"You could always say no, it's just whether they'll listen to your answer that's debatable." Boyd smirked, adding wryly, "Look on the bright side-- you get a free road trip and slumber party out of it. A really extended one with a group of people you'd probably rather not see for awhile. It'll be fun. I'll bring the popcorn if you bring the flashlights."

Kassian couldn't help a grin. "I'll bring the booze."

Boyd chuckled. "I somehow think booze will help less with coordination than flashlights would, but hey, whatever works for you." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "Besides, it could be amusing to see Harriet drunk."

"If everyone else is invited, I'll have to pass." Kassian frowned, handsome face screwing up in a disdainful expression.

"What, so you're just trying to get *me* drunk, then?" Boyd asked with a smirk.

"Well that wasn't the plan initially but since you suggested it, sure why not?"

Boyd made an amused, contemplative noise. "Well, now that we have exciting plans you can have something to look forward to. In the meantime, you could go confuse Doug with your relative excitement about a job you're not enthused about, and I can try to track down my wayward partner before he wanders too far."

"Ha. Good luck with that venture." Kassian glanced at his watch. "Shit, I'm late anyway. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

"Same back to you," Boyd said, raising a hand in casual farewell before Kassian strode away.

Boyd turned and headed back the direction he'd come from, wondering whether he'd make it there before Sin left. He supposed it didn't matter much; there were a limited number of places Sin seemed to frequent so he should be easy enough to track down.

As he approached the Tower, he planned to head inside but movement from a secluded part to the side caught his eye. He slowed and headed in that direction, not knowing at first why until he realized he'd recognized Sin's form. As he came closer he had a good view of his partner and the surprising person standing next to him as they talked on seemingly friendly terms.

Ann Connors.

Surprise nearly made him stop in his tracks.

What the hell? They hated each other, didn't they? What were they doing having some sort of extended, casual conversation? More confused than anything, he slowed his steps and out of habit slid out of view so he could watch them from the side of a building, hidden by some trees where they wouldn't be able to see him.

He was entirely too far away to hear a word they said, especially given the wind, but he had a good view of their expressions and actions. At first, all he could tell was that Ann appeared to be cold and they were having a conversation that Sin seemed mostly confused about. Boyd was about to give up on watching them, feeling a bit strange standing there spying on his partner, but then Ann reached up and touched Sin's face in an obviously familiar way and Boyd froze.

For most people, that simple gesture wouldn't mean much. But most people were not Sin, who once nearly killed Boyd for lightly touching him in the middle of a nightmare. Even if Sin had changed since then, he hadn't changed as much with other people.

The fact that Sin didn't pull away, that he didn't look annoyed or disgusted, that he looked completely casual with the situation, made Boyd's stomach clench.

Boyd watched in growing confusion and shock as she ran her fingers across Sin's face and up into his hair. Ann didn't even hesitate before she touched him, which showed that somehow she knew that he wouldn't respond badly. She, of all people, was fully aware of what Sin could be capable of, and even though it wasn't likely that Sin would have hurt her just for touching him, that didn't mean that it wasn't possible or she couldn't have believed it could happen.

The way she so confidently touched him showed that something like this must have happened before, or they were otherwise close enough for her to know it would be okay. The way she ran her fingers through his hair and along his face was anything but casual; it was the sort of touch a person would use on their lover.

It was a familiar gesture Boyd had made so many times with Sin; he knew exactly what that felt like, the silkiness of Sin's hair, the way Sin leaned slightly into the touch and seemed to crave more.

And Sin didn't jerk away, he didn't look at her in accusation, not even when she dragged her fingers back down toward his lips and touched them. A moment later Sin followed her and the look on his face could only be described as intrigued which made Boyd wonder where they were going and what they were doing.

Boyd didn't realize he was still staring at the empty space they'd occupied until an especially strong gust of cold wind cut straight through his clothing and burned like ice against his skin. He blinked, then turned and, mostly on autopilot, walked across the courtyard toward the main gates.

He'd left his car at his house during the training because otherwise it would have just sat for months in employee parking. That meant he had a long walk ahead of him, one he'd not been planning to make since he'd thought he'd just stay at Sin's for the night due to its proximity.

But right now, that was the last place he wanted to be.

He knew Sin's expressions and body language well enough to recognize that there'd been no animosity in Sin toward Ann, no sense of distance; if anything, he'd looked casual, comfortable. Friendly.

Intimate.

Boyd knew he couldn't be misinterpreting the intimacy of her gesture, the way Sin had let her touch him like that and seemed familiar with it. It was the same sort of stunned sense of disbelief and confusion he'd felt when Kassian had told him over the phone that Sin was dead, when he'd tried to imagine a future without Sin and what he'd do in it and had kept coming up blank.

Now, that sense of stunned confusion was aimed toward understanding what he'd just seen.

He could have run after Sin, asked what was happening, demanded some sort of explanation. But that would have been incredibly irrational since all he saw was Ann touching him.

But it was *Ann*. Ann Connors, who'd been a bitch to Boyd since they'd met, whose twin was catatonic now due to Sin, who'd seemed more interested in channeling Vivienne than anything any of the times Boyd had been around her. On its own, seeing her gently touch someone like that seemed odd given her personality, but when the recipient was Sin it was unfathomable. And the fact that Sin didn't seem to mind made it even worse.

Obviously, something had happened while he'd been in training. But he'd only been gone a month. Just one month.

The last time he'd seen Sin, he'd not gotten any indication that anything this huge had happened. So how were those two suddenly on such good terms? How could Sin, who'd said all that shit about how he needed Boyd, be completely fine with Ann running her hand over him?

That's what touching Sin had always been about; his trust that the other person wouldn't hurt him. And as far as Boyd knew, there had never been anything but animosity or disgust between Ann and Sin; where did trust come into that? How could something like that be developed in so short a time when it had taken him a year?

It was almost reminiscent of the scene with Jessica at Lunar. This was the second time he'd run across Sin being intimate with a woman Sin claimed he didn't even particularly like, although the first time Jessica and Sin had been kissing. Sin had nearly slept with Jessica back then but had seemed to choose Boyd over her in the end, but he'd never said why.

What did that mean for this, with Ann? Could that gesture have not meant what it seemed like? How intimate could Ann and Sin ever get, anyway? Boyd couldn't believe

they were on friendly terms at all, so imagining anything beyond that was inconceivable to him.

If someone had told him that this would happen, he would have expected himself to feel as intense a sense of jealousy as he had when he'd walked in on Sin and Jessica. But that jealousy, that blind conclusion and those assumptions he'd made, had cost so much, had not been worth it. Where he would have thought there'd be jealousy and anger, he felt a cold, echoing sense of disbelief, something that made him feel empty and worn.

He knew that other emotions would be following; he knew that this couldn't be all there was. But seeing that same intimate gesture he'd made so many times repeated on Sin by Ann, made his stomach clench and emotions automatically shut off for damage control.

He tilted his head toward the ground as he walked, eyes blankly staring at the sidewalk as it passed beneath his boots. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and he still felt cold, although he didn't know if it was entirely due to the weather.

What did this mean? Did this have anything to do with what Sin had been trying to tell him? But what the hell could Sin have wanted to say that could explain what he'd seen?

He didn't want to jump to conclusions. He knew he needed to talk to Sin before he did anything, but he couldn't bring himself to turn around, he couldn't bring himself to search out a partner he felt such conflicting emotions toward. A partner he wasn't sure at the moment he could trust as much as he'd thought he could, as much as he had been almost since they'd met.

But if it turned out that something was happening, what would he do? If the truth was that Sin couldn't even wait a month before growing bored and finding some random person to somehow get involved with, and if that person for the second time was a woman, what did that mean for him? If Sin could replace Boyd with someone, especially a woman, whenever Boyd wasn't convenient enough, what did that say about Sin and him?

Especially if Sin had no qualms with doing this after Boyd had confessed to loving him.

A deep pain shot through his heart and Boyd clenched his teeth but didn't stop walking. He almost would have welcomed anger or jealousy because it would have meant he didn't think as much, it would have meant he wouldn't be analyzing this and having to

deal with the possibility that Sin didn't actually care as much as he'd claimed to, that he'd been using Boyd just because he was there or because he'd been the easiest choice.

Hadn't Sin said before that he liked the *idea* of Boyd? Was the idea not as interesting anymore? Was it that others could be easy replacements, taking the position in that 'idea?' Was it that all of this, even everything Sin had once said about needing Boyd, had never actually been about Boyd himself but had just been about the position he filled?

Or what if it was something else, something more significant about the fact that this was the second time he'd seen Sin in any way intimate with someone else, and both times were with women? Even if all he'd technically seen was a touch, part of Jessica's words still haunted him, made him think that there could be more: "*Don't be surprised if one day down the road, Jason ends up with a woman.*"

Boyd didn't even realize he was at Crater Lake until he noticed a chunk of concrete beside his foot, and only then did he also realize he'd been hunched forward against the cold and the thoughts that seemed to spin in his head. He looked up at the towering, familiar pile of broken concrete and felt at the same time a deeply painful sense of nostalgia and a brief spike of something he couldn't properly identify.

This was where Lou and he had first kissed, and this was where he'd once kissed Sin. This was a place he'd tried so hard to infuse with positive memories. This was where he'd realized he needed to be a stronger person.

It took Boyd longer than usual to climb the pile of debris; somehow, his balance seemed to be off and he kept sliding and tripping on little obstacles in his way. He finally reached the top and sat down in his typical spot, hugging his knees to his chest and staring distantly at the familiar, usually calming sight of the colorful algae staining the water.

But this time the water was far less relaxing than he wanted it to be and he sat there for hours trying to figure out exactly how much his life had just changed.

Chapter 13

The desert stretched around them; rusty brown, hot, and nearly empty of all but patches of dry, desert vegetation. The sun was so blindingly bright that rays were seen peeking through the thin cloud coverage revealing spots of intense blue beyond.

For awhile, Cade and Boyd had tried wrapping their spare shirts around their heads in an attempt to keep the sun out of their eyes and off their faces but it had done little to keep the heat from feeling overpowering and ultimately they'd both given up.

At least Boyd had been exposed to this sort of extreme heat within the last year; Monterrey had been nothing if not intense and he felt like all those months had somehow primed him for this. Of course, he'd had less of an abrupt shift in temperature at that time.

Although it was sliding into winter back in America, in Australia the seasons were flipped; here it was hot and arid rather than cold and snowy, and here the temperature was nearing triple digits.

Dirt and dust puffed beneath their feet and Boyd thought that, for all that this off-compound training was going to be intense and extremely difficult, the change of environment may have almost been a welcome distraction to keep him from thoughts about Sin-- the paranoia and, honestly, fear that Sin and Ann were as intimate as Boyd thought that action could have implied.

He'd spent the majority of his day off just sitting at Crater Lake and still didn't know where he stood on the entire situation, or what it was going to mean for him. All he knew was that by the time he'd left to return to the compound, he hadn't wanted to even see Sin; it would have been too soon and Boyd was still too confused.

He didn't want to jump to conclusions, to automatically distrust Sin on circumstantial evidence. It wouldn't be fair to Sin or himself and he didn't want to mess up their relationship over something like unfounded jealousy or hurt. Although what he'd seen had seemed extremely suspicious, it was possible that there was some sort of rational explanation even if he couldn't conceive of what that would be.

He knew himself as well as his relationship with Sin well enough to know that if he'd tried to go to Sin's that day, it would have very likely turned out far worse. If he'd gone there and lost his composure, accused Sin of something untrue, Sin would have

probably brought up his annoyance and frustration over Boyd being irrationally jealous as he had felt about the whole Jessica fiasco. In return, Boyd would have probably snapped something back which would have resulted in an argument.

On the other hand if Boyd had gone there and Sin had actually admitted to some sort of tryst with Ann, Boyd didn't even know what he would have done but he did know it would have made it absolutely impossible to concentrate during this two week trek around the world.

So instead Boyd had resolved to try not to think about it as much as he could during training and to talk to Sin on his next break but it easier said than done. As soon as his thoughts turned toward Sin it was inevitable that a sharp feeling of pain or resentment would follow no matter how quickly he tried to stop it. So he studiously didn't think of Sin and for the most part was successful.

In the meantime, he'd decided that he needed to concentrate on what was happening with the training. And the change of pace would have been welcoming if it weren't for present company.

Boyd hadn't realized when he'd first seen All-terrain Survival and Evasion written on the schedule that for each assignment they would be in a different country with a vastly different climate and environment, and that they'd also be given different partners for each mock mission. It made sense as far as working with other agents went but he would have loved to not have been paired with Cade, all alone, in the middle of a desert.

The purpose of it all was for them to learn how to adapt in different parts of the world with different climates, geography and cultures. Each mission was designed specifically to take them out of their comfort zones and see how well they fared in each place.

At first, it had been frustrating. They'd been shipped off to the Gibson Desert in Australia, an area that had been remote and uninhabited by modern communities until recently. The desert was mostly inhabited by a tribe of people who had only come in contact with the modern world some forty odd years ago.

The purpose of the mission was to gather intel from the local tribe regarding reports of weapons testing by an unknown militant organization in the region but it was a lot more difficult than the briefing had made it seem.

Cade had, unsurprisingly, been rather impatient with the natives. At first he'd seemed to make an effort; he'd tried using some of their words as he'd understood and learned them and had made some non-offensive gestures as he'd tried to explain the situation. But that had lasted all of a day before the heat had gotten to him.

Cade seemed to feel like they weren't getting far enough fast enough and then he'd decided that the aboriginals were too stupid for their own good and they needed to just learn English anyway. He'd nearly jeopardized their entire mission when he'd somehow managed to seriously insult them, Boyd still wasn't sure how, and it had taken the better part of a day and all of Boyd's negotiating skills to convince them that he and Cade were not a threat.

In the end, Boyd and Cade had succeeded to the best of their abilities and were headed back to the pick-up point. They'd started off at dawn and were right on schedule. It would have been satisfying if Cade, ten minutes into the walk, had not taken it upon himself to pester Boyd relentlessly.

"So," Cade said as if continuing a conversation they hadn't been having as he gave Boyd a sidelong look. "How'd it happen?"

Boyd almost didn't answer but he knew Cade would just bother him more if ignored.

"How'd what happen?" he asked somewhat warily.

"How'd you turn fag?" Cade was watching him openly now but Boyd didn't answer at first. After a moment Cade smirked. "What, you saying you aren't now? I saw you with that freak. There's no way shit ain't goin' down between you two."

This was really the last thing Boyd felt like thinking or talking about. For that matter, he'd prefer if his sexual orientation didn't have to come up at all but he'd known Cade would bring up the meeting in the hallway; he'd already done so before and it wasn't surprising it happened again.

Cade had made sure everyone knew that Sin had been there much to Boyd's frustration but lack of surprise and although Doug hadn't done anything as punishment, Boyd wouldn't have been surprised if it'd been included on a checklist of all of the things he'd done wrong during training so far.

"Dude wanted to ass-fuck you right there and you would've let him, so don't act all normal and shit now," Cade continued in annoyance when Boyd didn't speak immediately.

"No he didn't," Boyd said flatly, giving Cade a look as he finally allowed himself to be drawn into the conversation. "Why are you asking this, anyway?"

"Inquiring minds and all that shit," Cade said, waving one hand vaguely.

Boyd was very unimpressed. "That's not even a reason at all."

"Bet it had to do with Bulldog," Cade said firmly instead of debating the point. "She seems like she eats men's balls for breakfast."

That was one mental image Boyd was not going to go anywhere near. "Surprisingly, she prefers tea and toast to start the day," he said dryly. "And she doesn't have anything to do with it."

"C'mon," Cade said disbelievingly. "Don't be shitting me. She's pussy-whipped the whole Agency, same as you. Maybe you were scared away from chicks thinking they were all ice-bitches like her."

"You enjoy being offensive, don't you," Boyd said absently, more of a statement than a question, and shaded his eyes as he peered intently around them. He was pretty sure they were headed the right way, but he had doubts about the validity of the directions they'd been given. Or rather, their ability to properly follow them.

Their compass had managed to mysteriously break in the middle of the night and although Cade vehemently denied any knowledge or responsibility, Boyd found the "oh these things happen" explanation to be pretty weak considering the fact that it had been in Cade's possession and he threw his backpack around like something he especially hated.

Cade snorted. "You think I give a fuck if I hurt your feelings? What are you gonna do, cry to mommy?"

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly.

The man couldn't give a subject up once he set his mind on it and for the past two days, when he wasn't fucking up the mission by being too impatient, Cade had been apparently doing his damndest to make Boyd snap.

It hadn't all been about his sexual orientation; most of it had been about entirely different topics: Vivienne, Boyd's negotiation skills, the mission planning, the training, complaints that Boyd was trying to take over the mission, Boyd's leadership skills, and whatever other topic Cade came up with.

Boyd didn't know why Cade was so insistent about bringing up his homosexuality repeatedly; it was possible Cade was just bored or that he just liked to get a rise out of people. Each night they'd had to sleep, Cade had made a point of settling down far away from Boyd. On the first night he had proclaimed that if Boyd did anything near or to him that was "faggy" he'd beat the shit out of him right there, rules be damned.

At the same time, if Cade was so offended by the concept of homosexuality, why couldn't he just leave the topic the hell alone?

Something about it seemed a little off to Boyd; almost as if Cade was trying too hard to show how much he disliked gays or that lifestyle. But Boyd wasn't entirely sure if that was the case and any time he thought he'd figured something out, the man did something that seemed to defy the conclusion. Whatever the case, Boyd wasn't about to give Cade the benefit of the doubt until he had a real reason to.

"No, I just think you're trying to get attention and all it's doing is making you seem like a pathetic asshole," he said bluntly, looking over at Cade fully.

Cade looked entirely unimpressed. "Don't be all condescending to me, bitch," he drawled offhandedly. "You think you're such hot shit 'cause of your ma and the fact you're in one of the more classified units, but you're a bitch to be partnered with. All you do is nag all day long, like a fuckin' woman, and when you're not doing that you're trying to take over, like you know what the fuck you're doing. If I wanted that shit I'd marry some cunt from the 'burbs."

"Heaven help any woman you decide to propose to," Boyd said partially under his breath.

"See?" Cade said loudly, pointing at Boyd. "That's exactly the shit I'm talking about. You either won't talk or you gotta say some snide shit about whatever anyone says. It's like a

fuckin' compulsion with you. You know what? Sometimes you just need to shut the fuck up."

"You were the one who insisted on insulting me for my sexual orientation," Boyd said pointedly. "If you didn't start so many conversations with offensive remarks then we wouldn't be in this situation."

"We'd be talking like this regardless of the shit I said." Cade crossed his arms and used his height advantage to add to the way he looked down on Boyd. "I think you got no friends 'cause you're a fuckin' asshole who's always gotta be better than everyone else when you're not ignoring them and on top of that you're a fag. You got nothing going for you."

Well, that was certainly a nice vote of confidence from Mr. Misogynistic Homophobic Asshole. Although for the most part Boyd didn't take seriously the majority of what came out of Cade's mouth, he couldn't ignore the fact that it stung a little that the flaws in his personality kept being pointed out. Toby had basically said the exact same thing, minus the homophobia.

Boyd was trying to be better about these issues but it wasn't like he could fix everything immediately and anyway what the hell was so wrong with him in the first place? This wasn't a popularity contest and part of him felt like people could just deal with it if they didn't like his personality.

Rather than say any of the snide comments that came to mind, Boyd just shook his head and tried not to let Cade get to him. "Well, I don't know what to tell you. I'm not particularly thrilled with this partnership either but it's nearly over with. I don't know what you expect me to say about your accusations since you seem to find a way to make everyone's comments into something to mock or distort."

"Look Princess, this ain't about me, it's about you," Cade said, using his favorite new nickname for Boyd. "You piss me off and I want you to know that."

"Fine," Boyd said with a bit of an edge. "Point taken and returned."

"Good."

They were silent for a few steps and Boyd did his best not to get too annoyed with Cade, mostly because they were stuck in the middle of a desert and getting pissed off wasn't going to do anything but put him in a bad mood for the next assignment.

"So," Cade continued relentlessly after a moment, as if they hadn't digressed, "what's your problem then?"

"Jesus, Cade," Boyd said sharply as he narrowed his eyes. The edge strengthened in his voice, although his tone was reasonable enough not to sound confrontational. "It's none of your business why I'm gay and I don't think being gay is a problem. Am I asking why you're straight? Could you even answer that question if someone asked why you only think women are attractive but not men? It's not like it's a conscious decision on your part, it's just the way you are. So stop assuming I'm different just because the gender I'm interested in is the opposite of yours."

"It don't need to be conscious when it's *normal*," Cade said pointedly. "The difference between you and me is I like what men are meant to like: pussy. You're like some fucked up woman acting like a man."

"I *am* a man," Boyd said in irritation. "Liking other men doesn't in any way make me more feminine. How is that logical? And who the hell decided what's 'normal' anyway?"

Cade gave him a look that was hard to read. "Women are the only ones s'posed to like dick."

"And they also menstruate every month and can have babies." Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Can I have children? No. Do I have breasts or ovaries? No. Am I in any way more of a woman than you or other men are? No. Preference in a sexual partner doesn't have anything to do with gender."

"You look like one," Cade said, although it was more of a grumbled aside than anything.

Boyd nearly rolled his eyes at the comment but refrained, not wanting to give Cade more to go off on. They were quiet for nearly a minute as they continued to hike across the seemingly endless terrain and, for an optimistic second, Boyd almost believed the discussion was over.

"Maybe it was your dad, then."

Boyd looked over, opening his mouth to answer snidely but just before he spoke he noticed the tension in Cade's shoulders that was mostly hidden, the way he was looking a little too casually in the other direction. Cade had been looking at Boyd for most of the

conversation, as if he'd wanted to see Boyd's reactions to the rude things he was saying, but the fact that he wasn't now was significant to Boyd.

Instead of snapping anything at him, Boyd just made a noncommittal noise. The annoyance he felt was outweighed by his curiosity to see if Cade had been trying to ask or say something to him all along but hadn't known how to bring it up.

"Maybe the way he acted made you different somehow," Cade continued after a moment, shading his eyes as he peered in the other direction. "You got all fucked up and stupid and confused and for some reason you got all retarded and thought guys are good to fuck."

There was the very slightest of pauses before he added with a smirk, as if to hide the slightly more serious comment, "'Cause, y'know, your old man had to be some fucked up dude to be with your crazy bitch of a mom."

"Nice try but it didn't have anything to do with my father," Boyd said after a moment, acting as though he didn't notice that anything was different with this conversation.

"A brother, then?" Cade asked a little too quickly then hid it pretty well with a snide, "That is, if your dad could actually make himself fuck your ma more than once. Though, I dunno. She's smokin' if she don't open her mouth. Maybe he gagged her..."

"I'm an only child," Boyd replied simply, discreetly watching Cade in his peripheral vision as he trained his eyes on the horizon.

"Some people think guys go gay only 'cause he was abused as a kid so he's all retarded now."

The casual rudeness with which Cade spoke was well-executed, as if he was just making an observation and it was unclear whether he was trying to also imply something about Boyd. Cade still hadn't looked at Boyd but he was doing a good job of covering it by intensely searching for any sign of their meeting point.

If Boyd hadn't spent the last few days with the man, if he hadn't looked over right when he had earlier and noticed the tension in Cade's shoulders, he may not have realized that anything was going on here other than Cade trying to annoy him.

"That's a lie," Boyd said firmly. "I had nothing of the sort happen to me." He couldn't be sure but Cade's shoulders may have loosened the slightest hint, as if he was relieved.

"Yeah, well, maybe you were too ugly a kid to rape," Cade said with a smirk, looking over finally. There was nothing in his expression or body language to show that he had any motivation other than to insult Boyd as much as he could.

"Cade," Boyd said more seriously, gaze so intent that Cade didn't even try to look away. "Aside from the fact that everyone has some sense of uniqueness to them-- their looks, personalities, whatever-- there's absolutely nothing that differs a gay man from a straight man other than his choice in a sexual partner. Why I am this way doesn't have to do with most of the-- and let's be honest here-- bullshit you've been spouting this whole mission."

Cade's expression flickered, as if he automatically was going to say something snide but Boyd continued firmly before he could. "Do you really want to know why I'm gay? Because honestly I don't even know the answer. I just am. It's simply who I am. For me, it helped that I had a very close friend who loved me and happened to be male. Maybe without that, maybe if he'd been a woman, it would've been different but I doubt it."

"Maybe you should've tried with some chick, anyway," Cade said but the snideness seemed half-hearted, as if he felt the need to make a comment but still wanted to hear what Boyd had to say.

Boyd shook his head and said skeptically, "I don't think it would've worked. Even if it had been the same situation but he'd been female, I think she would have loved me and I wouldn't have been able to fully return the feelings. I probably I would have tried because she was a friend and when I grew older I would've realized the mistake I'd made and how it hurt her as well. And I would have regretted it. It wasn't family or tragedy or any of that shit that made me like this, it was just me realizing I could be me. Realizing I'm only attracted to men. Just the same as you would have regretted trying to love a male childhood friend when you just couldn't return the feelings or desire."

Cade made a face as if he was about to argue that but Boyd knew the moment the man opened his mouth then this entire conversation and argument would just be needlessly prolonged.

"If you can't accept that I'm the same as you, that being gay doesn't make me inherently subhuman and someone to disrespect, then there's nothing left to say," Boyd continued. "You need to stop spending your time trying to get to some elusive answer of 'why' because that's not the important question here. Who gives a fuck why I'm gay? Why do you give a fuck who I sleep with? I don't think you actually do."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "The question you should be asking yourself is why it bothers you and what you can do to fix whatever issue is happening in your life that's making my sexuality be a point of contention with you. What I do on my own time behind closed doors has little bearing on you, the same as I don't give a shit who or what you fuck; and I have as little right to know why you are the way you are as you have a right to know about me. What's happening here, this conversation we're having, has very little to do with me and a lot to do with you. And if you start going off on me about my 'fagginess' and you digress back to the pointless insults, I'll be the one ending this conversation very firmly and very soon. If you have something you want to ask me, try doing it civilly and we'll get a lot further." He raised his eyebrows and gave Cade a strong, cool look. "Understand?"

Cade watched him for a long moment and for once the bravado was mostly gone from his expression, resulting in a strangely enigmatic look from a man who seemed to otherwise be constantly smirking or shooting his mouth off. The tension between them was intense and for a moment Boyd really did think they'd get into a physical fight but then Cade looked away dismissively and lazily shrugged.

"Whatever, don't get your panties in a bunch, Princess," Cade said offhandedly. He glanced toward Boyd again, appraising this time. "You gonna whine to mommy 'bout this?"

"I don't plan to tell anyone about this conversation unless you don't shut the fuck up soon," Boyd said casually although his eyes were serious and showed he meant it.

Cade studied him again for a long moment before, surprisingly, he shrugged and let the topic drop.

As they walked up a rocky rise, Boyd shaded his eyes and finally saw the rock outcropping that he recognized as the place they'd hidden their dune buggy. Relieved, he glanced toward Cade who nodded to show he'd seen it, and together they jogged the rest of the way.

Sweat was pouring down Boyd's skin, soaking his clothes and making the air feel hot and papery in his throat. By the time they made it to the vehicle, which was only about a fifteen minute jog, Boyd could tell that Cade was just as ready to get out of this environment as he was even though he acted as tough as ever, like nothing bothered him.

They'd rented an old Joyner two-seater 1600cc Terminator dune buggy, a dark brown color that thankfully was hidden well in the shade. The sides and front were totally open, letting in any sand or dust that came their way, but at the same time also keeping it from being a contained vehicle that would be entirely too hot with trapped air.

The metal supports were hot to the touch as were the seats despite the fact Cade and Boyd had done their best to keep it in the shade. They hadn't wanted to drive the dune buggy around aimlessly looking for the tribe partially because that was a waste of gas and partially because they hadn't known how interested the group would be in outsiders and the buggy had a loud engine that would have warned anyone of their approach.

Boyd slid into the driver's seat before Cade could comment. On the way out, Cade had immediately chosen to drive without letting Boyd try and since part of the training involved becoming accustomed to different vehicles, he wasn't about to lose his chance now.

At first when he started the buggy it took a moment for him to adjust to the humming of the vehicle beneath him, the slight vibration of the wheel, but the seats were surprisingly comfortable and the seatbelt going vertically down both sides of the chest felt more secure than a usual car's. And at least the driver's side was on the left like he was used to.

They each took a pair of goggles out of the glove box and he started the vehicle up.

The dune buggy jerked beneath them when he first hit the gas and Cade gave him a quick look, as if silently doubting his capabilities but within the initial minute of driving, Boyd already felt like he had a good handle on how to use this vehicle. He experimented a little by driving the buggy up the side of dunes and in making a few quick jerks of the wheel to get an idea of how it handled in different situations.

Within minutes, he was pleased with the fact they'd chosen the higher end model; the other models capped their speed closer to 75 kilometers per hour, which only equated, when he'd done the math in his mind, to about 50 miles per hour. That was entirely too slow for their needs and, he thought now as the wind whipped his hair behind him and his face was nearly forced into a grimacing grin from the pressure, it wouldn't have been nearly as fun.

The one issue was the way the sand, when kicked up, bit like bits of glass against their skin. Luckily, most of the sand and dirt was shoved off to the side, to follow them in a

wake of drifting dust marking their path across the desert as clearly as the tire tracks in the ground.

He'd never thought about it before he'd started as an agent but being exposed to different climates, locations, and vehicles made him realize how much he appreciated the diversity in that regard. If it hadn't been for this job he may never have left his home city. He never would have felt real heat or seen real sunlight and likely would have gone the rest of his life only experiencing the psuedo-nuclear winter that North America had been subjected to, even if it the soot that had clogged the stratosphere was finally beginning to disperse.

But now he was experiencing new things and seeing new things. One of the things that he was finding out was that he truly enjoyed driving; he liked being in control, he liked adjusting for different environmental obstacles like sand or ice, and, most of all, he liked going fast.

He understood by now that he was becoming a bit of an adrenaline junkie and this was a perfect example. Riding in the passenger seat on the way out had been somewhat intriguing in that he'd never been in a dune buggy before and he'd been watching the desert but it was entirely different when he was the one behind the wheel. He was pleased that they'd ended up with the style that would let him go 100 miles per hour if he chose, which he couldn't help doing on one particularly flat stretch of land.

The drive took almost three hours going ninety for the most part, primarily because there were a few places Boyd had to slow down to account for obstacles that he didn't think blazing over would be intelligent, even if they were in a vehicle specially designed for off-road.

They barely spoke the entire way to Alice Springs. Cade seemed almost pensive, staring out as the landscape flew past, but it wouldn't have mattered if they'd wanted to talk anyway. Between the wind and the light growling of the engine, they would have had to shout to get any information across.

Even so, whatever was on Cade's mind, Boyd guessed that Cade didn't realize how much it was bothering him or else he never would have shown so visually how distracted he was. Boyd wasn't about to complain though; the silence was a welcome respite after days of Cade's sniping comments. Besides, it gave him even more time to enjoy the feel of driving a dune buggy.

He found that, for the first time since he'd started training, he was truly enjoying himself and not thinking about anything but that. It was somehow relaxing despite the situation and he wasn't about to question or challenge the mood in his own mind; he just let himself experience it.

It was early evening by the time they arrived at Alice Springs, heading immediately toward their meeting point near the airport.

As they pulled up, they could see Doug sitting on the hood of a car and Kassian standing off to the side. Kassian's face was pretty much expressionless; although black sunglasses hid his eyes, his broad shoulders appeared tense beneath the sleeveless shirt he wore. Even now, after the first assignment, it wasn't entirely obvious why he was there. Kassian likely knew but he still didn't seem pleased about it.

Toby and Jon were already there and as Boyd parked and got out, another dune buggy pulled up next to them with Patrick and Emma inside. She said something with a laugh to him that made Patrick smile quietly as he got out of the driver's side and, grinning, Emma followed suit from the passenger side.

"Hey," Emma greeted the others with a large smile. Her hair was pulled back in a messier ponytail than normal and she was covered in dust and dirt but she seemed to be in a surprisingly good mood. Boyd, on the other hand, just felt tired.

"You're entirely too chipper," Boyd informed her and she laughed, clapping him lightly on the arm.

"It's just a good day to be alive," was all she said as she passed him to head toward Doug and Kassian. She stopped near them and stood to the side, presumably waiting for further orders.

Cade gave Emma an odd look then a suspicious one Patrick's way, who just avoided the eye contact and quietly headed toward the instructors as well. Toby and Jon seemed entirely uninterested in what was happening across the way and just leaned against their dune buggy. As Boyd glanced away, for the briefest second he made eye contact with Cade and a look passed between them of mutual intrigue.

But the moment passed almost before it was there and Cade immediately gave him a challenging look. "Got a problem, Princess?"

Boyd knew that Cade had felt the same curiosity he had about the others, their interaction and what they'd done, but it was also clear to him that Cade wasn't ready to acknowledge even that level of understanding between the two of them. So Boyd just shook his head and walked away from Cade without bothering to respond.

It was obvious that whatever unspoken truce that had been between them was not going to last, which was unsurprising especially since they were now around others. Cade seemed to be the type who was very interested in showing off in front of others, whether it was his muscles or his stunning ability to say even the simplest observation in the most offensive way.

Even so, Boyd was intrigued by the side of Cade that had briefly shown, and although he had no intentions of trying to figure out what it had all been about or even bothering to bring it up again, it was nice to know there was more to the man than a penchant for pissing people off.

Within five minutes, Harriet and Andrew arrived. Harriet looked somewhat frustrated as she got out of their dune buggy and Andrew looked equally disappointed. They didn't say anything as they joined the others near Doug.

The tall man looked tanner than usual, as if he'd been outside a lot for the past two days in his native country. He looked to be in a better mood than usual although his expression was still critical as his gaze swept over them all. His light blue eyes rested on Patrick for a moment before speaking.

"We have about six hours before we depart. Our pilot plans to take off at approximately 1 am, so that means you get to the take off point by midnight at the latest," Doug said. "Our ultimate destination is Luoyang, China but I'll get into that after we arrive which will be around 2:30 pm local time. You all have got a few hours of break and mission reports to write. You can do it now or during the flight-- your choice but I recommend sleeping on the plane 'cause I can't promise the next time you'll have fifteen hours of sitting in one place."

Doug squinted up at the sky and the corners of his mouth turned down slightly, as if the sunset wasn't strong enough for his expectations; likely he'd remembered it being brighter, bigger, and less dreary pre-war. Even though Australia had escaped most of the effects of the global cooling, the damage done to the ozone layer and stratosphere still caused a noticeable change in heat and sunlight. Those changes weren't as significant as the ones in Mexico, but the level of UV rays was still extravagantly high.

He shrugged unconsciously and looked at them again. "There's laptops in the shop," he continued, referring to the small office he'd rented for the duration of the trip. "You can take turns using 'em; there's four, so do it in there or grab one and take it on the plane. Arrive back late and you'll be findin' your own way to China."

Boyd couldn't help feeling intrigued. China? He knew that their destinations were being chosen according to some sort of relevancy to actual rebel groups, in countries they may potentially be sent to as agents. As far as that went, it made sense to have China be a destination, considering the fact that the Di Zhi were headquartered there. He just hadn't thought about the places they were going.

Boyd would have wanted to visit China anyway, to get firsthand experience in the country of the rebel group that was probably the least of an enemy to the Agency than the others, but it added a level of intrigue for him to realize he'd be in Sin's home country as well. Of course, China was huge and Boyd probably wouldn't be anywhere near towns Sin had actually been in but somehow it added a strange sense of completion for Boyd, as if finishing a half-started novel.

Doug neither dismissed them nor ordered them to stay and even though it was assumed that they could go, it was obvious that he had something else to say. His gaze focused on Patrick again and he tilted his head to the side. "Got bad news from home, Pattycake," he said coolly.

Patrick's eyebrows drew together and concern clouded his face. "Bad news? From who?"

Doug stared at him for a long moment before shrugging casually. "One of your kids is sick. Got a bad bug of some sort."

Emma looked toward Patrick immediately, seeming concerned.

Patrick's face went ashen and he took several steps forward. "Which one?"

"Clara," Doug went on calmly. "The littlest, right?"

"What's wrong with her?" Patrick demanded, not seeming as patient and mild-mannered as he had in previous discourse.

Kassian removed his sunglasses and studied Patrick, a slight frown on his face, and he shot Doug a mildly disapproving look although it wasn't obvious why.

"I dunno. But she's in the hospital. Must not be good then, eh?"

"Then I have to go back," Patrick said without hesitation. He shifted his backpack on his shoulders as if ready to set off right then.

Both of Doug's eyebrows raised but it seemed more for dramatic effect than genuine surprise. It was pretty obvious to Boyd that their Instructor had been expecting that response. "Just wait one bleedin' minute there, bloke. You can't go jetsetting back to the States every time you have some kind of family emergency. Just what do you think this is?"

"I wasn't asking your permission," Patrick practically snarled at him. Parental concern was quickly transforming him into someone impatient, angry, protective, and Kassian stood up slightly straighter when Patrick took another step towards Doug. "I was telling you."

"Well I think you know what the outcome of that'll be," Doug replied, not at all seeming concerned with Patrick's temper. "Disqualification and all that. Maybe some other consequences."

"How soon can I get back?" Patrick demanded, not looking worried about Doug's warning in the least.

Doug didn't immediately reply and instead examined him for a good long moment before sighing and gesturing for Patrick to come talk to him at the side. Nearby, Kassian gave a deeper frown and shook his head as the others began slowly heading towards the rented office or just to hang out until the break was over.

Boyd noticed Emma looking after Patrick with a worried expression. She watched him for a moment then turned and, seeming distracted, walked into the office.

Boyd ended up being one of the last people to disperse, not because he particularly cared about hanging around but because it just happened that way. He was surprised by Patrick's outburst; he'd been so calm and quiet in all of their training that Boyd wouldn't have thought he was capable of such a quick change in temperament.

At least that went to show that Patrick was the type of person who actually cared about his kids. It made Boyd curious about what his father's reaction would have been if Cedrick had been in another country and someone had said Boyd was in the hospital.

Would he have reacted that way too or would he have taken the news in stride and just tried to get back whenever he could?

Both of his parents had been so involved in their professions that he couldn't imagine his father jeopardizing his career just because his child was in the hospital, but then, Boyd didn't really understand the way family love was supposed to work in a healthy, more normal relationship than he'd grown up with.

He didn't dwell on the topic for long because for all that Patrick had seemed like a decent man, the fact that he was leaving meant very little to Boyd. He'd barely spoken to the man so the only way it potentially affected him was how they were going to deal with groups now that they had an odd number of people. Maybe future training missions had more than two people to a group, anyway.

He did wonder what Doug had meant about possible 'other consequences' though. Although Boyd suspected Kassian knew what it meant, he didn't go ask; he felt comfortable approaching Kassian as a person but in this case Kassian was their supervisor and he didn't want to add more to the perception that he had connections. Besides, with only six hours until departure, he wanted to get his report written.

When Boyd made it into the office, he saw that all the laptops were taken so he rested in the corner, head tilted back against the wall and slid his eyes closed. A warm dry breeze blew through one of the windows and rustled strands of blond hair against his forehead. As he absorbed the alien feeling of an almost golden and arid warmth, Boyd idly wondered about where else training would take him and what other challenges they would come across along the way.

Chapter 14

The air was so cold that every time Boyd exhaled, a cloud from his breath nearly obscured his vision and every time he inhaled it felt like ice was forming in his throat. The moist heat from his breath was trapped between his mouth and the scarf, creating an uncomfortable scratchy, wet-cold feeling while still letting enough breath out for the dissipating fog.

It almost felt like even the slight moisture of his eyeballs was in danger of icing over. Even his sinuses felt like they were freezing, giving him a dull headache between his eyes that he knew was not going to leave for the entirety of the mission.

He was bundled up in long johns, two layers of coats, heavy pants, thick boots, a hat that pulled down over his ears, a scarf wrapped all the way around his head so his eyes were all that showed and thick gloves. Yet despite all that, each time the wind blew down the street he felt it spearing against his skin. He huddled, arms crossed over his chest and hands held tightly against his body, and stomped his feet a few times as if it would do anything useful.

Kassian walked ahead of him, seeming far too unaffected by the cold. He was just as bundled up as Boyd was but whereas Boyd curled in on himself as he shuffled along, Kassian stood with his back straight and looked around calmly as if it was a normal day and not what felt like a good fifty degrees below zero.

What made it even worse was knowing that only a day ago Boyd had been standing out under real sun rays as sweat poured down his body with the hot Australian sun pressing down on him and, Christ, even if sweating like a pig didn't feel that fantastic, he'd take that over this misery any day.

He breathed in a little too quickly and the air caught in his throat, feeling dry and full of ice, and he fell into a coughing fit that took a few seconds to recover from. Watching Kassian walking ahead of him unperturbed, not to mention the native Russians hanging out around them as if nothing unusual was happening, Boyd felt rather pathetic. He'd thought he was the type of person who did well being unaffected by drastic temperature changes but he was finding that he had his limits.

"*Fuck*, it's cold," Boyd hissed in frustration as he caught up to Kassian.

Kassian looked back at him and shrugged. "Yeah. I just got used to this before," he said cryptically, referring to his long undercover mission in Russia.

After Patrick's decision to abandon the training, Doug had informed them all that Kassian would be replacing him for the following missions. Apparently they all were planned to be two-man assignments and now Kassian would be in Patrick's place for however the teams were planned. But instead of a partner and active participant, Kassian wasn't allowed to do more than play the part of subordinate and offer mild suggestions so that the playing field was still even.

"Right after Moscow got hit, it was even colder," Kassian went on. "Probably fifty or sixty below plus wind chill."

Boyd's eyebrows rose in stunned sympathy for the people living here at that time. "I would've killed myself," he declared only slightly dramatically. "Or got the hell out of Dodge."

Kassian finally cracked a full smile and it brightened his previously glum expression nicely.

He'd been more than a little moody since his participation had been announced; after the mission in China had been completed and they'd headed out to Russia, it'd become even worse. He was silent for long periods of times around the others and during the ten hour flight from Luoyang to Murmansk, Kassian's expression had grown significantly darker.

"Yeah, it was tough as shit acting like I was used to being in Siberia," he replied. "I should have gotten an Oscar for that performance."

"You can have twenty and a Golden Globe if you give me tips to adjust a little faster." Boyd looked around as best he could. "Help me out here, the scarf's giving me a disability. Am I so completely obvious that I'm going to ruin any chances of blending in or is it possible they think I'm an especially pathetic old woman? I'm hoping my hunched back is misleading."

"You don't fit in anyway," Kassian said conspiratorially. "You don't have that Siberian look."

"Oh really," Boyd drawled with a wry smile that couldn't be seen but was heard in his voice. "Why's that?"

Kassian shrugged and stopped walking. "You're not taking swigs from a flask of vodka. That's the real trick to keeping out the cold," he said with a wink.

"Shit, where's the nearest liquor store," Boyd said, looking around jokingly. "I'll buy fifty liters if it warms me up."

"Ha. They barely gave us enough rubles to get out of this shitty country, so you'll have to make do with looking like an outsider." Kassian looked around, appearing thoughtful, but not saying exactly what he was thinking. "So how long do you plan to search for a used car?"

Boyd managed some maneuvering to get his watch visible between the cuff of his coat and edge of his glove, and glanced as quickly at the time as he possibly could before he stuffed the glove back under his coat. Even that brief amount of time made the bones in his wrist ache from the cold and he grimaced although the expression was almost entirely hidden by the scarf. It was about 11:30 am, which meant they'd already been walking around for two and a half hours.

They'd been given the parameters for this mock mission as they'd traveled from China to Russia. The scenario was that they were on a mission in which they received vital information and needed to transmit it as soon as possible to the US. The fictional scenario also called for them to escape Russia using alternate means of transportation than bus, train or plane because the group they'd stolen the information from was now aware of their presence in the region and would be searching for them in the obvious places.

They had very few supplies and very little money and had to travel across Siberia to reach a place where they could safely transmit the information and/or call for help. The chosen destination was Helsinki, Finland, but the time period they were given was exactly forty-eight hours as of their 9 am arrival in the country as they'd stepped off the plane.

Although Helsinki was the ultimate destination of all four groups, not all of them had been dropped off in this specific city although they were all the same distance away from Helsinki. That seemed to be the way each mission was going to be set up so far, likely to prevent groups from sharing information, resources and ideas.

As a precaution against 'cheating,' each trainee had been given a tracking device so that Doug could monitor which routes they were taking. If anyone used mass transportation in Russia, they were disqualified from the mission and any points they

would have received on the mission would not be counted in their overall judgment at the end of the three months. Although, the good news was that once they made it into Finland they could use whatever means of transportation they wanted.

Although there had been a car rental place right outside the airport where they'd landed, Boyd hadn't even looked at it twice once he saw how expensive rentals were for the two-day minimum they had listed. The 30,000 rubles Doug gave each group sounded like a lot but when Boyd considered that their destination was in another country across the tundra and they had to survive along the way by their wits alone, he didn't want to spend 20,000 rubles on one item, especially since once they hit the Finland border they'd have to convert to Euros anyway.

Granted, if everything went well, then having a rental car to take them straight to Helsinki would work wonders in keeping them within the forty-eight hour deadline. But Boyd's experience on missions was that the only time it went really well was when something was going horribly wrong.

So when Kassian had been assigned as Boyd's partner and Boyd had said that he wanted to find a used car, the senior agent had just nodded and been noncommittal. Hours later of walking in the freezing cold, Boyd wondered if Kassian was wishing he'd been teamed with someone who'd been willing to go for a rental car that they could be nice and warm in and already a few hours into the mission.

Alternatively, they could have stolen something but since the whole point of the mission was to lay low, the last thing he wanted to do was draw any attention to themselves or risk being chased by local law enforcement.

Because of that, it was better to ration their money as much as possible and go as legit as they could on deals.

"Another half hour, I guess," Boyd answered finally, pushing the scarf back so he could peer around more clearly. "If my memory and instincts are wrong on this, we'll have to splurge on a rental or some other alternative, but I don't feel comfortable with that. And I know there has to be an area..."

He trailed off as they rounded a corner and an especially dismal area of Murmansk lay before them. Like Boyd's hometown, Murmansk had been devastated by the bombings of the war. While Boyd's city was apparently targeted due to high traffic intel, Murmansk had been an important port for the Russian navy.

Entire areas of the city were still completely destroyed with buildings crumbled on the ground and covered in snow like miniature urban mountain ranges. The area before them was covered in rubble, garbage, and discarded junk. Simple metal barrels were off to the side, two of which had fires raging inside. Several men and women sat around them, leaning back casually as a few of them drank from flasks just as Kassian had joked and a few casually threw old bottles of liquor into the barrels, watching the fires flare in response.

Past that open area was, in essence, a small outdoor market although it wasn't the sort Boyd had seen in Mexico or China. People sat around with the occasional blanket spread out with items on it or handmade wares dotted in front of them but for the most part the majority of the people seemed to just be sitting or milling around.

Boyd paused, gaze sweeping over the assortment of people as he searched for particular body language and other cues that made him feel that was the person to approach, then glanced over at Kassian. "Can you translate for me?" he asked, fully ready to try charades to get the idea across if Kassian felt it would be an unfair advantage to speak Russian for him.

Kassian nodded without hesitation, probably already having come to that decision before they'd even arrived in Russia. "Even if I was another trainee, I'd be able to use my language skills so it's not just a Level 10 advantage. Toby used his knowledge of Chinese dialects when we were in Louyang. The only thing I'm not really allowed to do is tell you things I've learned and experienced as a Level 10, things you wouldn't know at your own rank."

Boyd made a soft noise of assent; that made sense. "That would've been helpful in China."

Of all the times to not be stuck with his snobbish roommate, of course it would be when Toby's training would have been immensely useful for the task at hand. Even so, he and Emma had done well by finding their fake bomb in time although they'd only had a handful of minutes to spare, which would have been harrowing in a real life situation.

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "If this little adventure lands us in France at any point, there'll be all sorts of people wishing they'd been teamed with me. Except for everyone who knows such a common language."

Kassian snorted and looked around the market. He didn't look curious or confused but he did seem intrigued and examined a few carts of blankets closely as they walked

through. "I don't know how common it is to Americans. Although I guess a lot of Intel people are linguists."

Tilting his head in agreement, Boyd didn't answer as he approached the man he'd seen from afar.

The man was fairly average-looking; he appeared to be in his mid-fifties, with graying dark hair and a beard that liberally covered his chin. His clothing was tattered and worn but he looked as though he felt less cold than Boyd did in his multiple layers. He was one of the people sitting to the side without anything visible in front of him, but Boyd chose him with no hesitation.

"Zdravstvuyte," Boyd greeted the man, using the only Russian word he'd learned and could actually pronounce decently when he'd tried to echo Kassian in the first hour of their walking.

"Privyet," the man replied easily.

Boyd glanced toward Kassian to alert him to the fact that he'd need the translation now, and said to the man, "My friend and I were looking for a car but we don't have money for a new one. I heard to come to this place; you know anyone who could help?" He did his best to minimize his American accent and make it sound a little more British or at least something ambiguous.

Kassian responded quickly, the Russian words gliding off his tongue fluidly, and at the moment he really did sound like a native of the region. His tone also changed from the easy-going way he'd been speaking to Boyd and became far more assertive and no-nonsense.

After a moment of conversation with the other man, Kassian looked at Boyd again. "He asked why you thought to approach him, but he seems more curious than suspicious."

"I'm just guessing," Boyd said easily with a shrug. "Your blanket is empty but you keep looking at people and the other sellers seem to know you. So I just assumed maybe you had a larger item somewhere else..."

Kassian translated once again and the guy looked at Boyd appraisingly before gesturing toward the South and explaining something in Russian. Kassian looked in the direction he pointed even as the guy continued to speak.

After a moment Kassian nodded and once again turned to Boyd. "He says there's a guy to the Southern end of this market who sells used electrics but if we don't have any money, we likely won't be able to trade those either since they're pretty valuable. However he said that he has an old junker fuel-based car that is rusting away in his garage that he's willing to swap. He tried to sell it for awhile in the market but everyone wants plug-ins since fuel is so expensive and scarce."

Boyd felt genuine relief at that and although usually he would have hidden it, he let part of it show in his expression not that it mattered much since his face was almost entirely hidden.

"Really?" he asked hopefully. "We don't have money, but, uhh, does he want my coat?"

Boyd unzipped the outer coat to show the man the thickness and tried not to shiver too uncontrollably as he lost all the body heat that had been gathering. "It's really warm..."

The man seemed to pick up on what Boyd meant without Kassian having to translate but the senior agent did anyway. After a few moments of consideration, the man shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, speaking idly to Kassian as his gaze moved carefully over both of them.

"He says his own coat is fine," Kassian translated, watching the man. They exchanged a few more words. "But he'll take my boots."

It made sense; Kassian's boots were thick, durable and a lot newer than the battered ones the man had on. He'd likely had heavy winter clothing even before the downward spiral of the economy but a good pair of boots weren't as easy to patch up in the long run and were likely very expensive to buy new.

Boyd hesitated and looked at Kassian questioningly; it had never been his intention to make Kassian pay for their transportation, especially when it had been Boyd's idea to go this route. In such a cold climate, there was no way he would expect Kassian to give up a good pair of boots.

"I wouldn't ask you to give up anything of yours. I do have a pretty nice watch if he wants it," Boyd said to Kassian after a moment. "It would get a decent price and it would be a lot easier to get rid of than a car..."

Kassian shook his head. "It's fine, I have another pair of shoes in my pack." With that being said, he turned back to the man and told them that they had a deal although he wanted to see the car before he started taking off his boots in the middle of the market.

The man, who belatedly introduced himself as Aleksei, led them on a winding route across several blocks and down a few side streets before they ended up at a small, utilitarian, squat home with a garage that was nearly falling apart behind it. Every other house on the street looked almost the same and the saddest part was this was one of the nicer blocks in the area. It didn't take long for Aleksei to get the car out into the open.

It turned out to be a 1988 Lada 2107; a dark blue, boxy little car that was rusty and full of so many dents and scrapes that it looked like someone had once taken personal insult with the vehicle and had tried their best to attack it. That was unsurprising, given the fact that it was over thirty years old and had somehow managed to survive the bombings.

Boyd examined it briefly; from the outside it didn't appear to be in much better shape than the garage it had been stored in but when they opened the hood, everything seemed to be in order and the engine seemed to be in decent shape. They had roughly 700 miles to go and then they'd be dumping the car anyway so it wasn't like it needed to be in perfect condition. Getting it on trade was going to drastically increase the amount of money they had to spend elsewhere as fall-back in case they needed it. Plus, as a bonus, Boyd noted that the tank was about half to three-quarters full.

Kassian agreed to the trade only after he'd looked over the car as well and turned it on, testing out the basic functions and going with Aleksei and Boyd for a test drive. After Kassian gave Aleksei his boots, who handed over the keys, it didn't take long for them to get in the car and head out of Murmansk.

Boyd discovered that, as a pleasant surprise, the heater actually worked decently in the Lada which was already making the mission seem a lot smoother although the shocks were horrible and each bump they went over resounded through his body.

Boyd removed his scarf and hat before they took off so he'd be able to see better to drive. When he glanced at his watch he saw that it was only just past noon, so they were making pretty good time. He was glad he'd thought to pick up a map of Russia and Finland before they left because now that he was in the car, he didn't want to stop if he didn't have to.

Boyd glanced over and saw that Kassian was looking out the window, seeming gloomy. Boyd had initially hoped that once they were on their way maybe it would help Kassian snap out of the mood he was in but that no longer seemed likely.

"Are you okay?" he asked five minutes into the drive when it became apparent that Kassian was going to remain quiet and pensive.

"What?" Kassian looked over at Boyd, an inquisitive look on his face even though the troubled expression hadn't entirely cleared. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem... distracted," Boyd said, glancing over briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

"Oh." Kassian shrugged, rolling his shoulders with the movement and finally reached up to unzip his jacket at the top, unwinding the scarf from around his neck now that the heater was working. "Yeah, I'm just pretty annoyed that I have to be here."

Boyd looked over again, not entirely certain how to interpret that. He suspected Kassian meant the trip in general, but Kassian's mood had seemed to grow worse once they landed in Russia so it was possible it had something to do with his extended mission. After all, he'd spent years in this country and had finally gotten back to America only to get jetted around the globe once more and end up right back here.

On the other hand, Boyd hadn't been with Kassian in China and Kassian had seemed disgruntled that he'd had to take over Patrick's position and, in effect, do even more work on what was supposed to be his time off. So it could just be that he meant 'here' as in having to work in a group assignment at all.

Boyd couldn't really blame the man; if he'd finally had some much needed downtime and he'd been told to help some lower level agents out, and then had to follow someone around but not even be able to properly contribute, he'd probably also be annoyed.

"That's understandable," Boyd said, not wanting to press him for information on exactly what he meant; as far as he was concerned, all the interpretations made sense.

He'd learned to be at least a little more sensitive and not to push people for personal information in general conversation; he'd upset Sin a few times doing that and tended, in those cases, to suck more information out of the person than he ever gave back. It wasn't a balanced way to converse and he didn't feel comfortable pressing for information from someone who he wasn't even sure he could properly identify as a

friend. He liked Kassian and thought he was a good person, and they may have spent some time at Kassian's house, but they were still basically acquaintances, not friends.

Kassian nodded noncommittally and began watching the passing scenery again. Murmansk was a lot like the Agency's home city; there were alternating areas that had been rebuilt and some that looked just as badly as they did right after the war.

When they finally exited the city, the terrain was a lot more sparse and there was nothing for miles around except for the moss-lichen that dominated the tundra.

There were only about four hours of daylight during the day at this time of year and after awhile of driving the sun was already beginning to set, darkening the grey sky even more.

"This whole region is so ridiculous," Kassian muttered finally after a long stretch of silence. "Even the sunrise and sunset piss me off."

"Why?" Boyd asked. "Because it's on such a different schedule?"

"It's depressing," the other man complained mildly. "Even the pathetic bit of sunlight that filters through the cover back in the city is something, but twenty hours of no sunlight at all is just out of control. That's why this damn region has such a high suicide rate, I bet."

"Hmm." Boyd considered that. "It's probably true. I read once that Seasonal Affective Disorder had a marked increase in the general population just after the war, since light was no longer as readily available. Some of the Nordic countries already experienced higher rates but if you add the fallout from nuclear winter along with their already extreme conditions, it would just intensify what was already here. And that's not even taking into account PTSD."

"Miserable bastards," Kassian muttered and leaned his head back against the seat rest before turning it slightly to the side to watch Boyd as he drove. "But most everyone in the world is a miserable bastard these days. Except Doug."

Boyd smiled faintly. "You don't think he is?"

"He's not," Kassian said with a shrug and a half-grin. "I know it seems like he is but he's probably the most easy going dude I know. He's just an asshole though. I mean on the one hand I agree with how he treats trainees but I thought what he did with Patrick was pretty unnecessary even if I guess he had a point."

"What he did with Patrick?" Boyd echoed, glancing over curiously. "What do you mean, by giving the news in front of everyone?"

Kassian hesitated for a moment, as if he wasn't sure whether or not he should say anything but then he made a face. "Well in retrospect I probably shouldn't have mentioned this but since I already opened my mouth, Patrick's kid isn't really sick."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Really." He said it more as an intrigued statement than a question. He thought back to Kassian and Doug's reactions to Patrick's response and it made a little more sense. "It was a test, then?"

"Yeah, that's why I shouldn't have said anything. Doug had a feeling that Patrick wouldn't be able to commit entirely from day one-- ever since the orientation." Kassian shrugged and rubbed a hand across his blond hair. "So he tested him. And also, I think Doug wanted him to back out. He didn't like the idea of Patrick becoming Level 10 and doing all of the crazy junk we have to do when his kids are already out of one parent, you know?"

That made Boyd wonder if Doug planned to test each of the trainees in similar ways but he didn't ask Kassian about it; it wouldn't be fair for him to know something like that ahead of the other trainees and it would put Kassian in an awkward position.

"I didn't realize Patrick is a single father," he said instead. "I just assumed he had a wife."

"Yeah she died from skin cancer or something, courtesy of our new and improved ozone layer," Kassian said sarcastically. He was quiet a moment and then retracted his previous statement. "Actually I guess Patrick didn't seem too miserable. I guess he could be in his private time though. I should ask Emma what he was like. I think I'll be with her on the next assignment."

"I think she was sad that he's gone," Boyd said. "She seemed a little distracted at first in China and said she hoped Clara was okay. I guess they talked about his kids on the trip. We didn't talk about it too much since the mission was rather hectic."

He added the last part dryly because ten hours in an overcrowded foreign city looking for a fake bomb when they didn't even speak the language made his comment a bit of an understatement.

"Although, speaking of people who've managed to stay unaffected by the state of affairs in the world, I'd cite Emma as an example. She seems to be consistently in a decent mood. Your next assignment will probably go pretty smoothly if you're with her."

"Hopefully more than that goes smoothly with her," Kassian leered, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Boyd laughed suddenly and looked over. "You know what's funny about that? She gave me a handful of condoms when we landed in China."

Kassian did a double-take and looked at him incredulously. "No way. What the hell for?"

"That was about my reaction, too," Boyd said with a bemused smile. "I'm still a little fuzzy on the details but as far as I can tell, she thought of it awhile ago but when we were alone it seemed like a good idea to her. She seemed as embarrassed by the way she did it as I was confused, but apparently she had a gay friend who died of AIDS so she was worried for me. She said she wasn't trying to be stereotypical or anything but, you know, past issues the gay population's had with AIDS... There was a lot more backpedaling in the conversation but you get the gist."

Kassian stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head. "I can't tell if that's insulting or naive. What a strange chick."

"It actually didn't bother me," Boyd said thoughtfully after a moment. "If it had been anyone else, I probably would've been insulted. But Emma really means well and she stumbled all over herself trying to explain, and she said she didn't have them just for me it was just that she happened to think of it at that time. I don't think she thinks only gay men get AIDS, I think she was just... being Emma. And as far as that goes, it's not like I use protection anyway so I guess she has a point." He paused and seemed to realize he'd just said that aloud. "So... that was a bit too much info..."

This time Kassian gave him a strange look. "What do you mean you don't use protection?"

Boyd was regretting bringing the conversation in any way to the topic of his sex life. He didn't distrust Kassian or expect him to talk about this to anyone else but it was a little awkward, especially since Sin and Kassian were rivals and anything Boyd said was in essence talking about Sin's sex life too.

Boyd had never verified that he was sleeping with Sin but it was implied, so he assumed that Kassian knew or at least had a good idea it was happening. At the same time, he'd been the one to bring it up so it was stupid to try to avoid replying when he couldn't take back what he'd said.

After a moment, Boyd shrugged casually. "Well, it's not like I never have in my life. I just haven't lately. It's... not really necessary right now."

Kassian arched an eyebrow but as if sensing Boyd's reluctance to say more, didn't push it. "Well I guess if you're sleeping with one person it's not necessary, right?"

Boyd inclined his head, relieved that Kassian wasn't going to press the topic. "That's the way I see it," he agreed.

Kassian nodded and looked out the window casually, silent only for a moment before curiosity overcame his previous decision to back off. "So you *are* sleeping together then?"

Although Boyd could have hedged around the answer, there was no point. "Yes."

"I figured as much," the other man replied, not looking very surprised as he pulled a small bottle out from an inner pocket of his coat.

Boyd glanced at him sidelong. "Getting a head start on staying warm?" he asked lightly, noting that it was vodka.

"It's already cold," Kassian replied as he took a swig. It was obvious that he was taking his role as mindless flunky very seriously. If he were in Senior Agent Trovosky mode, there was no way he'd drink on assignment. "This heater isn't doing much more than making us less likely to get frostbite or something."

Nodding, Boyd was quiet as he idly went over the conversations he could remember having with Kassian. He figured Kassian assumed they were sleeping together due to the way Boyd had been acting about Sin but even if Boyd had feelings for Sin that didn't mean they were necessarily reciprocated or that Boyd acted on them.

After a moment, curiosity got the better of Boyd and he asked, "What made you think that?"

"What made me think what?"

"That I've been sleeping with Sin." Boyd looked over at Kassian although he kept his attention on the road in his peripheral vision. "That it wasn't just one-sided on my part."

"Ahhh." Kassian took another sip and tucked the bottle back into the depths of his coat. "I'm not really sure. The way you act around each other, the way he talks to you is different than the way he treats everyone else but that's obvious."

Kassian seemed to think for a moment before continuing. "I'm not really sure. I just got that impression after seeing you together. That you were in a relationship or at least sleeping together. Something more than just friends."

"Hmm." Boyd didn't know whether that was good or bad; he and Sin didn't go out of their way to hide what was happening between them but they also were definitely not obvious about it around others, with the exception of that one debriefing and even then it was under the table. "It's that obvious, then?"

"No, not really. I probably never would have thought of it if I hadn't seen the way you acted in Mexico and all," Kassian replied. "It's not like you were a couple of obviously flaming gays or something with your hearts on your sleeves."

"Well, good," Boyd said, unable to suppress a slight smile at the amusing mental image of Sin acting that way. "If I ever become that obvious I'll let you reserve the right to lecture and/or kick me." He glanced over with a sidelong, wry expression. "That doesn't work retroactively for Monterrey, mind you."

"That wasn't flaming, it was emotional. Extremely so." Kassian reached down and fiddled with the seat until he made it recline more, allowing him more room to stretch out his long legs. "But it's okay. I don't think anyone in my crew really thought much of it except maybe thinking you were way too attached and amateurish to be on that kind of assignment."

Boyd made a light noise of assent. "I suspect that's the case. Harriet and Archer certainly didn't seem impressed."

Kassian shrugged, neither agreeing or disagreeing. "If someone had suggested to me back then that you'd be up for promotion now, I probably would have thought the idea was crazy. But seeing you in training shows that judging you just based on that one mission is pretty dumb. I've had some pretty ridiculous shit happen to me on assignment in the past on more than one occasion and I've also acted in ways that are not exactly in

the Agency guidelines. People don't judge me solely on that so it would have been asshole-ish for me to do that to you."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "I appreciate the vote of confidence but I don't think I've exactly been stellar on most of the training you've been around for."

"That's not true," Kassian said in disagreement. "You were better at subduing in last week's combat training. You just have to build up your strength and stamina. And Doug gives me a heads up on how everyone is doing since I'm being dragged along for the ride. He said you did well in negotiation, escape strats and undercover training."

It was good to know that Doug and Kassian didn't think he was completely failing. After the shaky start he'd had with cryptography and later with Krav Maga, he'd been feeling a little paranoid.

"Thanks," Boyd said, appreciating that Kassian would even bother to tell him this.

The other agent nodded, asking, "Which reminds me, what made you think to approach Aleksei?"

"It was mostly guessing based on experience, to be honest," Boyd said with a shrug. "You overheard the man at the airport telling some tourists to check out the back alleys for cheaper items, right?"

Kassian nodded in assent, watching him and waiting for a further explanation.

"Well, I was banking on the fact that Murmansk would be a lot like home," Boyd said simply. "If you search for the shittiest back alleys, you usually find either cutthroats or traders markets, and that man's comment made me think I could find markets. I used to go to markets with a friend because we didn't have a lot of money. So I have an idea of the sort of mannerisms to look for."

He paused and glanced over at Kassian, who didn't speak as he apparently waited for the full explanation. "Like I told Aleksei, it was primarily because he was sitting there with an empty blanket, watching people," Boyd explained. "A number of people acknowledged him or got into conversation as they passed, so I assumed he was well-connected or at least enough of a regular to know the sort of items up for trade. Judging by his body language, the fact that the people around him seemed to like him, and from what I could see of his interactions, I didn't get the feeling he was a scammer."

Boyd shrugged again. "I wasn't sure that he'd have a car but I thought he may be most likely to know someone who did and not screw us over in the process. And if that didn't work I was just going to look around for someone else."

"Good observation skills," Kassian commented, breath puffing out in front of him in a cloud. "I'd noticed the same thing about him-- that he seemed to be paying close attention to the shoppers. I figured he was either a thief or had something to offer."

"Thanks," Boyd said again and Kassian just nodded without responding. They fell into relatively amiable silence for the next forty minutes or so. Boyd concentrated on the road while Kassian eventually went back to looking out the window silently.

Boyd found the quiet to be almost welcoming; he didn't mind talking to Kassian but in an unfamiliar country and terrain, in a car he'd never driven before, in the nearly pitch black with only their pale headlights to light the way, he wanted to be able to put as much attention toward driving as possible.

It also meant he could hear the car a lot better although that didn't necessarily mean much. The car was an automatic, something he wasn't used to, so he wasn't entirely certain if it meant anything that as the gears shifted it sounded progressively less smooth.

Just as Boyd was wondering whether he should comment on the noise, the car suddenly started slowing down. Boyd pressed firmly on the gas and the engine revved, the RPM dial went higher and higher but the car wasn't going any faster. No matter what he did, it seemed like the forward momentum was quickly decreasing and they were about to stop.

"Shit," Boyd said sharply, looking quickly at the dials as if he could determine what was wrong. He couldn't tell what was happening, though; there was still a quarter tank of gas and the RPM seemed to be the only thing going wild.

Within moments, the car rolled to a stop and wouldn't move. Boyd stared at the steering wheel in displeasure then parked the car and looked over at Kassian. "I think it's dead."

Kassian let the back of his head thump against the seat and he released a long, low sigh. "That's just wonderful. And judging by the jerks and noises the gears just made, it's probably the transmission so we're screwed."

"Shit," Boyd repeated, a little more emphatically this time.

He stared at Kassian a moment then looked out the window at the darkness. They couldn't afford to spend all night just sitting there and even if they waited the inordinate amount of time for the sun to rise the following day, they'd be in the same situation; stuck in the middle of the tundra with a dead car. If they were more on an decline they could have at least pushed the car and let the momentum take them for awhile but that just wasn't happening in this area.

"We have to leave the car," Boyd said after a moment. It was slightly a question, as if he was wondering if Kassian had any better plans.

Kassian just looked at him neutrally and shrugged, beginning to pull on his heavy wool gloves again. If he had a better alternative, he didn't say and it was likely because he either didn't have one or couldn't make the suggestion without Boyd thinking of it first. So he just pushed the door open silently and got out, standing on the frozen tundra in a pair of tan Timberland boots; the particular style was more suited for hiking than walking through the freezing cold in the snow.

They popped the hood and examined the engine for a few moments before deciding that it really was a lost cause. There was nothing they could do to repair the car.

"Good thing I get to walk about 40 miles in my Tims," Kassian commented wryly as he slammed the hood shut again.

Boyd looked down at Kassian's feet but he could tell that Kassian wore at least a size larger than him. "I'd trade you, but unfortunately I don't think that would be very comfortable for you. If you'd like to try..." He felt bad that Kassian was going to have to walk in sub-zero temperature in completely inadequate footwear since this entire situation was due to Boyd's decisions.

Kassian snorted, his breath puffing out in front of him as he wrapped his scarf around his face and pushed his hood back on. "Not in a million years, kiddo. It's not your fault."

Wrapping his own scarf more securely around his head and pulling his hat on, Boyd looked over at Kassian and couldn't help a faint smile although the expression was hidden by his winter gear. It was as if Kassian knew what was going through Boyd's mind and, rather than letting him stew on it or go any further with feelings of guilt, he casually dismissed any blame Boyd may be putting on himself.

Once again, Boyd found himself thinking about how Kassian truly seemed to be a good person and, he had to admit, of anyone on this trip to be stuck in the middle of the tundra with he would have preferred it to be Kassian; in truth, he would have even chosen Kassian over Sin. Boyd had the suspicion that if Sin were here he would be gracing Boyd with dark-humored sarcasm although Sin's high tolerance for cold would have likely kept the worst of his impatience in check.

As they grabbed their packs from the trunk and Boyd hefted his heavy bag onto his back, he thought about how miserable this was going to be. The wind seemed even more intense out in the open without even the buildings to stop it and he nearly staggered at a particularly large gust. Even with his thick, warm gloves, his hands were already starting to tingle and, when he readjusted his gloves and saw a flash of his watch, he realized it was only 2 pm. Judging by the darkness around them, it felt more like 2 am.

He dug around in his backpack until he located the compass then walked closer to Kassian. Not only was the strength of the wind increased out there but the sound of it was as well. He had to speak loudly when another large gust rocked him on his feet.

"We need to head west to cross the border," Boyd said loudly, holding the compass up; it was relatively sophisticated and had a faint light in it, which was fortunate because they wouldn't have to waste flashlight batteries every time they wanted to check their directions.

"We'll have to decide what to do but I don't know if we could realistically camp in this weather, even with our tents."

Kassian looked around, a slight frown on his face. "There's a town near the border but it's small as far as I remember and I doubt we'll be able to stay there. I'd say we at least got about 150 miles between us and Murmansk judging by how fast you were going. So we're about 15 miles from the Finland border. We could try to stay at the town there but I doubt it will happen, so we may end up camping regardless."

He hefted his large pack, adjusting it on his broad shoulders. "From what I remember, there's a town about 20 miles into Finland named Ivalo. You should be able to find some alternative ways to get to Helsinki from there since our car obviously isn't going to do it."

Kassian didn't hesitate before speaking, apparently deeming whatever prior knowledge he had of the region important enough to share. He wasn't supposed to use information he had from his own experience but freezing on the tundra as they wandered around

wasn't a good alternative and by not stating specifically which 'alternative ways' existed, he was still mostly following Doug's guidelines.

Boyd nodded to show he heard Kassian and, feeling briefly overwhelmed by the situation and task ahead of them, he checked the compass again and headed westward.

The walk was long, exhausting and miserable. The wind seemed to cycle, occasionally letting up just enough to lull them into a sense of relief before it suddenly slammed into them again. It was a good thing that their backpacks were made with secure straps and flaps that fastened or else Boyd was certain that any number of items would have flown halfway across the tundra before they even realized it was missing.

The land wasn't completely flat, so every rise and fall, no matter how steep or subtle it was, leeched away energy little by little until Boyd felt like he just wanted to fall over. With the wind as strong as it was, even walking on completely even ground would have felt like an uphill battle. They had the occasional respite when they passed through forested areas but even that wasn't enough to stop the wind entirely.

To make matters worse, Boyd's sweat either caught beneath his layers of clothing and felt incredibly uncomfortable or, where it was exposed, froze like flashes of ice that burned away at his skin.

Boyd split his time between repeatedly checking the compass to make sure they were headed in the right direction and checking on Kassian. Even if Kassian said it wasn't Boyd's fault, Boyd was still worried especially since Kassian's hiking boots didn't look nearly as insulated as his other shoes had been; in this cold frostbite was always a concern. But Kassian actually seemed to be faring better than Boyd, likely because he was more accustomed to the cold and had better stamina.

It felt like the walk took forever but by the time Boyd saw lights in the distance and headed that way, his watch showed that it was close to eight in the evening; they'd been walking a little over seven hours. Together, they pushed their way through the wind to finally arrive within view of the border guards. Thankfully, they had no trouble passing the border and they were able to transition relatively painlessly into Finland. If it'd been a real mission and they were really on the run from Russian officials, Boyd had no idea how they would have realistically snuck past the border in such a flat, open land.

Once in Finland, tall old-growth trees rose around them like sentinels in the dark; they were far enough apart that for the most part it was easy to pass between them but it lent

an otherworldly feel to the night. It probably would have been more impressive if they hadn't been hiking across frozen terrain for the past seven hours.

Just as Kassian had predicted, there hadn't been anywhere reasonable for them to stay in the town at the border so they'd continued on their trek with the unfortunate realization that they would be camping in the woods that night. The wind wasn't as bad in the trees but the cold was still severe and with sweat cooling their skin even more beneath their layers of clothing, it was entirely possible that they'd get sick or worse.

An hour after passing the border, Kassian stopped walking and looked at Boyd. "I just had a thought."

Boyd stopped as well and looked over tiredly. "Thoughts are good. Enlighten me."

Kassian opened his mouth to reply but hesitated and gave Boyd a sheepish look. "I'm not supposed to be doing this so don't mention it in your mission report."

"Trust me," Boyd said dryly, "your secret's safe with me."

"Good because I was gonna say it anyway. Rules be damned, I don't feel like freezing my ass off tonight." Kassian shifted slightly, wiping a cold sleeve across his face before yanking a flashlight off the side of his pack and flashing it abruptly. "Where's that map?"

Boyd pulled his bag off and dropped it to the ground, briefly rolling his shoulders with the sudden loss of weight before he knelt down and dug around inside it. Within seconds he had the map out and unfolded it, trying to hold it as straight as he could for Kassian to see, by pulling it taut at the edges, although it still jerked around in the wind.

Kassian shone the flashlight at it and his face became visible suddenly. His face was reddened from the lashing wind, which somehow made his eyes look even bluer than usual. At the moment they were focused intently on the map as he held out a glove and studied it thoughtfully.

"On that assignment," the words came out almost sullenly, as if he dreaded to even talk about it, "I had some business to take care of and it took me out here in this region. I had to lay low for a few days and I remember staying in this camping spot out in the forest. It wasn't too far from the border so it shouldn't be that far off..."

Kassian frowned, studying the map closer and blinking several times as though his eyes still hadn't adjusted properly to the light. "It was around the same time of year and it was

abandoned so hopefully no one is there now ei-- Aha! I remember now. It's about another hour of walking though," he said apologetically.

"Are you kidding me?" Boyd asked incredulously in response to Kassian's tone. "I love you right now. If I were a woman I'd have your babies. I'll gladly walk another hour if we have some sort of destination in mind. All I could think of so far was trying to find a way for us to rest while avoiding freezing to death and I wasn't coming up with many solutions."

Kassian laughed; it was an abrupt and extremely pleasant sound, and it left his face looking far brighter than it had during the past several days. "Well, save your gratitude for after we actually find this place. I just hope I'm not remembering wrong and they're in the area I'm thinking. If they are, they should be empty. I think the days of tourists winter camping died after the war though. They looked like they'd been abandoned for years when I was there."

"Anything is better than out here," Boyd said. "I'm sure we'll manage something if you can help lead the way there."

Kassian nodded and adjusted his scarf again, folding the map and stuffing it into one of his big coat pockets. "I'll try, boss. I'm pretty sure I'm right, now that I think about it. I saw some scattered near the forest not too far from the border."

With that being said, he once again began his trek out into the frigid wind. Although it was miserably cold and it felt like time was moving incredibly slowly, they were actually keeping a fairly steady and quick march across the land.

Darkness loomed all around them with the exception of a faint light far in the distance as a vehicle drove along a distant road. Now that they were going off their previous course, even that bit of life was random and much less frequent than it'd been before. For the sake of the theoretical mission, they'd been avoiding the main road between the Murmansk territory and the Finland border, but now they were even farther away.

The more they walked, the thicker the trees became, and finally they were actually in the heart of a forest instead of the barren tundra. The farther they went, the more anxious they became to be out of the cold, until finally well over an hour later-- they saw the first building.

It looked like a lodge of some sort and the signs were so old and faded that the words weren't even legible although it was obvious it'd been some kind of office. They

continued on and when they finally reached the first cluster of cabins, exhaustion had really begun to set in. It seemed as though the campsites were set up in small communities in the woods and although they'd probably been charming at one point, they looked to be barely standing at the present time and it was obvious no one had used them in a long time.

Winter camping in Lapland had obviously lost its appeal from tourists after the three-sided world war. Even though Finland had been mostly neutral during the conflict, it was still near the heart of some major battles just past the Russian border.

Kassian climbed the short staircase to one of the old red cabins and leaned over, peering in the window. "Ha. I bet I was the last person to actually use this damn place."

"Did you happen to think ahead and leave us a hot shower?" Boyd asked hopefully, leaning around Kassian to look in as well.

"If I'd had one back then, maybe I would have," Kassian replied, teeth chattering slightly. "And since I broke the rules by leading us here, you can find a way in." He said it like a friendly challenge and backed away from the cabin, watching Boyd and once again taking the role of assistant-Instructor.

Boyd nodded, already studying the place to determine how to get in. First, he tried the easy route of trying the locked front door then walking around the cabin, tugging on windows. All the windows were locked and there was only the single front door. As he came around the side again, he slipped past Kassian and knelt down by the front door, examining its lock. Although he could have just kicked the door in, that would've been a stupid move because they wouldn't have been able to close the door properly against the cold and it would have made it more obvious to passersby that someone was in there who shouldn't be.

The deadbolt the cabin had was an old and inadequate one, but years of neglect and cold had made it more difficult to break into. Luckily, Boyd had a small set of lock picks in his bag, although at first it seemed like even that wouldn't be enough to help him avoid breaking in more forcefully.

It was too difficult to maneuver the picks with his large gloves on so, after a moment, he had to take them off and use his bare hands. His hands went numb almost immediately in the wind and subzero temperature and the metal of the lock picks burned painfully against his fingers. Boyd narrowed his eyes but said nothing and didn't pause in his work.

It took awhile but finally the tumblers shifted and the door swung open. They both walked inside immediately and shut the door behind them. Boyd absently opened and closed his hands, shaking them to bring back the circulation and he looked around now that he could see the area more clearly.

The cabin was small and had two rooms with wooden furniture, including a small dining table, a bench, and two beds in the second room. There was a little kitchen area, complete with microwave and stove, and in the far corner there was a bathroom. Boyd walked around the place, noting that despite the fact that the doors and windows were all closed and with the wind blocked it was much better than outside, it was still cold enough that his breath puffed in front of him.

The place was in definite disrepair; dust covered everything and the cushions on the chairs and bench were ripped and looked rather pathetic. There were two beds but the blankets looked somehow eaten away or fraying, possibly by insects or animals but otherwise just by age, and half the furniture seemed to be broken or falling apart.

There was an electric heater to the side but when Boyd tried flipping on a light switch on the way there, unsurprisingly there was no electricity. He knelt down by the heater and studied it thoughtfully, brushing away cobwebs as he peered around the back. The main saving grace was that it appeared to be able to run on batteries as well. Of course, it was likely it wouldn't run for long or nearly as powerfully as it would have with electricity.

"Have any batteries?" Boyd asked, looking at Kassian over the top of the heater. "Or are there any in the drawers?"

Kassian slowly unwound his scarf, exposing his reddened cheeks and nose. Once again the contrast just made his eyes look bluer and his hair blonder, the full effect making him look something like a Norse god. He sniffled slightly, screwing up his face, and squinted at the heater. "Yeah, I have a pack of D batteries for my flashlight."

He shrugged off his pack and knelt beside it, rifling until he found the container of batteries. "I don't know how Vega trained in this shit. He should be the one here, not me," Kassian muttered as his body ached from the cold.

Boyd belatedly pulled his hat and scarf off as he waited for Kassian. His hair was a mess, the outer layer frizzy from static cling with the rest pressed down from the hours of being held down by his winter gear. He idly held his hair back in a ponytail as best he

could for a moment and lamented the fact that he couldn't bind it since he'd forgotten to bring any hair bands. His own cheeks were bright from the cold and his hands still burned and tingled as they recovered from the lock picking.

"I don't either," Boyd said as he leaned back against the wall, letting his hair fall straight again. "He has an amazing ability to withstand cold weather. I could almost see him wandering around out there in his usual ratty shirt, wondering why everyone else is shivering." He smirked slightly in amusement. "I guess he'd do well undercover here as far as that goes."

"Yeah if he were a little less odd-looking," Kassian agreed, turning on the little heater and staring at it intently until it sparked to life, emitting a soft hum.

"Odd-looking," Boyd repeated drolly. "I can't decide whether I should take offense on his behalf or not."

Kassian snorted and stood up straight finally, giving the heater one last glare as if warning it about what would happen if it died. He looked around the room and then glanced down at his heavy coat, taking it over to the door and shoving it alongside the bottom, preventing any air from getting in the crack.

"I didn't mean he was ugly," Kassian replied finally. "But having four entirely different ethnicities makes for one odd-looking bastard."

"Hmm." Boyd idly watched Kassian for a moment then pushed himself away from the wall and took off his outer coat as well. It was cold in the cabin but a lot better than it was outside, and although he shivered he didn't say anything as he walked over to Kassian.

"He definitely does have a unique look. I'd say 'exotic' before 'odd' but," Boyd shrugged lightly, "semantics." He studied the door as he offered his coat. "Want mine, too?"

Kassian considered the door before letting his gaze run along the window sill. He took Boyd's coat and shoved it alongside the sill since there was a draft coming through, probably because the windows weren't entirely level anymore. "Well love can blind you and all that."

"And so can rivalry," Boyd replied idly.

"I don't consider him a rival," Kassian replied, seeming entirely genuine. "He gets under my skin and I hate for people to compare us, but that's because we're too different to compare. I would never want to be like him."

As Kassian spoke, he walked over to the cupboards and looked through drawers until he found a ratty old quilt that seemed decades old but still had some insulation in the middle.

"I agree that you shouldn't really be compared, and if it weren't for the fact that you're the only two Level 10s, I'm not sure anyone would have thought to. As field agents, you have entirely different styles." Boyd paused briefly, wondering whether he should stop there or say anything further but then decided it wouldn't hurt anything. "But as for people in your positions, I think you're more alike than either of you realize. You just react differently."

Kassian kicked off his stiff, damp Timberlands and wriggled his toes in the two pair of wool socks he'd worn beneath. "What makes you say that?" he asked curiously, setting the boots nearer to the heater so they could dry.

Boyd followed Kassian's example by starting to remove his excess clothing to let it dry. He pulled his inner coat off and set it by the heater then sat down on the bench so he could work on his boots. "You both resist the expectations people have of you but then end up living up to them anyway, sometimes to the detriment of your health and happiness."

"So he lives up to acting like an ass?" Kassian asked, sitting on the edge of one of the twin beds in his thermal under clothing after laying out his fleece sweater and heavy pants. He seemed to be frowning down at the heater but he didn't say anything about it yet.

"He does in a way," Boyd agreed, dropping his boots to the side and pulling his socks off. He pulled some hair behind his ear and looked up at Kassian through his eyebrows. "I mean, to an extent part of it is just his personality. But there's a lot more to him than most people ever see or care to acknowledge could exist. He puts on a strong front the same way you do; the difference is just that people expect you to be perfect and they expect him to fuck up. You can both struggle as much as you want against those perceptions but if the majority of people won't let you be anything but what they want you to be, I imagine after a time it just seems easy to give up and give them what they want."

Kassian was silent for a moment before he sighed. "I'm not trying to come down on your partner, or whatever you two are or anything. Sometimes I even feel bad for giving him a hard time, but you gotta understand, he's a real pain in my ass."

"I understand," Boyd said, genuinely meaning it. "Honestly, you're probably a pain in his ass, too. I can understand why you two may not get along, why it may be hard to try to imagine seeing the other as anything but the way you do now, and truthfully sometimes it seems like he especially tries to goad you. I'm not angry with you for comments you make about him based on your experiences, anymore than I would be about comments he makes about you."

Boyd sat up and pulled his light sweater off, waiting a second to continue so his voice wouldn't be muffled by the fabric. "I know I probably seem delusional to others," he said frankly, tossing the sweater to the side.

"I know my opinion of him probably seems compromised because of my feelings, and maybe it is," Boyd continued honestly. "I know to an extent he shows aspects of himself to me that he doesn't usually to others, so that's part of it too. I guess I just feel like I'm in the position where I think you're both good people, I like you both, and for all that you may see the negative in yourselves or the other, I can see the positive at the same time. So I'm not trying to tell you not to feel or think the way you do, it's just that I would be remiss not to comment on similarities as I see them." He shrugged idly. "I could be wrong about it all, of course. Just because I've spoken seriously with both of you doesn't mean I'm right."

Kassian gave him a half-smile and pulled out another small bottle of vodka from his pack; this one was new which meant he'd already finished the other. "Well, I can't disagree with you about any of it. And you're probably right. You know him better than anybody."

Kassian took a swig from the bottle and continued, "It's still fucking ice-cold in here. The heater just makes it livable but I don't know what the hell we're going to do with that one shitty blanket."

Boyd removed his heavy pants, leaving him in his full length long johns the same as Kassian, and he brought his heavy pants and sweater over by the heater to set down to dry. He knelt by the heater and studied it a moment then looked around the room thoughtfully, trying to determine if there was any way to increase the heat circulation in the space they were provided, but there really wasn't.

Kassian was right; it was cold enough that goose bumps rose all along his arms even beneath the layer of his thermal undershirt and as the night grew longer it would only get worse. His fingers and toes were already starting to feel a little tingly-numb and his skin felt chapped from the cold.

He sat back on his heels and looked over at Kassian. "I guess we could try to check the other cabins for blankets or see if we can dislodge any of the heaters but, honestly, I'm so fucking tired that I don't think I have the energy when we'll only be here a few hours anyway. We're probably just going to have to use body heat in addition to the heater and blanket. We may have to sleep in the same bed or push them together."

Kassian nodded, giving him a look of approval. "Which do you prefer?"

Despite the situation, he was obviously going to make sure that he left Boyd in the leadership role. It was entirely possible that if he was forced to take it on, his entire casual attitude would do an about-face switch.

Boyd contemplated the beds and their heavy wooden frames, trying to imagine how much energy it would take to shove them together just for a few hours. It seemed pretty useless and they'd be able to fit in one bed, even if it was tight.

"One," he said after a moment, meeting Kassian's eyes again. "There's no use expending unnecessary energy when we need all we can for the remainder of the walk tomorrow. And the closer we are, the warmer it will be anyway."

"Good call."

Kassian sat on the bed closest to the heater and pressed his back against the wall. He closed his eyes for a moment, exhaling slowly and finally letting it show that he was just as tired as anyone else would be in their position, Level 10 or not. He seemed relieved to just be able to sit in one place in the luke-warmth of the space around the heater and extend his worn legs.

After a moment of silence as Boyd also sat on the bed near the heater, Kassian finally looked at him. "Want some?" He held out the bottle. "It's pretty much the only thing besides the heater keeping me warm right now."

Boyd looked at the bottle, debating the pro of feeling warmer against the con of a potential hangover, and decided that as long as he only had a little it would work out and probably help him sleep better as well. Normally he didn't like straight vodka or,

really, anything except possibly wine, but these were extreme conditions and he'd make an exception.

"Sure," he replied and accepted the bottle. "Thanks."

He took a drink, already feeling a bit better as it warmed his throat, then handed the bottle back to Kassian as he tilted his head wearily against the wall. His body ached, especially his legs and back, and he was so tired that he almost felt like his exhaustion was working against him and he'd have a hard time sleeping.

"Won't Sin mind that we will be technically sleeping together?" Kassian asked dryly, eyebrows rising in mock seriousness as he tapped the bottle with his index finger.

"I think he'd mind more if we froze to death," Boyd said with a faint smile as he glanced over, but he couldn't quite hide the troubled look that flashed across his face. Kassian's comment and the idea of being in close proximity to someone else made him think of what he'd seen with Ann and Sin, of the intimacy of that moment and how little he could be sure of what it meant.

Kassian studied his expression for a moment and drank from the bottle again before passing it back to Boyd. His eyebrows drew together and he grimaced slightly as if he had a headache. "What was that look all about?"

Boyd held the bottle in both hands in his lap and stared at it a moment, trying not to feel the familiar weight of paranoia, uncertainty and doubt, then drew in a deep, tired breath and briefly ran a hand across his burning eyes.

"I'm..."

He hesitated briefly, because he didn't know how much he wanted to talk about this, but at the same time he desperately did. He wanted to get the weight off his mind, he wanted someone else with an outsider's perspective to say what it sounded like it meant to them, he wanted some sort of relief from his thoughts.

At the same time, he didn't think it was fair to Sin to talk about this with others first, to not give Sin the first chance to respond and explain, and he didn't want to blow a simple misunderstanding out of proportion.

But he couldn't bring himself to remain entirely silent; out in the middle of a forest in Finland, huddled inside away from subzero weather with Kassian the only one who

would hear even the bit of doubt and fear he was willing to mention, Boyd felt like this would be his only chance for the next week and a half to speak candidly to someone who wouldn't judge him.

"I'm worried," Boyd admitted finally, frowning slightly as he studied the bottle. "A little. I... saw something that I don't know how to interpret." He took a drink, glancing at Kassian sidelong, and handed the bottle back. "I'm hoping it's nothing."

Kassian looked just as confused as he felt. "Saw something?"

"I don't know," Boyd said, shaking his head slightly. "It was pretty circumstantial and I'm probably going to sound ridiculous for even thinking anything of it. I just saw Sin outside with a woman and he was letting her touch him and he didn't care. Like it was normal."

He tilted his head and gave Kassian a wry look. "I mean, just touching his face and hair, that sort of thing. Nothing huge, it's just... it's Sin. Even he and I rarely touch in public. So." He sighed and dropped his head against the wall again, looking at the opposite wall. "It bothered me."

The other agent looked quite surprised by this revelation but it wasn't entirely obvious why. Kassian just said neutrally, "He doesn't seem like a very affectionate person at all."

"He's not," Boyd said frankly. "Even in private he isn't. Not really."

Kassian grunted, took another gulp, and handed the last of it to Boyd. "Well, unless he was the one doing the face touching, I wouldn't worry about him seriously wanting to trade you in for this chick."

Boyd took the bottle and drank the rest, enjoying the feel of it moving down to his stomach, warming his blood as it buzzed through his limbs. "I'm trying not to," he said, looking over at Kassian more fully than he had for the majority of the conversation. "And I think, if I can't even trust or believe in him then what the hell am I doing saying I love him? It makes no sense. So I'm trying not to jump to conclusions."

The other man nodded slightly and slid down the bed, allowing his cheek to rest against the rough bare mattress as he stared at Boyd through heavy lidded, tired eyes. "Well, you'll see what happens. Your next bit of time off is after all of this madness is done, ain't it?"

"Yes," Boyd said, then set the empty bottle on the floor next to the bed. "I plan to see him on break." He shifted so he could lie down.

"Hmm," Kassian said tiredly. "Break. I remember that word. It's usually a lie when applied to me though."

Boyd couldn't help a light chuckle. "If I get promoted, I don't want to grow up to be a Level 10 like you, too responsible for my own good. I think I'll take Sin's approach of disappearing into the sidelines."

Kassian scoffed at that but didn't actually reply and after a few moments of silence it seemed that he'd dozed off or was in the process of it at least.

Boyd decided to follow suit. It was awkward trying to arrange himself on the bed so he could slide down completely next to Kassian without feeling like he was going to fall off the side but also so he wasn't sprawled all over the other man. As he struggled to arrange himself comfortably without jostling the bed too much, he kept checking Kassian's expression but it quickly became obvious that Kassian really was asleep because he didn't react, even when Boyd accidentally elbowed him.

The dim light from the lantern threw long shadows across the room that danced every time the flame flickered. In that light, Boyd could see the dark circles under Kassian's eyes, the drawn tiredness of his expression even as he was relaxed in sleep. Despite that, Boyd idly noted that he was a very attractive man, made even more so by his personality.

Aside from Ryan, for years Boyd hadn't felt comfortable enough to just talk to someone like this without worrying about carefully wording his thoughts. The fact that Kassian was such a good agent as well as a good person was relieving somehow. Kassian was human like everyone else and had his troubles, he wasn't perfect, but he could still be a dependable, relatively stable person even after the stress of being Level 10 for years.

He could still be the sort of person who would listen to a person's worries and make them feel at ease without immediately judging decisions or thoughts.

Boyd carefully shifted Kassian's arm out of the way, idly appreciating in passing the solid feel of his muscles, and immediately forgot the thought as he was finally able to lie down on his side. Even the rough mattress against his face felt wonderful as he finally got the chance to relax and the buzz of the vodka made him sleepy. He ended up with his back to Kassian's chest with a bit of space between them. The blanket that covered

them wasn't very thick or warm but it trapped their body heat well enough and between that, the heater and the vodka, Boyd slept decently at first.

That peace only lasted a few hours until the batteries in the heater died and the cold once again consumed the small cabin. They huddled together unconsciously in their sleep, desperately seeking relief from the biting cold; they were both beginning to grow restless from the inevitable discomfort when it was time for them to wake up anyway.

Kassian's watch alarm went off at about 3 am, jerking Boyd awake. He realized that sometime during the night they'd shifted positions enough that he was half on his back and Kassian was partially sprawled over him.

"Sorry about that." Kassian gave him an apologetic half-smile and sat up, rubbing the back of his head before shuddering.

"I don't care." Boyd shivered violently as the blanket shifted with Kassian's movement, exposing both of them to the cold, still air. "All the more warmth for me." He sat up as well, unconsciously rubbing his hands quickly along his arms and blearily looked around for his outer clothing.

"We should get moving as quickly as possible if you're going to figure out a way to Helsinki in the next day," Kassian said between grit teeth, stiffly yanking on his fleece sweater and heavy pants. "We still have a long walk to Ivalo."

Boyd nodded and got out of bed, already reaching for his outer pants as soon as he found them. "Agreed."

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"Jesus," Emma was saying as she leaned back in her chair, "I knew it would be cold but I wasn't expecting glacial. And that was just mean, doing desert first. I'd rather go desert now... burn some normal temps back into my bones."

Her lips were still chapped and even after the night's sleep in the hotel and the warmth of the lounge, she was bundled up with a fuzzy sweater over a sweatshirt. As usual, her clothing choice matched well and she'd left her hair down and tousled, but otherwise she didn't look ready for the day at all.

It was obvious she would have preferred to rest a little bit longer. A coffee mug was clutched between her hands and every once in awhile she brought the side of the cup up to her cheek, just to let the warmth spread across her skin.

"You should've come to my room last night," Cade said with a smirk. "I could've warmed you up real good."

"Thanks but no thanks, Cade," Emma said with a polite smile aimed his way. "As I've been saying. Besides," she added with a slight frown, "didn't you room with Harriet last night?" She glanced toward Harriet curiously.

Harriet gave her a pointed stare. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that even if I'd been interested," Emma said carefully, "which I'm not, it doesn't seem right to even suggest it knowing someone else is staying there at the same time. It would be rude for the roommate."

Harriet stared at her for a long moment as if she was trying to search for a veiled insult but found none. "Well Carter isn't exactly a considerate human being so I doubt he'd care regardless."

"Fuck no, I wouldn't," Cade said unrepentantly. "First off, knowing someone's watching could be hot. Secondly, even if you're not real wet dream material, Stevens, you know I'm up for a threesome any day."

Harriet gave him such a vicious look that it was no wonder she didn't get up and strike him, repeatedly and violently. "I doubt you'd be up for anything considering what you're packing, Carter."

Cade raised his eyebrows and grabbed his crotch through his pants. "I got more juice in my left nut than you can handle in your whole pussy, Stevens." He looked her up and down derisively. "Not that I'd be able to get it up for some scrawny little dyke like you anyway."

Harriet didn't look remotely insulted, instead she just raised a slim brow. "I can't imagine what bonehead recruited someone as ignorant as you are. They must have been really desperate."

"Nah, they needed my skills for this place," Cade said, leaning back in his chair on the back two legs with his arms draped behind him. His tone was idle and casual, losing the

derisiveness easily, although it seemed more than anything like he was losing interest in Harriet because she wasn't reacting enough.

"So," Emma said carefully, in an apparent attempt to avoid more confrontation, "where *did* you come from before the Agency?"

Cade looked over at her sidelong and at first Boyd wondered why she'd even tried to engage him in conversation because he would probably just keep making his outrageous comments, but instead he just shrugged. "Army."

Emma nodded and looked away, although something in her expression implied she wanted to say something but caught herself. Cade's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What?" he demanded.

Emma frowned distractedly and took a sip of coffee, as if to give herself a chance to think. "Well, the Army... Some of the other people I've met still follow those codes they were taught. You know, like respect and honor... You don't seem very interested in emulating those beliefs."

Cade snorted. "That's 'cause it's all a load of shit. Respect and honor? Where was the fuckin' respect when those terrorists came in, fucked our shit up and even killed some civvies?"

"But she's your teammate," Emma pointed out, her tone non-challenging. "She's not the same as an enemy."

"Bitch, we don't know jack shit about who our enemies really are," Cade said incredulously, although there was no real bite in his voice. "How the fuck do I know who you people really are? If you can even be trusted? Maybe you're at my side now but you ain't part of my team. The only reason we're all in one place is 'cause we're going for the same thing. There's no time for kumbaya along the way and I haven't seen shit yet with Stevens that I gotta respect."

"Well," Jon piped up with his Irish drawl. "The fact that she's in an elite unit with Senior Agent Trovosky should say something about her skill."

Harriet waved a hand dismissively. "Don't bother with his sorry ass, it's not worth the trouble. He's ignorant and that will be his downfall. Whatever nonsense comes flying out of his big mouth doesn't offend me in the slightest-- I can't even understand whatever the hell he's saying most of the time."

Jon smiled a small, discreet smile, and nodded. After a moment he turned his gaze away and went back to examining the fairly upscale Helsinki hotel and the scant amount of people that were actually sitting in the lounge.

It was surprising that he'd even spoken up at all; so far whenever they came together as a group he fell into the background quietly as though he wasn't used to conversing with large groups of people or perhaps just didn't feel interested in doing so.

Cade seemed entirely unconcerned by the side conversation and rocked back and forth in his chair. He looked like he was considering saying something but before he could, Emma cut in.

"Speaking of Senior Agent Trovosky, where is he?" She looked curiously toward Boyd, who was eyeing his tea as he tried to determine if he'd let the bag steep long enough. The color looked golden but when he sipped it, it tasted too thin.

"I have no idea," Boyd said, leaning back in his lounge chair and holding the mug carefully in his lap as he looked over at her. "I didn't room with him so I haven't seen him since we arrived."

"What?" Cade piped up, giving him a strange look. "The hell is that? I had to room with Stevens and Johnny Appleseed got Emma. Who'd you stay with?"

"No one, I got my own room." When Cade raised his eyebrows dubiously at that, Boyd simply shook his head slightly. "It was just happenstance. Anyone who was supposed to be with Patrick would have been in the same situation after Kassian replaced him."

Harriet looked over, seeming interested in the discussion now that it had turned to her team leader, eyebrows drawing together slightly when Boyd simply called Kassian by his first name.

"How'd that work out, by the way?" Emma asked curiously. "I'm a little nervous about having an instructor along for our next mission so I was going to ask Toby what it was like in China, but he's not here yet."

Although nearly all the groups had arrived sometime the night before, Toby and Andrew were the only ones who had yet to arrive. Given the fact that they were all supposed to rendezvous at 9 am and it was already 8:50 am with no sign of them, it seemed likely that they were going to be late.

It raised the question of what they were supposed to do if any of them didn't make it back in time for the flights to the next missions; would Andrew and Toby be stuck in Helsinki and have to find their own transportation to the next mission or would everyone's schedules be held back? Since they changed partners each time, having Andrew and Toby out of commission would similarly mess up their assigned teammates.

"It was fine. He doesn't really contribute," Boyd said, purposefully not mentioning the fact that technically Kassian did voluntarily help by finding them the cabin. "He just lets you make the decisions, whether or not they're good ones."

"Hmm." Emma considered that, taking a deep drink of her coffee thoughtfully. "That would probably be alarming. I'd be worried I was making all the wrong decisions and think too much about it. I guess that's part of the test."

"I wouldn't characterize it as 'alarming,'" Boyd said with a slight shrug. "He basically stands off to the side and doesn't give any indication of how well you're doing. After awhile, it's basically like being on a solo mission only with someone who can help out if you ask."

Emma didn't look entirely convinced, but she did seem curious. "So, how'd you get here, then?"

Boyd would have preferred to just sit there quietly with his tea and not have to bother with being the extended focus of the conversation, but that was obviously not going to happen. So he just shifted to get more comfortable and decided to make it as short of an explanation as possible. "We traded for a car in Murmansk but it broke down before the border. We walked from there to Ivalo, then caught the express bus to Rovaniemi, where we took the train to here."

Emma's eyebrows rose. "What the hell, you walked all that way? How are you not a Boydsicle right now?"

"I felt like one by the end," Boyd said with faint amusement.

"Christ. How long did that take you?"

Boyd had to think about it for a moment. "Around eleven hours?"

Emma gave him an incredulous look. "Well. I'm impressed by your fortitude, at least."

"I take it that means you had less walking involved?" Boyd asked wryly.

"Just looking for transportation, mostly, not like we decided to hike across the country," Emma agreed. "That didn't stop me from missing summer with a vengeance, of course. But, yeah, we bought a used Vjatka in Murmansk -- it's like a Vespa, basically, so it was really cold. It wasn't super fast so we ditched it at the border and took trains and buses over here."

"What time did you get here?" Boyd asked curiously, wondering about his arrival time compared to theirs.

"Uhh." Emma looked questioningly at Jon. "It was about nine or so, wasn't it?"

Jon nodded without looking at them. "Yes, we couldn't afford direct transportation and the locals had multiple stops and layovers."

"Hmm. A few hours before us, then," Boyd observed idly.

There was a brief pause in the conversation, then Emma looked toward Harriet. "How did you get here?"

Harriet gave a one-shouldered shrug and didn't really seem interested in discussing it with them but after an awkward silence, she gave an exasperated sigh and looked from Emma to Boyd. Over the course of the training her distant attitude toward them both had made it obvious that they weren't her favorite people yet. She got along well with the guys, except for Cade, though.

"We stole a vehicle, which drew more attention than expected and we had to end up ditching it anyway. In the end we acquired another truck and drove straight here," she said shortly, obviously not planning to expand.

"Were you chased?" Emma asked curiously.

"No." Harriet turned her attention back to the entrance of the lounge, obviously impatient to get on with the rest of the mission and away from the chit-chat.

As if on cue, a very refreshed Doug and a tired Kassian finally walked through the door. While the Australian man seemed to be enjoying his jet-set through different countries

and continents, Kassian was slightly pale with a crease between his eyebrows, as though he had a severe headache.

It was similar to a look that he'd had the morning before on the bus to Rovaniemi when he'd reluctantly admitted to Boyd that he had a hangover from all of the vodka. It wasn't unlikely that he'd spent the previous night drinking in his single hotel room considering the look on his face.

Boyd wasn't the only one who noticed; Harriet's eyes narrowed a bit at her team leader as well.

"I see at least three out of four groups managed to make it here," Doug said in a droll tone. "Looks like we'll be departing without Toby and Andrew."

No one said anything and no one really seemed all that surprised.

"We'll be departing for Grenoble, France in two hours. And don't be expecting another long flight so I suggest starting your reports as soon as possible. I'll explain the next mi--"

A loud ruckus from the entrance of the lounge interrupted his sentence and Toby and Andrew rushed through, nearly colliding with a waiter in the process. Both of them looked haggard, worn out and incredibly on edge.

As they got closer, it was also easy to see that neither of them were dressed properly for the arctic weather even though they had definitely started out that way. Both of them were wearing tennis shoes and their heavy winter coats and gear was gone. There was also a large purple bruise under Toby's left eye, which was practically swollen shut.

"Well look who decided to arrive," Doug said coldly, staring at them unkindly.

"We had trouble," Toby muttered, looking highly mortified. "Our vehicle was stolen, we spent the better part of the mission trying to get money back--"

"Save it," Doug said, holding up a hand to silence the trainee. His unruly black curls bounced wildly as he turned away and focused on the group again. It wasn't entirely obvious if this counted as mission failed for the two agents or if they would just be marked down, and Doug didn't seem likely to share that with anyone at the moment. "Gather your belongings. We'll meet here in one hour and depart for the airport."

With that, Doug turned away from them again. Kassian frowned silently in Toby's direction before shaking his head and wandering off across the room. After a moment, Harriet followed.

"Damn it!" Toby hissed quietly, throwing himself into a chair. "After all of that trouble, he probably won't even count this as part of the final judging."

"What happened?" Emma asked, taking in Toby's swollen eye half in concern and half in bemusement.

Toby glanced at Andrew before sighing softly. "We rented a plug-in and figured with the rest of our money, we could use the charge stations along the way and it would be fine-- the car was in tip-top shape, we even had them run a diagnostic so even though it used nearly all of our money, we thought it would make it. But then right after we crossed the border into Finland and we got to the first station, it was stolen right under our noses. The thieves must have been experts."

"Yeah?" Cade asked, seeming highly amused by the entire affair. "What'd you do, leave the keys in the ignition?"

Andrew made a face. "Very funny, Carter," he said heavily as he dropped into a chair. He looked exhausted, unhappy, and completely unamused. "For your information, everything was fine but we went to get some food real quick. We were gone maybe ten minutes, and I mean *maybe*, and it was just gone." He spread his fingers in front of him. "Like smoke."

Emma winced in sympathy but no one else seemed particularly moved by the story.

"Or like a high-end car sitting all nice and packaged in Ghettosville, which is probably where you left it," Cade drawled, continuing to rock back in his chair.

"The area was just fine and we weren't doing anything obvious or stupid," Andrew said stiffly. "We just had bad luck."

"So," Emma said slowly, "how'd you get here?" She eyed their bedraggled state and lack of proper clothing. "Did you sell your stuff or something?"

"Yes. It was the only thing left to do and even that took a ridiculous amount of time," Toby muttered, eyeing Cade in annoyance. "It doesn't matter anymore, I don't even want to discuss it. What's done is done."

Emma nodded and let the topic drop; Cade smirked at Toby with a mocking, smug look but surprisingly didn't say anything. Emma drank the last of her coffee then held the mug idly in her lap.

"Well, you must be exhausted but I guess at least all your things are already in order so you can rest for the moment. We already ate but do you want anything, even coffee? I can grab something for you two; just makes it easier and I was headed that way anyway." She held up her empty mug as explanation. Her tone was amiable and she didn't seem to have an ulterior motive as she looked between Andrew and Toby.

"No, that's fine. I'm just going to wash up and get ready since we're obviously leaving soon," Toby said dully.

Andrew hesitated, looking longingly at Emma's coffee mug, but then he glanced quickly toward Cade. "I'm fine, thanks."

Cade raised his eyebrows with an innocent expression but he didn't say anything.

Emma's expression didn't exactly change but her eyes flashed with a sense of understanding. She smiled quietly, nodded, and stood. "I'll leave you two to get ready, then."

She walked away, pausing at the main desk as she leaned over the counter to talk briefly with the receptionist and pointed discreetly toward Andrew, making sure the movement was hidden from Cade's view before she headed back toward the restaurant area.

Cade's eyes followed Emma's movements, anchored primarily on her ass in her fitted jeans, then he dropped the chair forward with a sound of finality. "Later, losers," he said idly as he stood and sauntered toward the elevators.

Within a minute, Jon headed away as well, leaving Boyd, Toby and Andrew as the only ones still sitting there. Toby looked agitated and tired, and Boyd suspected the only reason he hadn't left earlier was because he didn't want to end up stuck in an elevator with Cade.

Boyd would have left already but his bag was already packed in his room, he still had half a mug of tea to go, and he suspected the laptops were already in use for writing the reports. Although the mission would likely generate a decent length report, he didn't

think it would take him too long to write it out; he'd had the night before to go over the entire mission in his head and properly formulate how he would explain it.

Even though his mission had gone a lot better than Toby and Andrew's had, he'd still had his share of issues and he wondered if any of them would end up faring well on the off-compound training overall.

Toby was just standing to go when Andrew relaxed back in his chair and covered his face with his hands.

"Shit," Andrew hissed.

Boyd had to agree with the sentiment.

Chapter 15

The trees loomed around them, bright green with vegetation and giving little shelter from the humidity. There wasn't a clear path to follow so they wove between trees as much as they could in the dense undergrowth, constantly running into holes and dips hidden by the flora. Their compass was the only guide for where to go; the canopy was so thick that even if there had been strong sunlight to burn down on them, only dappled spots would have made it below.

They hadn't really spoken for over a day, not since they'd landed in Sierra de Perijá, and it suited each of them just fine. If anything, Boyd found it relieving to not have to worry about creating small talk with a partner who had no interest, and he suspected Harriet felt the same.

Harriet had taken the lead half an hour earlier, a dark shadow passing quietly through the rain forest, pushing aside brush and branches alike. Other than the swishing of leaves, the fabric of their clothing brushing against itself, and their hushed breathing, the only sounds surrounding them were the distant calls of animals and birds he probably wouldn't even know the names of.

For some reason, Boyd felt that it made him pay even more attention to their surroundings; he'd hear a cry and wonder what creature that was, what it looked like, and whether it was something they needed to avoid.

That sense of heightened awareness may have been all that saved their lives.

Boyd barely had time to register a very quiet noise as suspicious before he saw something out of the corner of his eye. Without thinking, he automatically threw himself at Harriet, knocking them both painfully to the ground just as shots blasted above them.

They didn't have time to think; they instantly rolled to the side and scrambled to their feet, leaned over as they crashed through the underbrush to escape. Behind them, a man yelled suddenly, "*¡Pilas que son dos! Un catire y una jeva negra. ¡Venga, adelante!*"

The call was returned by someone in the distance, the words indistinguishable.

"Shit," Harriet hissed, eyes narrowing although her face was the picture of calmness.

Boyd agreed with the sentiment but didn't say anything immediately as he quickly scanned their surroundings. He couldn't see anyone, but that didn't mean much since he'd barely seen the other person in time.

Part of the point of this mission was that they were supposed to evade Movilización Unida despite trekking directly through their territory. If navigating wasn't confusing

enough as it was in the middle of a rain forest, trying to stay unseen by a large militant group made it even worse considering the militants knew the land far better than the two agents did.

But it was imperative to stay out of the way because Unida would shoot first and ask questions later, not to mention that they were rather hateful of Americans. It was entirely possible that the Agency had chosen this location for that reason; to prepare the agents for future missions with this group and in this part of Venezuela.

Whatever the case was, Unida's main encampment was supposed to be a good three miles away, and Harriet and Boyd had timed their trek through this area specifically to avoid any confrontation. The fact that there were scouts out this far meant something had gone wrong; something had changed. And Harriet and Boyd were supposed to go exactly in the direction they were running from now if they wanted to make it to the rendezvous in a day.

The leaves on the underbrush whipped their legs as they ran through the forest. Boyd tried to listen intently for any signs of pursuit but their pursuers were well adapted to the terrain and knew how to stay silent except when they wanted to make noise.

He could hear men yelling back and forth at each other, some of them more militaristic and serious, others whooping with excitement, and judging by the number of different voices and directions they seemed to come from, he guessed that if Harriet and he weren't surrounded now, they would be shortly.

Another round of shots could be heard in the distance, this one a quick burst of noise and destruction, and Boyd realized with a sinking feeling that they were armed with semi-automatic machine guns as well as AK-47s. He'd known the militants would be well-armed but the group had an eclectic choice of weapons and he'd been hoping this front wouldn't have anything that powerful.

"This isn't going to work," Harriet growled as the voices got closer. Outrunning them didn't really seem like the most viable option; their pursuers were likely very good at tracking and would follow them for as long as it would take.

"I know," Boyd said as quietly as he could while she could still hear. One of the voices was quickly gaining on their right, accompanied by a sudden burst of gunfire into the air apparently in the thrill of the hunt. "Any ideas?"

Harriet peered through the leaves for a moment, her expression intent and nodded shortly. "Wait for my cue."

Without giving him a chance to reply, she jumped up in one fluid moment and extended one long arm, grabbing the lowest hanging branch in the massive tree that towered over them. In a few fast movements, she pulled herself into the tree and climbed up until her camouflaged pants blended in with the leaves.

Boyd watched her disappear into the foliage then quietly slid back into the shadows of the trees behind him, crouching down to stay hidden within the underbrush. He could hear the combatants quickly approaching and he shifted minutely, splitting his attention between her and the rebels.

Harriet had hidden herself well; even knowing she was there, he could barely identify her between the leaves. From there, she would have a definite element of surprise while he could back her up from the side so they weren't in the same place and more easily taken out.

After several moments of anxious anticipation, his heart pounding with adrenaline in the dangerous situation, six men entered the area. They weren't in a tight knot but they were evenly spaced out and close enough for all of them to come into view at the same time. MU was a well regimented force in these parts and from Boyd's understanding, they typically traveled in squads of twelve. This group of scouts had apparently split up to search their designated area.

The men spoke in Spanish to each other and some of the cockiness had faded from them as they looked around, obviously aware of the fact that Boyd and Harriet were nearby and hiding. One of the men stopped walking abruptly, his foot mere inches from Boyd's face.

Just as the man turned, Harriet fired a single shot with her Compact XM8. The man's head snapped back and his body crashed to the ground.

She followed up with another two shots, taking out as many people as she could before they pinpointed her location in the tree. Her shots were impressively quick and precise but just as she aimed for a fourth target, one of the younger militants spotted her and aimed his weapon towards the tree.

Boyd kicked one of the man's legs out beneath him just as he fired, forcing the shot to go wide and to the side. Before the man could recover, Boyd was behind him with a garrote tight around his throat, choking him from behind. The man shot blindly for a moment then dropped the gun to claw at his neck as he stumbled around, trying to get Boyd away.

Out of the corner of his eye, Boyd saw that one of the other militants had noticed him and was headed his way. *"Alejandro -- ¡no se mueva!"*

Within seconds, several things happened almost at once.

Alejandro stopped stumbling but his fingers still scrabbled at his throat. The second militant drew a 9mm handgun and shot at Boyd, who released his hold on the handles enough to simultaneously drop down while hitting the back of Alejandro's knee.

Alejandro's body pivoted suddenly, shielding Boyd just enough to catch the bullet in his stead.

Immediately, Boyd tightened his hold on the garrote again and yanked Alejandro in front of him to act as a shield between the militants. The other man yelled something that was indistinguishable in anger and ran at him. Alejandro gurgled something weakly as blood spurted from near his armpit and Boyd realized the man had been hit in the auxiliary artery.

Knowing Alejandro wouldn't have the energy to fight back immediately, Boyd twisted the wire around itself to try to keep it in place briefly then shoved him at the other attacker. Alejandro fell heavily against the man, whose gun was nearly lost from his hand as he fell back with the sudden weight. The man started to push Alejandro to the side, probably intending to set him down, but Boyd was on him immediately.

Alejandro was shoved to the ground where he weakly struggled against the foliage, gasping and trying to pull the wire away, before he simply collapsed.

Boyd slammed the other militant's gun out of his hand by twisting the man's wrist back toward him until his fingers couldn't hold it anymore. Boyd threw the gun to the side and immediately hit the man repeatedly on the arm and then face.

The man struck at Boyd but, dazed by the repeated hits to the head, he wasn't fast enough to defend against a knee to the midsection that dropped him forward, or the follow up elbow to the back of the neck. The man dropped to his hands and knees and Boyd was on him, hitting and kicking him efficiently until the man fell to the ground and didn't move.

Sliding to the side in a defensive crouch, Boyd quickly looked over to see that during the fight, Harriet had already killed the sixth man. She was standing over his body, compact rifle once again strapped to her shoulder; she appeared to have jumped out of the tree to dispatch him.

"Good job," she said simply, her tone mostly neutral although there was a definite note of surprised approval.

"Same to you," Boyd said, similarly impressed as he straightened.

He looked down at the bodies then walked over to Alejandro and knelt by him, carefully moving him around until he located what he was looking for. He slid a small compact radio out from beneath Alejandro and tilted it around to examine it.

"I thought I felt something before," he said in explanation as he glanced up at her. "There may be something on the others, too. Do you know Spanish?"

Harriet shrugged and removed the sixth militant's handgun, sticking it in the side of her belt before also taking his spare ammunition. "Some. Not enough to understand someone fluently speaking except for a word here or there."

"Between us we should understand some of it, then," Boyd said. He took the radio holder off Alejandro's belt and clipped it onto his own, then picked up the handgun he'd thrown to the side and slid that under his belt as well, although he tended to avoid actually using guns. He flipped the radio on, keeping the volume turned low, and listened intently.

At first there was nothing but muffled static; then a voice came through, scratchy with white noise but with a demanding tone.

"¿--pasó? ¿Dónde estás? ¿Los mataste? ¡Contesta!"

Although it had been months since Boyd had been surrounded by Spanish and he'd never been fluent in it, he'd at least become accustomed enough to decently understand conversations. The problem was dealing with accents and speed, and the people here seemed to be using some strange forms of the verbs. This man was easy enough to understand due to the fact he spoke clearly but Boyd knew they wouldn't be able to rely on that luck forever. It did help that French and Spanish had many similarities, although it was easier for Boyd to recognize them in writing rather than when listening.

Boyd kept his thumb well away from the call button and looked over at Harriet. "We need to move. They already know something's wrong."

Harriet nodded and stood up straight, dark eyes flitting around rapidly. "This isn't good," she said, a note of worry present in her voice. "We were supposed to avoid conflict. Why the hell are they suddenly swarming around like this?"

She didn't seem to be really asking him so much as speaking her concern out loud and it was surprising that she even did that. During the entire course of the training and especially in the early part of this mission, she'd avoided speaking to him unless it was absolutely necessary.

Boyd listened to the radio for a moment but nothing of import seemed to be coming across. He flipped it nearly silent then recovered the garrote and put it away. "I don't know, but if we'd caught them completely by surprise I imagine there'd be a lot more chatter on the radio right now. They're too calm, which means they'll be more rational about searching. We need to hide."

Harriet wiped sweat from her brow and stepped over the dead men, not even giving them a second glance. "Remember that area about two kilometers west of here? That rocky area near the waterfall?"

Boyd nodded thoughtfully. "The cave?"

"Exactly." Harriet's eyes narrowed slightly at something in the distance. "Let's go."

They took several moments to hide the bodies, covering a few corpses with huge fallen branches from the tree canopy and shoving the others within the depths of the tangle of bushes and wild plants that covered the surrounding area. They used leaves and dirt to cover the blood stains before quickly making their escape in the opposite direction.

Together they moved quickly through the rain forest, pausing occasionally to lay low as they thought they heard people in the distance. Boyd kept the radio near his ear, volume so low it was nearly silent, and listened intently for any indication that the bodies had been discovered. Harriet had an impeccable sense of direction, which was good because although Boyd was quite good with directions in cities, he became uncertain in forested areas.

By the time they reached the cave, the day was heading fast toward late afternoon, although it was still bright out. The entrance to the cave was nearly hidden behind water and foliage, which was advantageous for hiding but would make it more difficult to spot people as they approached.

Once Harriet and Boyd entered, they were able to see that it was dark, dank, and relatively shallow. There was plenty of room for them both to walk a few feet in, but there weren't any hiding spaces inside. If the militants found them, they'd be caught with no exit and easy to kill. Even so, it was their best option for hiding that they knew of in the area and at least it got them out of the open.

Boyd moved all the way back into the cave, ignoring the spider webs that caught in his hair and clothing and sat down in a relatively clear space.

Harriet squatted down on her heels, brushing back strands of dark hair that had escaped her ponytail as she looked around. "Unless they suddenly transmit that they've decided to give up the search, we should probably stay here until dark. They know the terrain much better than we do and cover of darkness at this point is our safest bet."

"I agree," Boyd said with a nod.

He turned the volume up slightly on the radio and listened, although it was mostly static right then. He didn't want it to be too loud for fear of the acoustics in the cave giving their position away to anyone outside; at the same time, because they were so near a waterfall, the sound of water would mask a lot of the quieter noises they would make.

The two of them fell silent; Boyd fiddled slightly with the radio now and then and Harriet examined the gun she'd picked up, looking to see if the magazine was full and checking the aim. They didn't speak for nearly fifteen minutes, in which little was said over the radio that seemed important or that Boyd could translate well enough.

A new voice came on suddenly, sounding angry. "*Subteniente, he encontrado los cuerpos.*"

An older man with a clipped, militaristic tone cut in almost immediately. "*¿Dónde?*"

"Cinco kilómetros y medio al noroeste del campamento."

"They found the bodies," Boyd said, eyes narrowed as he tried to understand the quick, heavily accented words of the militant who seemed to be reporting what was found.

Harriet looked up abruptly, posture automatically going into a more defensive stance.

"What are they saying?"

"*¿Cuántos?*" the militaristic man was demanding over the radio.

"*Seis.*"

"He's just reporting where he found the bodies right now," Boyd said absently as he continued to listen. "They found all six. I think the man he's talking to his higher up in authority."

The militaristic man went icily quiet a moment while in the background some people could be heard swearing furiously. "*¿Testigos?*"

"*No, subteniente. Solamente en la radio.*"

"*¿Cuántas personas?*"

"*Creemos que hay dos.*"

There was brief silence before the militaristic man asked coolly, "*¿Son amigos de los otros?*"

"*No sé, subteniente. Nos topamos con los gringos ayer. Los de hoy parecían más profesionales.*" The man's voice darkened. "*Mataban rápida y eficientemente. Seis cuerpos en menos de diez minutos.*"

"Wait," Boyd said more intently as he held up a hand to signify he needed a moment of silence and he focused his attention entirely on trying to translate. "They're saying there's only two of us, but..."

After a few seconds of trying to figure out what was said, his eyes narrowed. "Shit. I think they're on alert because someone was found. Or seen? I can't tell. Something about whether we're related to the others."

Harriet scowled deeply, brown eyes narrowing. "What the hell. We were given the coordinates of their main base-- it wasn't difficult to figure out their pattern of patrols, what idiot group could have fucked this all up?" She seemed very annoyed that someone else from the Agency was causing them so much trouble.

The militaristic man's voice sounded clipped and colder as he ordered sharply, "*Busquélos. Tráigamelos.*"

"*Sí, subteniente. ¿Vivos?*"

"*Preferiblemente,*" the militaristic man said uncaringly. "*O muertos, no me importa.*"

"*Sí. Ampliaremos el área de búsqueda inmediatamente.*"

Boyd shook his head. "I don't know. Now they're saying something about dead or alive and a search. They--" He stopped suddenly as some of the quick chatter on the radio between other voices caught his attention.

"*¿Cómo son?*"

"*Un hombre rubio y una mujer negra.*"

"*¿Cuántos años?*"

"*No sé.*"

"*Tienen armas?*"

"*Un rifle, quizá más.*"

"Damn," he said in frustration as he looked up at her. "They have our description and know we're armed. At least, they're saying to look for a blond man and black woman. I couldn't understand the man before but that must've been what he said when he found us; I think someone overheard it on the radio."

Harriet gnashed her teeth together and allowed herself to sink entirely to the hard ground, tilting her head back against the cold wall. There was sweat on her brow that wasn't just from running around in tropical climate. It'd been obvious since the previous day that she was getting sick and with all of the environment changes in the past week and a half, it was really no wonder. "Well. Then I guess our only choice is to move in the dark."

Boyd made a noise of agreement and listened for a bit to the radio but within a minute the voices fell silent as they presumably started searching. "I think they'll be quiet awhile until they find something." He paused, realizing that made it sound certain that they'd be found. "Unless. *Unless* they find something."

She nodded, disappointment evident in her expression. It was obvious that she was thinking about how much this would slow them down. Even if they moved out as soon as the sky grew dark, navigating would not be nearly as fast as it would be during the day.

Silence fell between the two of them once more; with the radio quiet there was nothing to distract Boyd and Harriet turned her attention to idly sharpening her knife.

At first, Boyd was content with not having to bother to talk but it occurred to him that the time would pass more quickly if they weren't sitting there in boredom. Besides, he had to keep reminding himself, he was trying to be more approachable and he and Harriet rarely interacted; what better time to try than when he was stuck in a cave with her for the next few hours?

"You have a strong sense of direction," he said, and even though his tone was casual it seemed somewhat abrupt after the silence. "Have you had a lot of missions in forests or is it something you're just good at?"

Harriet glanced at him, raising an eyebrow as if she couldn't possibly figure out why he was making small talk. But she didn't reply sarcastically; she just shrugged and looked down at her knife. "We've had a lot of missions in South America recently," she admitted finally. "But I've had good direction since I was a kid. Camping, hiking, etc."

"I always wanted to camp but never did before here," Boyd said, leaning against the cave wall and letting the radio rest in his lap, the volume turned low but still loud enough for him to hear if they started talking again. "Where did you go?"

She shrugged again, still not making eye contact. "Nowhere special. Around San Antonio, once we went to Oklahoma but we had a cabin there so it wasn't really camping. Oklahoma was more for hiking though but it was a much bigger area."

Boyd had only been in a handful of cabins and all of them for work-- like the one he'd stayed in during the Warren Andrews mission and the cabin he was in just the other day with Kassian in Finland. The idea of hiking and camping that much as a child was intriguing to him, although that could be simply because he and Lou had dreamed about doing so for a long time. Most likely, it was overly romanticized in his mind.

"Did you like it?"

Harriet made a sound in the back of her throat that was neither a negative or a positive. "It was interesting. I enjoyed hiking, and living in Texas allowed for a lot of outdoors activities, I suppose."

After a moment she finally looked up at him evenly. "I suppose you didn't get much of that back in the city."

"No," he said, shaking his head. He paused, then added somewhat wryly, "The first time I was really outdoors for something other than a trip to the beach was when I joined the Agency. I'm a bit of an idiot in forests especially. It's confusing to me without having landmarks other than obvious places like this waterfall."

"Takes getting used to," she agreed tonelessly, still studying him. She seemed surprised that he was carrying on the conversation, perhaps even more surprised that she was participating. "Agent Trovosky seems to do it effortlessly though but he has military background so he's better trained in that regard, I guess."

"You don't?" Boyd asked, mildly surprised. He'd assumed she had, not only because many of the agents he met did but also because it just seemed to fit her somehow; the way she acted, how skilled she was, and the things she knew.

Harriet made a face. "No. Not at all. I'd never had a fistfight before I came here."

"How were you recruited?" he asked, curiosity piqued.

"I was working for the CIA when they recruited me," she replied, looking down at her knife again, pressing the tip against her palm idly. "In a situation like this I almost prefer I was still there."

The CIA? Boyd was really surprised now; somehow Harriet didn't fit the stereotypical CIA agent in his mind. He never would have guessed she'd worked there, although he supposed that it made sense in the way she rarely gave out more information than necessary and seemed content with silence, although that could have just been her personality.

"That's impressive," he said and it was clear he meant it. "What did you do?"

"I'm an engineer," Harriet responded casually. "I have a Masters in Electrical Engineering. I was going to school for my PhD when the Agency came calling."

Boyd raised his eyebrows, as further impressed as he was surprised. "What were you working on?"

Harriet sat up straight and she seemed more interested in the conversation now that they were talking about her former passion. "Mostly I was developing surveillance and reconnaissance programs and equipment, but I was looking to get into the weapons area because I thought it would be fascinating. I'd just gotten a foot in that door when the Agency recruited me."

"How'd you become a field agent, then? I'm surprised they don't have you designing programs here." By 'here' it was obvious he meant the Agency.

"It was my idea," she admitted, voice holding a slight hint of remorse. "I've always been athletic-- I was a gymnast and a runner as a teenager, and I was intrigued by the idea of a more physical job. So I convinced Captain Chase to let me enter training and I worked from the bottom up to get to level 9."

"Do you regret it?" he asked, nothing in his tone to imply he would judge her regardless of her answer or even that he thought she should.

"Hmm." Harriet went back to her intense scrutiny of him. "Why are you interested in this?"

"I was just curious," Boyd said honestly. "I guessed by your tone that you weren't entirely happy with the decision but I wasn't positive. And since all I know of the Agency is where I'm at now, I just wondered about the position from the viewpoint of a person who would have been as equally skilled in another area as here."

"Huh." Still eyeballing him, she leaned back and extended her long legs. "Sometimes I do. I miss using what I have in my head, what I studied for. I miss being around other introverted, socially-inept engineers. I miss not being surrounded by so much testosterone even if there still is some sexism towards a female engineer."

Harriet gave a one shouldered shrug and went back to her knife. "But I'm here now and I'll get to the top, just like I did when I was an engineer."

Boyd watched her a moment; honestly, he had no doubts that she would get to the top, if not this time than another attempt in the future. Aside from the extreme personality clash in Monterrey, she seemed to follow in Kassian's footsteps; professional, efficient, and quick to assess the situation on missions.

He could also sympathize with her in that he was an introverted person and the feeling of testosterone that surrounded them in the Agency didn't always include him, especially not after it got out that he was gay. He didn't have near the troubles he used to, but that didn't mean everyone accepted him, his lifestyle, or took him seriously.

Sometimes he missed school, where he could just show up and disappear in the middle of a classroom, and all that mattered was that he understood what was happening and he could pass a test. But then, a life like that would have probably been uneventful in the end and, like her, he was where he was at so he'd be the best he could be.

"Hmm. I know what you mean," he said, mostly in reference to the testosterone comment. "Is there a Department you could hang out or collaborate on special projects during your off time, like Blair said he does with Aerial?"

"No." Harriet put the knife down finally and pulled a protein bar out of her pack. "I have a one track mind. I have to focus on one thing and one thing only or else I'll get distracted."

She unwrapped the bar and took a small bite before adding. "Agent Trovosky makes fun of me for it constantly." Another bite. "That reminds me."

Boyd waited for her to continue but when it was clear that she didn't intend to, he raised an eyebrow slightly. "Of what?"

Harriet seemed intent to take very small bites, stretching out the 'meal' for as long as possible. "Are you attracted to Kassian?"

Boyd stared at her, at first too surprised by the abrupt topic change to properly assess the question. When he did, the randomness of it seemed odd to him; why would she think that? Just because it was known he was gay he was supposed to like every man that passed in front of him? But he doubted Harriet meant it that way since it wasn't her style and, besides, she was so straightforward about it.

He shook his head in bemusement. "What the hell gave you that idea?"

She shrugged, not looking deterred. "You're extremely friendly with him. The only other person you show active interest in is your partner and it's generally assumed among my team that you had something going with him during Monterrey."

He studied her intently for a moment, trying to decide if she was slipping in a slight, but she didn't seem to be. He wasn't quite sure how to answer, because the main reason he was 'extremely friendly' with Kassian at all was because Kassian had basically sought him out, but he wasn't about to talk about that with one of the people that Kassian felt he couldn't truly be himself around. At the same time, he knew that Harriet liked Kassian and that Kassian had no interest in her, so it was a rather awkward position to be in.

"If you're asking if I think he's attractive," he said finally, "then yes. Or if I think he's a good person, I do. But if you're asking if I have plans to try to make him my boyfriend or something like that, then no. And if you're asking if I want to fuck him, then let me just say that he's straight and I have things going on so I haven't even considered it."

Harriet stared at him for a moment before a rare half-smile crept up onto her mouth. "That was a vaguely amusing response."

"Why?" Boyd asked, watching her suspiciously.

"Don't know." She finished the bar and crumpled the wrapper. "I just expected you to say 'no.'"

Boyd stared at her then looked away. He should have just said that; he didn't know why he hadn't except that he'd had some bizarre urge to clarify and be truthful.

Harriet didn't seem too interested in pursuing the conversation and shifted slightly, pushing her pack against the wall and leaning her head against it. "I'm going to rest briefly before it gets dark."

"I'll keep watch," Boyd said, settling more comfortably against the wall.

She didn't respond verbally but gave a short nod and closed her eyes.

Boyd watched her briefly, then turned his attention to the radio, not certain if he was silently willing it to stay quiet or make noise. On the one hand, he wanted to know where the militants were, but on the other, in this case no news was probably good news.

Time passed slowly in the silence broken only by the constant rush of the waterfall and Harriet's subdued, even breathing. The radio made him think of Sin, probably because he was the only person Boyd had ever been on a full mission with before all this, and many times the radios had ended up being their saving grace when everything fell apart.

At the thought of his partner, he felt an intense mixture of emotions.

He missed Sin. He really missed him. Although he didn't regret choosing to go for Level 10, being on these missions reminded him of the rapport they had although he had to admit that in some cases he didn't miss Sin's biting sarcasm.

But when he slept alone at night, he missed Sin's body heat and breath next to him, and when Boyd had to struggle to figure out how to carry on a conversation so he didn't seem like an asshole, he missed the fact that, although they seemed to constantly have problems with miscommunication, at least they didn't usually have problems conversing naturally.

He missed those strong hands running along his body, the breath against his skin, the way Sin made him feel. He missed Sin's sexy smirks, the sight of Sin leaning against the wall with a cigarette between his lips and a cloud of smoke obscuring his expression, the sound of Sin's voice murmuring his name.

But then the suspicion and paranoia slid in and eclipsed the feeling of missing Sin.

Even so, Boyd had been doing well with not obsessing on what he'd seen between Sin and Ann, mostly because he'd concluded that he didn't have enough information. Somehow, talking to Kassian in Finland had made some of the anxiety leave but he was still just as confused and doubtful as ever.

In just two days they'd be headed back to the States, tired and exhausted from the constant adrenaline highs and crashes and the hours of jet lag built up from two weeks of intense missions dotted around the world. Their break was going to happen

immediately and he was going to spend all twenty-four hours tracking Sin down if he had to, because it was imperative they talked.

Even if much of his discomfort was subdued, part of it was probably because they were so busy and in entirely alien environments to him. Once he was back at the Agency, once he walked past the place where he'd seen Ann so intimately touching Sin, he knew the emotions would strengthen; he knew the paranoia and concern would return and he knew there was no way he'd be able to handle another two weeks of wondering that the hell that had all been about, what it all meant.

Boyd was worried, though. He didn't know what to expect and he hated that feeling; it was like going into a mission blind and without any chance to prepare at all. Part of him had the neurotic urge to plan his every response according to every contingency of what Sin could say, but what the hell would that do?

He'd just start thinking about the worst case scenarios and he didn't even know what he'd do, anyway. He didn't want to judge Sin ahead of time, he didn't want to automatically distrust his partner. If Boyd had been seen in some bizarre and suspicious circumstances with someone, he'd want Sin to do the same, to give him the benefit of the doubt.

But it was hard. Saying aloud to Kassian that he was worried about Ann touching Sin had made him realize just how ridiculous that sounded, yet at the same time it was Sin, and Ann was someone Sin didn't even associate with. It made no fucking sense.

It was confusing and it hurt because at the very least it implied Sin was getting friendly with others while Boyd was gone, that others were getting close to him, becoming someone else Sin would choose to spend time with. But then he realized just how selfish that sounded, like Sin was only allowed to be his friend and his alone.

He didn't want to lose those moments when Sin's mouth stretched into a grin, when his vivid green eyes locked on Boyd and Boyd alone, as if the rest of the world could fall apart around them and it wouldn't change what was happening between them. Part of him felt terrified at the idea of losing that-- like he really hadn't changed after all these years, like that fear of losing Lou when Lou had been all he had was now morphed toward Sin instead. Another part reminded him that was what all this was about; growing stronger and more independent.

He didn't know what to do with the suffocating, redundant thoughts; with the way his heart felt pinched with worry and the immediate reprimand saying he didn't need to feel that way in the first place. He told himself to stop but the thoughts circled in the distance, vultures in the sky obsessing over the prey struggling below; just waiting for that moment of weakness to move in.

He tried to only think about how he loved Sin and he missed him but all he could think was that he wished he'd never even seen the stupid interaction in the first place

because it was probably nothing and it had been bothering him on and off for two weeks.

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut as the beginning of a headache formed and he tilted his head forward, rubbing at his temples with one hand.

Fucking *hell*, he hated this. He hated distrusting Sin at all and he hated that part of him was afraid he had reason to. He hated his doubts and he hated his second guessing.

He didn't want to be thinking of this because all he did was run in circles in his mind, over and over, questioning and hesitant and doubtful and suspicious, and it wasn't doing anyone any good. The only way he'd resolve this was once he was in the same room with Sin, once he could ask, "What did that mean?" and once Sin could answer.

His mind was cool with the logic of "I'll believe in him until I have reason not to" but his emotions felt troubled and convoluted, confused and fearful.

He dropped his head back against the wall with a muffled sigh and opened his eyes to stare blankly at the cave's ceiling.

Just a few more days.

Seventy-two hours from now he'd have the answer either way, and seventy-two hours from now maybe everything would have changed. The thought was as ominous as it was relieving, in that at least he had a time schedule; at least he had a plan, as weak and bare bones as it was.

Exhaustion pulled on him like a heavy, wet blanket and he idly wished that he'd said he was going to sleep before Harriet had, so she could be the one alone with her thoughts and he could be oblivious.

But with a group of militants armed with guns searching for them nearby, all he could do was wait.

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Harriet took the lead as they slipped quietly through the forest. They'd camped out the night before, so Boyd hadn't realized how much more difficult it was to navigate the rain forest silently when he couldn't even see where he was going. At least Harriet had a good enough sense of direction that the dark didn't seem to deter them.

Although Boyd had tried changing frequencies and channels, there hadn't been a single noise on the radio in the hours he'd waited. He and Harriet hadn't known how to interpret that, but they couldn't stay in the cave forever. They had to get to the pickup point in Maracaibo or they'd very well be left behind on the last mission and have to figure out a way from Caracas to the States on their own.

Since they didn't have access to the money or influence to pull that off from here and they'd probably end up losing their day off which he absolutely had to have, he didn't want to risk getting stuck here.

They had to pass by the enemy encampment to head toward Maracaibo, but they were taking the extra time to go well out of the way as a precaution, even though it was only adding to their delay. Whoever tipped the militants off had made this entire mission a huge pain in the ass for Harriet and him, and he was looking forward to sitting on that plane, writing his report, then going to sleep, more than he had on any of the other training assignments.

After thirty minutes of uneventful, careful hiking, there was the quiet snap of a tree branch that seemed to resound in the night.

Harriet and Boyd both froze immediately and when their eyes met in the extremely dim moonlight it was obvious that the sound had not come from either of them. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Boyd crouched down slightly and glanced around for the telltale glint of moonlight off a metal gun barrel but he didn't see anything, which didn't actually mean much.

Harriet made a series of signs with her hands, using code they'd been taught in training. Boyd responded the same way and silently they were able to communicate quickly and efficiently that they would split up to search for the militant who was in the area. Since they couldn't see anything around them and the militants had the advantage of knowing the forest, the two agents were better off not walking around waiting to be ambushed at the same time. They agreed to meet in thirty minutes about half a mile away, to give them each the opportunity to circle around and move slowly.

Boyd split off from Harriet as she disappeared into the shadows in the other direction. He slipped through the forest cautiously, straining his ears and eyes for any hint of movement or sound. His heart pounded in his chest, blood rushing with the adrenaline high he only felt this intensely in a dangerous situation on a mission.

The weather was hot and humid, making his every quick, muffled breath feel sticky and faintly suffocating. He could feel his clothing cling to him, his muscles taut with tension as he prepared to react quickly to the slightest provocation.

He was acutely aware of every bit of light and how it could be giving away his position, of how anyone could be watching him right now with a gun aimed on him. Of how he could be killed before he knew what hit him.

Even as highly aware as he was he barely had warning before he felt a presence behind him. He spun immediately and attacked the militant who'd been trailing him. The man was taller than him and stronger, but he seemed surprised by Boyd's sudden movements.

Their fight was fast, furious, and littered with muffled exhalations of pain and panting breath as they each fought for their life. The man was bigger but Boyd used every bit of combat training he'd learned as he quickly tried to take the man out. After a tiring struggle, Boyd got a good elbow into the man's windpipe, causing the man to clutch his throat and lean over with a frantic gasp, and Boyd used that to his advantage to get him to the ground with a series of kicks, punches and elbowing. Boyd was finally able to kick the man in the head so powerfully that there was a crack and the man fell still.

Panting and covered in splatters of the man's blood, Boyd stood and started to turn when sudden, blinding pain overcame him.

He didn't even have a chance to react before he fell to the ground, unconscious.

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The first thing he noticed was the intense pain in his head, a vicious throbbing that made his eyeballs feel like they would burst and every pump of his heart feel like it was shoving nails through his brain. At first he couldn't even understand what was happening; he couldn't pull his thoughts together well enough to remember where he'd just come from but he knew something was strange about waking up this way.

Then he was aware of the sounds. Boots scuffing against the ground and the background, confusing jumble of syllables he couldn't immediately place into coherent sentences. As he struggled to open his eyes and automatically shifted, he realized that his hands were bound painfully behind his back and there was dirt and a wooden floor beneath his lips.

He'd barely even started to comprehend that when a new spike of sudden agony caused him to let out a muffled gasp of pain. It took him a moment to realize that someone had just yanked him up to his knees by his hair and that the reason it hurt so much was because he'd been hit in the head. It took him even longer to understand that he was surrounded by a number of armed men in uniforms and that they were all speaking Spanish.

After that came the realization that he'd been captured by Movilación Unida and he was in serious trouble.

A tall man with long dark hair, intense grey eyes and an aquiline nose stared at him intently, expression calculating and severe. There was something frightening about him, about all of the people currently surrounding Boyd. The stark difference between these highly trained militants and the untrained rebels he sometimes went against was very clear.

"Where are your friends?" the man barked suddenly, in strongly accented but well-spoken English.

With the understanding of how serious this situation was, adrenaline helped clear some of the sluggishness of Boyd's mind. He thought as quickly as he could, knowing there was no way he could implicate the United States in this, especially not after the fallout from Monterrey. But since he couldn't let them know that he was American, he only had one other nationality he could in any way quickly approximate.

Boyd stared blankly at the man as if he didn't understand.

"*Je ne comprends pas*," he said, letting the Parisian accent he'd learned from his mother flow heavily but naturally.

The man's eyes narrowed slightly and he looked at a shorter, stockier man to his left. They exchanged quick, almost incomprehensible Spanish sentences, and the grey-eyed man indicated Boyd with a jerk of his hand after the end of the discussion.

Another militant, this one tall, lean and with a dangerous glint in his eye, approached Boyd and slammed a fist into Boyd's gut.

"Revolución?" The gray-eyed man demanded, obviously well versed in his knowledge of rebel groups and militant organizations worldwide.

Boyd stifled a groan as pain radiated out from his stomach and between the spikes of pain in his head and body he was briefly overwhelmed. He felt physically ill from the repercussions of the blow to his head and his body already ached from uncomfortable hours crouched in a cave and the vicious fights with the militants in the forest. All of it together made it briefly almost impossible for him to think clearly. He nodded as best he could.

"*Oui*," Boyd muttered, the disjointed thought passing through his mind that he'd dealt with Revolución enough to believably pull this off. And it wouldn't hurt to make MU angry with the group. The more in-fighting among the rebels, the better.

But the response only earned him a highly suspicious glare and the man, obviously the Squad Commander at the very least, scoffed softly. "Carlos," he said coolly, the name rolling off his tongue as he trilled the 'r' sound. "*Continúa*."

The tall man, Carlos apparently, reared back and slammed his fist into Boyd's face this time, snapping Boyd's head back. The Commander said a few more things in rapid Spanish to Carlos and the man who Boyd assumed was the Deputy Commander of their squad, but all Boyd could make out as pain exploded across his head was that he'd given away Revolución too easily and that Carlos was to get his real alignment.

The two Commanders turned to leave and it was only at that time that Boyd was even aware enough of his surroundings to realize he was in a *palafito*, a floating hut of sorts. The two left Boyd alone with Carlos, giving Boyd a sinking feeling in his stomach.

It was obvious there would be some kind of torture-interrogation but the good news was that Boyd dimly heard the Commander order someone else to find a man named Jose who allegedly knew French, so they still didn't think he was American.

He cursed himself for not thinking clearly, for not hesitating before he'd agreed in order to make it seem more believable. It had been a stupid move and the circumstances didn't excuse it. Now he had to figure out another French rebel group he could be from, one who would have it out for Revolución and want them implicated with one of the most militaristic, organized rebel groups in the world.

It was obvious within the next few minutes that Carlos' job was to make Boyd more compliant. Carlos watched Boyd without expression, striking hard and fast every time Boyd paused to catch his breath, every time he thought he had a chance to rest. His body burned with agony and with his hands behind his back he couldn't even catch himself any time he fell to the floor, causing Carlos to drag him painfully back up.

Time seemed to pass slowly, the only sounds in the place being the impact of Carlos' fists and feet against Boyd's body and Boyd's muffled hisses, gasps, and pained coughs in response. He felt like there was barely any time between the spikes of pain, making it difficult for him to properly formulate a plan. He almost felt like a ball that someone was kicking to keep in the air; the only thing holding him up at times was the momentum from Carlos hitting him, one side and then the other, fast and hard.

More than once, he found himself spitting his own blood onto the floor and every time Carlos wrapped his fingers in Boyd's hair, it felt like Boyd's skull was splitting open.

At least the combat training and Boyd's relentless working out in the gym back at the Agency seemed to be working to his advantage; his pain tolerance and stamina had only increased in the last month and it was probably for that reason he was still able to keep his wits about him at all with the otherwise relentless attacks further exacerbating the blow to his head.

By the time Jose arrived, Boyd found himself perversely relieved, because at least now they'd pause to ask him questions.

Jose was an attractive middle-aged man with thin, wire-rimmed glasses and a large scar that arced across his face and missed his right eye by mere centimeters. He had a sinewy body and leathery skin that seemed to be permanently tanned a deep olive color. Even so, despite the hardness of his exterior, there was something calm about his face and voice.

"What do we call you?" Jose asked briskly in French, obviously assuming that this young French rebel wouldn't be supplying his real name.

Boyd knelt on the floor, arms twisted painfully behind him, hair messy and half-covering his face, caked with dirt and his own blood the same as his face was. His clothing was ripped and his fingers were curled behind him, slowly starting to tingle due to the tight bindings. The metallic taste of blood was strong on his tongue and his entire body felt like one giant bruise.

"*Armand*," Boyd said after a moment, as if he was debating whether he even wanted to answer.

"*Well, Armand*," Jose said with a grim smile, displaying even white teeth. "*Now we will play a game called tell the truth or you drown.*"

Boyd felt a spike of fear that he quickly suppressed without letting it get to his body language or expression.

Jose snapped his fingers and Carlos jumped to attention, grabbing Boyd and hauling him out of the rickety structure and onto the thin wooden porch-like area. Boyd saw that they were in the middle of a body of water, likely the same river that led to the waterfall, and that this *palafito* was one of several in the area.

This couldn't be the main camp, then, which wasn't near the river. That just gave him a sinking feeling; he had no idea where he was and even if by some miracle he managed to escape, in the dark and with the disadvantage of being in an unknown forest, he wouldn't be able to get away.

Carlos dragged Boyd unceremoniously to the corner of the wooden floor and forced him to his knees, leaning over and shoving Boyd's head down until his face was mere inches from the water.

"*Who are you with?*" Jose demanded.

Boyd's heart pounded in fright, his aqua phobia resurfacing as he stared at his reflection in the water; his eyes were a little wide and he could see the fear in them, but he kept his expression unreadable so from that distance away he didn't think Carlos or Jose could see.

He'd had the chance to think of a group he could pretend he was aligned with: the New League of Jesuits, who were a radical group of young, intensely religious rebels who had broken off from *Revolución* six months ago. *Nouvelle Ligue des Jésuites*, who often went by *Nouvelle Ligue* or *NLJ*, mimicked the Jesuits of old who had massacred hundreds in France in order to bring about a better world.

But he wasn't stupid enough to say that name right away or they'd know he was lying.

"*Revolución*," he said firmly.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the steel-eyed Commander had returned and was watching from the ground.

"Tsk, Tsk, Armand," Jose murmured in French. *"A soldier of Revolución would never betray his brethren so easily. I should know-- I spent time with them."*

Carlos didn't need another cue and immediately shoved Boyd's head underwater, holding him beneath for a long moment.

Boyd tried not to struggle but he hadn't drawn a full breath before he was submerged and the water stung his eyes before he squeezed them shut. He kept still at first, trying furiously to think of something else to get his mind off the fact there was water everywhere, that he had no way of getting away and if he fell forward he would drown without his hands free. His heartbeat was terribly loud in his ears and his fingers curled unconsciously and ineffectually behind his back.

He could feel the bubbles from his slowly escaping breath run past his cheek as they headed toward the surface, his heartbeat rocketing with terror, and he was just starting to struggle when he was hauled out of the water, spluttering and coughing. Water blinded him as he opened his eyes to see the surface just beneath his nose.

"Now, again, where are you from?" Jose demanded, louder this time.

"Revolución," Boyd insisted. *"I'm new!"*

Carlos shoved his head beneath again after Jose gestured casually. This time, he held Boyd down for longer.

Boyd was able to get a deeper breath first but as the seconds ticked by and his lungs began to burn, he jerked against Carlos' grip. He felt Carlos' fingers tighten in his hair painfully and despite his best intentions, he couldn't help letting small breaths of air escape. He was just starting to panic when Carlos suddenly jerked him out of the water.

"Where?" Jose demanded firmly.

"Rev--"

Boyd wasn't even able to finish before his head was shoved underwater. Unprepared, he hadn't had the chance to take a breath and he accidentally inhaled some water before he stopped himself.

This time, terror and anxiety burned within him and he jerked quickly against Carlos to no avail. His eyes squeezed shut and heartbeat resounded; he tried not to panic, he tried to keep himself under control, but there was no hope. Even if he hadn't been afraid of drowning, there was no way he could hold himself still with so little breath.

Increasing puffs of air escaped into the water and he tried to push himself up, to twist away from Carlos' hands, but all he did was renew the agony from his injured head. Panic truly set in as he struggled furiously. The water felt like it was closing in around him relentlessly, claustrophobically, and the more he moved, the more air he lost but he couldn't help it, he had to get away.

Carlos held him steadily immobile.

Boyd's lungs burned so painfully that without meaning to he suddenly gasped in a mouthful of water; he choked and coughed, his body working against him as he automatically tried to draw another breath and just choked on more water. Water was within and around him and there was nothing he could do-- Strong fingers had a painful grip and his hair floated around him freely, clouding his vision as he quickly looked around; as if underwater he'd find a way to escape, as if he'd find a way to breathe again.

But all he saw was muddled water and the bubbles flying past his eyes, the escaping breath from his lungs. The visible, slow loss of his life.

He was going to die.

He was going to drown here and he'd never make it back home, he'd never draw a breath of air again, he'd never see Sin or anyone else again. He'd never get away from this feeling of water enclosing him in resounding silence that would muffle any sound, even if he screamed and pleaded and begged for them to let him up. He'd suffocate painfully and slowly and it would only take seconds--

Something in him snapped, releasing the primal fear that would probably never leave him; the distant memory of water over his head and the light disappearing and the knowledge that he was lost, powerless. That something greater than him was swallowing him whole and sucking the life from him and it didn't matter what he felt or wanted, he was going to die.

There was no rhyme or reason as he struggled for his life, terror and self defense combining with adrenaline until he willingly would have ripped the hair from his scalp if it meant he could get to the surface again.

Carlos suddenly yanked him above water and Boyd sagged in his grip, choking and coughing and still unable to draw a proper breath. His stomach clenched with fear and nausea and every breath he tried to take caught in the middle, like his lungs were already half full of water and there wasn't enough space for the air. Automatic tears stained his cheeks from the way his eyes burned and he spluttered helplessly, terrified that he wouldn't be able to breathe properly again, and more terrified of being pushed under once more.

"*Who are you with?*" Jose asked again and this time Boyd didn't even bother holding out.

"*Jésuites!*" Boyd cried out as he tried to stop coughing, not having to put much effort into acting desperate. "*Nouvelle Ligue des Jésuites!*"

Jose stared down at Boyd with slightly narrowed eyes and Carlos let him fall unceremoniously to the floor.

Boyd shuddered and couldn't draw the energy to hide the brief weakness or his tears; he slid his eyes shut and left his mouth open as he gasped and coughed. He focused simply on trying to draw a full breath, on ignoring the terrified pounding of his heart and that distant thought that plagued him, whispering that maybe this half-choked feeling would never leave.

The dirt on the floor stuck to his wet cheeks in a gritty and uncomfortable feeling, his hair caught against his lips as he panted, and nearly every part of his body spiked with pain. Even so, he would have welcomed a hundred beatings before a few more seconds underwater.

There was a brief moment of silence before Jose walked a few steps away and exchanged another round of rapid-fire Spanish with the Commander, who walked away soon after.

The only thing Boyd could try to pick up was the word negotiate and then Carlos was hauling him up again. For a brief second, Boyd thought they were going to pull him to the edge again, that Carlos was going to shove his head underwater and this time they wouldn't let him back up. He tensed but before he could find the strength to struggle he was dragged back into the shack. He felt such a sense of relief that he didn't even care that they restrained him before leaving; anything was better than the water.

Boyd sagged against the restraints, still struggling to draw a full breath without coughing. His entire body hurt and he felt a sudden, overwhelming sense of hopelessness and helplessness as he realized he didn't know how he was going to get out of this.

It was only a matter of time before MU contacted Nouvelle Ligue and MU found out he'd been lying. He could only hope that they would think Nouvelle Ligue was playing with them, or that there would be a miraculous breakdown in MU's technology, making them incapable of contacting the French revolutionaries until after Boyd had somehow found a way to escape. The time difference would work against him, though; France was about six hours ahead, so even though it was late night here, MU would be able to contact someone early in the morning there.

MU was known for ransoming their hostages but if they realized he wasn't who he claimed, they would double their effort to discover his allegiance and, knowing what he did of this group, he didn't want to find out what that would mean for him.

Boyd didn't know how long he'd been unconscious before Carlos had woken him that first time but he thought it had to have been at least an hour, considering the fact that he hadn't been near water when he was captured. Harriet had to know by now that something was wrong. He didn't know what she'd do with that information; he didn't even know where he was other than not in the main encampment so he had no idea if she'd be able to find him if she tried.

Or maybe she'd been caught too and they were holding her in another encampment.

Boyd tried to find a way to escape but his restraints were well-designed and too tight. Pain radiated from his head and stomach, mixing with the bruises forming from the other places Carlos had hit him. His arms hurt from being in the same uncomfortable position for too long and he knew that after a few hours his fingers would probably start to fall asleep, making it more difficult to do anything. There was nothing he could reach around him, not that it would have mattered much since he would have to use his feet.

He was caught with no way out and his future looked incredibly short right then.

Hours passed slowly; each time he heard voices approaching the door, his heartbeat thundered and adrenaline spiked within him. Every plan he came up with fell flat when he played the scenario out in his mind, and each time he concluded that he was only getting out of this alive and intact one of two ways: he could somehow overcome his captors when they came to collect him and, miraculously, he could elude them in a forest they knew better than he did; or someone would rescue him.

But each hour that ticked by made it more obvious that Harriet wasn't coming, that he was alone in the middle of an enemy encampment, and that his hastily created cover story was about to have as many holes ripped in it as his body would be when they found out.

He could only go so many hours of boredom wracked with spikes of adrenaline before it all became too much. With ominous thoughts plaguing his mind, he drifted off into an uneasy sleep born of exhaustion.

He felt like he'd barely closed his eyes when something woke him.

Sunlight poured through the windows, still pale with morning light but strong enough to show that it was later than he'd expected. The light must have woken him and, he realized with a sinking feeling, with the arrival of morning it became obvious that he was alone in this. Harriet must have headed toward the meeting in Maracaibo, maybe to get help. But even if Doug sent a group back, even if the other trainees tried to help him, by that time there was no doubt that MU would know he wasn't really with Nouvelle Ligue.

By the end of this all, he may be lucky if they just killed him.

Dropping his head back, he slid his eyes closed and tried once again to plan a way out of this, even if he knew there was no good way.

Just as he decided that there was very little hope, he spotted movement across the *palafito* out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head fully and stared in surprise at the slim dark hand that was holding onto the opening between the floor and the wall.

Another hand appeared and then a familiar face came into view as a pale, wet and very muddy Harriet pulled herself athletically through the wide opening. She moved silently, crouching on the wooden floor as her eyes searched the room quickly before she finally focused on Boyd.

Harriet did a quick once over of him, likely checking for any serious and obvious wounds, and when she saw nothing life-threatening she hurried quickly to his side. "We have to get out of here, now," she hissed, voice hoarse and scratchy as she crouched beside him. Harriet pulled out her knife to cut the straps of his restraints, looking ten times sicker than she'd been the previous day but not letting it slow her down.

Relief flooded through him but he wasn't ready to feel too hopeful until they were far away from the camp. He tried to tilt his body to give her easier access.

"They'll be here any time," he said so quietly only she would be able to hear. "I told them I was with Nouvelle Ligue; they left to check."

Harriet nodded, sawing through the strap and freeing one of his hands. Her skin and clothes were completely caked with mud and her movements were stiff, jerky, as though her body was sore. Despite that, she continued to work on the next strap and didn't complain or even wince.

For several moments the only sounds in the *palafito* were Harriet's knife cutting through the tight restraints but just when Boyd's other hand was almost free, the door opened and someone started shouting in Spanish.

Before Boyd could even look to see who it was, a spray of bullets blasted across the shack and Harriet dove out of the way, overturning a chair and scurrying behind it as the MP7 ripped the chair apart. Boyd turned his head and tried to hunch in on himself as best he could to make a smaller target since he had nothing to hide behind, even though the bullets were focused on the other side of the room.

Harriet pinned herself to the floor, panting harshly but as soon as there was a brief pause in the shots, she sprung up and took Carlos out with a clean shot to the head with her pistol.

Harriet ran across the room and was just grabbing Carlos' submachine gun when the sound of boots running across the shaky wooden floor approached them. Boyd struggled to get his other hand free, the heavy strap chafing and scratching his skin as he yanked furiously against it. There were no weapons within reach so he focused on awkwardly trying to rip the strap with his free hand.

The door flew inwards but Harriet immediately kicked it shut and threw herself backwards, spraying it with heavy firepower from the MP7. It grew silent on the other side of the door just as she ran out of bullets, but before she could crawl over to Carlos' body for more ammo, the now half-hanging door burst inwards again and the Commander tackled Harriet to the floor.

He grabbed her by the throat and in one instant a huge knife was in his hand and soaring down to her neck but Harriet caught his wrist and twisted it, disarming him with a move they'd learned during Krav Maga. But the Commander simply used his other hand to whip out his own pistol and pointed it at her head.

Boyd snapped his hand free of the restraint and saw that the Commander didn't have his finger on the trigger yet. Boyd threw himself at the Commander before the man had a chance to move, tackling him to the floor and causing the Commander's grip to slip on Harriet.

The Commander didn't drop the gun and Boyd and he wrestled for control of the firearm briefly. Boyd's body shook but he focused all his strength on trying to wrench the gun away. They struggled against each other and just as Boyd was getting a better grip, the Commander violently kned Boyd in the stomach and flipped him over.

Harriet scrambled to her feet, grabbed the fallen hunting knife and threw herself at the Commander, shoving the knife deep into the back of his neck. Blood sprayed everywhere and there was a strange gurgling sound for a moment; Boyd was staring up at the Commander as the man's eyes went wide in a combination of disbelief and anger, his mouth open as if to say something. The Commander's hand twitched as if he was going to reach up toward his throat but the light faded from his eyes almost immediately and he collapsed on top of Boyd, dead.

The Commander's body was heavy and unwieldy and it took Boyd a moment of struggling to push him off. He scrambled to his feet, nearly slipping on the spreading blood pool, and looked over to see Harriet peering out the door. His heart was thundering in his chest and he felt shaky with a combination of adrenaline and exhaustion but he fell into the familiar mindset of mission mode, not thinking about anything but their objective and how to obtain it.

"Are we clear?" he asked quietly as he grabbed the fallen gun.

She gave a short nod, giving Carlos' corpse a quick once over and grabbing her compact rifle once she realized he didn't have any more ammo for the MP7. "There's

only two squads stationed here. One is pretty much wiped out now and more than half of the other is out searching for me."

Boyd nodded silently.

Harriet pushed the door open slowly, peering outside further and showing that there were at least three dead men on the deck, victims of the rapid gunfire from the MP7. "We need to get out of here now. I'm not positive how many are still lurking around."

"No arguments here," Boyd said dryly, briefly looking over Harriet's shoulder to assess the area.

Across an open space the forest was thick with greenery and underbrush; they could easily disappear into there but then they'd just run into the same problem of needing to outrun a group who knew the area better than they ever would.

His gaze flicked around until he noticed what looked like a Jeep that was half-hidden by trees across the camp. He didn't see any movement in the area and with bodies lying out in the open they couldn't rely on going unnoticed for long. Even if they were discovered on their way over, they'd be better off than waiting to get ambushed in the *palafito*.

He tapped her shoulder and pointed to the Jeep. "Unless the way you got here works better I can hot wire that."

"Getting lost three times and spending the night in the mud under this shack thing doesn't really sound fun to do again," she muttered and took off sprinting across the camp.

Boyd looked at her briefly, then quickly searched the bodies nearby to check for keys just in case. He didn't find any but he took the Commander's wallet and grabbed the knife Harriet had used to kill the man. He wiped the knife off quickly on the Commander's clothing then followed Harriet.

Luckily, no one was around to stop them; it seemed the remaining members were still out searching for Harriet and either the militants had died before they could radio for help or the other group was too far away to have returned yet. Whatever the case, it was a welcome respite that Boyd fully intended to take advantage of.

He jumped into the Jeep and immediately set to hot wiring it. Not even a year ago he'd had no idea how to hot wire a car, but when he'd returned to the Agency he'd it made a point to learn.

He worked quickly but was unsuccessful at first, likely due to lack of practice. He heard Harriet shoot out the tires of the two other Jeeps parked nearby but he didn't look over, feeling adrenaline pump through his body so fast his fingers nearly shook. The

uncertainty of the situation-- would this work, could they escape, would someone appear any moment with a gun and decimate them-- made the moment even more intense.

But even as the thoughts raced through his mind, the engine revved and Harriet jumped in the passenger seat. He immediately slammed on the gas and they took off. Trees blurred on either side of them as they sped down a dirt road; Boyd had to take a few turns so fast that they nearly went into the underbrush. Harriet spent her time between the map and compass for navigation while keeping an eye out for militants on their trail.

The good news was that they were headed in the opposite direction that the militants would have been looking for Harriet so Boyd was able to drive out of the Sierra de Péríja and onto a main road with relatively few problems. They were several hours behind schedule and had long ago missed the rendezvous in Maracaibo; their only hope was to speed their way across Venezuela and catch the others in Caracas before the flight.

They had to stop very briefly in Maracaibo for gas, where Boyd was very glad he'd thought to take the wallet because neither of them had *bolívares fuertes* on their own to pay. He threw one of the militant's jackets left in the back of the vehicle over his bloody, ripped clothing to try to look a little less conspicuous, but although he'd tried to wipe his face off there wasn't much he could do about the blood staining his pale hair an ugly, clotted shade of deep red or the bruises that were forming on his face.

They were back on the road almost immediately despite an odd look he'd received from the attendant. Boyd risked the off chance of raising suspicion by speeding recklessly; if he didn't, they'd likely miss the flight.

For the next several hours, they followed a main road and put more and more distance between themselves and the militant territory. Both of them relaxed visibly although there was still tension as they continuously checked the clock, anxiously wondering if they'd get to Caracas in time.

When they were about halfway there, Harriet settled back in the passenger seat. Navigation wasn't imperative anymore now that there were clear signs indicating which way to Caracas and other cities along the way. Her eyebrows drew together, full lips pressed down in a frown as she curled in on herself with a shiver despite the relative warmth.

Boyd glanced over briefly when he saw how uncomfortable she seemed, looking as though she was even worse off than he was. She appeared to be a little pale and there was a sheen to her skin that had nothing to do with the mud coating her.

"How are you?" he asked finally.

She raised a shoulder in a weak shrug. "I probably have a fever of well over 100 and my entire body hurts, but other than that I'm just dandy." Despite the sarcasm, there was no real bite to her tone and she mostly seemed tired, weak. After a moment, she looked over at him with heavy bloodshot eyes. "It's all of this damn climate change. I was feeling it early yesterday and then spending the night in the muddy water didn't make it any better..."

Boyd was quiet a moment then looked over while still keeping his attention on the road. He was impressed that she'd managed to hide so silently for hours if she'd already been sick, and even more surprised that she'd returned for him given the circumstances. But if she hadn't, who knew what would have happened to him.

"Thank you," he said sincerely. "For coming back."

Harriet closed her eyes and leaned her head against the door. "Regardless of what I may think of you, you're still my ally. And besides... you're not so bad, Beaulieu."

Boyd couldn't help a small smile, feeling somehow touched and pleased. "You aren't so bad yourself, Stevens."

There was no response and when he glanced over he saw that she was asleep.

The trip to Caracas passed in silence; Boyd focused all his attention on driving as quickly as he dared while not risking their safety. His body ached and he'd gotten very little sleep the past few days-- the past two weeks, really-- and he felt so nauseated that he thought it was a wonder he hadn't vomited yet.

Every muscle in his torso felt thoroughly abused and the shakiness in his limbs told him he was running on pure momentum from the adrenaline, that when that ran out he was going to crash pretty spectacularly with exhaustion. But the pounding in his head actually kept him awake so he figured it worked out in the end.

It took them several hours but their luck continued to hold all the way to the airport. *Aeropuerto Internacional de Maiquetía Simón Bolívar*, at one point, had been a large international airport with two terminals that catered to a variety of flight destinations. But with the rising price in oil and the plunging economy, it had long ago become too cost-ineffective to keep the entire airport open since air travel was an extreme luxury for the average person. Now, just a section of it was in use, primarily for private jets or small flights.

Because the trainees had flown into the same airport, he knew exactly where to drive to. Harriet woke up on her own just as he was pulling in to park and the two of them silently and quickly hurried into the building, heading toward the same area they'd unloaded when they'd flown in.

At first Boyd thought they'd missed their flight but an echo of a voice caught his attention and, exchanging a quick glance with Harriet, they followed the sound until they turned a corner and found the others sitting around as they presumably waited for the plane to be ready.

Boyd felt such an intense sense of relief that he stumbled as he slowed down.

Kassian was the first one to look up and it was difficult to identify the expression on his face. His mouth dropped open slightly and he stood up, eyebrows drawing together even as a smile crossed his face as he looked at Boyd and then zeroed in on Harriet.

Kassian crossed the lobby in two long strides and picked her up effortlessly, actually hugging her in a very un-Kassian like way. "Thank fucking God," he said, relief heavy in his voice.

Harriet's weary face scrunched up in surprise and her gaze shot over to Boyd and then to the onlookers before she stiffly patted Kassian's shoulder. He didn't seem to mind and released her after a moment, squeezing her arm before he gave her a thorough and clinical once over, switching into professional mode automatically, before looking over to do the same to Boyd.

Toby stood up next and rushed over to Boyd, actually looking concerned. "What happened?"

Boyd shook his head, at first too tired to even want to explain, but since Toby seemed to actually care he made the effort. "They were on heightened patrol and I got caught," he said simply.

Kassian frowned and, finally releasing Harriet's arm, he grabbed Boyd's chin and examined the wounds on his face and head. "It's my fault," Kassian admitted after a moment and he stepped back, satisfied that Boyd wasn't near death. "Cade went somewhere he shouldn't have and I didn't outright stop him even though I knew it wasn't a good idea."

"Good job, retard," Harriet said coldly, glaring at Cade.

"What?" Cade demanded indignantly. "I was just doing what I was supposed to, checking shit out. How was I supposed to know they'd be there? Not my fault Beaulieu's too retarded to avoid them."

"You're that unobservant that you didn't pick up on their patrol patterns?" Toby asked skeptically.

Kassian made a face. "Just drop it. What's done is done." He turned to Harriet and Boyd again. "I'm glad you two are alright. I was worried."

"Me too," Boyd said, leaving it unclear which he meant. "I think we've both had better days but we're fine."

Toby looked like he wanted to say more but before he could, Doug's voice boomed loudly. "Let's go everybody, we don't have all bloody day."

The tall Australian appeared suddenly in the waiting area and paused, looking at Harriet and Boyd evenly. "You made it. I figured you were dead by now."

Neither Harriet nor Boyd had the energy or presence of mind to properly answer and the moment passed easily when Doug turned and ordered everyone to hurry up.

They all loaded onto the plane, a few of them slower than the others, and they settled down after storing their bags; at least, the ones who hadn't lost theirs.

Boyd sat toward the back where it was a little quieter, mostly because there were fewer people. Boyd didn't bother to listen to anyone else's low conversations; the moment he sat down he was finally able to relax, to know he was safe and that they'd made it. The off-compound training was over and that was all that mattered.

Exhaustion weighed on him heavily, enough that even the pain radiating throughout his body was nothing compared to the sluggishness of his mind. He looked around the plane and noted that Kassian was sitting next to Harriet, who was asleep. Kassian was staring out the window for the most part, appearing to have fallen into one of his glum moods once again and at intervals he'd glance at Harriet with a somewhat guilty expression

Not having the presence of mind to think about anything too clearly, Boyd just decided that Harriet had the right idea.

Chapter 16

"What exactly is this depersonalized business?"

Ann looked at General Carhart patiently although she quirked an eyebrow in a manner that typically meant she wasn't pleased with something. "Depersonalization, General. It's a dissociative disorder."

Sin shifted in the stiff-backed chair, staring at Carhart's desk and doing his best not to feel the irritation that was creeping up. He didn't want to be sitting there having this meeting with Carhart, Ann and Dr. Schwartz. It was bad enough that the entire topic revolved around him and the state of his health, that they often spoke of him as though he weren't sitting right there, but Dr. Schwartz's long penetrating stares made it even worse.

He'd only met the man three times and despite the fact that the doctor mostly dealt with him in the same clinical manner he used for every other agent, something about him unnerved Sin. He could be droning on in the blandest most monotonous voice about Sin's lack of nutrition but the intense way his deep brown eyes bore into Sin was extremely disturbing.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Carhart asked, frowning. "I don't know anything about this psychological hocus pocus."

"Hocus pocus," Ann repeated, narrowing her eyes. "Belittling my profession isn't really the best thing to do, now is it? Considering a large part of his return to active duty depends on what I have to say."

Carhart didn't look too concerned with her scathing tone. "Just explain yourself. How should I know what these terms mean?"

"Disassociation," Dr. Schwartz broke in, "is the word for an individual who partitions segments of their personality or mental processes, et cetera."

"Yes," Ann agreed, eyes still pinning Carhart coldly. "Precisely. It's commonly associated with people with DID or multiple personalities as you may know it, but there are a number of disorders that are dissociative in nature. In Sin's case, I've concluded that he suffers from a form of depersonalization."

"Which means *what*?" Carhart asked impatiently, sitting back in his chair as he glared at Ann. He ran a hand through his brown hair in aggravation, blue t-shirt bringing out the color in his light blue eyes, which were currently sparking at the psychiatrist.

"It means I'm a crazy fuck," Sin muttered, crossing his arms over his chest as he sunk lower in the chair.

"It means that when Agent Vega experiences intense feelings of helplessness, when he feels outnumbered or when there's an extreme threat, his mind shifts gears and in an attempt to protect himself from what is about to happen, he experiences an out of body sensation in which he can see what's going on but he cannot control his actions. In a sense, his mind decides to protect itself by putting his body on autopilot while shielding itself from the actual experience." Ann tapped Sin's thick file. "That's the layman's explanation but the full details, if you care to pursue them, are in the folder."

Carhart looked at Sin for a moment before turning another skeptical stare on Ann. "And this is why he reacts so extremely sometimes, why sometimes he doesn't remember what occurred?"

She nodded. "Such as with Lydia and the incident more recently in the medical unit, yes."

"So if this happens when he feels threatened, why the hell doesn't it happen when he's storming a base solo?" Carhart demanded. "That doesn't add up."

"*Particular* situations that make him feel helpless," Ann corrected herself. "Situations when he isn't in total control of himself, such as at the medical wing when he was hallucinating and seeing the staff members around him as dead targets or victims come back to haunt him. Or with my sister, who had him on a severe cocktail of drugs which exacerbated an already distressed state, and sent him into a psychotic rage."

"And what about the time in the city?" Carhart demanded, interrogating her thoroughly. "I've seen the surveillance tape-- what triggered that?"

Sin began rubbing his face tiredly, wanting to be far away from them and this conversation. He wanted to go back to his apartment and sleep. Even though the hallucinations had thankfully retreated, his nightmares hadn't and it was still hard to get a good night's rest. The one saving grace was that his nightmares were no longer as disturbingly vivid and he could at least sleep for a few hours at a time.

He'd strongly debated staying in bed that morning and not even showing up for this damn meeting but between Ann and Carhart, he would have never heard the end of it. This was the day that they would discuss whether or not he could return to active duty and when that would be. It was also the first time he was hearing about his diagnosis in depth; it seemed that Ann had researched thoroughly before coming to a firm conclusion.

"Depersonalization disorder is something that typically stems from people who were severely abused as children, physically, emotionally, sexually--"

Carhart's eyebrows drew together and his gaze snapped over to Sin, a deep and concerned scowl curling his mouth downwards. Ann actually stopped speaking for a moment due to the alarm in the General's expression and, sensing the lull, Sin sighed without looking over. "Don't get your panties in a bunch. It wasn't my father."

Dr. Schwartz seemed extremely curious about that comment and turned his penetrating gaze to the general, thin lips twisting slightly as he debated whatever internal thoughts he had.

"Then who?" Carhart demanded, his tone of voice making it obvious that he'd track the person down and kill them if he could. "Someone here?"

"Just chill out," Sin muttered, disinterested in the topic. "Who cares?"

"I care," the General snapped, leaning forward, youthful face marred with anger and frustration. He'd tried his best to protect Sin over the years, from himself as well as others, and the idea that something so horrible could have slipped by him was disturbing.

"If you're speaking of the sexual abuse when he was a child, then it wasn't someone here or even someone in this country, so there is nothing that can be done about it now," Ann said patiently, logically. "But if you're talking emotional and physical abuse, I think all of us, as well as his father, had a hand in that and in some cases what has been done to him here has been worse; more damaging."

Carhart looked away, likely thinking about the box, the collar, the latter having been his own idea in a skewed attempt to keep Sin out of permanent incarceration.

"Just move on," Sin snapped. "I didn't come here so you could throw me a fucking pity party."

Ann cleared her throat and crossed one wool-covered leg over the other. As the winter approached, her way of dressing changed drastically. Skirts and thin blouses were completely useless for most of the year and had been since the nuclear winter had fallen over certain parts of the world. They were a luxury she was allowed for a few months and now she'd gone back to heavy wool clothing, insulated jackets and coats.

"In any case, experiencing something that takes him back to that time, or even seeing or hearing about it, can be enough to jerk him swiftly out of reality."

There was another brief silence as Carhart let that sink in, as his eyes remained trained on Sin's sullen figure. Then it was as if something occurred to him suddenly and he sat up straight. "Did Harry and his associates ever behave inappropriately with you when you were in the box?"

Sin gave a long suffering sigh and stared at the desk, narrowing his eyes at the dark wood. "What does it matter? He's no longer with us so it doesn't really matter, now does it?"

Carhart turned to Ann expectantly. "Did they?"

She nodded her assent, even if she hesitated slightly before doing so. The concept of doctor-patient confidentiality weighed on her but she knew that in the case of the Agency, that concept didn't matter very much at all and it was critical that Carhart understood everything.

"I remember watching that surveillance video of Captain Stevens' murder," Carhart said in explanation, looking very displeased. "A few of the guards and even Stevens himself seemed to be promising certain things for later, when Sin was locked up."

"Exactly," Ann said, voice warming considerably now that Carhart was taking her thoughts more seriously. There was a long-standing rivalry between the Agency's support staff, be it clerical, medical, IT or the analysts, and the Agency's field agents, about who did more for the organization, whose job was more important, and so on. It seemed that Carhart and Ann weren't exempt from this feud.

"His mind reacted automatically because he knew what was coming, the inevitable abuse while he was restrained and drugged. The same thing goes for the incident in the city-- he saw a girl being abused, helpless, it made him remember--"

"Listen, I didn't come here so you people could make ten thousand excuses for me because now you think you've finally got me all figured the fuck out," Sin growled, cutting her off suddenly. "I'm here so you can talk about how to fix me and whether or not I get to be active again or if Vivienne is going to get rid of me. So let's just go back to that and get off this topic."

"General Carhart needs to understand these things, Sin," Ann said with a frown in his direction. "How can you expect him to explain to Vivienne if he doesn't get it himself?"

"He gets it," Sin snapped. "Poor Sin got sodomized by a fat Russian soldier, poor Sin's mommy liked to play with him before he was even old enough to get hard, poor Sin sees and remembers bad stuff that makes him go all zany-- boo fucking hoo. We all get it now, thank you Annabelle for making it oh so crystal clear now get off the topic or I'm leaving."

His tone of voice had such a strong undercurrent of impatience and anger, that for a moment everyone just stared at him. Ann looked a mix between understanding his discomfort with discussing this and being furious by the way he spoke to her in front of the others, while Carhart and Schwartz seemed largely unfazed.

"Are you uncomfortable with the topic?" Ann asked, eyebrows rising slightly as she pinned him with a cool, unimpressed stare. "I thought it didn't bother you."

"What bothers me," Sin bit out with annoyance, "is the idea that some recent traipse into the boundaries of psychotherapy somehow excuses all of my past transgressions. Sorry but it doesn't fly with me, Doctor. I'm not doing this so you can make me feel like a better person. It's too late for that."

"I had no such fantasies," she replied, rolling her eyes at him. "Although letting go of your guilt is something that—"

"Okay, let's stay on topic," Carhart interrupted, giving the two a queer look. "The real question is-- can he return to work? Dr. Schwartz is giving him the okay, and now all we need is the word from you. You've diagnosed him but what now? Can you fix him? Is there a treatment that has a specific time frame? I need facts."

Sin looked at Annabelle, eyes narrowed slightly as he sat up straighter in anticipation for the answer.

She hesitated and for the first time, in a professional setting, Ann faltered. Her hazel eyes flicked from Sin to Carhart and back again, her lips pursing slightly as she sat back in her chair. The reality of the situation, or the gravity of it, seemed to suddenly settle on her shoulders as she realized that Carhart *wanted* her to simply say 'yes, Sin is fine;' as she realized that Sin needed her to say those words.

But she couldn't.

"When?" Carhart insisted, frowning at her.

"I don't know," Ann admitted finally and the declaration hung in the air for a moment before she continued. "Depersonalization, it's a very complicated disorder. There isn't just some cocktail of pills, some easy remedy, it takes time. There are experimental treatments out there, yes, but in truth the only time proven form of recovery has been through extensive therapy."

There was another long stretch of silence and Carhart's face was dropping, shoulders slumping, as she continued. "He's responding well to the treatment for his hallucinations but the real problem is the depersonalization. That's what causes him to lose control, that's what causes incidents like the one in the medical unit. And I can't tell you that it's going to be 'fixed' any time soon. There is no easy fi--"

Before she could finish her sentence, Sin was pushing himself up out of the chair and standing all in one fluid movement. His expression was stony, body rigid, as he began to stalk out of the room.

Carhart didn't bother trying to stop the agent but Ann reached out, grabbing his hand. She looked up at him, face grim but determined. "Sin, please just==="

"Just leave me alone," he growled, yanking his hand away, and was gone from the office before anyone else could protest.

"Damn it," Ann seethed, clenching her hand into a frustrated fist as she collapsed backwards in the chair, hair curtaining around her face briefly. "Damn it."

Schwartz and Carhart stared at her before the other doctor stood up, picking up his briefcase. "I'll be in touch," he said calmly, addressing the General.

Carhart nodded and followed him to the door where they spoke in low tones for several moments before the door finally clicked softly as Dr. Schwartz made his exit.

Carhart walked back over to his desk and sat down, idly eyeballing his computer for awhile as he waited for Ann to leave. But she didn't-- she seemed completely lost in an annoyed and frustrated fog as she stared blankly at the wall.

Finally Carhart stopped all pretenses of work and stared at her. "So, what's going on?"

Ann looked up at him, jerked out of her reverie. "What?"

Carhart crossed his arms over his chest and raised an eyebrow. "Okay," he said after awhile, rephrasing the question. "How are you and Sin getting along?"

"Fine. Why do you ask?"

"I find the two of you interesting," Carhart said slowly. "A year ago, you wouldn't have pissed on fire to put him out and now..."

"And now, what?" she cut in impatiently, hazel eyes narrowing at the general.

"Why so defensive?" he asked innocently, tapping his long fingers against the desk as he fixed her with an intrusive stare.

"I don't see the point of this line of questioning," Ann replied blandly, standing. "I'm sure Vivienne explained why I was chosen for the job and I've already told you why I had a change of heart about him."

"Change of heart, huh?"

Her annoyed look turned into a full-on glare and she leaned forward, planting her hands flat on the desk. "Is there something you're getting at, Zachary? The coy thing was never your strong suit."

"General Carhart," he corrected easily, although he didn't look particularly offended by the familiar use of his name.

"I'll call you General when you call me Doctor," Ann said flatly. "It's been a long time but not long enough that I've completely forgotten about young innocent Zachary getting stoned off two tokes before nearly having his way with me up against a wall."

Carhart's calm expression melted instantly and he reddened, discomfort clear.

She smiled down at him triumphantly. "Same old easily flustered Zach."

"Oh and I suppose that was all my idea?" he demanded defensively.

"I never said that. I don't deny it, I'm not ashamed of it, sex is no big deal. Wasn't to me then and it isn't to me now." Ann gave him an arch look, leaning back finally in a manner that made it clear that she thought the battle was over and that she was the victor.

But before the self-satisfied smile could settle firmly on her face, Carhart shook his head. "So is that why you're suddenly so familiar with Sin?"

It was her turn to backpedal and once again Ann faltered. "What's that mean?"

Carhart stood up finally, shoving his chair back and gestured at the chair Sin had once occupied. "Just a thought. Just a theory... based on very little but still something that's been nagging at me," he admitted. "The way you interact now is quite different than it was before. Even when you first took the case, you seemed interested, intrigued, but not as personally tied up in it as you are now. Now it seems like you actually care."

Ann gave him a look as though he were the stupidest person in the world. "He's my patient and yes, I can admit that I do care whether or not he improves. I'm very aware of what will happen if he isn't allowed to return to active duty; he has no other way of contributing to the Agency other than field work. His life is my responsibility, how could I not care?"

"Spare me the Mother Teresa act, Annabelle. There's something odd with you. It's discreet but it's there."

Ann released a long slow sigh as she stared at Carhart evenly. Finally, she shrugged. "I've had sex with him. Is that what you wanted to know?"

Carhart's expression went from suspicious to horrified in an instant and he shook his head back and forth for a moment before he managed to get out an aghast, "*What?*"

"Oh, now you're shocked." Ann spread her arms in frustration. "What the hell were you trying to accuse me of then!"

"You're-- what? What the hell did you say?" He continued to stare at her in shock.

"I said I fucked him," Ann snapped. "Well, not regularly but it happened. Isn't that what you wanted to know?"

"No! I thought you had some weird obsession with him like your lunatic sister. I didn't know you actually convinced him to sleep with you!"

"Convinced," she repeated flatly.

"Jesus fucking Christ, woman, what the hell is with you and Vega men!"

This time Ann crossed her arms over her chest and adopted a cool look. "I could ask you the same."

Carhart made a face. "Give me a break. It's not even comparable."

"Isn't it?" she demanded, hazel eyes challenging him. "You weren't fooling me, Zachary."

"Don't change the subject," he retorted. "What the hell are you thinking? Can't you fucking keep the gate closed long enough to just do your damn job? Do you realize how unethical that is?"

"Unethical!" Ann threw her head back and barked out a harsh laugh. "Says the man who wants me to give Sin the medical okay so that he can go back to *assassinating* people."

A dark look crossed Carhart's face and he was silent for a moment. Talking about such classified information with a non-agent wasn't exactly something that sat well with him. The fact that she knew so much had never sat well with him at all. "Okay, Annabelle," he said evenly. "Enough."

Ann took a deep breath and nodded, rubbing her slim hands over her arms slowly. "Okay, I'm sorry. But the idea of you thinking I harbor some kind of infatuation or obsessed love for him angers me. And I knew that's what you were getting at all along, Zach, but I'm not my sister. I've had sex with him but it was nothing more than us using each other to temporarily forget about the horrible messes our lives have turned out to be. There's no feelings," she told him honestly. "There's no obsession. Just plain physicality."

Carhart looked away, obviously troubled.

"Please, Zach, don't tell Vivienne. I know that's what you're thinking and it's unnecessary. He and I are both consenting adults and it hasn't affected our professional relationship at all. It's unimportant. It really, really, is," Ann implored, reaching out to take hold of his sleeve.

Carhart shook her off and sighed, running a hand through his dark hair in his usual nervous gesture. "This is a bad idea, Annabelle. For multiple reasons. So many reasons."

"Zac--"

"And if that's all it is, why him of all people? Why not just go cheat on your husband with some random other guy? Why Sin?" Carhart demanded suspiciously.

"Why does it matter? I don't want to explain it to you, I have a reason but it's embarrassing and personal and it was bad enough to explain it to him and admit it to myself." Ann looked uncomfortable with the topic. "But a large part of it is, well, just look at him. You, of all people, should understand that."

Carhart turned his glare on her again. "Just shut your goddamn mouth with your insinuations already."

"Fine." Ann couldn't help but smile at his annoyance with the topic.

"I won't tell Vivienne yet," he said finally, reluctantly, after awhile. "But only because so far nothing seems to be coming of it all. But as soon as I catch wind of this all going bad..."

"That's fine," she agreed quickly. "The first time this seems like a problem I'll be the first one to make my exit."

Carhart just shook his head disapprovingly, staring out the window of his office and down at the view of the city. The oppressively overcast sky seemed to go on for miles and miles, past the half-destroyed city and even beyond the strange patterns of suburbs; some in perfect condition, others a mound of blackened rubble. "I just have a bad feeling about this."

Ann was silent a moment, staring at his gloomy expression. "About me and him or the entire situation that he's in?"

"Everything," he admitted. "Everything just looks dark."

"He'll be fine. His biggest problem at the moment is his temper and complete lack of patience," Ann said, trying to appeal to his logic. "Besides, even though his disorder can't be cured overnight, the fact that I've diagnosed it and can at least start on treatment and the experimental programs might be enough for Vivienne to put him back as active."

"I know that," Carhart replied, shaking his head. "But it's more than that, it's--" He broke off, frowning, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

Ann frowned, walking around the desk so that she could face him; study his expression and see the actual fear in his light blue eyes. Her phone began vibrating in her purse, the sound muffled but noticeable in the near-silent office. But Ann ignored it and focused on the general and the distress in his face. "What do you know, Zach? What's going to happen?"

Carhart didn't answer for a moment and when he did, it was with a resigned sigh.

"Nothing good."

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Thunder cracked loudly and a streak of blinding white flashed across the sky as Sin absently wondered whether or not sitting under a tree was a good idea at the moment. After another flash struck somewhere closer, Sin didn't move, coming to the realization that he really didn't care.

It was hard for him to pinpoint exactly what he was feeling at the moment but if he really tried, it was something close to sheer hopelessness. Complete and utter despair for the state of things; of his mind, his future, just... everything.

How could it be that a couple pills could have solved one problem so easily but there was no apparent real fix for the other? The anger and frustration that had built in his

chest had been so overwhelming that Sin didn't even know what to do with it now. He felt a strong need for violence, to inflict pain on someone else or himself. A desire to just do... *something* to get the load off him.

But he knew it was just another bad idea; fleeing the compound and getting away had been the better option and of course, as had been the case so many times in the past few months, Sin found himself at Willowbrook.

Sin stared up at Lydia's window, vaguely able to make out her slight form in the dimming light, and wondered how many others would suffer because of him. How many other lives would he unintentionally ruin because he couldn't control his own mind? His own body?

Sin grit his teeth and dragged his gaze away, trying to ignore the suspicious burning behind his eyes. He shook his head and tangled his fingers in his hair, tilting his head back against the tree trunk. Life had been better before he'd learned how to feel. Now that he did, now that he had a reason to care, he was a complete mess. Now that he wanted to be someone better, saner, someone deserving of Boyd's love, the possibility seemed farther away than ever and the realization was painful.

After everything that had happened in the past two years, after everything had seemed so impossible... after all of the obstacles that had gotten in the way of them having a connection, a friendship, a closeness that Sin had never thought was possible for him to experience, it was his own darkness that would tear them apart.

And Sin had no doubt that someday it would be Boyd that he turned on in a seething rage. His father had been the center of his world as a child and Sin had still killed him; even if Boyd had been able to snap him out of his rage so far, that didn't guarantee what would happen in the future.

That fear had been what had kept Sin at a distance for the past few months but he knew he wouldn't be able to go on that way forever. It was too difficult to leave Boyd, too hard to keep things from him, impossible not to want to stay by his side and feel his warm body and breathe in his scent...

The thought trailed off and Sin shuddered slightly, eyes closing as a mental image of Boyd pale and bloody and unmistakably dead flashed before them.

Why did everything have to be an uphill battle?

The sound of footsteps several yards away drifted over to him through the howling wind but Sin ignored it, even as they came closer. He knew it was Ann and he wasn't surprised. She popped up everywhere these days; she was like a rash he couldn't get rid of.

There was another loud boom across the sky as Ann approached him, a steady drizzle beginning to fall as she stared down. He didn't look at her and they just stayed in silence for a while before she finally sighed. "Do you want to sit in my car so that we can talk?"

"Not really," he replied dully.

"Well do it anyway," she snapped impatiently.

Sin glanced up finally, eyes sparking like a green fire even though the rest of his face was etched in moroseness. "Why is it that you think you can tell me what to do?"

"Because that's my job," Ann replied acidly, displeasure practically oozing from every fiber of her slender figure as she glared down at him. "My task, as assigned, is to get you ready to work again, to figure out how to do that, not to let you die under a tree because you're too thick to realize that we're in the middle of a storm."

"Has it occurred to you that I just don't give a shit?" Sin asked flatly, although he finally pulled himself to a slouching stand. He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at her through his overgrown hair.

Ann shook her head, looking up at the sky as she finally demanded, "Why are you here, Vega? I told you not to come here. I made it crystal goddamn clear that you are not to see my sister yet I get a call from the Willowbrook staff telling me that you're lurking around outside."

"If I'm lurking how could I be seeing her?" Sin retorted.

"You have no idea what kind of effect your presence has on her," Ann went on as if he hadn't spoken, eyes blazing. "If there's even the slightest possibility that this isn't a permanent condition-- that she's just doing it to herself and can one day come out of it, how do you know that seeing you consistently just won't cause her to crawl deeper into the darkness!"

"I--" Sin broke off, face troubled, turning his eyes away from her to glance up at the window again with a frown. "I didn't think about that."

"Because you don't think," Ann practically shouted at him in frustration. "You just react! You do whatever comes to your head and don't stop to question why you're doing it, whether or not it's a good idea. The only time you do think is when it's about yourself."

"That's not even remotely--"

"You're so worried about the state of your own mental health, but you don't even begin to think about what affect you could have on my sister's! At least you're still alive. She's just a damn husk! But you just don't car--"

"I don't care?" Sin roared, anger taking the place of misery as he stood up straight, glowering down at her. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about, Annabelle. You have no fucking clue. Why the *fuck* do you think I'm so desperate to figure out what's wrong with me? So I can go back to the Agency's little missions and assignments, because I'm so fucking anxious to please Vivienne and Carhart?"

Ann paused, temper cooling in the face of Sin's wrath. She shrank a little but didn't back down, didn't step back, even though he was practically screaming in her face.

"Or maybe you think I just want to save my own ass? I'm scared to die?"

She shrugged, tone still stiff. "Everyone wants to save their own asses. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"Right," Sin growled. "That's exactly it, Ann. You hit the nail right on the head. I did want to save my own ass-- I did when I thought there was a chance. I did when I thought I could maybe be normal and appreciate the fact that for the first time in my entire life I'm not being treated like a fucking animal."

Ann's eyebrows drew together in confusion. "It just takes time, Sin. And even the general agreed, after you stormed off, that Vivienne will okay a return as long as we cont--"

"I don't give a fuck about being active! I care about not going crazy and killing someone I care about because I'm too weak to control my mind!" Sin looked away, breath coming fast as the emotions began to overwhelm him. He swallowed hard, a dizzying sensation overcoming him as the burning behind his eyes grew stronger. "I'm afraid of killing someone I'm close to again."

Ann's mouth dropped open slightly and her eyes searched his face for a sign of what that meant. She grabbed his arm and turned him back toward her, taking in the way he trembled, the way his hands were clenched so hard that the fingernails drew blood-- the way he looked on the verge of a breakdown. He looked so distraught, so traumatized, that somehow it just came to her. The knowledge, the realization, because really there was no one else that fit.

"So that's what happened," she said finally, simply.

"I didn't mean to," Sin said in a choked voice, lips trembling slightly as he finally said it out loud. His eyes were red with unshed tears and he turned away from her again, covering his face with his hands. "I can't fucking do this anymore. I swear I can't do it. I see it every time I close my eyes and it makes me want to die every single time."

Ann opened her mouth to reply but struggled with what to say. This wasn't something she'd expected, not in the least, and she felt completely inadequate. What was there to say? How could she console somehow who realized they'd murdered their father?

So she just stared at him, at the way he was closing in on himself with such intense self-hatred, and put a hand on his shaking shoulder. "Don't do this to yourself."

"How could I not?" Sin replied, voice shaking as he struggled to get control of himself again, to stop showing such weakness in front of her. When he spoke again his voice was low and more despondent than ever. "Whatever you people think about how horrible he was to me... He saved my life. He made me strong. He was all I had. I wanted to be him, I didn't want to fucking murder him."

Ann nodded even though he couldn't see her, mind racing to put things together. "And you think this is going to happen again? You'll kill someone else in that state, someone that you're close to, that you're thankful to?"

Someone like Boyd Beaulieu, Zach, maybe even the others in his unit? It made sense now-- Now she saw why he was so anxious to be cured, why he wanted so badly to be healthy and normal when he'd never cared before.

"Yes," Sin said finally, turning around again as he took a couple deep breaths. He wasn't shaking anymore but he looked on the verge of something drastic. His eyes looked empty, completely devoid of the personality that he'd begun showing lately, the man she'd started to feel at ease with. There were times that he'd admitted to feeling truly suicidal and Ann wondered if this was one of those times.

"Sin, it's not like there's no hope," she said, shaking her head as the rain finally began to fall steadily. "We're going to try the experimental programs, we're going to go ahead with the therapy... If you'd sat there and given me two more minutes to explain, you'd know that."

Sin stared at her for a moment before shrugging and looking away. He didn't seem any more enthusiastic by her words and as his arms hung loosely at his sides, fingers slack and limp; he looked absolutely defeated. "I suppose."

Thunder crashed again and Ann jumped, putting a hand over her chest as her heartbeat rocketed. "You just have to have some faith, Sin," she bit out as the rain began to thoroughly drench them both. "I know life has dealt you a shitty hand but you can't always assume the worst. Sometimes things do get better and since you have people trying to help you now, since you're not in this completely alone, now wouldn't be such a bad time to start trying to believe that."

Sin shook his head wearily, his bright green eyes bleak in the shadows. "It's not that easy, Annabelle."

"You're right," she agreed. "And it never will be that easy, but I didn't think you were the type of person to expect things to come easy. You have to fight for things, even if it's fighting to believe in something, and if your life really has been going so differently that you actually care about yourself and your future, I'd think whatever caused you to change would be worth fighting for."

This time, Sin just looked down and didn't reply.

"You have to try, really try, to move past the things that happened before. That was then-- this is now. Those people can't be brought back to life, those things can't change. And I can see that it hurts you, that it makes you feel like a horrible person, but if you really want things to improve for yourself and the other people you've gotten close to, you have to try to get past that or it will keep dragging you down, keep hindering the progress that we can make."

Sin shrugged. Her words sounded so convincing, so confident, but that didn't necessarily mean any of it was true or that her encouragement would change the outcome in the long run.

They stood in silence for several long moments and after awhile Ann sighed heavily and shook her head, backing away. "I can't afford to become ill, Sin. I need to get out of this weather."

Sin nodded, not looking at her, and she hesitated briefly, once again taking in the raw misery in his eyes, the hair that was plastered to his pale face and the rain that was battering him relentlessly, drops of water sliding down the tip of his nose, down his cheeks. He didn't even seem to notice; he just stood there as if he didn't feel it, and Ann realized there was no way she could leave him there alone.

"Sin?"

Sin's eyes flicked up at her but he didn't speak.

Ann faltered once again, unprepared for the intensity in his gaze. It was almost frightening and she could only wonder about the individuals who had faced him down when he was truly in a rage. "Just come with me, Sin. I'll drop you off somewhere or you can come to my apartment until the rain stops and dry up."

He stared at her silently before finally appearing to become aware of their surroundings once again, of the storm, the thunder, and the icy cold that was seeping in.

Ann sighed in frustration and huddled closer to herself, the chill sinking into her wool coat. He always looked at her so suspiciously, as if she was up to something or he couldn't be sure that she wasn't. "I'm not trying to-- I'm just--"

She broke off and sighed. "I'm just trying to be nice to you, Sin. That's it. You can follow me or not."

Ann turned to go, anxiety eating away at her, the responsibility she felt for his well being weighing on her shoulders, but after a moment she heard his quiet footsteps trailing behind her. As they headed to the car, the faint imprints of their shoes on the wet grass was the only sign that they'd been there at all.

Chapter 17

Someone was knocking on the door and Sin's first instinct was to ignore it. He'd started a new trial of benzodiazepines in the past week and both Carhart and Ann were keeping close tabs on him to ensure that he didn't have the same side effects as the last time.

Sin had no real hopes about the drug working; it was just a test to see if it would help with the anxiety he so frequently felt. If it did, there was a chance that in future high stress situations, he'd be less likely to experience a dissociative episode but Ann wasn't even positive about that. She continued to stress that the most important method of treatment was intense trauma-focused therapy, which meant long discussions about his past.

It was not something he looked forward to and frankly Sin was tired of talking about himself. He was tired of Ann's intrusive questions and Carhart's impatience with his slow treatment and Sin really did not relish the idea of seeing either of them at the moment.

But even so, Ann had only come to his apartment that one time and Carhart never knocked.

Sin got to his feet and walked into the outer room, feeling sluggish and cursing the effects of the cocktail of drugs they had him on. He paused for only a moment more before opening the door and when he finally did, he couldn't help the half smile that crossed his face although it quickly faded as the guards looked on. It was strange how quickly his mood and his entire state of mind lifted as soon as he saw Boyd's face.

Sin stepped back so that Boyd could enter and observed the bruises that decorated his partner's pale face. They looked pretty severe and Sin had to wonder how Boyd was faring in the training seminar. Even though Sin had mocked it previously, he knew that for most people it was fairly difficult.

But even as Sin started to ask about it, something occurred to him.

"This is your first break?" Sin asked as the door shut, tone dubious as he took in Boyd's reserved expression.

"No," Boyd admitted. He glanced around the apartment idly before turning his gaze on Sin. He seemed to take in the fact that Sin appeared relatively healthier than he had the last time they'd been together. "It's my second; I had one two weeks ago."

"Well, thanks for the visit," Sin said sarcastically, raising an eyebrow at his partner with a slight frown. Annoyance quickly seeped into the brief moment of happiness he'd felt and Sin remembered how quickly he'd been dismissed from Boyd's bunker all those weeks ago. Even knowing that Sin had wanted to talk, Boyd had chosen not to visit on his break?

"I tried to visit you but you seemed preoccupied," Boyd said, with only the slightest pause before the last word. His tone was conversational and non-accusatory as he added, "You were with Ann Connors."

Sin made a face and stared skeptically. "So what? As far as I remember you get an entire day."

"I do, but I saw something that confused me," Boyd said evenly, although he hesitated for a moment before continuing. "You and Ann hated each other last I knew, but she was touching you outside the Tower without hesitation and you didn't seem to mind, and I didn't know what it meant."

Sin just gave him a blank look, his expression becoming increasingly confused the more Boyd focused on Ann. "I don't understand what this has to do with why you didn't come see me? You knew I wanted to speak to you about something. What the hell does Ann touching me have to do with it?"

"It makes a difference. But, look," Boyd said reasonably, voice determined as he pushed on. "Before we get into all that, and I don't mean to accuse, but I just want to know one thing: Is there anything going on between you and Ann?"

"I've had sex with her a couple of times, if that's what you're asking. Why?" Sin said it so calmly and so nonchalantly that it was almost as if he were commenting on the weather.

There was a long stretch of tense silence before Boyd burst out, "You-- *What?*"

Sin crossed his arms over his chest, brow furrowing at the unexpected response. He took in Boyd's expression, tense posture and tone, as confusion clouded Sin's face even more. Shifting slightly and running his hand through his hair in a gesture that showed how unsure of himself he was at the moment, Sin repeated himself slowly,

"I said I had sex with Ann."

"Jesus Christ, Sin, what the fuck!" Boyd nearly shouted, looking furious. His expression darkened, golden brown eyes stormy as his hard glare pierced through Sin. "When?"

Sin started to reply but he faltered and blinked at Boyd instead. There was obviously something wrong here, something that he wasn't quite grasping and it made him hesitate. "When... what?"

"When did you sleep with her?" Boyd demanded, eyes narrowing at his partner impatiently.

Sin shook his head slowly, mouth drawing down in a bewildered frown. "A few weeks ago, I suppose. Why does it matter?"

"A few weeks ago when?" Boyd insisted, shoulders tense and tone hard. "When I was in training? Before? When?"

"Well you've been training for over a month," Sin said slowly. "If it was before then, I'd have said a few months."

"Jesus," Boyd hissed, looking briefly as though he didn't know if he was more angry or disbelieving of the situation. He brought a hand to his head almost as if he had a headache and partially turned away. His expression and posture reminded Sin of the way Boyd got on missions when everything seemed to be going wrong all at once, when Boyd continued to fight for control over the situation.

However, Boyd must have been unable to get the control he sought because almost immediately he snarled, "Goddamit, Sin-- What's *wrong* with you? I was gone for a fucking month! How fucking hard is it to keep your dick in your pants that long?"

Sin's eyebrows rose and he stared at Boyd with a baffled expression on his face, genuinely taken aback by the outburst. "Why are you angry with me?"

"Why would I *not* be? You know how I feel about you, I'm gone one fucking month, and you're already fucking someone else!" Boyd's eyes narrowed, his voice twisting in sarcasm as he added, "What the hell did you expect me to say? 'Hey, no problem, let me know next time and we can have a fucking threesome?'"

There was a brief moment of tense silence and Sin shifted, beginning to feel defensive and slightly aggravated as well as puzzled. "What does the way you feel about me have

to do with anything?" he asked blankly. "I don't understand why you're as angry as you are or what that's supposed to mean."

"It has everything to do with it," Boyd said vehemently.

The look he gave Sin was sharp with anger and betrayal. "I've gone through so much shit for you-- I would've done anything for you-- Jesus Christ, Sin, after Monterrey-- After all that bullshit you gave me about needing me, *this* is the shit you pull? You say I'm so necessary and then can't even wait a goddamn *month* before you're fucking around? What the fuck am I supposed to take that as?"

Sin stared at him, not really knowing what to say or how to react. It had never occurred to him that this would be a problem or that it was something he wasn't supposed to do. Boyd hadn't seemed to have a problem with all the flirtation and sexual energy at Lunar but now he was hurling accusations and insults. The contradictory responses were completely confusing to Sin and his brow furrowed as he shook his head slowly, trying to figure out what he had done that was so wrong; trying to figure out what Boyd's accusation really even was.

When Sin spoke it was in a calm voice although there was an edge to it. "Why does me having sex with someone else mean I don't care about you or that all of those things were untrue? What does one thing have to do with another?"

"It's about trust!" Boyd snapped, obviously frustrated. "It's about being able to believe in you. If you're involved with someone, you don't start fucking someone else the first time your lover is unavailable. If you actually cared about me you shouldn't even *want* to fuck Ann, or anyone else, let alone 'a couple of times' in a fucking month."

"But I don't even give a damn about Ann," Sin protested, voice rising in aggravation as he stared down at Boyd.

Sin shook his head and turned away, walking farther into the apartment as he continued to shake his head in denial. The disconnect between his thoughts and Boyd's was so large at the moment that he didn't know what to say to improve the situation. The more he tried to figure out why it was such a betrayal, the stranger it seemed.

Did it really matter so much if he'd physically touched someone else? Sin didn't understand why that would change anything unless Boyd had the impression that he was being replaced with Ann. That point of view would have made sense to Sin; it would have been similar to the one he'd had in France.

When Thierry had been able to get so close to Boyd when Sin hadn't even been able to speak to him, the envy and anger had driven him to entirely uncharacteristic behavior. But this wasn't the same situation and Sin couldn't make sense of Boyd's accusations at all. Sin couldn't help but feel an intense sense of disappointment that after weeks of looking forward to seeing his partner again, this was how it had turned out. He wished he could just understand where Boyd was coming from but as much as he wanted Boyd to stop being so angry with him, Sin truly didn't see what he had done that was so cruel. If anything, he was almost starting to become irritated by the entire conversation.

"Who cares what I did with her? It doesn't change anything between you and I. I don't understand the correlation between the two or why one thing leads to another. You didn't love Thierry when you had sex with him."

A loud buzzing sound interrupted the argument and both of them abruptly looked at the cell phone that was simultaneously vibrating and ringing on the kitchen counter. Sin didn't even make a move to get it, didn't even see who was calling, and Boyd returned his hostile gaze to Sin.

"They aren't the same circumstances at all." Boyd stared at Sin with an expression that was a cross between incredulous, frustrated and furious. "We weren't involved when I fucked Thierry; we hadn't even kissed yet. It's not like we'd been sleeping together for months or you'd told me you loved me; or like I'd convinced you I needed you and kept telling you to believe in me because of *course* you could fucking trust me. And unless I missed something, it's not like you fucked Ann for work."

Sin's eyebrows drew together at that, still ignoring the phone. "That... is contradictory. Since you're now classified as a homosexual valentine operative, Vivienne or whoever will come calling eventually with an assignment like that and you'll do it because it's for work and that's okay but what I did is a huge betrayal?"

"I didn't even know valentine ops existed when I slept with him," Boyd said in frustration, and the way he glanced in irritation toward the phone showed that the constant buzzing wasn't helping his mood.

He turned his attention back to Sin. "I wish that wasn't in my file. But it is now, the same as assassin's on yours. If they ordered me to? I wouldn't want to. Thierry was my decision, not someone else's to make for me. But if I had no other choice? If there were consequences that outweighed saying yes?"

Boyd shook his head, looking tense and agitated. "I don't fucking know, Sin. Maybe I would. You've done shit on missions you didn't want to either and I don't hold it against you. It's work, it's what we do. But if I was involved with you, I would've talked to you about it first."

The phone finally stopped buzzing which Sin was thankful for; he'd been a second away from smashing it. Frustration was starting to boil over into anger as Sin tried to wrap his mind around everything that Boyd was saying to him but none of it was clicking in Sin's mind and that fact made him even madder.

"So what you're saying is that all of the rules can be remade and retold to fit what you'd do in any situation, and you somehow expect me to be able to go along with it and understand it?" Sin shook his head with a frown. "Sorry but it doesn't work that way for me. I don't know how any of this works, I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing in this situation and your own behavior tends to be confusing on the topic. When you saw me in Lunar with Jessica, when you saw all of those other people touching me and flirting with me, you never said a word about it."

"These aren't some mystical rules I'm suddenly making up, Sin," Boyd said sarcastically but he hesitated for a moment before continuing, eyebrows drawing together slightly. "And I'm not changing them just for me; I'd understand if you were pissed at me if I'd been sleeping with someone for the last month and didn't tell you."

"They're actually pretty fucking mystical for me," Sin snapped finally, getting angrier the longer the argument went on. At this point it was obvious that he'd made an error in judgment but Boyd's complete lack of understanding of Sin's viewpoint and the typically condescending tone Boyd took on when they had a disagreement was completely infuriating.

Sin's eyes swept around the apartment; he was suddenly desperate for a cigarette. "I have no reason to understand all of this shit you're telling me. All of these rules and when they come into play-- why should I understand any of it? How should I know when your mind changes about things-- why it was okay in Mexico but it isn't now? I didn't think it would matter as long as things stayed the same between you and me."

Boyd stared at him incredulously. "It's not like relationships come with a rulebook even for those of us with more 'normal' of childhoods," he said somewhat derisively. "You fucking figure it out, the same as the rest of us did. You think about how you'd react if I did the same shit to you. Like, if I told you I'd been fucking Thierry for the past month, are you honestly trying to tell me you wouldn't care?"

Sin sat down finally on the couch and stared into space. He heard his cell phone beep loudly, indicating a new voice mail but he didn't care. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered right now except for the horrible scene that was playing out.

"I can't say how I would actually feel for sure, but I would probably assume it was in your right to do whatever and I had no real say in the matter. I don't think I would stand there raging at you about morals and common sense unless you suddenly changed your behavior towards me. If you had all of these expectations about things, you should have told me. I've spent my entire adult life alienated and locked up so don't try to tell me I should know how all of this works."

Sin appeared outwardly calm but there was an intense anger in his voice. Anger that was directed at himself, at the fact that he'd apparently messed things up so phenomenally, but also aimed at Boyd for not even trying to understand why he'd made such a mistake, for being so judgmental and accusatory. For playing the victim and making Sin out to be the villain while refusing to see any viewpoint other than his own; that he had been severely wronged and Sin had done it deliberately and with no regard for Boyd's feelings.

Boyd seemed to consider this but his expression was skeptical. "Then *why*, Sin?"

Sin finally dragged his gaze back towards his partner and this time it was his turn to hesitate.

How the hell could he even explain it in a way that Boyd would understand? It had taken Sin a long time to work up the courage to even attempt broaching the topic and now with this whole other issue in the middle of it... Was it even a good time to try?

Would Boyd ever be able to understand that Sin had just needed something to make him feel human? To make him feel something other than the incredibly painful burn of guilt? Would Boyd understand that Sin never would have done it even then if he'd known that Boyd would consider it a betrayal?

"I..."

Sin trailed off and looked away again, raking his hands through his hair as indecision and anxiety ran through him. He was more than a little aware of Boyd's impatience, his anger, the fact that he wasn't exactly trying to see Sin's side of this at all. The idea of talking about this now when Boyd didn't seem truly interested in any of his explanations

was disturbing. There had been times in the past when Boyd had thrown things in his face during an argument and Sin didn't know what he would do if Boyd chose to do that now.

"It was just something I needed to do," Sin finally answered wearily, only belatedly realizing how wrong it sounded.

Boyd's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Something you *needed to do*," he repeated flatly. "Why? What made it so imperative?"

"It's not..." Sin broke off again in frustration.

He didn't know what to say, how to convey his thoughts, how to make this better. He wanted to tell Boyd the truth about everything that had happened in the past month and a half but at what cost? Would Boyd even care or take it seriously? There was a chance he wouldn't, that he would respond with the same mocking tone, and Sin didn't think he'd be able to handle that.

After everything that had happened, after everything he'd remembered, after all of the therapy and medication just so he could be someone normal for Boyd, Sin didn't quite know how he'd respond if Boyd ridiculed him for it all. He could almost picture the mocking tone and condescending stares that Boyd would grace him with if he found Sin's response to be unsatisfactory. Boyd had already flat out denied all of Sin's explanation; why would he take this at face value at the moment when he was so determined to be angry?

Sin knew it wouldn't be good if something like that happened; he knew the default destructive behavior he'd automatically resort to and after trying so hard to improve, Sin didn't want that to happen over a stupid argument that could be resolved easily once they were both calmer and Boyd was more willing to listen.

It was better to wait a few hours until Boyd cooled down. This was already a bad situation and Sin wanted to avoid adding more fuel to the fire, with more possibilities for unforgivable statements to be made by both of them out of anger and frustration.

"It's not something I feel comfortable discussing now," Sin said finally, not looking Boyd fully in the face. "Let's just leave it at that for now. That I wouldn't have done it had I known this would happen and that it was something I thought I needed to do..."

Boyd gave Sin a look of contempt. "How am I su--" he started to say with an edge, but Sin's phone insistently buzzed again and the incessant sound was finally too much for Boyd.

"Jesus," he growled as he strode to the phone and swiped it off the counter. "Would you fucking--" Boyd looked at the name flashing on the front and suddenly went very still before looking up.

There had been many times they'd argued, many times when Boyd had been angry in Sin's presence, but Boyd's expression had never quite looked like it did then. The usual cold, indignant, or distant aspects were all missing; instead, he glared at Sin with obvious disgust.

His body was so tense that his knuckles were white around the phone and his complete lack of composure made him somehow look more his age and less of the mature, older adult he typically tried to emulate. There was nothing calm or collected about him as he gripped the phone in one hand and approached Sin.

At first, it almost seemed like he was going to walk past Sin but instead Boyd slammed the phone into Sin's chest with all his strength, hard enough to make Sin rock back slightly. "Forget it," he said with quiet fury.

Sin shook his head slowly but didn't respond. There were so many things he could say in his own defense to try to explain but at the moment it was obvious none of it would matter so he said nothing.

Boyd looked up at Sin and even though he was several inches shorter, right then the tenuous control he had over his anger made him seem taller than he was, more intense, like a contained storm. He abruptly let go of the phone and didn't bother to wait to see if Sin would catch it.

Without saying anything else, Boyd stalked past Sin and slammed the door shut behind him as he left.

Sin could do nothing for several moments but stare blankly at the closed door and try to figure out what the hell had just happened. After awhile he finally looked down at the phone, at the message that announced he had two missed calls, and he hurled the device against the wall.

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It was a measure of Boyd's state of mind that he didn't immediately hide his stormy expression as he strode across the compound, and he'd never be able to say how many people saw him, or if there were even other people around at all.

All he could see was Ann's name flashing on Sin's cell phone, all he could feel was anger, betrayal and hurt at a far more heightened, agitated level than he'd ever felt before. There was so much going through his mind that he couldn't even sort it out and the disbelief was the only thing keeping the entire moment from feeling surreal.

He couldn't believe it had come to this; he'd actually convinced himself before knocking on Sin's door that he'd probably been wrong. Even when he'd considered that maybe something more was going on, he'd never expected Sin to be so casual about it, to act like it wasn't a big deal. Like it wouldn't matter if Boyd did the same.

Even then, Boyd expected there to be some kind of reason. After years of defending Sin's actions because of his past, even as angry as Boyd had been, he'd made himself pause at the idea that maybe Sin just was that clueless. But it was pretty obvious to Boyd that Sin had just been bullshitting about actually having a reasonable explanation. If there had been a reason, why couldn't Sin just say it? Why did it seem like he was trying to come up with a lie?

Unconsciously, Boyd found himself heading toward his room in the bunkers. He nearly slammed open his room door, thoroughly startling Toby who was sitting on his bed reading. Boyd didn't care that Toby would clearly be able to tell something was wrong. All Boyd wanted was to be left alone but not in an oppressive environment where he'd have to deal with memories that would anger him further, which was exactly what would have happened had he gone to his house or Crater Lake.

Boyd shut the door behind him firmly and, not looking Toby in the eye, threw himself on his bed and buried his face in his pillow. It took every fiber of his being to resist the urge to just shout loudly and furiously.

Agitation built in him until his shoulders were so tense that they started to ache. He wished he could just go to sleep, he wished he could start the day over, he wished none of this had ever happened and he wished he could think about something else but he couldn't.

It was undeniable to him now that his relationship with Sin had grown strained; a gradual regression that had been happening for months but maybe he just hadn't wanted to see. Or maybe he'd been too wrapped up in his own feelings to understand.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized where it had started.

Ever since he'd told Sin that he loved him, it seemed like distance had started to grow between them. It was even worse than it had been in Monterrey when they'd first started sleeping together, long before emotions had entered the conversation; at least then they'd talked. But even Monterrey hadn't been perfect by any means.

At Lunar, Sin had clearly had no problem kissing Jessica right in front of Boyd. Sin had apparently thought as little of that as he had of sleeping with Ann Connors. Boyd now wondered if he should have paid more attention to Sin's behavior at that time.

Boyd had thought that he'd had no right to tell Sin what to do at that time, even if they'd been sleeping together, because they hadn't mentioned feelings. But it was now clear to Boyd that feelings meant little to Sin; that regardless of what Boyd felt, it didn't affect what Sin did.

Sin claimed he didn't care about Ann but he still slept with her; he claimed Boyd mattered to him but it didn't stop him from doing whatever he felt like and expecting Boyd to just blindly agree.

Boyd had struggled against all the walls he'd built within himself, against the fear of believing in someone again, believing in a future the same as he finally had with Lou before everything had fallen apart. He'd fought against his own fears and hesitations to reach out to Sin, to lay himself open and trust someone again, to start to believe, to let himself love.

And this was what happened.

Sin hadn't even been able to think of a believable explanation for sleeping with Ann and expected Boyd to take "just because" and "I wouldn't have done it" at face value. It was the same way the rest of their relationship had been going lately; Sin did whatever he wanted and expected Boyd to be fine with it.

What did that mean when, even after a confession of love, their relationship had been more physical than anything lately? Boyd had been so certain that Sin cared, but had he? Or had Sin's definition of 'care' been so far removed from Boyd's that they weren't

even compatible? Had the physical become more important to Sin-- had sex become the greater connection between the two of them? And if so, *why* had Boyd so easily been replaced?

The entire situation just left Boyd feeling used.

He'd done all that he felt he could do for Sin, given up everything he'd had to give. He'd given more than just sex to Sin; he'd let Sin see and touch his scars, physical reminders of a past Boyd had tried to run from. He'd told Sin things he'd never told anyone else, he'd believed in Sin and through that had started to try to believe in himself. He'd let Sin become a source of strength and security; he'd let himself believe that Sin would be there for him, that no matter what, he always had someone he could rely on.

He'd consciously given more of himself to Sin than he'd ever given anyone before and it apparently hadn't been enough.

Boyd had nothing more to give, nothing more to say.

What Sin had done was more than cheating; it was a betrayal of all the belief and trust Boyd had put into his partner, into the relationship they had. It was a slap in the face after all the times he'd defended Sin, he'd protected Sin, even when Sin wasn't there. After how much Boyd had struggled just to get to where he was, after he had been through so much because of and for Sin, after Boyd had forced himself to get past his deep-seeded fear and let himself go, let himself believe again--

To have this happen felt like Boyd threw himself into open air and Sin turned his back instead of catching him. It was like carving another tattoo of *I'll believe* on his body and having Sin show up the next day saying there was no reason to believe because it had never been what Boyd had thought it was.

Maybe Boyd's biggest mistake all along was that belief in the first place.

Maybe he'd been a complete idiot to ignore everyone's warnings-- to keep reaching for Sin even after his mother, Connors, Carhart, Kassian, Thierry-- everyone said not to or wondered why he did. After everyone questioned the relationship, his loyalty, his motives. After even Sin himself had questioned Boyd more than once.

If he was being honest-- truly honest with himself, what proof had he ever had that Sin actually felt anything like love for him? Unrelated words and the way Sin had changed. But Sin's progression from being a completely sarcastic asshole to the man he was

today could have had nothing to do with any feelings of affection. The change in Sin's behavior could have solely been based on the fact that Boyd was giving Sin a chance to be someone other than the stereotype. And that wasn't affection or love-- that was a sense of comfort and friendship.

Sin had once said he'd liked the idea of Boyd-- had that been all it was all along?

The role Boyd filled for him as a friend and an endless source of forgiveness and understanding-- and nothing to do with what he felt for Boyd?

It felt like Sin didn't care what Boyd wanted, like he was leading Boyd on.

Sin wanted what he could get from Boyd, just as he always had. In the beginning, he'd wanted someone to make him feel like he had a friend. Then he'd wanted someone to keep forgiving him. Then, once Boyd had introduced sex to him, Sin had wanted someone to fuck.

The feeling of helpless betrayal and intense pain heightened overwhelmingly, as Boyd whispered the words in his mind that he didn't want to acknowledge but now couldn't help: Sin didn't give a fuck about Boyd except for what Boyd did for him, what role Boyd filled.

All the trust, belief, security-- those quiet moments of contentment with the rise and fall of Sin's chest, the feel of Sin's silky hair soft between his fingers-- all the terror and insanity and pain-- blood beneath his hands in Monterrey and Sin's hitched breath in the van before he'd stilled like a broken doll, Boyd chained down and screaming in the Agency as he'd been forced to see the pictures, as he'd been convinced he'd once again killed his lover and partner, the suffocating guilt that had shut him down, that had skewed the world around him and made it impossible to know what had been real, made him feel hopeless for his future just as before--

Everything he'd done for Sin, everything he'd become for him, every moment he'd put himself out there for a person he'd thought he knew-- It was now twisted and strained, and he was finally seeing what he should have all along: From the beginning, he'd only been used.

For a moment, Boyd felt like he balanced on a precipice with two ways to fall.

His head pounded with the pressure of his face buried in the pillow, with the way the position exacerbated the bruises from Venezuela. He let himself fully feel the burning in

his eyes, the tension in his shoulders, the angry knot in his stomach, the suffocation of the cloth covering his mouth and nose, the physical feeling of nausea from such intense emotional turmoil, the aches and pains and bruises from being beaten and thrown around the day before.

He could have focused on that, could have lost himself in the discomfort as a way to give himself something to concentrate on. He could have tried to deal with the rest of the emotions later.

But wasn't that just running away? Wasn't that just a distraction, an avoidance of the actual issue? Wouldn't that just make him into the person he'd been struggling so hard to leave behind?

The other side was facing the situation head-on and finally acknowledging what he should have all along:

That maybe he never should have gotten emotionally involved in the first place. That he'd been fooling himself by thinking that Sin ever actually cared about him the way Boyd did for Sin. That all their problems, all the times they hurt and lashed out at each other, were more true than the times he'd thought they'd been experiencing a sense of peace. That he'd let this attachment weaken him, skew his perception and thoughts.

That he couldn't help that Sin and he would remain work partners once training was over but that he could affect the rest. That the best thing he could do right then-- to protect himself, his feelings, even his career and health as training continued to loom around him and was only going to get worse-- was to cut off all emotional ties.

That maybe he really *was* a fool for loving someone who would never or could never truly love him back.

Faced with the two options, it wasn't even a question which was ultimately best to choose. He'd let Sin use him for months-- years, actually-- and he wasn't going to let that continue. He'd let Sin upset his emotional balance, let him take his love and throw it back at him, but that didn't mean he had to let Sin disrupt what little else of a life he had as well.

Maybe he didn't have someone to believe in anymore but he still had something he could throw himself into: his job, his training. He had the bet with himself that he could improve, that he could stand strong on his own, that he could be his own person. This

just made it even more important that he succeed; if he couldn't rely on anyone else, he had to at least be able to rely on himself.

He had nothing else to fall back on, nothing else to surround himself with. The truths he'd thought he could trust were not truths after all, just misdirection and denial, and the most important relationship in his recent years had probably never been what he'd believed it to be.

Slowly, Boyd let the familiar, all-encompassing feeling of iciness creep in and replace the anger and betrayal, the doubt and disbelief, the pain and hurt so strong it otherwise felt suffocating. He let his emotions snap and break off one by one until he felt nothing but the comfortable, safe feeling of absolute detachment.

Right then, he thanked his mother for the coldness she'd taught him; for the clarity it could bring, for the protection it represented. Because if he didn't do this he knew he'd fall apart; he knew he wouldn't be able to contain the anger and hurt.

He knew he would cry until he had nothing left in him and he knew none of that would make him feel any better, only worse-- that he'd only feel disgusted with himself later for not having moved forward when he'd had the chance. That instead he had let himself continue to be so devastatingly affected by someone who so cavalierly betrayed what he'd thought had been the most important truths in his life right now.

He stayed still for nearly a minute longer before he felt it was safe to move. He shifted and, keeping his expression completely emotionless, he sat up on the bed and decided to work on the encryption he'd been trying to decipher since the first week. He was fairly confident that he'd correctly identified it as a Vigenère cipher and he just had to identify the correct keyword. He'd determined that the keyword was seven letters long and that the first letter was G. He grabbed the code book, his notebook and a pen and focused solely on his work. The cold was like a buffer that let him concentrate on what was important.

He could feel Toby's eyes on him but the other man didn't say anything, continuing to stay on his own side of the room with a book open in front of him. However, after several long moments there was an audible shift as Toby sat up and seemed ready to finally comment. Before he could, there was a loud knock on the door.

"What the--" Toby stood entirely, staring at the door with a look of combined confusion and annoyance. He shot Boyd a questioning glance that Boyd didn't return or acknowledge. Toby crossed the room in two strides, pulling the door open.

Unsurprisingly, Sin stood in the doorway with a deep frown etched into his features. He shoved Toby aside unceremoniously and scowled down at Boyd. "Get lost, McAvoy."

Toby gawked at him uncertainly, struggling to find his voice and making several strange noises in the process. "You probably shouldn't be here, Senior Agent Vega," he said slowly, staring up at the much taller man. Now that they were standing directly next to each other, he realized how Sin really did tower over people. He also looked a lot more dangerous up-close when he wasn't falling asleep on a table.

Boyd didn't even look up at Sin. "Why are you here." It came out more as a statement than a question.

Sin ignored Toby's comment and after Toby's obvious refusal to leave, pretended the man wasn't even standing there, opting to kick the door shut instead. "We need to finish our conversation."

"We did." Boyd checked two separate sheets of paper he had with what looked like a series of grids, graphs, and lists with letters and check marks drawn on them.

Sin exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing slightly at Boyd. "You're not even giving me a chance to fix this."

Boyd made a soft noise in his throat and started drawing a second bar graph, looking between it, an incomprehensible list of letters, and a list of letters with numbers written next to them. The graphs had the alphabet listed below them, starting at different letters, and the bars went up to varying heights with different numbers listed on the side.

After a moment he looked up without expression. "What do you want to say?"

"That you're misinterpreting everything," Sin said, appearing grateful that Boyd was giving him an opportunity to speak at all. "There's some things we need to talk about but you just have to understand that now isn't a good time."

"Hmm." Boyd considered him a moment then looked back down at the graph, checked it against block of random letters and a separate list with check marks, and drew another bar in the graph. "What reaction are you expecting from me?" His tone was completely neutral, as if he was interviewing Sin for a job.

Sin just stared at Boyd and his expression went from hopeful to weary. "Are we back to this bullshit again?"

"So you're expecting me to just accept you at face value and act like nothing is wrong," Boyd observed, looking back up. There was nothing cruel in his tone; he simply seemed to be verifying the situation as he saw it. "Is that accurate?"

"Don't give me this idiotic Vivienne act," Sin snapped impatiently. "I didn't say for you to accept anything or act any particular way. I'm just tired of always going back to square one with you every single time there's a problem."

Toby's brows furrowed and he looked between Sin and Boyd in relative confusion although he definitely appeared intrigued.

"And I'm not asking you to accept my reaction," Boyd said simply. He set his pen down and studied Sin closely. "I don't understand what you thought you'd gain by coming here. You're telling me exactly what you said before-- I'm misinterpreting and we'll talk later. Maybe I won't always be here for the talk later, Sin. Maybe it's too late for the talk at all."

"Why would it be too late? Because you form your own conclusions without waiting to hear what I have to say?" The irritation and resentment was clear in Sin's voice.

"Because you're giving me no other choice. You have some brilliant explanation but won't share it; you don't want me to form any conclusions yet you do what you did and then tell me to wait." Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Wait for what, Sin? For you to feel like it's 'something you need to do?' Why should I put my life on hold for your explanations? It won't change what happened."

Sin stared at him incredulously. "So basically what I have to say doesn't matter. That's what you're telling me."

Boyd looked back down at the notebook and picked up the pen again as he glanced between the graph and another sheet of notebook paper in front of him. "Unless the fate of the world rested on you sleeping with her at that moment, I can't imagine it would," he said simply.

Toby's eyes opened wide and he stared at the two of them in shock but had the intelligence not to say anything.

Sin's eyes narrowed at Boyd and he brought a hand to his temples. He seemed on the verge of completely losing his patience but he managed to grit out, "So what are you telling me then, Boyd?"

Boyd didn't answer at first but when he looked up he was expressionless and point blank. "I'm saying this entire relationship was a mistake from the beginning. And I'm doing the first intelligent thing I've done since I met you: I'm ending it."

"You are such fucking bullshit," Sin practically shouted and without warning his fist slammed into the wall, caving the drywall in easily around his hand. Toby jumped, startled, and backed away.

Sin crossed the distance between the door and the bed and stared down at Boyd, waves of anger and frustration practically radiating off him although his expression was clearly distraught. "Every single time things get hard you pack up and run away and I'm always the one going after you. For someone who claims to be so fucking in love, you're really quick to give up."

"I'm not giving up, I'm being realistic," Boyd said, completely unaffected by Sin's reaction. "What I feel for you hasn't changed your actions at all. If anything, the relationship's been getting worse. Whether I love you or not has nothing to do with whether I should have stayed with you all that time. If you can't even respect me then it's pointless."

"Being realistic?" Sin asked bitterly. He raked his hands through his hair violently, breathing hard and appearing to be taking this very poorly. He was practically trembling, voice shaking with anger or sadness, it wasn't obvious which one.

"No, you're being like everyone else. You're doing what you condemned everyone else for doing all along. You judge me and my actions and don't take anything else into account. Everything is suddenly so black and white when the problem is between you and me but I fucking rip someone's throat out and you go out of your way excusing my behavior because of how fucked up my entire existence has been. But now that doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that I have no idea what the hell I'm doing here or that I made a stupid mistake because I honestly didn't fucking know how bad it was. Now nothing else matters to you but that."

"Do you understand *why* it matters so much?" The cold detachment cocooned Boyd from any reaction to seeing Sin so upset as he continued; instead, Boyd stated the facts as he saw them. "Because I can't trust you now; I'll never know what to expect from you."

You ask me to keep believing but you've given me no reason. You want me to wait for you but you won't wait for me. You say you have a reason but you won't tell me. I told you I loved you and suddenly our only real connection is sex, then even that is no longer just between us. It could go on. This is ridiculous, Hsin. I'm doing us both a favor by ending this charade."

"You're doing yourself a favor." Sin backed away from Boyd until he was near the door, his face downcast, miserable. "Taking the easy way out instead of trying to understand me. I'd gone almost thirty years without sex and you can realistically tell yourself I decided to sleep with her because I had nothing better to do? That the only reason I spent time with you is for that? Bullshit. This is just you turning your back because now you're seeing that I can't automatically be the way you expected me to be. It's easier to write me off and pretend like the last two years boil down to nothing in the face of a couple of quick fucks with someone else."

Toby's mouth actually dropped open slightly.

Boyd watched Sin a moment, expression and posture completely unreadable. Another time he may have felt something at seeing Sin's misery; he would have backtracked, apologized, been patient and maybe even taken the blame. But right then he didn't see it that way. He hadn't come to this decision lightly or without warrant.

Sin could say whatever he wanted but it didn't change the fact that their relationship *had* almost exclusively been about sex lately, that it *did* seem like everything else had fallen away. Regardless of whether the sex with Ann had meant anything to Sin, it meant something to Boyd.

"Believe what you want of me," Boyd said finally, "but this has been building for awhile, if I'd only paid attention. Maybe it's just easier for you to think I'm being unfair or selfish than to understand why it's come to this."

Sin released a sound that was halfway between a snarl and a growl and he reached down, yanking Boyd's books off the bed and hurling them violently across the room. Toby had to dodge out of the way to avoid being hit. Boyd's eyes narrowed dangerously, the first expression he'd shown since Sin had entered the room, but he didn't move or otherwise react.

"Fuck this," Sin spat. "Fuck your jealous unreasonable bullshit. I knew I couldn't tell you anything-- I knew you'd never understand anything. You're too wrapped up in what you expect, what you want. All you want to do is focus on your fucking training so when I

come to you, when I need to talk to you, you completely dismiss me. You have a certain idea of how our relationship should be, how I should act and think and if anything goes against the ideas you already had, you're done with it all."

Sin turned away, jerking the door open. "Just-- just fuck you." He disappeared into the hallway, slamming the door shut with such violent force that the door frame splintered and the top hinge came loose.

Boyd's jaw clenched and he glowered icily at the door, entirely too aware of his books against the wall. For all that he tried to keep the detachment in place, he couldn't help a muffled spike of anger at Sin's parting shot, at the fact that Sin thought he had the right to come in there and blame Boyd for everything then throw all his hard work around.

That Sin thought he could just label this as Boyd being jealous, completely dismissing Boyd's viewpoint as nothing but unreasonable selfishness. That Sin thought he had the right to make Boyd out to be the bad guy when Sin had started this all.

Tension built in Boyd again and he had to resist the urge to slam the door open, to yell, "Fuck you, asshole!" at Sin, to make it clear he didn't want to see him again unless he absolutely had to.

Instead, he stood and, with curt movements, stalked across the room toward his books. The book about codes had a number of pages that were bent and the top several sheets of his notebook were ripped. The separate sheets with the Vigenère square and the frequency distribution graphs were partially crumpled from when they had caught between the pages and had fallen beneath the book. The books cast against the wall were like a metaphor for where he felt his life was like at that moment; messed up, wrenched to the side, and partially ruined but still somehow functional.

Picking up the books and papers off the floor, he tried to straighten the pages out without ripping anything further and was only marginally successful. He strode back to his bed where he placed them firmly in front of him as he sat down. His eyes were narrowed and expression cold as he flipped through the code book to find his place again.

He could still feel Toby's eyes on him but despite a slow exhale of breath, Toby didn't make a sound.

The words jumbled in front of Boyd's eyes and he felt completely on edge behind the cold wall he'd built to block out the emotions. Now that Sin wasn't directly in front of him,

it was harder to keep the detachment fully in place. He had no intentions of cutting off all emotions in his entire life; that would serve no purpose and would just make him lose all the hard work he'd been doing trying to be more approachable to the other trainees.

If he let this destroy all that, he'd just let Sin negatively affect even more of his life than he already had. All he really needed to do was cut off all emotional ties with Sin; to turn their relationship back to a business partnership; to be strictly professional around him the way he'd never quite managed to be. And the only way he knew how to do that with Sin was to be utterly cold and detached. Without blanketing his emotions it would be too difficult not to get involved again, even just in pointless arguments that would go nowhere.

However that meant nothing now that Sin was gone. The cool, emotionless demeanor he'd shown earlier was slipping until the anger and betrayal surfaced, until he looked agitated and annoyed.

He refused to look at Toby as he focused solely on the books in front of him, on the sentences that partially made sense then became incomprehensible letters and words, on the attempts to analyze the frequency distribution in order to determine the keyword.

He didn't like that Toby had witnessed the argument; that it was painfully obvious now what exactly his relationship had been with Sin. Given Toby's preoccupation with connections, he didn't know how the man would interpret what he'd witnessed but Boyd doubted it would be beneficial for himself, whatever it was.

Time passed as he concentrated completely on the methodical analysis of the number and type of letters at predetermined spaces in the cipher text in comparison to a standard distribution of the alphabet. Boyd slowly settled down enough that his expression fell back to something closer to neutral and he relaxed his shoulders a little.

"I hope you know you're going to fix the door," Toby said suddenly from his side of the room. After standing beside the broken door and gaping at Boyd for a long period of time, he'd finally retreated but it was obvious he wasn't going to let the incident slide into oblivion without comment.

Boyd continued writing without looking up, feeling unsurprised but not particularly pleased by the comment. "Alright."

Toby continued to stare at him. "So get up and do it then or do you want me to have to explain how it got that way?"

The quiet scratch of the pen across paper stopped as Boyd looked up at him and then the door. Although Boyd had initially intended to fix it later, Toby had a point. He didn't want to explain the broken door any more than he wanted Toby to; it was going to be difficult enough hiding the hole in the wall until maintenance could fix it, and he could only hope none of the other trainees had been in their rooms and overheard the argument.

He set the books to the side and walked to the door, not looking at Toby as he got closer and examined the door. It was hard not to think about Sin's parting words while he studied a physical reminder, but he didn't let his anger and frustration with the situation resurface.

Luckily, it seemed that all the hinge needed was for the bolts to be re-tightened although Boyd wasn't going to be able to do anything about the damaged door frame. He grabbed the toolbox from the corner it was shoved in and, without speaking, began tightening the screws.

Toby sat down casually at the end of the bed although his blue eyes didn't leave Boyd's back. After a moment he spoke in the condescending tone he'd used on Boyd when they first met. "It was extremely idiotic for you to bring your drama here. Obviously if the argument was that heated and you walked away in the middle of it, he was going to go searching you out."

Once again, Boyd did not immediately respond; he simply finished fixing the hinge, then tested the door a few times to make sure it worked before he left it shut. He glanced past Toby but didn't meet his eyes.

"It won't happen again." Boyd returned the toolbox to the corner.

"Good. That entire scene mortified me and I wasn't involved," Toby said blandly, drawing his thick eyebrows together in disapproval. "Seriously, Beaulieu. I knew you were uneducated but now I think you're just plain stupid. Did you honestly think you could have a normal relationship with that man?"

Boyd's shoulders tensed and he kept his face toward the corner for a moment. He really didn't want to think about this anymore. He could already feel a headache forming and he didn't want to have to deal with that on top of everything else.

"It was poor judgment," Boyd said, then turned and firmed his tone and expression as he met Toby's eyes. "I realize it was my mistakes that got us here, but I wouldn't have chosen for you to witness that any more than I'm sure you wanted to see it. I'll fix the room; that's my fault. We interrupted whatever you were doing; that's also my fault. I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. But I really don't need your commentary right now, Toby."

Toby held his gaze for a moment before shrugging casually and scooting back on his bed, crossing his legs. He was silent for a grand total of two minutes, giving Boyd enough time to sit on his bed and start working on the decryption, before Toby spoke again. "For a minute I thought he was actually going to cry."

Boyd kept his gaze firmly on the cipher text. He didn't want to think about whether or not Sin actually had been, although the man had clearly been upset by the end. Boyd wasn't going to get anywhere if he kept being brought back to the very conversation he was trying to move past.

"He can do what he wants," Boyd said after a moment.

Toby shrugged, unfazed and continued on. "Who breaks a door just by slamming it, anyway?" He frowned at the door frame again. "He doesn't look nearly as strong as he must be. It's disturbing. I can't believe you successfully had intercourse with him."

Boyd didn't know which was worse; Toby's choice of wording or the fact that the man was apparently thinking about Boyd's sex life. "Can we not talk about this?" he asked slightly wearily as he turned the page in his notebook.

Toby sighed and lay back on his bed, staring up at the ceiling in contemplation. He didn't seem condescending now; he seemed mostly curious about the situation and likely thankful to have something else to dwell on other than training.

There was another stretch of silence and then Toby abruptly said, "You know, I'm gay too. I'm not judging you for that, if that's what you think."

Boyd paused, staring at his notebook for a moment before he looked over at Toby thoughtfully. He'd guessed as much before but he didn't know if he wanted Toby to know that. On the other hand, Toby was already privy to some highly compromising information so it couldn't hurt; maybe it would make their vulnerabilities to each other more equal and decrease any possibility of Toby trying to use the information against him. Boyd wasn't trying to be manipulative; he just didn't trust Toby and he didn't want anything else to go wrong.

"I thought you might be," Boyd admitted finally, keeping his tone and body language carefully nonjudgmental.

Toby raised an eyebrow. "Really. How?"

There was a brief pause as Boyd tried to figure out how best to word the reason but then he decided to be forthright. "I walked in on you in the bathroom a few weeks ago, during Krav Maga. I left right away and I don't think anyone else knows, but I thought it may be related to Kassian's one-on-one training."

He tilted his head and added, keeping his tone light, "You may want to go into a stall next time just so it's less obvious. Cade would've probably been an ass to you regardless of who he thought you were thinking of."

Toby stared at him in something akin to horror but after a moment the expression faded and he looked down at his discarded book. It was obvious that he was embarrassed but his reaction wasn't nearly as extreme as it could have been. "Well, I suppose that puts us on an even keel."

"Seems so," Boyd agreed and briefly returned his attention to his notebook and the rips from when Sin had thrown it. He looked back up at Toby with a firm expression. "So you won't tell anyone about this and I won't tell anyone about the bathroom." He said it like a statement, as if that was just the way it was going to be, but there was a hint of a question in it that showed he wanted confirmation from Toby.

Toby nodded briefly, not looking at all angered by this bargain, and dropped his eyes to his book. However, after a moment he added, "I do have some questions for you later, though."

Boyd just shook his head, not even wanting to think about that at the moment, although he was unsurprised. If he'd been sitting in his room quietly reading and Toby had suddenly come barging in with that much drama, he would have had questions too.

He would deal with the questions when they came but for the moment he had a cipher to break.

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Sin sat in the darkest corner of his apartment with his head down as he slumped against the wall, gripping the cell phone with enough strength to crush it. Despite the abuse it'd already taken that day, the device was still usable even with the shattered screen.

And this time when it rang, Sin picked up without hesitation.

"I'm done with this," he said immediately, voice rough and quiet.

"Done with what?" Ann's voice queried on the other end. "The medication? Have you had side effects? The General and I have been trying to reach you all day."

Sin stared at the floor as he spoke flatly. "I'm done with this whole thing. I was doing it for Boyd and now he doesn't want anything to do with me so there's no point."

"What are you talking about?" Ann seemed truly confused.

"My statement was fairly straightforward." This time it was said in an impatient growl. "I'm done with this fucking shit. I'm not showing up for any more sessions, I don't want it. I don't want to see you. I don't want to deal with this anymore. I don't care what happens."

There was a long pause on the other end before Ann replied. "That would be a foolish course of action to take."

Sin had to struggle to stop himself from smashing the phone against the wall as impatience and impotent anger boiled within him. Why would no one ever listen to him? "I don't care what you think."

"Well when you stop taking your medication and then whatever happened with Boyd blows over, you'll regret having been sent to the Fourth, won't you?" she asked derisively.

Sin hesitated, eyebrows drawing together. "Maybe it doesn't blow over."

"How can you know for sure?" Ann demanded. "If you got in a fight, things were probably said out of anger. Why don't you wait until you speak with him again before making any drastic decisions that will affect both of you permanently?"

There was another long silence as Sin thought about that. It was possible that the scenario Ann described could very well turn out to be the case. There had been many

times in the past that it seemed like he and Boyd's friendship would never recover and then things turned around completely. The thought gave him a small twinge of hope but it wasn't much and it didn't do a lot for the depression that had settled over him like a heavy blanket.

"I'll continue with the medication for now," he finally agreed. "But our sessions are over. We won't be seeing each other again."

"Sin, what is this all about?" Ann asked finally, confusion obvious now. "What am I missing here?"

"Don't worry about it. That's all you need to know."

The only sound was a faint high-pitched whine in the background, likely distant construction work coming through on one of their lines.

After awhile Ann cleared her throat. "Keep taking your medication and continue checking in with Carhart. I'll ask him to report your progress to me. But in two weeks we have a progress meeting which will be submitted to Vivienne and you need to get your priorities straight before it. Don't go in there with your sullen attitude and start muttering about how you don't care because when you make up with Boyd, suddenly you'll care again and it will be too late."

"Fine," Sin said dully.

"Sin, just tell me what the hell this is about," Ann said suddenly, impatiently. "Is this about--"

Sin hung up before she could finish the sentence.

Chapter 18

The day started entirely too early for most of the trainees' preferences; several of them were drooping with exhaustion. Each day that the training progressed seemed to go longer than the one before and seemed to demand more of them. Even Emma had finally caved and was on her second cup of coffee of the morning; she gave Boyd a sheepish look when she glanced past him as if to say she hadn't lied that time in the cafeteria but apple juice would just not cut it.

As for Boyd, as much as he would have loved a warm cup of tea, he hadn't felt like getting up early enough to get one ahead of time. His body ached and he was growing more exhausted by the day.

As much as he tried to concentrate fully on training-- to not let himself get distracted by everything that had happened, by the fall out with Sin and all the doubts and worries that had grown in the week since then-- there was only so much he could do about it at night.

When he laid down to sleep his mind raced furiously; it was always a jumble of second-guessing the actions he'd taken in training along with obsessing over what he could have done better, and repeatedly replaying his break up with Sin. His dreams were chaotic and stressful and he often woke up multiple times in the middle of the night.

To try to compensate he was throwing himself more intensely into working out in the gym for hours even after the late times their training ended. Harriet, Cade and Emma made regular appearances as well but Boyd was the only one who went so consistently. He wanted to increase his stamina, to practice moves he'd failed at during practical exams, to exhaust himself so much that maybe, just maybe, when he laid down he wouldn't think about anything at all, not even training.

On the nights he hurt too much or simply did not have the energy for the gym, he crouched over his book and notebook far into the night while working on the decryption. Sometimes he had to leave the room because Toby wanted to go to sleep and he often found himself in the cafeteria at those times, simply because it was the quietest and most comfortable room that was open.

He'd run into Andrew a few times during those late night study sessions and the other man had looked distracted and worried as he sat hunched over an untouched soda from the vending machine. They'd inevitably drifted to the same table and wound up talking idly about nothing of importance. Boyd could tell that something had been bothering

Andrew but Andrew hadn't said what except mentioning once that training hadn't quite been what he'd expected.

That mindset must have been apparent to the instructors as well. During combat training, Andrew had repeatedly hesitated to do the killing blows and as a result he'd ultimately been dismissed from training.

The last time Boyd had seen Andrew was one of those late nights in the cafeteria, the day before Andrew was kicked out, and Boyd couldn't help remembering the furrow in Andrew's eyebrows; couldn't help feeling like maybe it was better that Andrew was gone anyway.

This clearly wasn't the type of position Andrew would have felt comfortable with; Andrew wanted to be the hero, he wanted to save people, not kill them to further the Agency's goals. That much had been apparent since the raid when Andrew had been shocked by Boyd's more ruthless ways.

Even so, Boyd thought it was unfortunate the man was gone. Andrew had been one of the people who was amiable and inviting; he'd often smiled at Boyd and would walk over to say something offhanded or joking. The mission they'd been on in France had gone well; like Emma, Andrew had been an easy partner to be around. They were both professional and knew what they were doing but they were also just genuinely nice people.

And Andrew and Boyd had Ryan in common; even if Andrew and Ryan weren't together anymore, even if Boyd hadn't seen Ryan for months, it had still helped to have someone to talk about it with. Andrew had said at one point that he knew he and Ryan would not be getting back together but he still considered Ryan to be his friend.

In any case, Andrew had left abruptly and with little notice but Boyd knew that he'd make the effort to stop and talk to Andrew if they ran across each other in the future.

The group of trainees was now down to Toby, Cade, Jonathan, Emma, Harriet and Boyd. The six of them were sitting in one of the training conference rooms and watching Doug with varying degrees of impatience and exasperation.

Their Instructor had been fiddling with the computer for the past five minutes, swearing at it under his breath and seeming annoyed as he apparently experienced some sort of unforeseen technical difficulty. He finally seemed to fix it because he abruptly straightened and looked at his gathered audience.

"Consider this a study session before the week's training starts," Doug said as he rolled up the sleeves of his black sweater and nodded toward the projection screen. "We're gonna watch the Agency's greatest hits, if you will. Most talked about assignments and whatnot. It's a shame they never documented older missions-- some of the assignments Carhart and Emilio had together would have been good for this."

"Wait, we're going to be actually be watching missions?" Toby asked skeptically. "How's that possible?"

"The few I have are put together from bits of surveillance cameras and also some from recording devices that they attached to the agent." Doug appeared to have expected this question. "It's not a fluid video-- some parts are grainy and it skips around a bit. It's edited so that you can see parts in the agent's viewpoint but also includes outside surveillance videos so that you're able to see the full scope of the situations and events."

"Why would they have an agent bring a recording device on a mission?" Jon spoke up, one of the rare times that he actually had. He was gazing at Doug quizzically, idly fingering one of the scars on his face.

"Cause they wanted to see the agent in question in action," Doug said simply. "Two reasons for that. He was new, young, and somehow accomplished things that shouldn't have been possible all by himself. So Connors and the guys above him wanted to see how that could be. They wanted to observe. And they wanted to prove that having someone that young on the team was worth it."

"Senior Agent Vega?" Toby's question seemed more like a statement and he cast a furtive glance toward Boyd.

"Precisely," Doug said with a wink. "I knew you'd catch up one day!"

Boyd didn't look at Toby but his eyes did narrow slightly as he felt his stomach drop. The last thing he wanted to watch right then was anything to do with Sin.

"Do they do that often?" Emma asked, looking intrigued.

"No. It was done specifically for Vega. In the case of a kid being a field agent, they had to prove the pros outweighed the cons," Doug said with a shrug. "But that's not the point of this. The point of this is to show you what's expected."

Cade leaned back in his chair and watched the screen, actually looking interested.

Doug stared at them for a moment before turning off the lights and going to the computer, clicking a few things before an image appeared on the projection screen.

It was a very clear and sharp video recording from a surveillance camera outside what appeared to be a large warehouse or factory. The image didn't move for a moment and Doug took the time to explain.

"This was taken before the war ended, a couple of years before the second major wave of attacks on US soil. The Agency got information that this warehouse was a front for a ring of foreign spies who were staking out a nearby military base. The assignment was to take it out and to try to get a captive."

"Why would they send someone solo?" Toby asked dubiously, brows drawing together.

Doug shrugged. "My theory is that it was a test to see if his previous solo assignments wasn't nothin' more than a string of good luck."

There was finally movement on the screen and a figure appeared from the left, slinking through the shadows so quickly that it seemed to disappear before they could identify who it was. It was obvious that the person, presumably Sin, still had to be in the camera's view but he seemed to have all but blended in with the darkness.

The image abruptly changed as the camera switched to a first person view point. Sin wasn't visible on the screen but every time he moved the camera moved, and it was actually eerie in a sense. Although this had been taken years ago, it felt like they were there with him, sneaking around this large factory without a partner, without anyone to watch his back. It actually caused a sense of tense anticipation to build among many of the trainees.

It was the kind of anxiety someone felt when watching a suspenseful movie except that it was real; this had actually happened.

A pair of skinny arms and hands appeared in front of the camera as Sin pulled himself up effortlessly onto a creaking black fire-escape. Despite the fact that his limbs had the familiar olive coloring, he seemed incredibly thin with hands that looked almost fragile. They were completely different from the powerful, callused hands that Boyd was now so familiar with.

Boyd narrowed his eyes a little further and tried not to be affected by the video as a hint of discomfort grew within him.

The camera angle changed again and switched back to the surveillance tape. It was farther from Sin now but there was no mistaking his scrawny figure, clad all in black and crouched on the fire escape. He couldn't have been much taller than 5'3" at the time, over a foot shorter than Sin stood now. His face was obscured by the shadows but it was obvious that he was quite young.

"How old is he?" Emma asked, her voice quiet but obviously shocked.

"Bout fourteen," Doug replied casually, not appearing alarmed by this at all.

No one said anything but the trainees, even Cade, stared in a sense of disturbed awe as the child version of Sin fiddled with something. Boyd's was the only expression that remained studiously blank.

It was too dark to make out what Sin was doing and he was so small that he practically disappeared into the shadows several times but then the image changed to the first person view point.

There were loud rustling sounds and the camera abruptly dropped and darkened before an image of Sin appeared above it. He'd taken off his outer jacket and the camera along with it as he unhooked his bullet-proof vest and wrestled it off, leaving himself only in a long sleeved black t-shirt.

Sin tugged his backpack on again and picked up the camera, examining it for a moment. Finally his face came into view and young Sin seemed to glare out at them moodily although he was actually staring at the tiny camera disdainfully. His skin was a shade lighter than it was now which made his jet black hair more pronounced and the green of his eyes more vivid. He was a striking child and it seemed as though the intensity of his stare had been there even fifteen years ago, although seeing it in the eyes of a child was mildly off-putting.

Boyd felt the discomfort grow; it was difficult not to be moved by Sin's youth, knowing what sort of situation he was in. At that same age, Boyd had been quite happy with Lou and had lived a relatively normal life. He'd smiled and joked around and even though life hadn't been perfect, he'd been able to have fun.

Sin, on the other hand, had been working solo on missions that included killing people, and he'd been doing it for years even before this video. It was a disturbing thought to Boyd because it emphasized how messed up Sin's life truly had been.

After a few seconds, Sin's face disappeared and he seemed to attach the camera, a pin as Doug informed them, to his clothing once again. The next several moments of video followed him as he found a way into the warehouse and slunk around noiselessly as he explored.

At one point, young Sin approached a small tidy office. There was a heavysset man inside who swung around as the door opened wider. He began sputtering at Sin in English although he had a distinct French accent.

"What do you think you are doing, boy? This is not a place for games!"

Sin didn't respond and the man swore, reaching for a radio, most likely to berate whoever was supposed to be on watch. Before he had the chance to speak, those fragile-looking hands shot up and Sin broke the man's neck in two clean movements.

The corpse fell to the floor, blank eyes appearing and disappearing from the view of the camera quickly as Sin calmly stepped around him and sat on the chair by the desk. Thin fingers flew over the keyboard as he searched the computer for something. After awhile, he put a memory stick into the computer and began downloading several files.

The scene played out for several moments and the trainees watched as the young agent skulked around the base like a ghost, shadowing behind or alongside the spies and somehow managing to stay completely silent and unseen.

Sin slipped into other offices, downloading information and planting devices, stealing information and obviously planning to destroy all traces of the original copies before the mission was through. Doug explained that they were low grade explosive devices and completely decimated the research and notes that the spies had been gathering, although it hadn't harmed the building itself. It had been done just in case anyone was left alive and uncaptured, someone who could have still used the data.

Sin moved ridiculously fast, somehow getting around the entire warehouse and completing his tasks in the space of a few minutes before someone finally realized that the man in the upstairs office had been killed. Sin was crouched in the corner of what appeared to be an exposed upper level when a man came running down the stairs yelling to his comrades.

Sin crept over like a deadly panther before suddenly moving so fast that the surroundings were temporarily a blur. Sin once again cracked a neck without hesitating but the man's body went tumbling over the side of the railing. There was barely a pause before loud shouting and a confused commotion of sound could be heard. Sin began moving even faster, so fast that the camera spun sickeningly from his view point and made it almost impossible to watch.

Thankfully it switched to another exterior view and they watched as fourteen-year-old Sin ducked out of the way of a hail of bullets. They watched as he whipped out two huge guns that almost seemed comical in his thin hands and began firing them with deadly precision, his accuracy not at all put off by the fact that he was simultaneously running and dodging out of the way.

At one point he jumped up on the railing of the spiral staircase that led to the ground floor, incredibly recklessly considering his lack of a bulletproof vest, and went sliding down as he continued to unload his weapons. A bullet skimmed his arm but Sin barely reacted and sprang off the end of the railing to roll beneath a large table.

His speed was extraordinary and he'd likely removed the vest so that it wouldn't slow him down but even then it seemed almost unnatural. The fact that a child could be capable of such talented killing... it was almost unreal. His speed and accuracy almost made it seem as though this couldn't have really happened; that instead it was a scene from action movies long ago where the scene had been edited to appear more intense.

But in reality, a single teenage boy wreaked havoc on a building full of adults who were armed with weapons that couldn't seem to catch him. The main room was splattered with arcs and sprays of blood and dead bodies littered the floor like discarded toys.

The remaining few people alive abruptly charged the table and overturned it. Sin bounded out of the way quickly but the man lunged toward him with a shout, yanking the scrawny teenager backwards as a knife went plunging toward Sin's face.

There were shouts in the background in French and Boyd translated absently; the men were telling their comrade to save the kid for interrogation.

Sin caught the knife with his bare hand, the edges slicing into his fingers viciously as he reared his free hand back to slam into the man's nose and his knee came up simultaneously to smash the man's crotch. Sin's attacker cried out in surprise and Sin twisted the man's wrist violently, a loud pop ringing through the air as he did so.

One second the man was holding the knife and in the next, it was in Sin's hand as he sliced the man's throat open.

Blood sprayed everywhere and Sin ran at the remaining two spies. Any ideas of taking back a captive had obviously disappeared from Sin's mind, if they'd ever been there at all, as he attacked them ferociously.

"He's a phenomenal fighter," Jon commented idly as teenage Sin destroyed both men with his bare hands, moving with the self-confidence of a veteran killer. His fighting style was hard to describe and likely impossible to emulate. There were elements of Krav Maga in the way he fought but it was more the idea behind it than the actual moves they'd been learning.

Sin wasn't fighting in a textbook style of martial arts but he was definitely using the principles applied in Krav Maga. Fight to completely disable and kill in the quickest and most ruthless ways possible.

After a moment Sin was the only living person left on the camera. He stood there amongst the slaughtered spies and stared at them seemingly blankly for a stretch of time before he looked directly up at the camera. Without warning he raised his gun and shot twice before the tape went white.

The entire mission had lasted all of fifteen minutes.

Boyd looked down at his desk, the discomfort having grown throughout the video, leaving him feeling vaguely sick to his stomach.

He didn't know why exactly that was; whether it bothered him more to see the ruthlessness without immediately excusing Sin as he usually would or, more likely, the obvious reminder of how different Sin really was, of the situations he'd been in even at such an early age. Boyd had known Sin had been killing people since he was young but it was another thing to see a teenage version of his former lover, to see him with the body of a child but with the ruthless eyes of an assassin.

Boyd didn't let the feeling overwhelm him, though. He couldn't let himself. What happened with Sin when he was fourteen was no longer Boyd's business other than how it affected their work relationship.

Boyd did his best to push the thoughts aside; to forget the memory of that blank face splattered in blood and, worse, the distressed expression that Sin had shown before he'd left Boyd's room the week before. Boyd didn't like the feeling that quietly grew inside him at the thought so he cut it off and concentrated fully on the room he was in, the training he was going through.

There was a breath of stunned silence after the video finished before Emma finally murmured, "Oh my God..." She didn't say anything else but Boyd guessed by her tone that she was thinking a combination of 'that poor child' and 'how did he do that?'

"That was some hardcore shit," Cade said in reluctant approval, although when Boyd glanced over at him he saw that the man seemed a little surprised. "He was really fourteen there? The hell kinda training did the dude get?"

Doug waved his hand idly in a sweeping gesture. "Your guess is as good as mine. He already knew how to do everything when he arrived here. Likely his old man had been training him for years."

"How could you possibly expect us to realistically be able to do what he can do then? The scope of his experience and training is completely different from ours," Toby said with a frown, obviously unhappy with the unfairness of such a comparison. His own abilities lay more in communication, in espionage; if they were expected to become unbeatable fighters overnight Toby may as well start packing his bags.

"You're not expected to be able to do this solo," Doug corrected him flatly. "But you're expected to be able to do the same thing as a team that he can do alone. There will be situations where you'll have to go it alone but I haven't seen very many that involve storming a base. It's not logical except in his case. For Vega, he usually worked better alone."

Harriet glanced over at Boyd curiously for a moment before looking at Doug again.

"I see some of you sighing in relief but let me make this clear. You're expected to be that fast and that fucking lethal. It's harder than it sounds and since you have to rely on other people to have their shit together, it actually makes it even more tricky. But if as a group you people can't measure up to the way Vega was as a child, you're all wasting your time here."

Doug frowned at Toby, blue eyes narrowed as he continued, "And I don't give a shit if you think it's unfair. This isn't becoming student body president or head of some fuckin'

school club, kiddo. This is real life, this is fighting for your life, having other people's lives in your hands and if you can't handle that, if you don't got the skill for it, you're useless. And you will have mostly solo assignments as a rank 10 even if they ain't storms so you need to be as confident in your ability to defend and kill as that fucking kid on the screen was. Got it?"

Toby shifted uncomfortably but lifted his chin in defiance. "Yes."

"Good."

"Why's he even got a partner now, then?" Cade asked, waving his hand toward Boyd and looking at him while Boyd kept his expression completely neutral. "Obviously he can do this shit in his sleep. What's the point of Beaulieu?"

Emma looked over at Boyd thoughtfully but didn't say anything.

"He can wipe out an entire base but that's not necessarily the point of an assignment." Doug shut off the projector and flipped the lights back on. "This video was a case in point of that. What happened to the captive he was supposed to take back to the pick-up spot? He didn't leave anyone alive. Agent Vega is a study in extremes. He seems to either completely eliminate everyone he sees as an enemy or he'll completely botch an assignment that requires actual human interaction because he's incapable of normal social skills."

"How could he have normal social skills?" Harriet asked dryly. "You said he was being trained to become... that, for 'several years' before he even arrived at the Agency and he was fourteen there."

Doug shrugged. "I don't give a shit about how sad his childhood is to you people. I was pointing out a fact and answering a question. He's an extraordinary fighter and assassin but the point of his partner is to handle the areas where he consistently failed. Negotiation, mediating and undercover work."

Boyd's thoughts were still distracted by Harriet's comment-- the idea of Sin being incapable of normal interactions. It was true that Sin had a skewed perspective and, faced with undeniable proof of Sin's extreme differences in childhood, it made it more difficult for Boyd to continue thinking to himself that Sin should have known how a relationship worked.

But at the same time, was that supposed to change Boyd's reaction? Was Boyd supposed to just let everything slide in the face of that and not look out for himself? Were Sin's circumstances supposed to make Boyd's emotions or reaction any less valid?

Tension and agitation built within Boyd and part of him just wanted to stand up and leave, to go into the hallway and take a break. Why did they have to talk so much about Sin? Why did they have to watch these videos after Boyd had just broken up with him; when the last person he wanted to see in any way was his former lover?

He could feel a gaze burning into him and Boyd looked over to meet Cade's eyes evenly. Boyd didn't let even a hint of what he was thinking make it to his face and Cade frowned at him, seeming to be considering something.

Boyd had no idea what was going through the man's mind but he could only assume Cade was either analyzing how well he thought Boyd would do in those positions or he was rehashing his own mission with Boyd in Australia where Boyd had ended up negotiating for them. After a moment, Cade looked away dismissively.

Boyd returned his gaze to Doug and gave the impression of waiting patiently even though he wanted nothing more than to be out of the room.

"The next few days will be spent on group assignments," Doug said, his hard gaze moving between their faces. "There will be six assignments and for each there will be a different team leader. The assignments ain't gonna be staged, let me make that shit clear now. What you do and how you do it will significantly impact the grander scheme of things and how badly you fuck up will impact your career as a whole, not just this training. Keep this video in mind and it will give you an idea on how your performance will be judged. Time is a factor, organization, focus, fighting skills, how well you perform your assigned task-- you should be able to perform better and faster as a team than Vega could as a child by himself and all of you are gonna wear a recording device that will act as a live feedback to headquarters so I can watch you in action."

Jon whistled softly but didn't say anything, looking more challenged than intimidated.

"When's the first mission?" Harriet asked. She leaned forward over the desk in obvious anticipation of being on an actual mission with a real goal.

"Three hours," Doug replied with a cold smirk. He held up a stack of papers and dumped them on the front desk. "Basic outline and objective is here. Carter's the rock star for the day. Good luck." Without another word, he left the room.

Toby gave Cade a withering stare and sighed.

Cade looked mildly surprised but very pleased to hear he would be in charge. He stood to move toward the desk and, in the movement, just caught Toby's expression. Cade rolled his eyes. "Shut it, McAvoy. I do this shit all the time. We're safer with me in charge than most'a you dumbasses."

"Whatever," Toby mumbled dubiously although he didn't really go out of his way to argue with Cade's point.

Apparently feeling as though he'd won the argument, Cade smirked at him rather smugly then moved to distribute the outlines.

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Boyd was not a fan of rooftop surveillance.

He had to stay relatively still to avoid detection as he lay under a built-in small tin enclosure so anyone in the taller buildings around him wouldn't see him. The cement roof was uncomfortable and hard beneath his aching body and put pressure on his joints; his elbows already felt like they were going numb. He would have loved to be sitting but that would have given him away.

The binoculars he'd received for his part of the mission were high tech, allowing him to zoom in incredible distances, enough for him to determine from afar whether any of them was the target. But as much as people-watching should have interested him, it didn't.

Part of him wished Cade had placed him on the other team.

The information they'd received was that a man named Ethan Bruce, former research coordinator in a bio-weapons division within the CIA, had turned traitor and formed his own domestic terrorist group, Terra.

Due to Ethan's extensive history with the CIA, he was well-informed regarding how the government worked; he understood where to go to get information he needed and he knew what would hit the government hardest if attacked. He was also brilliant; when working with the CIA, he'd helped fashion a number of ways to make their research more efficient and had seemed to have an innate understanding of the way chemistry and biology worked.

Unfortunately, no one had told the researchers that they weren't just looking for how to protect American citizens; that this wasn't just for defense. The research they were doing was going to be used to fashion new and improved bio-weaponry and when Ethan had discovered this, he'd defected.

Time had changed his efforts from defender to terrorist. He'd become paranoid that the government was building bioweaponry everywhere and had led Terra on a crusade that had already killed hundreds of innocent people. Terra had already been responsible for a number of attacks on CIA facilities-- most incidents of which were kept under the media's radar and the rest of which were blamed on groups like Janus-- and Terra was now expanding to other government buildings.

An undercover Agency operative in Terra had tipped them off that some sort of new, improved, and especially deadly virus was going to be released at a research facility on the edge of a nearby city. The vague information claimed that the spores would somehow be released in the form of an explosion.

The virus in question was deadly enough to have immediate effects on anyone who so much as touched or inhaled the spores. The symptoms described had been incredibly disturbing and so was the fact that many people would likely die within an hour of infection.

The responsibility put in the hands of Level 10 agents was made very obvious by this mission. If any of them made a wrong move, the virus would spread to the hundreds of people in the building. With a park nearby and a number of busy streets in the area, there were hundreds more innocent bystanders who would likely get injured or killed as well.

The Agency had decided to intervene for a number of reasons.

Their primary objective was to capture Ethan alive and bring him back for interrogation at the Agency. After all, he had a lot of valuable information and he would be able to

give them great insight on a number of issues, the least of which being the new man-made virus he'd created for the bombs.

Secondarily, they were supposed to find and stop the bombs from detonating within the facility before they could kill or harm anyone. Another reason the Agency intervened was likely that Vivienne didn't want to give Terra further chance to spread their propaganda in the media, or allow the regular citizens to lose faith in the government with bombs going off on their own property.

Despite the fact that the information the trainees received had been bare bones, they had been told that Ethan would not be part of the group that was planting the bombs. He preferred to stop by at the end of the attack, to stand nearby and observe the culmination of his efforts, rather like a pyromaniac who came to watch the fire burn.

Cade had split the trainees into two groups; Harriet and Jon were in Alpha Team and were inside the building searching for the terrorists while Emma and Toby were in Bravo Team as they sat in the park pretending to relax and enjoy some time off.

Despite the somewhat chilly day, Emma acted as though she was determined to tan as much as she could with the dim sunlight, wearing a low-cut tank top and a light skirt that was crumpled over her thighs and left the majority of her legs bare. She alternated between lying on her back and her stomach and she often smiled flirtatiously at the men who looked over at her appraisingly.

Seemingly unconnected to her, Toby idly sat against a nearby tree and seemed to be reading a book. He didn't look up or react to anyone in the vicinity, making it appear as though he was so thoroughly engrossed that he had no idea what was happening around him.

Boyd, who was also part of Bravo, was on the rooftop of a five-story building across the park from the facility; he was placed nearer to the two large roads that stretched out from the edge of town into the surrounding rural areas that were filled with a combination of uncluttered, open spaces and forested hills. He was watching for Ethan's arrival and would immediately alert Toby and Emma, who would apprehend the terrorist.

Cade's role as the team leader placed him in a surveillance van so that he could oversee the mission and be readily available to make sudden decisions and give orders. The van was situated with a radio transceiver and a tracking system that he watched constantly; his operatives showed up as tiny dots on the screen as he watched their positions.

Back at the Agency, Doug was monitoring the live feed from the pin-cameras each of the agents had on them.

The trainees had arrived at the scene long before they thought the bombs would be placed; they didn't have a specific time but the insider had given them a range of several hours when he'd guessed it may occur. As a result, Boyd had hours to stare blankly at the breezy port city below him and feel nothing but irritation with the scores of happy and carefree civilians that wandered around.

The mission had taken them over 200 miles from the city and into a breezy coastal town named Annadale Beach. From what Boyd had seen of it, it was largely a university town and had a very urban and laid-back atmosphere. It seemed surprisingly far removed from the destruction that had impacted the areas further inland; the fact that it was virtually surrounded by beach on one end and forested hills on the other only added to that.

Although the city hadn't sustained physical damage, the effects of the economy could be seen clear enough. There were boarded up shops and abandoned homes on every street and the places that remained open were mostly coffee shops that catered to the college-aged clientèle and second hand shops that sold discount items. There was still the occasional big-chain over-priced grocery store or bookstore but most of the young people congregated in the hole-in-the-wall cafes, in the parks and on the beach.

Boyd couldn't help but glare at the happy couples that came and went; the people laughing and smiling and the lovers who leaned against each other and stole kisses when no one was looking.

Agitation began to grow in him and he jerked the binoculars away from the scene to search the surrounding streets.

In the back of his mind he automatically noted the best escape routes, the places to hide, the stupid things people were doing. A woman very obviously put her purse in her trunk after she'd parked her car, not noticing the man across the street who acted as though he was reading a newspaper but was watching her instead. Another man parked his motorcycle and locked it but then put the keys in a back compartment; even if it was in an alley, he hadn't been completely hidden from view. A teenager stopped watching the toddler next to her as she chatted with an older male she apparently thought was more important than the child wandering toward the street.

A shadow of movement crossed between a group of people and Boyd looked over immediately. A short, lanky male with dark black hair easily navigated the crowd and as Boyd tracked the man's every move, for a moment Boyd vividly remembered the surveillance footage of Sin as a child; of his blank expression and those too-old eyes, of the way he'd so casually hidden in the shadows, the way he'd so easily killed everyone.

An emotion Boyd didn't care to name made his heart ache briefly and he looked away with a sense of annoyance when he realized that the person he'd been tracking had been a pale-skinned teenager who'd apparently been looking for his friends.

Boyd cursed himself silently. What the hell was wrong with him? He'd known the kid hadn't been Ethan; the man he was searching for had red hair so he shouldn't be hard to pick out of a crowd. But the longer Boyd watched, the more he saw clips and pieces of interactions that brought all his thoughts back to the one person he didn't want to think about: Sin.

Sin's young face resurfaced in Boyd's mind and he had to set the binoculars down, had to squeeze his eyes shut and tilt his head down briefly, covering his face with his hands as he focused on breathing evenly. His eyes burned from lack of sleep and possibly something else and his stomach felt twisted and heavy with nausea.

Worries and doubts nagged him-- Had he been wrong? Had he judged Sin too quickly? It was impossible to see that surveillance video, knowing Sin's age, and not acknowledge that Sin had been in extreme, unusual circumstances since he'd been young.

Maybe Sin really *hadn't* known what to do, maybe he really *hadn't* realized how grave an error it had been to sleep with Ann.

But at the same time, if Sin didn't realize something even as simple as Boyd felt that was, how many other things would Sin never realize? Did Sin even know the meaning of the word love? Was he capable of ever actually feeling it? Had Boyd just been fooling himself all along, reading into Sin's actions to extract the love he was apparently so desperate to have someone feel toward him?

What bothered Boyd more was Sin's comment that Boyd was just running away-- that he said he loved Sin so much but then he shut him out immediately when things didn't go his way.

For all that Boyd wanted to be someone strong, the more he'd thought about it, the harder it had been to deny that running away really *did* seem to be his specialty. If he didn't physically run away-- which didn't happen often but had certainly occurred after the JKS Convention Center-- then he ran away mentally.

Boyd was torn on the concept of whether he was just running away now. On the one hand part of him feared that Sin had a point, that maybe while Boyd felt that Sin had been using him, Boyd had harbored ideas of what he'd wanted out of the relationship and when reality didn't meet his hopes, he just cut it all off.

But the other part of him was angry and indignant-- didn't he *deserve* the right to cut himself off when the person he'd cared so deeply for was hurting him? Was he supposed to just let Sin do whatever the hell he wanted and keep forgiving Sin because he had a rough life? Was he supposed to keep giving second chances to a relationship that now seemed like it only hurt him?

An assassin's eyes and a sullen child's face swam before Boyd's closed eyes and he grit his teeth. He hated that he felt so torn about this-- that he was doubting himself, that he was doubting anything. That he was letting this get to him so much.

"Boyd!"

Boyd jerked his head up, accidentally hitting the binoculars with his elbow. His heart slammed inside his chest as adrenaline spiked within him and he looked around wildly for a moment, thinking someone was there beside him. It took a second for logic to kick in, for him to recognize Cade's annoyed voice, and to realize that it had come over the radio.

"What?" Boyd asked quietly on the radio, not letting on that he was so startled.

"Answer me when I fuckin' call for you," Cade snapped in irritation. "I shouldn't have to yell three times. I'm not gonna ask again-- you see anything?"

This was the first time Boyd had heard his name; he hadn't realized he'd been so lost in thought that he had missed the first two. He picked up the binoculars and peered down at the park but didn't see red hair or Ethan's features anywhere. "No."

There was a beat of silence. "This is bullshit," Cade said in frustration over the radio and Boyd didn't bother responding because he couldn't magically make Ethan appear. "Fuck it-- Emma, go help Alpha. Bravo'll keep watch for the piss ant."

Boyd blinked, confused as to why they needed the change. He swung the binoculars over to Emma and watched as she idly stretched on her blanket.

"Copy," her voice mumbled smoothly over the radio, the movement of her lips effectively hidden by her hair. She casually rolled up her blanket, slid it into a trendy bag she had sitting near her and calmly walked across the park as if she didn't have a care in the world, taking the time to smile at people as they passed.

She didn't make it obvious that she was heading toward the facility but there was no doubt to Boyd as to where she was going. Toby didn't once look up from his book or shift but Boyd knew he was paying attention.

"Get here ASAP," Harriet's voice said seriously over the radio. "We don't know how many there are."

"Found another." Jon sounded calm and collected compared to everyone else. "South stairwell, fifth floor."

"Shit," Harriet hissed, seeming frustrated and annoyed that the mission wasn't working as smoothly as it should.

"ETA five," Emma murmured quietly. "Unexpected security."

"We may not *have* five minutes," Harriet snapped. "That's the fourth we've found and who knows how many undercovers are in here."

There wasn't an immediate response but then Emma whispered, "I'm trying."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down and was able to gather from the conversation that there must be more bombs than they were expecting, or at least more terrorists.

Part of the problem they knew they'd have was that the terrorists were blending in-- the building was full of people there for a legitimate reason and Terra didn't wear a uniform or arm bad to distinguish themselves. Stopping the bombs was the secondary objective but with Ethan nowhere in sight it made sense to pull Emma to help.

Settling down again to continue searching, Boyd idly scanned the crowd for a man matching Ethan's description. He mostly kept an eye out for red hair but searched others as well since Ethan could be wearing a hat or wig.

Nearly a minute passed before Boyd's thoughts automatically began to wander again.

And what did Sin know about love, anyway? What made him so perfect, what gave him the right to imply that what Boyd felt for Sin wasn't enough; that Boyd was shallow or selfish or completely unwilling to sacrifice anything for Sin?

Hadn't Boyd done everything he could? If he'd made a few stupid mistakes here and there, it was only because he was human. Sin was human too, he also screwed up-- but not like this. This wasn't the sort of thing that could just be pushed away and immediately forgiven.

And if Sin had such a brilliant explanation, then he should have just said something. If whatever the hell had been going through Sin's mind had been what had brought him to the bunkers that first time, he should have just *told* Boyd instead of acting all indignant when Boyd didn't have time to spare for him. If it had been so imperative, Boyd would have listened.

Sin just wanted to make it seem like he was the martyr, like he'd been trying to say whatever he'd needed to and Boyd had just been completely uncooperative.

But at the same time...

There clearly had been something happening with Sin lately. Maybe he'd wanted to tell Boyd about that? The insomnia, the exhaustion, the nightmares? But what the hell did that have to do with Ann? And anyway, it wasn't like Boyd had no clue those nightmares existed so it wasn't like Sin would have a reason to hesitate to tell him. Although sometimes he almost thought something else was happening, no matter how Boyd thought about it, he just didn't know what it could possibly be.

It was all such bullshit.

The more Boyd tried to work his mind around it, the clearer it became to him that Sin had just been trying to buy time to come up with a believable lie. That he'd been trying to figure out what he was supposed to say to make Boyd say, "Oh hey, that's fine," and let Sin get on to what he'd probably felt was the important part: fucking Boyd or, apparently, anyone who would let him.

Boyd didn't even care about Ann in this-- she was completely unimportant and whatever she wanted to do meant nothing to him aside from how it had affected his life-- but it

made him wonder what the hell was wrong with the Connors sisters and why they were so interested in sex with Sin.

If sex was so impersonal to Sin that he could sleep with Ann despite all this-- if he could have sex with someone he didn't even 'give a shit about'-- then it cast even more doubt for Boyd as to what sex had been about between them all along. He could no longer point to sex as an example of how much Sin trusted him.

But it hadn't been about that. It hadn't been about anything except Sin getting off in whatever warm body was there.

Boyd felt sick at the thought-- sick with anger and sick with disgust and hurt-- and he briefly squeezed his eyes shut again, feeling the annoying emotions start to build again.

Sliding his eyes open, Boyd glared down at the people in the park.

He wished he had a way of just shutting his thoughts off. Sometimes he was so good at it but apparently not if the topic was Sin. Boyd still felt lost and unbalanced as to how this had all happened. Part of him even wondered what he'd done wrong-- where he'd fucked up so completely that Sin had thought so little of their relationship.

At the same time... Toby had been right-- Sin really *had* looked like he was about to cry. But why? What had really been going through Sin's mind-- why would he act that way when everything else was apparently unimportant to him?

Boyd's eyes narrowed and he glowered at a couple leaning against each other and laughing as they walked toward his end of the park. Someday they'd realize it was all bullshit, too. Love and trust and believing in other people-- what was the point when humans were all flawed and fucked up anyway, when they only hurt each other continuously because they were too stupid to do anything else?

He was just about to look away when something caught his attention-- a man who was just getting into a car. The man's presence itself didn't seem sudden to Boyd and he realized that subconsciously he'd seen the man leaning in that area for awhile now but Boyd hadn't paid attention. It wasn't until he focused on the side view mirror and he saw the reflection of the man's face as the car started that Boyd realized with a jolt that it was Ethan.

"*Fuck*," Boyd hissed without thinking and immediately threw the binoculars to the side as he scrambled to his feet, nearly hitting his head on the small tin roof in his haste before he ran toward the fire escape on the other wall.

"What?" Cade said immediately.

"Target on the move," Boyd said as he sprinted to the edge of the roof and, without thinking, jumped off. The fire escape didn't extend to the roof but it was going to be the fastest way down. His legs jarred with the impact as he hit the uppermost metal grate and he nearly fell over the side, catching himself against the rickety, rusty railing. The entire fire escape groaned with the impact and shifted slightly but otherwise held.

"*What?*" Cade demanded incredulously. "Where?"

Boyd half ran and half jumped his way down the fire escape and cut himself on the ladder at the bottom as he slid down the last several feet. The ladder stopped suddenly a few feet off the ground and he fell, stumbled, and caught himself. Without missing a beat, he ran straight toward the motorcycle he'd seen earlier.

"Black four-door sedan, Ford Taurus, probably early teens," Boyd reported as he sprinted. "Southbound on Maynard, headed out of town. Partial on the plate, Charlie Zulu Mike one."

"Shit," Cade snapped. "Toby--"

"I'm on it," Toby said immediately.

"Too late," Boyd said as he jerked open the hatch he'd seen the man drop the keys into and snatched them out. "You'll need wheels." He started the motorcycle and nearly lost control as he gunned it and turned at the same time. "I'm in pursuit."

Distantly, he thought he heard a man shouting, "Hey, that's my bike!" but Boyd paid him no heed. His attention was completely on the street Ethan had been headed down; one that they hadn't expected.

Their information had implied that Ethan would have been on the other side of the park, would have headed in the opposite direction. Boyd was the only one close enough to be able to catch him; Toby, on foot, was going to be unable to provide any back up at all now that Ethan was so far away.

"Any others?" Cade's voice said over the radio, partially lost to the wind as Boyd increased his speed.

"Unknown, one at most," Boyd reported tersely, furious with himself.

After all those thoughts about not letting Sin get to him or ruin anything else, here he was-- destroying the mission because he'd been unable to stop obsessing about his former lover. If he'd been paying attention he could have alerted Toby and Emma, and Ethan would already be nearly apprehended instead of getting away.

There was only one way to fix this-- he had to stop Ethan, he had to finish the mission.

Boyd leaned forward, squinting his eyes nearly shut against the wind that made it almost impossible to see and he accelerated until he was able to see the Taurus ahead of him. Luckily, there was no traffic on the less-used street headed into the countryside. Ethan was driving at a normal rate until he presumably looked in the rear view mirror and saw Boyd closing in quickly behind him.

The Taurus sped up and Boyd set his jaw, ignoring the icy prickling of the wind against his bare face and even the way his hat fluttered on his head as if it was about to fly off.

He didn't care about anything at that moment-- not the idea of the camera being lost and the live feed disappearing, or the fact there was no back up, or the fact that although he'd become pretty good at driving a motorcycle during his training that didn't mean he was accustomed to high speed chases, or the fact that without a helmet or proper road gear he'd probably be killed or disabled if he crashed... The only thing he cared about was catching Ethan alive.

"Status," Cade barked over the radio; Boyd could barely hear him with the interference from the wind.

"Southbound on 95," Boyd replied, ignoring any other chatter on the radio. "Rest of plate is zero nine five. Target's going about 90, 95."

"Can you catch him?"

"I won't stop until I do," Boyd said seriously.

Cade made a noise that may have been approval but Boyd had already stopped listening. It took several minutes for Boyd to catch up to the Taurus but he was finally able to pull up alongside the passenger door.

Boyd was able to see that at least the man was alone; it wouldn't have stopped Boyd from pursuing him but it was going to make it easier to take him down. Ethan looked over at him calmly and suddenly jerked the steering wheel, nearly hitting Boyd with the side of the car as Boyd immediately evaded. Ethan did the same thing two more times quickly, going further into Boyd's space each time and forcing Boyd a few feet away to avoid losing control of the motorcycle.

With one hand on the handlebar, Boyd quickly reached into his pocket for something heavy and nearly lost control of the bike in the process. He caught himself just before he hit the side of an overpass and swerved back behind the Taurus, heart pounding and adrenaline spiking in a way that made him feel more alive, more crystal clear on his purpose.

He needed something to break the passenger window but all he had on him was the radio itself and since it was a small model, that wouldn't work. Luckily, this was one of the few times he actually had a gun with him; Cade had insisted they all carry weapons on the mission.

Boyd sped up alongside the Taurus again and, dividing his attention between staying on the curving, hilly road and not getting too close to the car, he shot at the passenger window, making sure to do it from an angle that wouldn't hit Ethan and was more likely to hit the windshield on the passenger's side instead. Even so, it was a reckless move and Ethan jerked down, automatically swerving the car away from Boyd.

Eyes narrowed, Boyd dropped his speed just enough to shoot at the window a few more times; the glass cracked with the bullet holes and shattered.

Speeding up alongside the car again, Boyd looked in to see Ethan glaring furiously but completely unharmed. "Fuck off!" Ethan yelled angrily as he swung the car violently toward Boyd again.

Boyd swerved just enough to avoid the immediate impact but this time, instead of getting far away, he grabbed onto the passenger window, ignoring the glass that cut his hands. The motorcycle started to jerk beneath him now that he wasn't controlling it and he nearly smashed his leg between the car and bike before he had to let go of the window with one hand just to control the handlebars with the other.

Ethan saw what he was trying to do and slammed the car to the side again. Boyd wasn't fast enough to evade and his leg ached violently with the pressure of the brief second it was pressed between the two vehicles before he was able to get the motorcycle a few inches away.

Before the same thing could happen again, Boyd quickly swung his far leg over the motorcycle and grabbed the window with both hands, letting the gun and bike fall away beneath him as he held onto the passenger side of the car. The motorcycle swerved and clipped the back end of the Taurus. Ethan jerked the wheel to regain control and Boyd nearly fell off, just barely managing to get his elbow inside in time.

Boyd tried to keep his boots off the pavement but he didn't quite have enough upper body strength and the rubber soles of his boots burned hot against the ground speeding below him. His toe caught against the road and he nearly lost his balance again as it jerked his legs out beneath him and slammed him violently against the back edge of the broken window. He felt glass grind into his shoulder, fingers and arm, but at least it was the popcorn glass of passenger windows and not as sharp as it could have been.

"Who are you?" Ethan shouted. He jerked the car again and Boyd just barely got his feet up in time before they could catch against the ground and force half of him under the car or worse.

Boyd didn't answer and instead focused on doing his best to brace his feet against the side of the vehicle as he used all his upper body strength to try to pull himself inside. The soles of his boots kept slipping and sliding against the side of the vehicle and if it weren't for his death grip on the window, he would have fallen off and probably been run over by the back wheels of the Taurus.

Seeming annoyed but unsurprised by Boyd's tenacity and lack of response, Ethan jerked the car back and forth in a rough and quick zigzag movement that caused the tires to squeal against the road and Boyd's lower body to literally fly off the side then slam into the car repeatedly. Boyd grit his teeth and nearly lost his grip again several times before he was able to use the momentum of the car to push himself inside further.

Boyd was able to get his upper body inside when Ethan, eyes narrowed and expression determined, suddenly leaned over and unlatched the handle on the passenger side door before jerking the car to the side again. This time the entire door swung open and Boyd lost his hold on the window briefly. His hands slipped and he hit the side of the door as his heels skidded along the road.

The sudden resistance caused the door to suddenly slam shut and part of Boyd's body was wrenched alongside the car briefly, his fingers sliding across the side of the window and just barely catching in the corner. The side of his leg briefly scoured against the pavement, burning against his jeans in a manner that would tear a hole in the heavy fabric in no time.

Breathing heavily, Boyd painstakingly used all his upper body strength to pull himself up again as he held his feet as best he could off the ground. It took him a moment to manage and if his fingers weren't locked in place, he probably would have fallen. This time, he immediately braced himself against the side of the car, and this time he tried to move faster, hoping that his own momentum would aid him since going slower had been proving futile.

"Who the fuck *are* you?" Ethan demanded, seeming incredulous and angry that his attempts so far hadn't shaken Boyd off.

Once again, Boyd didn't answer, and this time when Ethan moved to jerk the steering wheel, Boyd paid close attention to which direction Ethan looked like he'd go and Boyd braced himself accordingly. It took another heart-pounding several seconds but Boyd was finally able to get his upper body inside, this time with his hand over the lock so Ethan wouldn't be able to do the same thing again.

Ethan narrowed his eyes and looked to the side briefly; Boyd took that as his chance to jerk himself inside fully, noting as he dropped onto the passenger seat that Ethan was looking down for something. Boyd immediately grabbed the steering wheel with one hand and tried to press on Ethan's windpipe with his other arm.

Ethan immediately slammed his arm around and hit Boyd painfully in his upper stomach then tried again for his throat. Boyd brought an arm up to block and felt a spike of pain from the impact but successfully kept Ethan at bay.

He struggled against Ethan, who was keeping half his attention on the road but seemed more intent on knocking Boyd out, and as a result the car swerved dangerously a few times as Ethan lost control of the wheel.

Ethan tried to hit Boyd again and Boyd blocked it, only then realizing that Ethan had a knife in his hand. Boyd grabbed Ethan's fingers and quickly twisted his wrist back with a snap, causing the knife to clatter to the console where Boyd grabbed it and immediately threw it out the window.

Ethan made a furious noise within his throat and the fight continued.

Boyd used all the combat training he could but he had to be careful how he would knock Ethan out so he wouldn't endanger them both since the car was still speeding. Although they were headed into rural area, with the amount of trees, hills and quick turns, they could easily get into a crash that neither of them would walk away from. At least they seemed to be headed into some more open areas, with only gradual hills around them and fewer trees.

Boyd tried to use both hands to press on Ethan's windpipe, to choke him into unconsciousness, but Ethan just jerked the car around wildly until Boyd had to stop for fear of the car rolling. Boyd tried to grab the steering wheel to steady it with one hand and jerk Ethan out of the driver's seat with the other but Ethan resisted furiously and struck Boyd repeatedly on the head until Boyd was forced to block the punches or risk getting knocked out and probably thrown from the moving vehicle.

The only good news was that they both seemed to be without weapons but that didn't make it any easier to finish the job.

After several minutes of fighting in which Boyd tried to stop the car, tried to gain control of the vehicle, and tried to knock Ethan unconscious, all without success, Boyd finally growled in annoyance, "Stop the fucking car! You'll kill us both!"

"I'll kill *you*," Ethan said heatedly, expression somewhat crazed.

Boyd had just enough time to realize that Ethan was ensuring that his own seat belt was securely in place before Ethan suddenly slammed the steering wheel all the way to the side, causing the car to squeal as the back tires fishtailed angrily. Suddenly the entire vehicle flew on its side, smashed against the ground, and kept going.

Boyd tried to get his seat belt on but he barely got it hooked before they were rolling violently across the terrain, windows smashing out around them as glass flew everywhere, blood flying in arcs that obscured his vision. The next several harrowing seconds were consumed by the smoke of the vehicle as it crashed against the rocks and the angry squeal of metal as it ripped and broke away around them.

The world spun confusingly around Boyd and the seat belt dug into him so painfully that he knew it would bruise. As the car finally landed on its roof and skidded along the ground, the fact he hadn't quite gotten his seat belt properly latched was apparent as it

finally broke open beneath him, causing him to fall down against the roof and just barely catch himself before he broke his neck.

The chaos and violence of the moment was there and gone in seconds but the deafening sound of crunching metal and crashing glass echoed in Boyd's ears even after they rocked to a stop. He coughed violently in the smoke and dust, dazed and in shock, his entire body feeling weak and shaky. He pushed himself up just as he heard movement beside him.

Ethan unbuckled his seat belt and awkwardly fell to the roof, navigating his way around the deployed driver's side airbag and crawling out the driver's side window that had broken in the crash.

Boyd could hear Ethan digging around; a distant sound in the back and the thump of something onto the ground, but Boyd couldn't understand what it meant.

With a shake of his head, gaze blurred and unfocused, Boyd was just trying to figure out how to get out when hands enclosed violently on his legs and he was roughly jerked out of the car. He was flipped onto his back, coughing with the dirt and smoke he inhaled in the process, and a foot came firmly down on his chest and held him still.

Boyd squinted up, trying to understand what was happening, when he recognized the barrel of a gun aimed between his eyes and Ethan's cold face, unfocused in the background.

"I'll ask again," Ethan said calmly, looking far better than Boyd did, which was unsurprising since Ethan had been protected by both an airbag and a seat belt, although he still seemed a little unsteady on his feet. "Who are you? CIA? FBI?"

"Does it matter?" Boyd asked, coughing again as a puff of dust got caught in his throat. He peered up at Ethan with eyes that were watering slightly from the acrid smoke in the air.

"Yes, actually it does," Ethan said as he tilted his head. "I want to know who I'm sending a message to, and the violence of the message depends on the recipient." He smiled pleasantly, seeming as though he enjoyed the idea, and there was more than a little madness in his eyes.

"Hmm." Boyd considered that and dropped his head to the side in a show of weakness, although what he was really doing was trying to figure out where the gun had come from.

His mind was slowly starting to work again as the shock of the car accident wore off and it occurred to him that Ethan must have taken something from the trunk. Sure enough, a duffel bag was sitting nearby and a gun holster was discarded to the side. Boyd let his eyes fall half shut, as if he was struggling to stay conscious, and gave no indication with his body language that he was ready to fight back.

"I'm with the Girl Scouts," Boyd said as he looked back up at Ethan blankly.

Ethan gave him a look that slowly morphed from incredulous to pleased. "A smart ass, huh? I can see I'm going to enjoy this."

He shifted the gun down, apparently intending to torture Boyd by shooting him in non-lethal areas to extend his life, but that movement was all that Boyd was waiting for. Without warning he suddenly jerked and knocked Ethan's leg off him with all his strength, causing the shot to go wide as Boyd rolled out of the way.

The next several minutes were confusing and chaotic as they each fought for control of the situation and the gun. Ethan kept trying to aim the weapon at Boyd, who was trying to keep it aimed away from both of them.

Boyd slammed his elbow into Ethan and tried several of the combat moves he'd been taught but many of them were aimed at killing or permanent injuries and Boyd couldn't risk that. He couldn't hear anything except the scuffling of their feet against the ground, the impact of their fists and arms against each other, the harsh panting of their breath.

When he looked into Ethan's crazed and intense eyes, he knew it was the same for the other man.

Finally, Boyd managed to grab the duffel bag and slam it against Ethan's head, trying to knock him out. But Ethan rolled with the movement and twisted the duffel bag so that Boyd's hand and wrist was caught in the strap. Ethan abruptly stepped down on the strap where it met the duffel bag, wrenching Boyd's arm down and to the side. Boyd was jerked down to one knee, arm caught, and as he worked quickly to unwrap his hand, he looked up to once again stare down the barrel of the gun.

Boyd stopped trying to get his hand away and tried to disarm Ethan but he didn't have near the leverage or reach he needed and Ethan easily evaded him; almost playfully, he put all his weight on the foot holding down the strap and kicked Boyd in the head. Boyd's head snapped back and he was unable to stop himself before he slammed onto his back, arm twisted at a painful angle.

Panting to regain his breath, Boyd stared up at Ethan, who stared back down mercilessly.

"Maybe I don't have time to play with you after all," Ethan observed idly and aimed the gun between Boyd's eyes again.

There wasn't much Boyd could do from his angle and with his arm caught; he wanted to keep fighting but his body just wouldn't let him. He still felt shaky from the accident and his entire body ached-- from his head to the stab wounds where he could feel the leaking blood slowly draining his energy. He felt exhausted, drained, and weak, and whatever adrenaline high had pushed him this far had all but disappeared except for the staccato pounding of his heart.

He had to acknowledge that Ethan had gained complete control of the situation. Boyd just stared at Ethan and wondered how pissed the others would be when they found out how terribly he'd failed.

A strange thought passed through his mind; all that talk of people dying and here Boyd was, about to become a statistic. Would Doug regale future trainees with the story of his death to scare them away or would Boyd just be a side note?

"Any last words?" Ethan asked, eyebrow raised. "I'll make sure they carve it on your gravestone."

Boyd was too tired to bother with a witty response. His head ached from all the times he'd been hit in the last half hour and, slightly deliriously, he thought that at least once his brains were blown out it would relieve the pressure.

He started to close his eyes but didn't; it was for that reason he saw when Ethan smirked but then suddenly jerked, started to look to the side in surprise, then swayed and abruptly crumpled into a heap on top of Boyd.

He grunted with the sudden dead weight on him and was still unable to get his hand free from the strap since Ethan's leg had fallen over the bag.

For a moment he felt a spike of surprise and fear-- strangely, he was almost more afraid of living and having Ethan suddenly die and the mission failing than he was of Ethan staying alive and killing him because then at least another group could get Ethan eventually. But before he could raise a hand to check Ethan's pulse, the man's body was suddenly lifted easily off Boyd.

"Wait to ask that question 'till it's actually his time," Cade said in mild irritation to Ethan's unconscious body before he unceremoniously dropped Ethan to the side. Looking down at Boyd, Cade raised his eyebrows and gave him a look that was too hard for Boyd's muddled mind to decipher.

"You," Cade informed Boyd as he reached down to grab his arm and yank him to his feet, "are one crazy fucking bastard." Boyd stumbled and almost fell and Cade caught him with a hand against his arm but let go immediately when it was clear Boyd had regained his balance. "You know that?"

Boyd shook his head slightly, one hand going up to his temple as his head throbbed with the sudden change in position. He peered blearily down at Ethan. "What happened?"

Cade rolled his eyes and grabbed the duffel bag off the ground as he held up his tranquilizer gun in the other hand. "Tranq gun, you fucktard. I can't believe you raced off without backup on a no-kill without at least something like that."

"I was in a hurry," Boyd mumbled. He blinked a few times as he tried to comprehend what had just happened; that he wasn't dead after all, that the mission was a success. That Cade, of all people, had been the one to save him. He looked over at his teammate and frowned. "The others?"

Cade gave a rolling shrug and easily jerked Ethan off the ground, throwing the man over his shoulder. "S'all good. They got everything. Didn't you listen to any of the shit on the radio?"

Boyd narrowed his eyes in confusion and looked down, realizing belatedly that his radio had been crushed sometime during his pursuit. "Guess not."

He looked up as Cade strode to the nearby surveillance van and Boyd wondered how he'd managed to miss hearing the vehicle approach; but then, Ethan and he had been

focused so intently on each other that if Cade had rolled in quietly it was probably no surprise.

Boyd realized he'd lost his hat somewhere along the way as well and the camera transmitting his live-feed back to the Agency was long gone. He hoped Doug wouldn't be too irritated about that.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to Boyd's still somewhat shocked mind. "The transmitter came off. How'd you know...?"

Giving him a seriously unimpressed look, Cade seemed almost offended by the question. "C'mon, man. Even *McAvoy* wouldn't have missed the screech marks and broken car all over the place, not to mention that trashed bike." He raised an eyebrow. "The hell were you doing, anyway? Trying to kill him?"

"He's the one who crashed us," Boyd said, although somehow it came out slightly sullenly.

"Whatever," Cade said without care as he carelessly threw Ethan into the back of the van and expertly tied his hands and feet, then tied him to a hook in the center of the floor. "Mission accomplished and all that shit. I'm just glad you didn't fuck up my time to shine." He looked over as Boyd swayed on his feet and he frowned. "Jesus, just get in the fuckin' van already. You're bleeding all over hell and look like a fuckin' ghost. We'd better get back before your pussy ass dies on me."

Boyd tried to give him a look but then decided he really didn't care; sitting down did sound good right then. He wandered over to the van and crawled inside, collapsing against the passenger seat and closing his burning eyes as he tilted his head back. A jumbled confusion of echoes of screeching tires and memory of glass breaking all around him greeted him in the darkness and he was too tired to feel any relief that he'd made it through alive.

Almost immediately, he felt the van jerk as Cade dropped into the driver's seat and slammed the door shut behind him. Without saying anything he immediately yanked Boyd's arm over and examined it until he found the cut from the knife.

"That may need a stitch or two," Cade observed, not seeming to care, and Boyd slit his eyes open just enough to give him an odd look. Cade grabbed a First Aid kit beneath his seat and roughly, without bothering to be gentle in the least, wrapped the wound

with white gauze that almost immediately stained red. He just glared when Boyd sat there and stared at him blankly.

"Well, Princess?" Cade demanded impatiently. "Where are the other boo-boos the big bad man gave you? I don't feel like dealing with Doug or whoever bitching that we got blood all over this shitty ass van, but you look like you swam in a lake of it."

Boyd frowned and looked down at himself. "It's not that bad."

"You're delirious, possibly dying, and a crazy asshole," Cade said pointedly, sounding more impatient than cruel. "Shut the fuck up and will yourself to stop bleeding or tell me what needs patching up. I'm not gonna undress your faggot ass so work with me here."

"I'll do it," Boyd said, not sure whether he was annoyed or exasperated with Cade at that moment. He grabbed a piece of gauze and some of the tape and looked for the cut he knew would be in his shirt by his upper stomach.

"Fine. Stay here," Cade commanded and got out of the van again.

Boyd glanced at Cade just long enough to see the man head toward the wrecked Taurus before Boyd returned his attention to his wounds.

He was glad Cade left; he had to pull his shirt up to wipe off some of the blood and stick the gauze pad over the wound in his stomach. It hurt but not terribly. Even though Ethan had stabbed him, the blade hadn't been long and in the chaos Ethan had held it at an odd angle that had caused more of a painful, bloody nuisance than anything. He doubted he would even need many stitches. Despite Cade's comment, the wounds were relatively minor and he didn't anticipate them bothering him much even in training.

Boyd finished with the wound and was idly picking glass out of his hands and arms and cleaning the wounds with peroxide wipes when Cade returned to the van and slammed the driver's door shut again. "The car's clean and no one'll give a shit that some crappy Taurus died out here. It's a shame you wrecked that sweet bike, though. What the hell happened, anyway?"

At first Boyd didn't answer but then he looked at Cade sidelong. "I got by him on the bike and crawled in the window. But then I couldn't get him to stop so he crashed us."

Cade stared at him for a long moment, as if wondering whether Boyd was kidding, but he apparently determined he wasn't because he raised his eyebrows and looked grudgingly impressed. "That so," he said simply.

Boyd nodded slightly then turned his head forward again, sliding his eyes closed. They were silent briefly as Cade turned the van around and returned to the road, presumably toward Annadale Beach and the rest of the group.

"You're stayin' in the van when we get to town, by the way. You look like shit." Cade paused, then added offhandedly, "But, hey. Workman's comp, at least."

"Fuck that," Boyd mumbled grumpily, bringing up one foot so Cade could see the way his boots were scratched to hell, the soles ripped away or nearly destroyed in some places. "I want new boots."

Cade snorted but actually smirked in amusement.

Chapter 19

The week of group missions had passed relatively well after the first disastrous assignment and although the other trainees had overall decided that Boyd had redeemed himself for his mistake by stopping Ethan, Doug seemed to be of a different viewpoint. Overnight, Doug went from mostly ignoring Boyd because he was silent and often didn't participate in discussions, to turning more ire toward Boyd than Doug ever had even for Cade.

After each mission, Doug didn't miss the chance to point out what Boyd had done wrong and mocked Boyd even when he'd done his job correctly. Whereas before Doug hadn't bothered Boyd when he remained silent, now it didn't matter; he singled Boyd out whenever he could, sometimes mocking Boyd for not speaking in the first place. If Boyd added to the discussion, Doug found reason to ridicule what he said.

Boyd wasn't the only one surprised and confused by the sudden turnaround; Toby had asked him one night what he'd done to piss Doug off so completely and Boyd had no idea.

He knew he'd fucked up pretty spectacularly in that mission in Annadale Beach; he'd had no excuse for missing Ethan lurking there and all he'd been able to do was say exactly that and apologize to anyone who mentioned it. He'd completely owned up to his mistake and had tried even harder in the subsequent missions, not even giving himself a chance to think about Sin at all. Clearly, letting his mind wander to Sin was disastrous for the mission and could potentially even be deadly for himself.

So he understood completely if Doug was pissed about the mistake; Boyd had *made* the mistake and he was furious with himself. At the same time, Doug had never seemed to care so much when others had screwed up before. When Cade could have gotten Boyd and Harriet killed in Venezuela, Doug had barely said a word to Cade, and Doug loved messing with Cade. Typically, when someone did something wrong, Doug mocked the trainee at that time, maybe for a day or so after that if it had been especially stupid, but he didn't go out of his way to ridicule the person for longer.

But that was exactly what he was doing to Boyd now and Boyd was at an utter loss as to what to do about it. He tried not to let the words get to him, tried to tell himself that it was just Doug being himself, and Boyd focused almost obsessively on trying to improve, on trying to avoid any and all future mistakes, and on finishing the decryption.

He had to avoid the gym for a few days; his left leg still ached from being pressed between the car and motorcycle, he'd had to receive a few stitches for the stab wounds and he wasn't supposed to strain them unnecessarily if possible. All the abuse his body had been taking for the past few months felt like it was slowly catching up to him.

He was able to make it through the missions because he didn't let himself care about any aches or pains but once he got back to his room he just wanted to take a few painkillers, rest in his bed and work his mind raw puzzling over the code until he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

The obsession with deciphering the cipher text had finally paid off.

Two nights before their third break, Boyd had cracked the cipher at about three in the morning; he'd been so paranoid that he'd been wrong that he'd checked and rechecked the results until nearly 4:30 am, and had felt such a sense of relief and pleasure that he'd ended up falling asleep before he could fully celebrate his accomplishment.

The next night, he'd researched as much as he could to determine the implications of the cipher; what it had meant, why the keyword had been 'Gwyneth,' and what he would tell Doug. Unfortunately, despite everything he'd tried, he couldn't find any concrete information on the group or that name.

The only clue he'd figured out was that the encrypted text was a passage from John Locke's Second Treatise of Government, but that told him very little except that the was in essence emulating the very ideas they would subscribe to and that the concept John Locke wrote about was similar in parts to the manifesto the group had read aloud. He'd even managed to get a good seven hours of sleep afterward.

Now, the morning of their third break, he headed with mild apprehension toward Doug's office with a handful of documents that included the cipher text, the translation, the research he'd attempted, and what he thought it all meant. Just to be safe, he'd written a report and was ready to hand that over as well if Doug needed it.

Boyd turned the corner and was surprised to see Kassian heading down the hallway toward him.

Kassian raised his eyebrows at Boyd and stopped walking. "Are you stalking me?"

The question was so unexpected and asked so seriously that it startled Boyd into a short laugh, making him forget for a brief moment his immediate concerns about Doug. "Damn," he said, acting disappointed. "You caught me."

Kassian nodded seriously, blue eyes narrowing slightly. "I figured that might be the case. I'm rarely on compound unless ordered to be but somehow I keep running into you the few times I'm here."

"Yeah, I spend all my free time researching where you might be. You know, routines, patterns of behavior, people I should terrorize to shake your schedule out of them..." Boyd raised his eyebrows. "You really make me go through a lot of work."

Kassian chuckled and shook his head at Boyd, appearing genuinely amused before his grin faded as if something just occurred to him. The taller man paused before he gestured back towards Doug's office. "You're not going to see Doug are you?"

"Yes," Boyd said slowly, feeling suspicious of the way Kassian's tone implied he hoped Boyd wasn't. "Why, did you kill him and I'd get myself involved in a crime scene?"

"That would probably be preferable for you," Kassian replied dryly.

Boyd hesitated, glancing past Kassian's shoulder then returning his gaze to study Kassian's expression. It was clear that Kassian was completely serious and Boyd felt at once frustrated and resigned that Doug still wasn't in a better mood. He'd hoped that maybe if he caught Doug early on a day off, the man wouldn't be as volatile because he hadn't been dealing with trainees all day.

"Is this a general thing or is he still pissed at me?" Boyd asked somewhat warily.

"Uhhh..." Kassian's broad shoulders lifted and he screwed up his face slightly as though he really had to think hard in order to answer. "Both probably. He seems pissed off in general, even had a bad attitude with me because I'm off the hook with this training shit finally, but you came up in passing."

"I did?" Boyd asked, the wariness increasing. "Why?"

"Hmm." Kassian hesitated again and nodded his head to the side, walking further back the way Boyd had come, indicating that Boyd should follow. They hovered in a dark corner under the staircase where they would be able to hear anyone coming along and properly adjust their conversation before it could be overheard.

"Honestly Boyd, I'm surprised you haven't been dismissed," Kassian said quietly, voice lower than it had been.

Boyd stared at Kassian half in surprise; on the one hand, he hadn't thought he'd been doing that terribly, but on the other, he had seriously fucked up the mission in Annadale Beach and others had been kicked out for less. And it wasn't like he'd had a perfect record before that.

Boyd tilted his head down after a moment, feeling a headache come on, and rubbed his temple with his free hand.

"You heard about Annadale?" Boyd asked equally quietly.

Kassian sighed softly and shook his head at Boyd. "Yes. I mean it's not like going around the compound or anything-- Doug told me because I asked how a few of you were doing. I was really surprised to hear what happened. What were you thinking?"

Kassian's tone was almost disappointed, as if he'd been rooting for Boyd to succeed, and although it was similar to his Senior Agent Trovosky style it really just seemed like he was concerned for a friend.

Boyd sighed, squeezing his eyes shut. "I wasn't. I just-- I'm a fucking idiot and I couldn't--" He realized he wasn't making sense and forced himself to stop then look up to meet Kassian's eyes. "I broke up with Sin on the last break," he said heavily. "I tried not to think about it, but... I just." He shook his head, disappointed with himself as well on a number of levels. "I let it get to me."

Kassian stared at him silently, eyebrows raised and his face a study in surprise. "I'm not entirely sure what to say about that. I didn't even realize you were in that kind of relationship. I'd ask what happened but this isn't really the place..."

"Heh." Boyd smiled faintly, humorlessly. "Yeah, well. Obviously it's not exactly a story with a happy ending and I don't know if I'd even properly be able to talk about it now anyway. I'm still trying to work on avoiding distractions and not thoroughly fucking everything up any more than I already have."

"Well for some reason Doug isn't getting rid of you just yet but I really suggest you forget about Sin for now and get your head together because Doug is looking for any reason to get your ass out of here." Kassian straightened and cleared his throat, speaking louder. "Just worry about yourself, kid. Don't let bullshit get in the way of this if you really want it, you know? I learned that the hard way."

"I know," Boyd said quietly.

Boyd didn't want to get this far then get dismissed for letting emotions get in the way. He briefly wished he could just be like his mother; whenever he let emotions distract him on missions, he seemed to do the stupidest things that had the worst consequences.

He had to stop thinking about it all, exactly as Kassian said; it would serve him no purpose otherwise and now he had at least some idea of how close he was on Doug's list of people to be kicked out.

"So," Boyd said after a moment, "I know you said he's not in a great mood and I'm clearly not his favorite person right now. But on a scale of one to killing me on sight, how much time do you think I have to give him something I've been working on?"

"I'm not really sure," Kassian replied with a shrug, stepping out of the corner so that there was more space between them. "He pretty much kicked me out of the office. He seems personally affronted by the fact that I'm free to go. I say give it a shot."

Boyd nodded and moved past Kassian but paused before he left. "Thanks," he said, meaning it on a number of levels, not just the warning about Doug.

Kassian nodded. "Not a problem although I'm not sure what I did to help."

The older man gave Boyd another half grin before speaking again. "You know, I meant what I said before. I wasn't just trying to get Sin more riled up by inviting you over. We should chill sometime. Now that I have my time to myself again, after these next few days I'll be doing a whole lot of nothing."

With a slight smile, Boyd tilted his head and studied Kassian. "Are you sure it's a good idea to invite your stalker over again? I may bring dead animals and bloody roses as a gift. I've been saving them for a special occasion."

Kassian snorted and started towards the staircase. "I'll risk it for non-obnoxious company. I'd rather be bored at home than here at the moment, but wasting my time playing the same videos over and over gets boring after awhile." He winked at Boyd and started to jog up the stairs. "I'll catch you later, kid. Good luck."

Boyd briefly watched him go then turned back toward the way they came and resisted the urge to sigh again. This wasn't going to be pleasant but he was determined to give Doug the information regardless of what the response would be. He hadn't spent all that

free time on deciphering just to avoid handing it over because the instructor was in a bad mood.

Unsurprisingly, Boyd didn't run into anyone else on the way to Doug's office. Everyone else was probably already gone on their break or on the other side of the building in the gym, cafeteria, or, if they were especially sure of themselves, still in their rooms asleep.

The door was closed and Boyd only hesitated for a second before knocking.

A gruff "What?" could be heard on the other side of the door and it was obviously the only invitation Boyd would be getting to come in. After another brief hesitation, Boyd opened the door and slipped into Doug's office quietly.

The room seemed to really be Doug's actual office and not a temporary base during the training. Boyd supposed that was unsurprising given the fact that Doug's entire job at the Agency revolved around training operatives of every level. Boyd wondered what his own experience would have been like when he'd first arrived at the Agency if Doug had been in the country at the time and had trained him all the way through.

Doug sat behind a large desk that was completely covered with large folders, paperwork, diagrams and graphs. A laptop computer sat amidst the files, along with a cigar that was burning in a big metal ash tray, and an incredibly large cup of coffee which Doug was currently spiking with something from a flask.

Doug didn't speak immediately and Boyd glanced around the office, noting the large map with several pinpoints stuck in various locations across the surface, a large plasma TV hooked up in the corner of the room and an assortment of framed photographs that showed Doug at various ages in his life. It was hard to believe that the ornery and rugged faced man that was currently glaring at Boyd had once been so fresh faced with a big charming smile.

"Well?" Doug demanded impatiently. "The fuck do ya want?"

"I deciphered the message from the first week's video, sir," Boyd said, keeping his body language and tone completely professional. He held the files up in front of him. "I came to drop off the information and report."

Doug took a sip of his coffee mixture and stared at Boyd over the rim of the cup before setting it down with a thump. "Don't try to kiss my ass, Beaulieu."

"I'm not, sir," Boyd said calmly. "I was already working on it; I just finished it yesterday."

The Instructor made a sound that was half grunt, half scoff. "Logan turned it in last week."

That was unsurprising; Jon had so far seemed to excel at everything he'd tried and he hadn't had the extra distraction of trying to improve his stamina in the gym like Boyd had. "I didn't just decipher it, sir," Boyd said carefully. "At first I tried to cross-reference the keyword 'Gwyneth' since it wasn't a name mentioned in the film and I spent some time looking into that attack on the Rose Parade but found nothing. The encrypted text was a passage from John Locke's Second Treatise of Government so I tried to cross-reference that as well to see if it matched the names or ideology of any current or defunct rebel groups but although I had a few leads they all led to nothing. I think--"

"Just drop the report and get out," Doug interrupted, still glowering although at least it didn't seem like he was thinking up further reasons to ridicule Boyd's work.

Boyd fell silent briefly then walked forward to set the files on the desk. He started to turn to leave but paused. He didn't think he'd find another chance anytime soon where Doug would be even this approachable. "I know I messed up on that mission but what else did I do?"

Doug snorted and picked up his cigar, inhaling deeply before speaking around the billows of smoke that escaped his lips. "You're under the impression that just 'cause it was one mission means you should get a pass?"

"No," Boyd said, shaking his head. "One mission can be more than enough and I'm fully aware of how incredibly poorly I performed, as an understatement."

He paused, trying to figure out how to word the question he wanted to ask. In the end he figured he couldn't piss Doug off anymore than the man already was. "But, with all due respect, sir, you seem... disproportionately more displeased with me compared to the way it's been with others in the past and I don't understand why."

"Others in the past didn't nearly fuck up their first real Level 10 assignment because they were fucking daydreaming," Doug shouted, sitting up straight and slamming a fist against the desk.

Boyd nearly jumped at the sudden outburst but he kept his expression neutral as Doug continued furiously.

"You fuckin' stupid kid, do you have any idea how important it was that we get Ethan? That was the point of the assignment, to get him here and workin' with us. If he'd gotten away because of your stupid bullshit I'd have recommended you for fucking termination as a whole. You're lucky you're still standing here at all so don't cry to me cause' I ain't kissin' your ass. I don't give a fuck who your mommy is, you're a trainee and as of that mission, a shitty one at that."

Boyd watched Doug for a moment; he didn't know what he could say that wouldn't just anger Doug further. What caught him mostly by surprise was that his mother was brought into it since Doug had never mentioned that before. Then again, when people got angry with him, she seemed to be one of the first people they brought up, as if Boyd was using her as leverage.

He was also caught off-guard by the knowledge that the Agency had wanted Ethan to work with them. He knew the Agency had turned rebels to their side before for information, just like had happened with Warren Andrews and Sector 53, but terrorists too? He supposed he shouldn't be surprised; but would the Agency only use Ethan's brilliance for defense purposes like Ethan had thought the CIA was going to, or was there more to it?

Boyd wasn't about to ask and he didn't want to think about all the implications at that moment. He could only assume that since he'd caught Ethan in the end, it had been the saving grace that had barely managed to keep him in training. Or, apparently, possibly even alive. He had to be especially careful not to mess up again.

Tilting his head down in acknowledgment, Boyd said evenly, "I understand. Thank you, Instructor."

Doug scoffed and took another gulp from the coffee cup, dropping his gaze back to his computer and silently dismissing his trainee.

Boyd turned and left the office, quietly shutting the door behind him. Without a hint of an expression, he carefully kept any deep thoughts at bay as he left the training building and strode across the compound. He didn't even know where he was going at first; he didn't want to stay in the training area, but he didn't want to go home or to Crater Lake, and he had nowhere else to go.

He decided to stay on the compound but the last place he wanted to be was somewhere very public where he could end up running into Sin, yet he didn't want to go

into any of the buildings since he had a feeling he'd just feel cooped up and agitated. Boyd remembered an out of the way courtyard hidden on the edge of the compound; a place people rarely went but where Boyd had once sat reading a book on a day off.

The wind had a cold edge to it that had only sharpened since he'd last been outside, making it feel like it was cutting straight to his bones and reminding him that he'd forgotten to grab a coat before he'd left. He didn't care though; maybe the cold would give him something else to think about.

Winter was looming around him; slate grey skies and even lower, heavier clouds than usual, all the leaves long ago crackled and fallen to the ground. There was even, he realized as he looked toward one of the distant silver skyscrapers, a hint of snow flurries dancing lightly in the air. He wished he felt some sort of wonder for the first snowfall but he didn't feel anything; just numb.

Thankfully no one was in the courtyard, allowing him to use one of the benches in the far corner where there were only dead trees and a fountain that had been shut down for the year. He sat on the end of the bench and stared blankly at the fountain at first; the two tiers had a simplistic design but the white stone had chipped away over the years, leaving it looking lackluster and worn. Like the fountain had tried to keep going despite the conditions but now it was slowly giving up.

Boyd felt a sudden burning in his eyes and knot in his stomach and at first he didn't understand why. He didn't want to feel it but, if anything, the feeling just grew more intense and, unconsciously, he drew his legs up to his chest with his arms on his knees, resting his head against his arms. He squeezed his eyes shut and focused on breathing evenly, on trying not to let himself feel as completely overwhelmed as he honestly did.

He didn't know what to do.

He felt so completely useless; so stupid and impotent and incapable of doing anything right and it had been a long time since he'd felt like such a complete fuck up on every level. It wasn't even just about the mission, although that definitely played a part.

It was everything. It was Sin and all the issues and emotions that came with just thinking Sin's name, just imagining his face and body. It was doubt that Boyd was making any of the right decisions-- that he was even capable of one at that point. It was exhaustion from too many nights with too little sleep and too many times he'd forced himself past a breaking point because he wouldn't give up, he wouldn't give in.

It was his aching body and the stitches that pulled at his wounds, the bruises and sprains and strained muscles that made even the act of curling up uncomfortable. It was the training that had become increasingly difficult and the way he'd been feeling like he was only barely keeping up. It was Doug saying he'd nearly come close to recommending Boyd's termination and it was the feeling of a car ripping apart around him, of a strap wrapped around his arm and the knowledge that he was about to die and he was ultimately, completely powerless.

It was nearly completely destroying yet another mission because of emotions and it was knowing that it was entirely his fault, that he just wasn't strong enough; that maybe he never would be.

It was feeling invalidated on nearly every level and being completely at a loss as to how to fix that.

It was knowing he had no one to go home to, no one to lean on and say, "I'm scared," and know they'd understand, know they wouldn't judge him for it.

It was isolation and pain and weariness and he was so fucking tired that he just wanted to stop; he wanted his thoughts to stop whirling and his emotions to stop rising up, or maybe stop existing in the first place.

His fingers dug into his upper arms and he let that be a focus; that and the chilled ache that told him he should probably be wearing gloves. His throat felt tight and it annoyed him, it pissed him off, it made him grit his teeth and press his forehead firmly against his forearms and breathe slowly. He felt his lungs expand and deplete and he focused on the shifting of the clothing against his chest as it happened.

But the thoughts wouldn't quite leave.

He just-- he felt so frustrated and angry and upset and, most of all, discouraged. Part of him felt hopeless, like everything was looming too far above him, like he was the only idiot still on the beach as the tsunami was about to crash down around him and there was no way he'd ever make it out on top.

But at the same time he wouldn't even consider the thought of giving up; he had nothing to do but keep pressing forward, keep going along even when he felt like he was faltering on every level he could, when he felt like each step was uncertain and frustrating and sometimes terrifying but it was all he could do to put his foot down and lift the other.

He wanted to be stronger; he wanted to keep going. He wanted to never feel doubts like he had lately, to never feel like this again.

He couldn't just give up because life was difficult or he'd messed up big time or his instructor didn't like him; he couldn't stop because his body hurt and he was so tired that his eyes burned from more than just tears of frustration that he refused to let go.

He couldn't stop because he'd felt betrayed by his partner and he'd started to doubt everything that he'd believed was truth about Sin, himself and their relationship. He couldn't stop because he felt weary and slow and prone to mistakes and he definitely couldn't stop just because he had doubts that he would succeed after all.

He couldn't stop at all because failing wasn't an option.

He couldn't stop because it would be giving up; it would be acknowledging that he hadn't been strong enough, independent enough, *good* enough to make it on his own. Stopping would prove everyone else right. And, damn it, even if that ended up being the truth he refused to acknowledge it, refused to let it be reality until he had absolutely no fight left in him; until he simply could not physically move forward anymore.

So he had to stop feeling sorry for himself because it wasn't doing any good and he was fine, anyway. It wasn't like he'd been completely incapacitated in training; his body hurt but he could still move. Maybe he felt so weary that his mind seemed fried but he could still think and function.

He still had a month of training left and he'd be damned if he let it beat him now, if he let himself get so discouraged that he just had one more thing to regret later when he looked back on how he'd failed so completely at every goal he'd set.

He told himself these things and he believed them, to an extent, and he felt galvanized, to an extent, but...

Even trying to give himself the stubborn strength to keep going, he couldn't deny how frustrated he was, how stressed and overwhelmed and tired he felt. How hard it was to keep his mind from returning to the same old worries and doubts-- the same painful memories of smiling against Sin's lips or the feel of hard muscles beneath his fingers and knowing that warmth he'd felt inside during those moments hadn't necessarily been reciprocated. Knowing that Sin had been lying to him or he'd been lying to himself and

regardless of who had done what, Boyd had been a fool to believe in the relationship in the first place.

And he was even more of a fool to miss it so sharply when it was gone.

Boyd tightened his fingers even more and drew in a deep breath then forced it out slowly in a sigh. His eyes were squeezed shut so securely that it was almost painful but he tried to get himself out of his mind by thinking about the physical aspect of where he was.

He took in the cold wind shifting his hair, the fact he couldn't feel the snowflakes at all on his bare skin and how that was somehow disappointing. He focused on the way his toes curled up in order to keep his heels balanced on the edge of the bench, of the wooden slats digging into his lower back and the air like ice through his thin, long-sleeved shirt.

This time the focus worked, and this time he was able to slowly loosen his grip on his own arms, to release some of the stored tension in his shoulders. He allowed his forehead to rest against his arms instead of pressing down but with the new focus on his surroundings, he couldn't help a sudden, deep shiver. Now he stayed in the same position to retain some body heat as well.

"Boyd?"

The voice sounded abrupt as it snapped Boyd out of his thoughts. The French accent gave the speaker's identity away before Boyd even looked up.

Thierry stood near the bench with an expression of mild surprise. He was only slightly better dressed for the weather, with an over-sized sweater and a scarf; as usual, he was smoking a clove cigarette. An mp3 player was clipped to the lower part of his sweater and he had a pair of headphones down around his neck. Boyd could hear the faint sound of jazz music playing, and although he didn't know the song or artist he could recognize that the lyrics were in French.

Boyd didn't know who was more surprised; Thierry or himself. "Thierry," Boyd said blankly, and after a moment he thought to add, "Hey."

Thierry gave him a puzzled look and moved closer, slipping his hands into the pockets of his worn black trousers. They weren't very long and stopped just above his ankles,

the moccasin type shoes he wore making his complete lack of socks obvious. "How long have you been here?"

Boyd stared at him then looked around briefly as if he'd be able to judge by his surroundings. There was a fine layer of snow around him and, he noticed as he glanced down at his arms, a light white powder on his dark clothing. "I don't know," he said honestly. "Awhile I guess."

Thierry shook some of his shaggy hair out of his eyes and shivered slightly as he indicated a large tree in the corner of the courtyard next to a nearby building. "I have been sitting behind that tree for a couple hours. I thought I was completely alone. I would stay but the cold is beginning to make my poor choice in clothing unfortunate."

"Ah," Boyd said in understanding, not really sure what else to say at first. He realized he still had his legs near his chest and he probably looked rather odd so he shifted so he was sitting normally on the bench. His joints ached with the movement and his fingers felt numb with the cold. Maybe he'd been there longer than he'd realized.

"I didn't see you," Boyd added belatedly. "I thought I was too."

Thierry nodded, grey-blue eyes studying Boyd and after a moment Thierry clicked off the mp3 player and tucked it away beneath the large knit sweater. "Would you like to come to my apartment for espresso?"

Boyd looked back down at the fluffy, thin layer of snow around him and realized he really had nothing else to do and he didn't want to sit outside in the cold all day anyway. Especially when the more he thought about the weather, the colder he felt.

"Okay." Boyd stood up and, after another chill went the length of his body, he crossed his arms across his chest, huddling in on himself for warmth.

Thierry smiled slightly and nodded before turning to walk towards the small residential building that he'd been assigned to. The walk wasn't long from the courtyard and they were entering the building and walking the few flights up to Thierry's floor just as the snow began to fall faster.

There was only one guard in front of Thierry's door this time and he greeted the French man in an amiable way before moving to the side so that the two could enter the apartment unobstructed.

"They have been less rigid with my security lately," Thierry said when the door was shut. He moved into the apartment and set his mp3 player on the kitchen counter, stepping out of his moccasins and curling his toes in the thick carpet. Heat flowed through the apartment and Thierry stretched, seeming to soak in the warmth.

Boyd paused in the doorway and glanced around. He'd been mildly surprised by the guard's change in demeanor but it made sense if there weren't orders to be as strict. Boyd suspected the reason Thierry saw less stringent rules was due to the Jourdain Allard mission but he didn't know for sure. Regardless, Thierry seemed more at ease than he had last time Boyd had seen him so the change seemed to have a positive impact on the man.

"I'm sure that's a relief," Boyd said as he stepped further into the apartment. "Do you know why?"

"They realized that I am an ally and always have been, it seems." Thierry relaxed his shoulders and moved around the counter to fiddle with the espresso machine. It was obviously brand new and appeared very expensive. "I am still not allowed to leave this horrible campus although I can send the service staff to fetch me items."

"Like that?" Boyd asked with a quirked eyebrow as he eyed the machine. He was rather impressed that Thierry even had anything that sophisticated but then again now that he thought about it he seemed to recall that Thierry also had one in his kitchen in France. "Couldn't live without one, I take it?"

"I need strong caffeine," Thierry replied as he leaned against the counter and gazed at Boyd. "My body operates more proficiently when it is properly energized. Now that I have access to some of my hidden bank accounts, I can caffeinate myself the correct way."

Boyd smiled slightly although it was still a more reserved expression than usual. It was strange how this was the second discussion that he'd had in the last two months about people and their caffeine addictions.

"I've always preferred tea, myself," Boyd said idly as he walked closer to the espresso machine. He was mildly curious as to how it worked; he didn't know a lot about espresso except that it was strong coffee of some sort. Since he'd never gotten into the habit of drinking coffee, he'd never had any interest in learning the different types and terms.

"It is very bitter," Thierry said as he poured Boyd a small cup. "But it is irresistible after the first taste."

Boyd rather dubiously eyed the small black and silver mug filled with dark liquid. But he was still cold and even if he didn't care for coffee, it would at least warm him. The espresso was hot and burned his tongue slightly and it was bitter enough that he made a face without immediately realizing it. Even so, he drank it all at once.

"Well, it's certainly strong," Boyd said as he stared down briefly at the empty mug before sliding it over to Thierry.

Thierry automatically re-filled the mug and pushed it over to Boyd, perching on one of the stools near the counter. "How is your training?"

The mug was small and contained only a few sips worth of espresso but Boyd just shook his head wordlessly at first and took a smaller drink. He didn't make a face this time but he still didn't like the taste; it was just especially bitter water to him but at least it was warm.

"Quite horrible at the moment, actually," Boyd said with a slight frown as he set the mug down carefully, staring at the espresso before returning his attention to Thierry. "Kind of one of the reasons I was in the courtyard."

"Ah." Thierry nodded, taking a small sip from his cup, eyes never leaving Boyd. "I believe it is a good place to think. When I first arrived here the constant clutter of people on the campus disturbed me. All I wanted was to be left to my thoughts, to my problems. I hid in the courtyard to escape but today I am glad that I found you there."

"So you could show off your espresso machine?" Boyd asked with a faint hint of teasing.

Thierry's lips lifted in a smile and he tilted his head to the side. "Yes, showing off my wealth is a tactic I use when attempting to seduce beautiful young men. Was that not obvious to you in France?"

"I do seem to recall glamorous hotels and fancy limos, yes," Boyd said mildly. He held up the mug and quirked an eyebrow as he continued jokingly. "Is that what this is, then? You know, most people try to get the other one drunk instead of more alert. Maybe you should've regaled me with a wine selection instead."

"Why would I have to resort to intoxicants?" Thierry asked innocently. "Am I not handsome and charming enough to seduce someone without it?"

Boyd smiled slightly. "I suppose."

Thierry made a sound at the back of his throat and looked almost offended. "You seemed to think I was in France. But then again, I suppose that was for your job."

"Yes, it was," Boyd said, not bothering to mince words since they both knew it was the truth. "Honestly, if it hadn't been for the circumstances I doubt I would have agreed. But I thought you were attractive and not a bad person so that made it easier. And it was nice to converse with someone in French." Even if Sin hadn't liked it, he added to himself somewhat bitterly.

Thierry nodded and slid off the stool, leaving the kitchen area to enter the carpeted living room where he sat on the sofa. There was a moment of silence as Boyd followed and Thierry studied him before smiling. "Had it been other circumstances, I would have reacted the same. Honestly, I would not have behaved that way with another agent. I was very attracted to you. Had we met somewhere on the street, far away from the intrigue of war, I would have tried to sleep with you still."

It hadn't occurred to Boyd that Thierry's circumstances had been unique as well; after how capricious Carhart had made Thierry seem, Boyd had just assumed Thierry acted that way around any agent except Sin. Even then it seemed that the French man had restrained himself only after Sin broke his nose in an incident that took place before Boyd had joined the Agency.

"I can't really be the first agent you've been attracted to like that?" It came out as a somewhat doubtful, somewhat confused question; Boyd didn't think Thierry was lying but he never would have thought he was that different from anyone else.

"Of course not, I am very generous with my attention and I am very appreciative of beauty. When I first met your partner I nearly fell in love with his green eyes before I realized how angry and violent he is. I have had many love affairs with men from various groups, Janus and Di Zhi included. However I never mixed work with pleasure as I did with you. But I could not help myself and did not think I would be given another opportunity to get to know you."

Thierry's eyebrows rose slightly at Boyd and although he was very matter of fact about what his intentions had been and how obvious it was that the attraction still remained, the overwhelming arrogance that had stifled their interaction in France was missing.

Boyd studied him thoughtfully. "It was the only time I've slept with anyone for the job," he said after a moment. "But I've wondered... what would've happened if I'd said no?"

Thierry shrugged. "I would have given you the disc anyway. Do not misunderstand though, although my intentions were always for the good of this Agency, that does not mean I am cooperative with any agent they send my way. I have been prone to prolong correspondence or mislead them depending on whether or not I like who they sent to deal with me or whether or not it is in my best interest to give up information at the time. Many times I decided I would and changed my mind later. If I am sent a beast like Sin, I am more likely to give him difficulties and send him home empty-handed because I will not help someone who does not respect me. I liked you so I would have given you the information whether you went to my home or not."

Although Boyd didn't know what response he'd been hoping for, he felt somehow satisfied by the answer. On one hand, it was frustrating that he was now classified as a valentine operative and the Agency could expect him at any point to seduce an informant, when in reality he could have just avoided the whole issue in the first place.

But on the other hand, he felt better having it verified that it really could have been a possibility that they had walked away without anything if the circumstances had been different. He hadn't known at the time the way Thierry felt about him so he'd had no way of knowing that denying Thierry's advances wouldn't have made Thierry decide to keep the information after all.

However, Boyd still didn't understand what Thierry saw in him that made him so different from anyone else. He watched Thierry a moment, trying to understand the man, trying to see himself through Thierry's eyes-- but he just couldn't. He couldn't really see himself through anyone's eyes at that moment and come up with a positive image; he still felt too discouraged.

"Why?" Boyd asked quietly. "You'd been doing this for a long time so why would you change your routine for me? How am I any different?"

Thierry laughed quietly and shook his head at Boyd, brown hair falling across his forehead carelessly. "You were so new, so young. It was refreshing to see and even though I knew you were kind only because you wanted information, I could not help but

be charmed by you. It is not every day in this business that I came across people who are not cynical, angry, demanding, unpleasant. People who will only talk of the world and its problems as if there is nothing else even if I sometimes struggle to remind myself that there is."

Thierry extended one slender arm and didn't hesitate to run his fingers along the side of Boyd's face, tilting his chin up as Thierry stared into his eyes. "And you were so gorgeous, I could not resist. Youth and beauty are my two weaknesses and you have both."

Boyd unconsciously leaned into Thierry's touch and, as he searched Thierry's eyes, he felt caught by the strength and sincerity of Thierry's gaze. It had been a long time, if ever, that someone had brought up his youth as a good thing.

At twenty-one years old, he was at least several years younger than anyone he typically worked with and, especially lately, he'd seemed to hear 'stupid kid' more than anything. He didn't think of himself as 'gorgeous' but right then he appreciated hearing anything good about himself, so he wasn't about to argue.

It hadn't occurred to him that his attitude would have been different than anyone else's but now that Thierry mentioned it, he could see how.

Of course, after awhile he'd become rather cynical himself but that had occurred long after the mission in France. Beyond that, over the last year he'd started to acknowledge that there was more to life than the emptiness he'd fallen into. He'd tried to remember the good times as equally or more than the bad. It had been a struggle and still was, but lately it had been even harder.

"Sometimes I forget too," Boyd said quietly.

"It is hard not to," Thierry agreed, his steel colored eyes intense as he continued to stare directly into Boyd's. "It has been especially hard for me here in isolation, a glorified prisoner of this political war. When you came to me two months ago it reminded me that there are still things in life that bring me joy despite my circumstances. It reminded me that..."

Thierry trailed off as if trying to figure out the correct English words. "That even in this concrete prison camp there can be beauty and... pleasure. Delightful distractions that can momentarily bring joy even if joy is difficult to obtain now." His hand trailed down from Boyd's chin and rested on his shoulder, squeezing it gently.

There was no question what Thierry wanted and Boyd found he didn't really mind. He was frustrated, tired, and so stressed out by recent events that he desperately needed to relax, even just for a few hours.

The only two breaks he'd had so far in the two months of intensive training had been as stressful as the training itself. He felt like it had been forever since he'd just had a chance to unwind, to let some of the tension go. To have someone sincerely just want to appreciate him, even if it was simply for his looks or body. To have someone look at him and not see all the things that were wrong and instead see someone who was desirable and worthwhile.

He had no delusions that Thierry wanted anything more from him than sex and that was how Boyd wanted it. They didn't really care about each other aside from as acquaintances; it was basically physical attraction. But since whatever relationship he'd had or thought he'd had with Sin was over, Boyd had no reason to deny himself this. He just really needed something to make him forget his issues, even for a little bit.

At that moment he just wanted-- needed-- to feel good again, to know ahead of time exactly what this was and for there not to be a catch. It sounded like Thierry needed the same.

Boyd couldn't look away from Thierry's eyes, from the smoky grey that was focused on him completely. At first he just nodded wordlessly before he thought to say, "I know what you mean."

Thierry's hand continued to knead Boyd's shoulder expertly before his long fingers extended to gently slide down the exposed skin along the button-down shirt Boyd wore as the two of them continued to stare at each other in heavy silence. Thierry's lips parted slightly, his eyelids lowering as he watched Boyd with barely concealed desire, and finally he took Boyd's lack of reaction as consent.

When Thierry kissed him, Boyd responded with a fire that seemed to surprise Thierry as well as himself. When Thierry automatically started to take things slow, covering Boyd's face and neck with gentle kisses as he ran his fingers through Boyd's hair, Boyd arched against him, drawing the other man into an explosive kiss that left little room for the romance Thierry obviously automatically defaulted to.

Boyd didn't want romance; he didn't want to make love. He wanted to feel something strong and hot enough to burn all thoughts of Sin out of his mind. He wanted nothing but raw, unbridled pleasure.

So when Thierry hesitated before removing Boyd's shirt, Boyd shook his head impatiently although a part of him appreciated the fact that Thierry had remembered his previous discomfort.

"It's fine," Boyd said breathlessly. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"*Are you you certain?*" Thierry murmured in French, nuzzling Boyd's neck with his face, tracing kisses along his collarbone.

"Yes," Boyd breathed and he practically tore his own shirt open as proof, anxious to move on, not wanting to focus on his scars, on his tattoos, on anything from the past. He let the shirt completely fall off him before he reached for Thierry again.

Just like before, they ended up sliding down to the carpet but this time they weren't in front of a roaring fire in a fancy home. This time they were in a Spartan Agency apartment and this time Boyd wasn't trying to do everything in his power to accommodate Thierry. This time Boyd was concerned about his own needs, his own desires, and his eyes rolled back and he shuddered as Thierry hovered above him and began sucking his dick.

It was obvious that Thierry was very experienced; he knew exactly what to do to make Boyd feel as though he was going to lose his mind. Boyd thrust into Thierry's pliant mouth urgently, harsh, open-mouthed pants and moans escaping his lips. He didn't think to stifle his voice at all; he didn't care even if the guard outside the door heard them and knew what was happening. All that mattered was the building warmth in his stomach and the prospect of losing himself in pleasure.

But Thierry had other plans.

As the suction of Thierry's warm mouth was just causing Boyd's moans to become more urgent, Thierry slipped away, kissing the inside of Boyd's thighs without allowing him to come. Boyd dropped his head against the floor and felt a surge of frustration. It was going to be impossible to forget everything, to feel true pleasure, if Thierry kept stopping.

Boyd needed more, he needed something stronger. He pushed himself up on his elbows, golden brown eyes intense and dark with urgent desire.

"Fuck, Thierry-- just-- I need you to fuck me," he hissed, having trouble ignoring the erection that strained between his legs.

Thierry seemed a little taken aback by the demand, tilting his head slightly to gaze at Boyd as though he'd never really seen him before. After a moment he just smiled slightly and shook his head, removing his own clothing slowly as Boyd looked on.

Thierry's body was toned but very slender and there was something about him that was beautiful, but not in the dangerous and exotic way that Sin was. On the contrary, everything about Thierry seemed almost effeminate, delicate, far more so than Boyd could ever be.

Boyd turned around and rested his arms on the couch, down on his knees as Thierry crouched behind him. Feathery kisses trailed along the nape of Boyd's neck, along his shoulders, down his back, and although Boyd shuddered with the sensuality of it, with the way it caused his toes to curl in anticipation, it was undeniable that he wanted to move on.

Extensive kissing, gentle foreplay, caressing; it wasn't something Boyd was used to. He was used to primal fucking, animal-like intensity, wild sex; fingers strong enough to snap a neck digging into his arms as a deep sexy voice groaned in his ear...

Boyd shuddered violently and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block Sin out. "Please do it already," he whispered to Thierry.

"*Patience*," Thierry crooned in his ear and to Boyd's frustration, the other man stood up and went to get some kind of make-shift lubrication. Despite the fact that he was back in seconds, Boyd couldn't help but feel aggravated by the pause. It would have been fine if they'd fucked with spit; he didn't mind, he'd done it before.

When Thierry's dick finally pushed into him, Boyd's mouth dropped open at the delicious pressure against the sensitive nerves. He pushed back against Thierry and Thierry began moving in a rhythm that caused Boyd to moan against the fabric of the couch. It felt good to be in the hands of someone who was so obviously experienced, to have someone be concerned with making him feel as much pleasure as he gave.

Even so, after awhile Boyd began to crave that familiar almost-violence of sex with Sin.

He began to push back on Thierry's cock harder, faster, wanting that rough burning pleasure-pain of a big dick pounding into him mercilessly.

"Harder," Boyd groaned, fingers digging into the couch.

"Shhh," Thierry breathed into his ear, moving in and out agonizingly slowly.

"Fuck," Boyd hissed. "Please, just-- faster!"

"*Hush*," Thierry murmured again and, if anything, he moved slower. "*Not everything is such a rush-- it doesn't have to be so rough, so hurried...*"

"Shit," Boyd practically growled and buried his face in the couch, panting harshly as he tried to enjoy Thierry, enjoy how skilled he was, and to forget the way Sin did things.

But it was difficult and as Thierry made love to him, all Boyd could do was feel distracted by the frustration he felt-- with himself, with the situation. He grit his teeth and tried to ignore how, even in the hands of someone who was experienced and knew how to make his body burn with sensuality, all he could think was that he just wanted Thierry to slam into his ass and fuck his brains out. How even with all the bruises and aches from training and the stitches from the mission, right then he almost craved the idea of the pain they would give him in rougher, unrestrained sex-- just to feel something more overwhelming and undeniable.

But the way Boyd was used to wasn't Thierry's style.

Thierry pushed in and out of Boyd, moaning quietly, sometimes murmuring things in French, and his arm slid around Boyd's waist in order to painstakingly massage his arousal. The perfect pressure on Boyd's erection, coupled with the heat and feeling of Thierry's dick moving relentlessly in and out of him, was enough to cause Boyd's heart to speed, his breath to quicken as it caught between his open mouth and the couch.

But each time his moans heightened, each time he whispered "yes" repeatedly, urgently, and could feel the warmth building, Thierry slowed down again, slid his fingers away from Boyd's erection or changed positions and made Boyd feel like he had to start all over.

The sex lasted longer than Boyd expected, longer than it ever had for him with anyone else. And even though Thierry brought him to the brink of mind numbing pleasure on

multiple occasions, the complete lack of urgency-- of the screaming, blinding, desperate passion that Boyd was used to-- ruined the experience for him.

By the time it came, even Boyd's orgasm seemed anticlimactic.

Boyd collapsed against the carpet, sliding his eyes shut as he tried to catch his breath and for several moments he didn't bother to move. After awhile he felt Thierry moving away from him with a low sigh and Boyd heard the rustle of clothing as the other man presumably put his clothes on again.

Boyd turned, noting that Thierry was just zipping his pants as he watched Boyd thoughtfully. The moment felt rather awkward but Boyd didn't react to it; he simply found his clothing and started to get dressed as well, beginning with his pants.

"Things have changed in two years, I see," Thierry said simply in French after a moment.

Boyd looked over at Thierry and paused as he was pulling his shirt on. He couldn't read Thierry's expression enough to know what he was thinking but Thierry seemed to simply be making an observation. Boyd glanced down as he started buttoning his shirt and thought about how true that was in many ways; even the fact that he was standing there with his chest exposed to someone else and it didn't bother him was proof enough on his part.

"I guess they have," Boyd agreed equally simply in French as he finished buttoning his shirt and took a moment to straighten the sleeves. He looked back up to meet Thierry's eyes. *"Some things, anyway."*

Thierry nodded and padded across the room barefoot, curling up in an armchair as he studied Boyd. *"Can I ask you something personal?"*

"Of course," Boyd said, calmly watching Thierry and making no move to sit down or to leave.

"It just seems as though..." Thierry crossed one knee over the other and shrugged with one shoulder. "Last time we made love you were not so..." He trailed off again, seemingly at a loss before finally asking. "Did you take a lover during the last two years?"

Boyd watched Thierry thoughtfully; it was true that the first time he'd slept with Thierry he'd been a lot more amenable to Thierry's style. Even discounting the fact that he'd been more interested in pleasing Thierry for work, he'd still been more satisfied sleeping with Thierry at that time than he felt he was capable of now.

He hadn't thought about how his tastes had changed so drastically since they'd met in France. Just another difference in himself that he now had to deal with. He was frustrated and annoyed that he'd let thoughts of Sin nearly fuck him over completely in training and now because of Sin he couldn't even have sex with Thierry and properly enjoy it the way he once had.

"Yes," Boyd answered finally. "I did."

Thierry nodded and slipped a box of clove cigarettes from his trouser pocket although he didn't take one out. He just continued to gaze at Boyd solemnly for a long moment before speaking.

"Well I do not know who your lover is," Thierry began, although the stiff way he said it made it obvious that he at least had a vague idea, "but my advice to you is that for the future, you keep in mind that not all men want to have violent sex. If that is what you wanted you should have not let me begin. Your irritation was quite evident while we made love and while I am pleased that we were together, I cannot give you what you want."

Boyd stared at him briefly then sighed and tilted his head down to run a hand over his eyes. "I know, I just-- I didn't realize..."

He shook his head to himself, knowing he was making little sense and knowing that it didn't matter even if he did. He looked back up to meet Thierry's eyes.

He had to admit that it was a pretty shitty way for him to behave. Although they'd both been happy to use each other for pleasure, the fact that Boyd's expectations were so different from what Thierry could provide made it so neither of them had probably gotten the release they'd wanted. It wasn't Thierry's fault that Boyd hadn't realized ahead of time how rough and unrelenting his preferences really had become.

"I'm sorry," Boyd said, not knowing what else to say.

"It is nothing to apologize for," Thierry said calmly, waving his hand elegantly. "I only mention it for the future, if we should sleep together again. Guilt is not necessary; it was merely sex and although frustrating, still pleasurable."

Boyd nodded and stood there a moment. Thierry was the only person he'd ever had casual sex with so it left him feeling like he didn't know exactly what to say or do. At least the initial awkwardness had died down somewhat. "Well, I'll see you around."

Thierry nodded and slipped his cigarette between his lips. "Of course."

Boyd inclined his head and with nothing more to add, he left.

The guard glanced at him as he walked past but Boyd didn't look over or bother to determine whether the man knew what had happened in there. It didn't matter, anyway; at that moment, the last thing he cared about was whether anyone knew he'd slept with Thierry since it was already common knowledge that they were both gay.

What bothered him instead was how undeniable it was to him now just how much Sin had changed him.

In the two times Boyd had slept with Thierry, it had been apparent to him that Thierry was experienced. This time he'd become especially aware that Thierry was an expert at thrumming pleasure out of the body, of building it until the last moment and holding off before climax, of slow pressure and gentle caresses, of finding the places that Boyd had responded to most and focusing on them.

Part of Boyd had craved something like that-- for his body to be so focused on, for caresses that made his voice twist out of him in helpless gasps and moans. He'd wanted that touch; that feeling of intimacy and appreciation which, many times, had been so utterly lacking with Sin.

Especially lately Sin had seemed more interested in his own release than Boyd's pleasure; it wasn't something Boyd thought of as a way of blaming Sin since he himself was partially responsible too. It was simply that Boyd hadn't realized the difference until he'd had something to compare it to, until Thierry had spent so much time learning all the places that made Boyd uncontrollably gasp and moan and had made certain Boyd felt it all on a shuddering, deep level.

But another part of Boyd needed an intensity that Thierry couldn't give him. Even when Thierry had caused his toes to curl and his body to arch, Boyd had been unable to keep

from thinking that Sin had been able to make him come in moments with just the right combination of pressure and roughness.

He hated that although Thierry had made him shudder with a longing for release, he hadn't been able to fully appreciate it because his body seemed completely dependent on what Sin had been giving him for so long.

It left him feeling frustrated and angry-- How the hell had he become so dependent on Sin? Why did everything circle back to him? Boyd knew it had only been two weeks since they'd broken up, that it was probably ridiculous to hope to put Sin aside so quickly, but Boyd couldn't help trying.

As Boyd thought about the situation he couldn't understand where it had all gone wrong- where *he* had gone wrong.

It seemed as though every part of him was now tied to his partner and it wasn't hard for Boyd to realize what a mistake it had been to allow that to happen. Sin was his partner at work, he'd been his one true friend and confidant, his lover; Sin had become his everything. And now that things between them were different, destroyed, Boyd felt at an utter loss as to what to do. The fact that he couldn't even appreciate sex unless his partner was sufficiently rough and violent made the effect of Sin on his life, his needs, all the more prominent.

How could he ever move on if Sin continued to dictate his needs and his actions? How could he forget about the burning sting of betrayal if he couldn't even push Sin out of his mind long enough to enjoy spending time with someone else?

The questions kept coming as Boyd walked aimlessly across the compound but he realized he had no answers. He was at a loss in his personal life and with training. It seemed as though whatever he did wasn't good enough; he'd disappointed Doug by obsessing over Sin and now he'd likely offended Thierry. It seemed that as long as Boyd focused on Sin, he wouldn't be able to accomplish anything successfully, even casual sex.

It was frustrating and Boyd couldn't help but feel foolish for allowing himself to become so immersed with Sin to the point of not even being able to properly function now that they were apart. It angered Boyd, especially when he considered the fact that he couldn't even properly pinpoint why he'd let himself get so sucked in.

Everyone had questioned his devotion to Sin and now Boyd couldn't help but do the same. What had made him think that he had Sin's character figured out so fully, so completely? What had caused him to believe that he and Sin had always been on the same wavelength?

Once again-- Boyd couldn't answer. He didn't even think there was one. He wondered if he could ever understand Sin, if he would ever know what to expect from someone so unpredictable, so complicated.

Boyd doubted it and he truly believed that continued efforts to understand Sin, to be so committed to him, would end in the same way unless something drastically changed.

Boyd's eyes narrowed as he walked across the compound, as the light snow flurry interfered with his vision and the icy wind cut through his clothing, sending prickling shivers along his body. The snow and cold weren't the only thing that made it obvious it was late November; with his birthday coming up next week, his luck was falling in line too.

Every birthday, every winter, had been completely chaotic since he'd joined the Agency. It seemed like ever since he'd met Sin, Boyd couldn't last through the month of November without at least something going to complete hell. First Lou's necklace, then Monterrey, now Ann.

Maybe Sin and Boyd were cursed to have terrible winters; to spend more than half the year miserable because they always found a way to hurt each other.

If that was the case, Boyd mused darkly to himself, at least this was the last time.

Chapter 20

The doors to the Fourth Floor Detainment Center opened immediately when Boyd swiped his ID card and, with only the briefest hesitation, he strode down the hall.

He'd only been on the floor twice; once without permission when he'd rescued Sin from the box and the other when he'd been brought to Shane's room for punishment after Monterrey. Since the last person he wanted to think about was Sin and since he definitely didn't want to remember his time with Shane, this wasn't exactly Boyd's first choice for a destination. But since he was here for his job and he had a lot of other issues on his mind, the location wasn't something that particularly bothered him today.

It only took him a few minutes to arrive at the interrogation room where Detainee #359 was being held. All Boyd knew about her was that she'd been the only person captured during the raid on the Agency and that he was supposed to get whatever information from her that he could using the interrogation techniques they'd been taught in training.

Two guards stood watch outside the room but other than a glance toward Boyd and his ID, they didn't bother to interact with him. Boyd was the second trainee to arrive for the interrogation; Harriet had been there the day before, and Emma, Jon, Cade and Toby would each be coming in that order during the next four days. Intensive weapons training was going on simultaneously so there was never a lull in activity for the trainees.

One of the guards opened the door and Boyd stepped inside.

The room was startlingly white; the walls, floor, even the table and chair that were bolted to the floor... everything was as blindingly white as new snow. A long mirror horizontally lined one wall and as Boyd glanced at his reflection, he couldn't help but feel a sense of anxiety, knowing that Doug was observing on the other side.

After a brief moment Boyd finally allowed his gaze to fully rest on the woman who was slouched in one corner of the room. She was not what Boyd had expected although he realized that he hadn't really known what to expect from the terrorist at all.

Detainee #359, or Jane Doe as Doug referred to her, appeared to be in her early thirties. She had long willowy limbs and appeared underweight which was likely due to the conditions she was kept in or perhaps even her own refusal to eat. As a result of her emaciated state, Jane's attractive face was gaunt.

She had very pronounced cheekbones that stuck out even more because of her thinness and full, bow-shaped lips. Her sandy complexion was pale, peaked and her large brown eyes were dull and uninterested in everything around her although there was still obvious resentment in her stare as she looked up at Boyd.

He couldn't tell her ethnicity immediately and while he wanted to lean towards Latina of some sort, she also looked as though she could be Native American.

Boyd calmly sat down in one of the chairs and watched her. Unsurprisingly, she didn't move or react and at first the two of them sat in silence. After a few moments, Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly. "Aren't you uncomfortable down there?"

Jane looked up at him dully and shrugged. "No. Not especially." She had a very slight accent and although it was obviously Spanish, it was so faint that he couldn't tell which country it would have originated from.

"Alright," Boyd said easily and leaned back in the chair. He kept his expression and body language completely unassuming. "If you're sure."

Jane stared at him blankly and said nothing.

Boyd continued to watch her calmly for a short period of time, seemingly unmindful of any time limits. In truth, he basically had eight hours to work with; a four hour period, an interval of about an hour in which he could leave if he chose, and another four hours if he needed more time. But as far as he was concerned, rushing into this would do him no good.

"I'm sure you don't particularly feel like talking to me right now and I understand that," he said at length, his tone reasonable. "Honestly, I'd feel the same if I were you."

Jane continued to stare at him in the same skeptical and unimpressed manner. He idly wondered if she knew she was the subject of a training procedure or if this whole thing was just incredibly odd to her. "Good for you," she said.

He didn't look away, gauging her reaction and body language. He'd already thought about how he would go about this. In order to complete this part of the training, he just needed to get some sort of information from her. It didn't need to be important but chances were high that she didn't know that.

There was no point in even trying for the bigger questions of who she was, what group she'd been with, what their plans had been, and so on... He knew very well how loyal rebels tended to be and if the Agency hadn't gotten that information out of her in several months of interrogation by people specialized in it, then there was no way he'd get it out of her in a few hours with very little training.

Instead, he looked at it from another angle.

He figured it was very likely that in the course of her time in the hands of the Agency, she'd probably already given away small, what to her was inconsequential information. She'd be much more likely to repeat that information to him because she would feel like it did him no good, that it was already in her file.

But even a small, inconsequential piece of information from her would mean that he'd passed this test and he definitely could not afford to fail this.

He could tell from her attitude that threat and force wouldn't do anything useful and it wasn't his style anyway. He wasn't even going to bother trying the tactic of claiming her people clearly didn't care about her and/or had abandoned her because he had no idea what group she was with and he didn't want to tip his cards, let her know how little he actually knew.

Not to mention she probably felt loyal enough that she'd just think it was all bullshit anyway and that regardless of whether she'd been caught, it didn't change her relationship with her group.

Instead, he planned to draw her into a conversation; to prolong the time she talked so there was higher likelihood that she would offhandedly mention something useful to him. There wasn't much he could comment on about her to start that conversation except, he decided, her accent, which intrigued him anyway. The best way to determine more about it was to get her to speak in Spanish, to show her he was willing to make an effort on his part to connect.

"Your accent is interesting," he idly observed in Spanish.

"Is it?" She replied and although it seemed she was speaking more out of boredom than actual need to carry on the conversation, she at least raised her eyebrows at him. It was better than the non-expression she'd had previously.

"Yes," Boyd said, then paused to consider her.

It was frustrating not being able to translate more complex ideas into Spanish simply because his vocabulary and knowledge of tenses wasn't strong enough but he was hoping to hold off as long as possible before he had to revert back to English. It was a shame she didn't speak French; it would have made it far easier on him.

He considered what sorts of topics he would realistically be able to talk about in Spanish.

"I went to Mexico for a time. Did you go there before?" The question was more rhetorical than anything; he didn't expect her to actually answer.

Jane crossed her legs in front of her and tilted her head back against the wall, eyes rolling up to the ceiling. *"You must not travel frequently,"* she said tiredly. *"My accent is not Mexican."*

"I know," Boyd said easily. *"I went to Mexico City, Monterrey, Tijuana... the people spoke with many different accents but not yours."* In truth, he'd only been to Monterrey but he didn't want to narrow it down to a single city.

Jane didn't respond for nearly an entire minute and during that time she continued to stare at the ceiling, although she grew almost unnaturally still. The abrupt silence ended finally as she said calmly, *"I wouldn't know. I've never been to any of those places."*

As soon as the words rolled off her tongue, Jane gave him the strangest look that Boyd couldn't even begin to properly analyze. It was suspicious and paranoid but there was a slight edge to it, to the way her eyes briefly seemed to drink him in entirely, that he didn't understand at all.

"The city is interesting. There are many people there," Boyd said idly, acting as though he didn't notice anything strange. *"The weather is nice too."*

Jane finally looked at him again, not seeming very impressed although she continued to stare at him with the odd, narrow-eyed expression. *"Are you going somewhere with this, kid? I've been here for several months and yesterday I had one pathetic excuse for an interrogation and now I have another. What is the point? To torture me with boredom?"*

She scoffed disgustedly. *"What's your name, anyway? Are you even supposed to be here?"*

Boyd kept his expression and body language perfectly comfortable and calm, not letting on how pleased he was that he'd finally gotten her to say more than a few words. Her accent was heavy and odd in a way; for instance, she pronounced *ll* differently than the Spanish-speakers in Mexico.

"My name's Jim," he said, tilting his head with a mildly curious expression. *"I studied accents and you sound like you're from Spain...?"*

Jane just made a face. *"Some regions in South America speak similar to people in Spain."*

With a shrug, Boyd settled back in his chair and idly watched her. He didn't let on that he felt a sense of thrill at her offhanded comment; the fact that she implied she was from somewhere in that area probably meant he just passed the test. Still, just in case, he didn't stop there. Maybe he could get more out of her.

Silence fell between the two of them briefly as Boyd didn't immediately respond and she felt no need to offer more information.

"You know," he started offhandedly in English, since it didn't matter anymore if she continued in Spanish and he wasn't fluent enough to keep a complex conversation going. He decided to try it from another angle, to see if she'd mention anything about the people she had been with. The best way to do that was to bring up information Sin had mentioned.

"You're caught here for months, random people come to ask all these questions, and you may never get to leave. I'd be pretty pissed if I were you, especially since my partner said the guy you were with bailed without a glance back."

Jane didn't immediately reply, likely having made similar observations more than once since she'd been captured, but after a pause it seemed that something occurred to her. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she sat up straighter, leaning forward with her hands planted against the floor as she stared at him intently.

Boyd could see burn marks on her palms when she moved them and he wondered what kind of torture she'd been subjected to.

"Your partner?" Jane eyed him warily, making no attempt to hide her interest. It was just another aspect of what he'd seen of her personality and mannerisms that made him wonder what group she was actually with. She didn't seem like the hardened and

cynical rebels he'd encountered in the past; he didn't really know what to make of her but it seemed clear that this was the first time she'd been captured. "The man who detained me is your partner?"

"Yes," Boyd said, keeping the intrigue out of his expression. Why did she respond so much to the idea of who had captured her? "He is."

"Who is he?" Jane all but demanded, dark eyebrows drawing together. Her voice was so intense, so urgent, that it was obvious Sin's identity mattered to her for some reason.

Boyd considered her thoughtfully. "Hmm."

At first he didn't seem as though he would respond but then he casually leaned forward against the table, his hands clasped calmly in front of him. "How about this? I'll tell you something about him if you tell me something about yourself."

Jane sat back again as she eyed him doubtfully. "Fine."

There was another stretch of silence as they stared at each other. It seemed as though Jane was struggling with what she would ask about Sin, clearly under no delusions that Boyd would give real information about his partner. She stared at Boyd with the same intriguing expression and finally asked, "What's his ethnicity?"

Boyd didn't answer immediately. He thought that seemed like an odd question since he couldn't see how that information was useful to her. At the same time, no matter how he thought it through he couldn't think of a way that giving her the truth about that would negatively affect anything, even if she somehow got free.

"Mexican and Chinese," he said finally.

Jane stared at him before allowing her gaze to drop as she looked at the burn scars on her hands blankly. She didn't immediately move or say anything further.

Having no idea what to make of her reaction, Boyd stayed quiet a moment as he thought about what to ask her. Just as she had with him, he knew she would never answer a serious question that would reveal too much. But maybe he could at least get some information on what sort of background she had.

"So, what do you do for a living other than terrorize places like this?"

The woman scoffed and slowly rubbed her hands together. "I suppose you can say I steal. And that's really all I have to say."

Boyd nodded and didn't press the subject. He ended up spending the next portion of an hour in the room, idly talking just to see if he could get her to say anything further. But it was obvious that she was done giving him any information; long silences passed between them and she barely spoke in complete sentences after twenty minutes. Eventually, he decided it wasn't necessary to drag this out any longer since he already had passed the test and it was just a waste of their time at this point.

He ended up leaving the Fourth floor and returning to the marksmanship training. Boyd felt a definite sense of relief as he walked back toward the training building; he'd managed to make it through the interrogation without any problems that he knew of and he hoped that Doug wouldn't find too much to be annoyed with.

Boyd hadn't seen Doug since the morning of the last break but he knew better than to expect Doug to suddenly stop scrutinizing everything he did. He'd obviously seriously pissed Doug off and it would take more than a successful interrogation to make up for the mistake in Annadale Beach.

The next few days passed rather uneventfully as they trained with Captain Chase, the captain in charge of training. Boyd had never worked with the woman before and it turned out she was curt, to the point, and held the trainees to a high standard. At the same time she didn't exhibit any of the sarcasm or taunting that Doug typically did.

Instead, she would simply point blank say what faults a trainee had, how to correct them and would make the trainee repeat the attempt until they got it right. A few times, that had resulted in someone making a spectacle of themselves when they couldn't quite fix it but she didn't seem to take any pleasure out of it; she simply watched with a critical eye to know where the move was going wrong.

On the seventh day, Doug returned to work with them as all six of the candidates were together for one more day of marksmanship as a group. They used laser guns and interactive holograms for the exercise; the holograms popping up around them at various distances and poses, programmed to react realistically to what happened around them. The idea was to present scenarios which would test the agent's immediate response to different situations and to see whether they could accurately kill only the suspect-- often a terrorist or rebel of some sort-- without endangering innocents around them.

If an innocent victim was shot, he or she would crumple to the ground and the rebel would escalate the situation but if the rebel was shot then the innocent victims would sometimes cheer or flee.

The holograms and their responses were extremely realistic, giving the impression at times that this was really happening. It was a strange experience and for the most part Boyd did well except one point when he realized the holographic suspect he had to kill was a father with a small son. The man's eyes were dark brown and he had a friendly smile; something about the man had made Boyd think of his own father, made him not want to make that child an orphan.

He hesitated only the slightest hint before he pulled the trigger and killed the man in the scenario. The little boy jumped, looked startled, then dropped by his father and started screaming and crying. Boyd watched the scenario play out, his expression turning slightly cold as he refused to let himself feel anything at the sight and when the large green and red target marks finally showed up on the screen he only paid attention to how he'd killed the man in one merciful shot to the head.

It may have been pure luck but Doug didn't comment on the hesitation, which had admittedly been very brief. Boyd expected every small thing he did wrong to be pointed out so he felt relieved and thought that maybe Captain Chase had been monitoring him at that point. They only had two rooms where the scenarios could play out so while two trainees were in the rooms, the other four waited for their turn in the hallway.

The training went into the early evening before Doug and Captain Chase left and the six trainees who remained ended up heading toward the cafeteria. There was now a definite shift in their interaction from the first time they'd sat in a room together.

Whereas initially, several of them had sat alone or in groups of people they knew, now they ended up all sitting at the same table. Although their personalities hadn't changed drastically, there were certain shifts in intensity that generally made it easier for them to get along.

Boyd was just sitting down with a mug of Earl Grey tea and a slightly stale bagel when he realized he'd entered into the middle of a conversation.

"Yeah, she and General Carhart are lovers," Toby was telling the group.

"Who?" Boyd asked, mildly startled. He'd never heard of anyone Carhart was involved with.

"Captain Chase. They're involved. Is it surprising?" Toby asked curiously since Boyd was the only one of the group who'd ever had close interaction with Carhart.

Although Boyd hadn't expected that tidbit of information, he contemplated it as he drew his eyebrows down and stared at his tea. When he thought about their personalities it did seem as though the two of them could get along. Captain Chase seemed to be about ten years younger than Carhart but she had the sort of no-nonsense, non-aggressive attitude that he could see working well with Carhart, at least as far as Boyd knew.

"I guess not," Boyd said, looking over at Toby. "They seem like they could be compatible. I barely know her and I mostly just see him in meetings though, so who knows. How long have they been together?"

"Almost two years," Emma spoke up, drawing her knee up between her and the table, with her other leg resting against the seat as if she were sitting cross-legged. She opened an apple juice bottle and raised her eyebrows when a few of the others looked at her curiously.

Boyd especially gave her a strange look; not that it mattered or would have come up but how had he missed that, how had he not even heard a rumor about Carhart and Captain Chase when he was in Carhart's unit?

It really did serve to underscore Toby's point of how little Boyd used to interact with anyone. He'd never sat around with Jeffrey or Owen like this even though he'd worked with them constantly; he'd barely spent much time with Ryan even before the raid. It brought him back to his earlier thoughts of how he'd let himself get too engrossed in Sin to the point that Sin had become everything to him.

"Actually," Emma continued casually after a moment, "there's a lot of women interested in General Carhart. He seems to be a genuinely good guy; he's smart, attractive, and high up in rank. I heard he refused to be in any relationship after his wife died but Morgan-- Captain Chase-- wants more than she's getting, so she's worried about him leaving her and all that. I also heard there was another woman once."

When she realized people were listening, Emma set the juice container on the table and leaned forward to relay more of what she'd overheard. "They said Morgan got pissed about it so she was really bitchy to everyone in training one week and Carhart and her almost ended right there. But then he dropped the other woman and never dropped

Morgan so she's still happy but paranoid. Supposedly she sometimes gives the evil eye to women if they get a little too close to him. Some people said they think she's planning to get pregnant to keep him but I think that's stretching it."

Jonathan turned a page in his book and didn't comment but Toby rolled his eyes. "That's ridiculous. I don't see Chase resorting to pregnancy-trapping and even if she did, who says he would settle down and marry her just because they have a baby?"

"Oh, come on, Toby," Emma said with a teasing grin. "Don't you know soap operas and romance novels practically rely on that scenario? And they don't lie."

"If someone that stupid was involved in our training I wouldn't want any part of it," Harriet muttered as she picked up her slice of pizza. "I wouldn't be surprised if one of the General's fan girls tried it though."

"Probably," Cade said as he popped open a can of soda. "Some dumb bitch tried it on me once."

"Someone wanted to marry *you*?" Emma blurted in surprise before she could stop herself. She immediately looked chagrined, as if she hadn't intended to be offensive.

"No way," Cade said, giving Emma a look as if he was insulted that she thought he slept with women interested in commitment. "She wanted money. Stupid bitch thought she could get it outta me with child support or whatever bullshit. But she was fuckin' five, six other dudes at the same time so who knew whose kid it was." He took a drink of his soda and looked immensely pleased with himself as he finished, "I told her to fuck off and I wasn't giving her shit."

Toby couldn't help but give the man a scathing look. "You certainly have a way with women." He picked up his own slice of microwaved pizza and raised his eyebrows in a mock-innocent expression. "I saw that firsthand yesterday."

"Yeah, how?" Cade asked, looking at Toby oddly.

"I was to interrogate the detainee after you, remember?" Toby replied dryly, putting down the slice of pizza again and wiping grease off his thin fingers with a napkin. He looked up at Cade again before glancing at the others. "Seemed as though you took the violent approach to interrogation. She was certainly beat-up enough to imply that, anyway."

"Oh, that," Cade said dismissively, appearing completely unconcerned with the idea. "Not my fault the bitch wouldn't talk."

Boyd looked over at Cade; although he supposed it was unsurprising that Cade had resorted to violence, he didn't see why it would have been necessary for Jane unless the interrogator just hadn't had the patience.

"Wait, what?" Emma said, looking at Cade. "You hit her?"

"Yeah, so?" Cade said, giving her a challenging look. "You got a problem with it, sweetheart? We were taught we could."

"But did you even *talk* to her?" Emma pressed, looking as though she couldn't decide if she was annoyed or displeased. "She was pretty reasonable as far as prisoners go."

"Yeah fuckin' *right* she was reasonable," Cade said in annoyance. "She was a fuckin' bitch who was already pissy when I got her anyway. I wasn't gonna sit around all day taking her bullshit and smug looks."

Jon turned another page and raised an eyebrow without looking up. "I didn't have any problems."

"Big fuckin' surprise," Cade said sarcastically, looking highly irritated now. "You never get called on shit, you never have trouble, and you're always reading a fuckin' book like that shit's more interesting than anyone in the real world. Even Beaulieu's got Doug on his ass now and you're still teacher's pet. It pisses me off."

Boyd didn't say anything but he had to admit that part of him agreed somewhat with Cade, which was surprising to him. Although, on his part, he wasn't angry with Jon; he'd just noticed the same thing that Cade was pointing out.

"I'm sorry," Jon replied calmly, flipping another page. "I'll try to be more inadequate so that you feel more secure."

Harriet snickered quietly but said nothing.

Cade rolled his eyes, looking more irritated than insulted. "That's exactly the shit I'm talking about. You always gotta be better than everyone else."

"Not *everyone*." Jon sighed and closed his book, finally meeting Cade's gaze with his own serene stare. "You're feeling insecure and so you lash out at me because I've been doing very well during the entire course of the training. I don't boast about it, I don't even comment on it usually. It's just a fact. But if you really feel as though I piss you off that badly, it is probably best if you just pretend I don't exist. That way we won't have to take this disagreement any further than it has to go."

"I'm not fuckin' insecure, I just think it's bullshit. There's gotta be something going on-- no one's that good at everything without cheating or fuckin' some higher up." Cade met Jon's gaze challengingly and raised his eyebrows. "You got something to tell us?"

"You're so stupid. It's really unbelievable," Harriet commented idly. "Don't even answer him, Jon."

"Stay the fuck outta this, Stevens," Cade said, giving her an unimpressed look. "Your opinion means shit. I saw you together on break-- if you're not already boning him you may as well be."

Harriet glared at Cade but before she could reply, Jon did.

"Eating in the cafeteria surely implies a sexual relationship," Jon agreed in what appeared to be his typical straight-faced sarcasm.

"Not funny," Harriet said, making a face. "I doubt he understands sarcasm. He'll think you're serious."

"So?" Jon raised his eyebrows at her with a smile. "You may be offended but I on the other hand am quite pleased that people may think a beautiful woman is interested in my sorry, scarred self. Cade is doing me a great service by spreading such rumors."

Harriet stared at him blankly, clearly not knowing what to say.

"God, you're pathetic," Cade said in utter disgust and seemed to lose whatever interest he had in fighting with Jon.

"Why?" Emma asked, looking at Cade. "Harriet *is* gorgeous so it's not like Jon's lying." She turned her attention to Jon and Harriet with a tricky little smile. "You know, after training there'll be a lot more time for dating..." She trailed off meaningfully.

Harriet stared at her pizza and looked very mortified. "Zip it, Emma," she muttered but there was no real bite to her tone. Her attitude towards Emma had grown far friendlier in the two months of training. Emma was so genuinely outgoing and sweet that even Harriet couldn't dislike her when they spent so much time in the same room.

"I've thought of that," Jon said in the same serious tone although he gave Emma a mournful look. "But I think she dislikes me because I'm disfigured. Or maybe because I'm Irish."

"Don't be silly," Emma said dismissively. "You're dashing." She raised her eyebrows as she shifted to sit cross-legged in her seat and deadpanned, "It would have to be the Irish. She's very particular about that, you see. Only Scots need apply."

"I don't like Scottish accents," Toby put in randomly, going along with the joke. "They're too much for me. Harriet has odd taste."

"Can we please talk about something else now?" Harriet pleaded finally with a sigh. She truly looked embarrassed now.

"Okay." Toby looked at the others and pushed his empty plate away from him. "Did any of you get anything out of Jane? By the time I got to her all she would do is sit in the corner and stare at the wall. If she hadn't been responsible for all the damage done to the compound, I would have felt bad for her."

Emma gestured to get their attention. "I did, actually. Her dad worked for LITO."

"LITO?" Toby frowned slightly. "Isn't that the name of practically every gas station that's around anymore? I haven't had a fuel-based car in years but I think that's what I see around."

"Yeah," Emma said, pulling some hair behind her ear. "I think her dad must've been someone important because I got the feeling she didn't see him much, so I figured it had to be a pretty big part of the company he worked for. And then when I looked it up, I saw that they're headquartered in Argentina."

"Argentina," Boyd said in sudden understanding, the pieces falling into place. When Emma looked at him in startled confusion, he shook his head. "Sorry. That just makes sense."

"What?" she asked, drawing her eyebrows down. "Why?"

"She had the Castilian accent when she spoke Spanish and when I asked if she was from Spain she said some regions in South America have the same accent," Boyd said, turning his attention to Emma. "I just couldn't figure out which area she was from."

Jon looked from Boyd to Emma with an intrigued look. "Impressive work. She told me she was from South America but now I think it's because she already figured I knew. What else did you find out?"

Emma shook her head. "That's all I got."

Boyd paused and then offered, "She also said she used to steal. And she seemed a little odd when I was talking about Mexico but I couldn't tell what she was thinking."

"Maybe she used to steal in Mexico," Toby offered for lack of anything else to say. His mouth was set in an irritated scowl, likely because he hadn't been able to get anything from the detainee at all.

"Could be," Boyd said with a shrug. Mexico was a huge place and it certainly wouldn't be surprising if the woman had stolen in one of the cities; there were plenty of people who did, just like Jorge. "It's unfortunate that she didn't feel like talking by the time you got her. We probably could've gotten more information; she was receptive to Spanish but my ability to speak it is limited so there were a lot of questions I couldn't even ask."

Toby shot Cade another indignant glare but didn't say anything more. Cade simply smirked smugly at Toby, now almost seeming proud of having thwarted the man.

Harriet turned to them again, apparently ready to contribute now that the conversation had turned away from her. "I wonder how much the Fourth's staff already got out of her. Did you see her hands?"

Emma made a face. "Yeah... I don't know. I mean, I understand that she's with the raiders but she seemed like a decent person when I talked to her. I'm not excusing what her people did in here but it sucks that she's taking the fall for all of them. I sort of feel bad for her."

Harriet nodded although she added only hesitantly, "I... kind of agree. I know people who were killed during the raid so I couldn't help but despise her on sight. I actually agree with Cade to a point that her attitude combined with what her people did made me want to just beat the shit out of her. That's probably why I didn't get far. I couldn't not

keep it personal. But at the same time, we don't know how involved she was with the planning. She doesn't seem like leadership material and is likely just a lackey. We all know firsthand what it's like to have higher ups ordering us to do questionable things. So at that, I guess I can feel some compassion."

"I fuckin' don't," Cade said vehemently, although he didn't seem to be directing his anger toward anyone in the room. "We lost a lot of good people in that raid; I lost three of my best friends. Those rat bastards are the ones who brought the shit to us; *they* attacked us, *they* killed our people-- for fuck's sake, they took out the dorms and that was people just trying to fuckin' sleep! I don't give a shit who ordered her to do what, it don't mean she didn't take part. And don't try to act like if one of us was caught by them they'd be sitting there saying they felt bad we got a boo-boo on our hands. They'd probably say 'burn the motherfucker' and be done with it. So I don't see why we gotta feel so sad for her when we don't even know how many people she killed on the way to being caught."

No one immediately replied because even though they all appeared to have different opinions, it was difficult to argue with Cade's last statement. After a few moments Harriet pushed her chair back with a sigh. "Well, I think I'm going to turn in for the night. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

There was a muffled chorus as they said goodbye to her with the exception of Cade, who looked tense and irritated. It wasn't long before Cade suddenly shoved his chair back and stood so quickly that the chair almost fell over.

"Fuck this," Cade growled under his breath and immediately strode toward the door without saying goodnight. He threw his empty, crushed soda can into the garbage as he passed and shoved the cafeteria door open. He seemed to be heading in the direction of the gym from what they could see before the door slammed shut behind him.

There was a period of uncomfortable silence that followed as the remaining four candidates stayed seated.

Boyd looked down at his tea and after a moment took a sip although it had significantly cooled and he wanted to reheat it. He had to admit that he couldn't decide who he agreed with more; Harriet or Cade. He did feel a little bad for Jane because he knew what it was like on Fourth; he knew how they found a person's secret fears and exploited them mercilessly.

And he agreed with Harriet, that Jane seemed like she was probably a lackey, that she'd probably just been ordered to do it. But he thought Cade had made a few good points and regardless of why it happened, it didn't change what had occurred. Boyd hadn't lost anyone he cared about in the attack but there were plenty of people who had.

Emma played with her juice bottle with a slightly troubled expression and after a pause she glanced up at the others. Toby was looking toward where Cade had disappeared to with a somewhat dismayed expression and Jon didn't let his thoughts make it to his face.

"Alright, people," she said suddenly, looking very determined as she leaned forward and rested her forearms on the edge of the table. "Game time."

"What?" Toby gave her a mildly disdainful stare. "Game?"

"Yes, game," Emma said, her serious face firmly in place. "And don't you be thinking about skippin' out, Mr. McAvoy. I know where you live and I'll be sending your roomie after you."

Boyd looked up at her with his eyebrows slightly raised at the idea of playing fetch with Toby. "What kind of game?"

Emma raised an eyebrow. "Something interesting. Something to make you, Mr. Silent Number One," she pointed at Boyd, "and you, Number Two," she pointed at Jon, "interact with us. Something to get us talking."

She straightened her back and seemed to consider this seriously, although it was clear she was planning on something that was at least somewhat lighthearted. "I propose a question game. One of us asks a question, everyone has to answer it, including the one who asked. Then it goes to the next. Everyone asks, everyone answers. You game?" She looked at the others hopefully.

Toby sighed tragically as if the idea of playing such a game was entirely beneath him but he shrugged. "Fine then. I don't want to go to sleep yet so I guess this is preferable at the moment."

Jon fingered the spine of his book as though he were seriously debating returning to his reading but in the end he pushed it away. "It could be interesting."

Emma looked expectantly at Boyd who just shrugged. "Alright."

A bright grin immediately lightened Emma's expression. "Sweet! Okay, since it was my idea, I'll start."

She chewed her lip and looked up and to the side as she seemed to consider what to ask. It didn't take long before she returned her gaze to the others with a pleased smile. "Okay. Who, within the Agency, do you find to be attractive and/or have a crush on and why? My answer is... Hmm. Kassian Trovosky, because he's professional and has a killer body and smile." She looked at Toby. "We'll go in a clockwise order. You're up!"

Toby stared at her in horror for a full moment before shooting Boyd a suspicious glare.

Boyd looked at Toby evenly, subtly getting across in his expression without being obvious that he hadn't said anything. It was pure coincidence that Emma had named Kassian before Toby; to Boyd's knowledge, she had no idea that Toby was gay or liked Kassian and even if she did, there was no way she would have deliberately hurt Toby's feelings.

Even so, Boyd felt a little bad for Toby; the moment must be especially uncomfortable for the man since he didn't want anyone to know his sexual orientation.

After an awkward moment of silence, Toby cleared his throat. "Um. Can I pass or is that not an option?"

"Not an option," Emma said decisively, hitting her fist on the table as if she had a gavel. She seemed to be taking great enjoyment in the idea of getting the others to play this game. "No one gets freebies, no one gets a pass. You can think about the answer for thirty seconds max, that should be plenty of time."

Toby rolled his eyes and sighed heavily once again. "Fine then. I suppose... Morgan Chase would be an acceptable female. Although I'd have to fight General Carhart for her, I suppose."

Boyd glanced at Toby sidelong; an 'acceptable female?' What a way to not sound like a typical heterosexual male... Although maybe Toby didn't care as much in present company, Boyd didn't know.

Emma pointed at Toby with a nod of approval and either didn't notice Toby's wording or didn't feel the need to comment on it. "Good choice. She's hot." She looked at Jon questioningly. "Number Two?"

"Hmm." Jon's dark brows lowered over his pale blue eyes and he rubbed his chin as he thought about this seriously. "Do I only get one choice?"

Emma couldn't help a quick grin of amusement before she tried to get her moderator's face back in place. "One choice is preferable but, you know, if you've already got a Top Five picked out..."

"Brilliant!" Jon enthused and sat back in his chair before ticking women off on his fingers quickly and with little hesitation. "Agents Darlene Fields and Linda Suarez in Espionage, Gwen Jennings in Research and Development, Daniella Cruz in Unit 16 and, of course, my darling Harriet."

"Wow, you really had it ready," Emma said with a laugh, seeming delighted by Jon's participation.

"Which one's Daniella?" Boyd asked curiously, trying to think of all the women he'd seen when he'd visited Unit 16 for preparations for undercover missions.

"The receptionist." Jon leaned back in his seat with a small grin. "You couldn't have missed her. She's tall, graceful, black curls with magnificent long eyelashes and green eyes."

Toby eyed Jon oddly. "I wouldn't have taken you for a pathetic romantic beneath that serious exterior, Jonathan."

"I'm not a romantic," Jon denied mildly. "I just appreciate the female form, that's all."

"Seems like you appreciate every variety of female form judging by the list," Toby said with a snort. "Gwen is short and nerdy, Daniella is tall and graceful, Darlene is blond and voluptuous, Linda is the skinniest stick I've ever seen and Harriet..."

"Harriet is perfect," Jon said seriously. "She's my new favorite."

"Perfect, he says..." Emma drew the words out with a growing smile that made her eyes twinkle. She seemed intrigued and pleased by this development. "Alright, spill. What makes her your fave? And you have to say why on the other girls, too."

"Oh God," Toby groaned.

"I just like strong women." Jon shrugged. "The other women are beautiful but I enjoy Harriet's personality as well. There's not that much to it."

Boyd watched the interaction silently. He hadn't expected Emma's game to work so well so quickly with Jon, who was typically even quieter than Boyd himself. He didn't think he'd heard Jon say so many sentences at once in the entirety of their training.

And the fact that Jon liked Harriet was intriguing, although if Jon's preference was strong women then it made sense to be attracted to her. But judging by Harriet's reaction to the idea and the fact Boyd had never seen her look at Jon the same way she had looked at Kassian-- with that hidden sense of vulnerability and pride-- Boyd didn't think Harriet felt that way about Jon.

Emma grinned at Jon. "Well, speaking as her roomie for the past few months, good choice. She's good people."

Toby made a face. "Okay, moving on-- Boyd, it's your turn."

Boyd gave the appearance of seriously considering the question. He really hadn't thought about who he found attractive and the ones who came to mind were not people he was going to say aloud.

He quickly ran through the men he'd in any way been attracted to or knew well enough to think of them but there wasn't a good choice among them. Mentioning Kassian would be rude to Toby and it would give the wrong impression, he didn't want to think about Thierry and there was no way in hell he was saying Sin's name. Boyd didn't want to mention Ryan who was at least bisexual but in the closet since it could cause trouble and Ryan definitely had enough on his mind as it was. Not to mention he didn't really have a crush on Ryan, he just liked him.

Since it was well known that Boyd was gay he had to at least say a man's name, so he decided to just be completely ridiculous about it and lie.

"I always thought Marshal Connors was rather debonair," Boyd said finally with a quirked eyebrow.

"Is there a penalty for liars?" Jon asked innocently.

Emma looked questioningly at Jon; she'd never met Connors so she didn't know how to judge Boyd's answer. She returned her attention to Boyd and seemed thoughtful as she made a hmm noise.

"Yes," she said decisively. "He has to answer the next question twice and they both have to be the truth or he'll get a noogie." She raised her eyebrows and looked very grave. "A very painful noogie." She glanced at Toby and Jon. "Same goes for anyone."

"This is stupid," Toby told her plainly.

"You have a better penalty idea?" she asked Toby with a raised eyebrow. "I've never had to make one up before."

"Not really but yours isn't exactly going to inspire someone to be truthful." Toby sighed yet again and rolled his eyes upward. "Anyway just forget it, it doesn't matter. Is it Boyd's turn or mine?"

"Then if we think of a better one as we go we'll adopt that instead," Emma said with a shrug. She didn't seem surprised by Toby's assessment; she'd probably been thinking the same thing herself. "Yours, by the way."

"Fine." Toby thought for a moment before asking, "What careers did you hope to have in your adult life when you were a teenager, or just starting college?"

"You have to answer first," Emma reminded him. "Then same circle-- Jon would be next."

"Oh, right. Well, that's easy. When I was in high school and entering college I wanted to be a UN ambassador and do a lot of foreign aid in third world countries," Toby said without hesitation.

That made sense to Boyd, considering their conversation the first day they'd roomed together. He didn't think of anything to say aloud before Emma asked curiously, "Any particular country?"

"My area of interest was mostly Eastern Europe but I also became interested in the Middle East after a time." Toby shrugged before turning to Jon. "Your turn."

"I didn't want to be anything." When Toby gave him a doubtful glare, Jon just shrugged unconcernedly. "Not everyone has long term life goals. I didn't even go to college."

Boyd was surprised by Jon's answer but somewhat pleased; at least he wasn't the only one who had a different background. Although, to be as good as Jon was at so many different things, it made Boyd wonder what Jon had done. Once again before he spoke up, Emma was already asking what he was thinking.

"Really?" Emma asked, looking intrigued. "What got you recruited? Were you in the service?"

"What service?" Jon asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Military," she explained. "Whichever one... Army, Navy, Marine, Air Force..."

"No, I'm not American." Jon idly caressed the spine of his book. "I was never in an official army. I didn't even finish high school, to be quite honest."

Toby looked completely aghast.

"How'd you end up at the Agency then?" Boyd asked, now very curious about Jon. He hadn't realized Jon wasn't American; the man had an Irish accent but that didn't mean much since he could have moved to America long ago and retained it.

"Oh." Jon looked up at them with a smile. "I was in the FFI, or Final Front of Ireland."

"That terrorist group?" Toby's expression was a combination of horror and confusion now, although the horror was likely still aimed at Jon's lack of education. "Are you serious?"

"Very. Does that offend you? I apologize if it does." Jon didn't appear very apologetic but he didn't seem too confrontational about the matter either. "I don't keep it a secret but I don't bring it up for no reason-- it's easier to avoid confrontation with certain people on the compound."

Emma looked surprised by the information and Boyd just gave Jon a contemplative look. He was initially surprised as well but didn't let it show.

He didn't personally care that Jon's background was with a terrorist group or that Jon hadn't finished school; it simply made it very interesting that the Agency had recruited

him. They must have seen something important in the man. On the other hand, obviously the Agency was planning to work with Ethan Bruce despite the fact he'd turned into a domestic terrorist, so it wasn't as though they had anything against working with former terrorists.

"That makes sense, actually," Boyd said thoughtfully.

"Why do you think so?" It didn't seem like Jon was disagreeing-- he just seemed curious as to why Boyd appeared to take it in stride.

"Your expertise," Boyd said. "You're very good at a lot of things and you know how to blend in. It's like some of the groups I've worked with; some are so small and disorganized it's easy to stop them, but the ones who have been around longer, the people who have been in it since they were young-- they're far more professional." He shrugged. "Sometimes the only difference between them and me is that I secretly work for the government they're trying to overthrow."

"Well, I was in an organization that hated one of the US's biggest enemies at the time; England. So the Agency saw me as someone who could be a useful tool instead of someone that needs to be interrogated and done away with." Jon gestured vaguely. "Anyway, that was my only real career goal. To advance the aims of FFI."

Emma had listened to Jon's explanation with a somewhat bemused expression, which made Boyd wonder if she hadn't previously known that the Agency recruited terrorists. Since Boyd had only just specifically learned that fact himself, he didn't find the idea to be too surprising. But despite the fact she still looked somewhat taken aback by the thought, judging by her still-amiable expression she seemed intent on treating Jon the same as she had before she'd known his background.

"What are they now, then?" Emma asked curiously. "Like, if you could be anything right now, what would you choose?"

"I'd be Level 10," Jon replied with a wink and turned to Boyd. "What about you, Mr. Beaulieu?"

Boyd glanced at Jon and then the others. "I didn't really want to be anything, either," he said honestly after a moment.

Since Toby had first posed the question, Boyd had tried to remember his goals from that time, from his childhood, but he kept coming up blank. Maybe there had been some

dream he'd long since forgotten but everything he could remember had just been related to people instead of careers; he'd wanted to spend time with Lou, he'd wanted to see his father, he'd wanted to make his mother proud.

Boyd couldn't recall ever sitting down, looking at his future, and coming up with a wish as to who he would become in twenty years.

"You two are pathetic," Toby informed Boyd and Jon flatly. "Hopefully Emma at least had a goal in her life."

"No, he has to answer. Two answers or a noogie," Emma reminded Boyd ominously. "Even if you didn't have an idea at the time, there had to be something you were interested in."

Boyd thought about that, trying to come up with what he would have wanted to be. Toby was probably right; it did seem pretty pathetic that he had to think so hard about this. After a few seconds he just shook his head.

"I don't know. There were topics I liked that I wasn't interested in for career paths; I liked psychology but never particularly wanted to be a psychologist or psychiatrist. I guess... I don't know, maybe I would've liked to work in an antique bookstore. Or be an artist."

"Do you paint?" Jon asked curiously, appearing mildly intrigued by the idea.

"Draw mostly," Boyd said with a shrug. "I took a painting class but it's not my favorite medium."

Jon nodded. "Interesting."

"Why?" Boyd asked, now curious himself. "Do you paint?"

"No but I knew someone who did," Jon said vaguely before looking at Emma. "It's your turn."

"Actually... I wanted to be a mechanic," Emma said after a moment, looking mildly embarrassed as she tucked hair behind her ear.

"I give up on all of you." Toby just shook his head with finality.

"What?" Emma asked, seeming mildly affronted. "What's wrong with being a mechanic?"

"Nothing," Toby sniffed. "Blue collar work is marvelous."

Jon shook his head at Toby, a hint of a smile on his scarred face. "You're an amazing man, Tobias. Usually when I meet wankers as big as you I'd have already dismissed him or clocked him one."

"It's because I'm so charming." Toby smirked at Jon before looking at Emma. "Continue with your dream of being a grease monkey or whatever it's called. What sparked this interest in working class life?"

Emma raised an eyebrow and didn't look very pleased. "My father was a mechanic," she said with the slightest hint of an edge, "and he was very a good man. You do realize the blue collar workers are the ones who keep this society going, who've made it possible for the country to get back on track even this much after the wars? If we didn't have people willing to do the lower-paying jobs, we wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"Save it for someone interested," Toby said dryly. "Your preaching will not change my opinions on anything."

Emma narrowed her eyes and looked like she was going to say something but then she just shook her head and looked away. It was the first time Boyd had seen Emma seem truly irritated with someone; she always seemed so forgiving and approachable that it was an intriguing change.

"Forget it," she said evenly, turning her attention to Jon. "Your question."

"Right." Jon tilted his head to the side as if thinking and suddenly asked, "I'd like to know how you all want to die."

Toby smirked. "Well now, that's a change of pace."

"That it is," Jon agreed, still appearing to ponder his own question. "I'd like to die suddenly, at the spur of the moment, without having foreseen it. Preferably quickly and without the opportunity for medical treatment."

Boyd blinked, trying to figure out his own answer to the question. He hadn't been expecting such an abruptly serious turn. "I don't know how I would..." He drew his

eyebrows down thoughtfully. "I guess just not drawn out... Not tortured to death. And not drowned. Any other way is fine."

"The question wasn't how you don't want to die," Toby reminded Boyd.

Boyd shrugged. "I guess suddenly as well, then. A bullet in the head and it's over."

"You're so boring." Toby frowned at him, determined to be nitpicky about everybody and their responses. He glanced at the clock on the wall as if to debate whether it was worth it to stay up with his co-trainees any longer. He apparently decided it was because he simply shrugged.

"I want to die painlessly and in my sleep," Emma said decisively. "But only after I've had an interesting life."

"I actually agree." Toby appeared surprised by this fact. "I'd like to die peacefully in my sleep after I've accomplished everything I'd set out to accomplish in my life."

Emma gave Toby a quick smile that was more subdued than usual, perhaps because she hadn't yet forgotten the blue collar comment. She then turned her gaze expectantly toward Boyd.

It occurred to Boyd that he'd been giving the least informative replies of any of them, although it was mostly because he didn't really know the answers to the questions. But it wasn't really fair or useful to play this game if he wasn't willing to release any information about his life at all. So he tried to think of a question that he knew the answer to and there was only one that first came to mind.

"What's your greatest regret?" Boyd asked. "For me... I think it would be not truly understanding what I had until it was gone. I had a close friend I should've done more with, listened to more, but I didn't and he died. I don't ever want to look back again and realize I didn't give as much as I could have, then regret that lost time or chance."

Emma gave Boyd a sad look. "I know what you mean." She glanced quickly at the others. "My greatest regret is not returning home before my father died. He used to get sick a lot so I didn't really pay attention the last time I was told he was going to the hospital and then the next call I got was about his funeral." She shook her head and shrugged uncomfortably, looking down at her fidgeting hands resting on the table. "I always felt like I let him down the last chance I had to make it right."

"Why would that make you feel like you let him down?" Toby inquired with a raised eyebrow. "Because you didn't go to the hospital?"

"Yeah. And, well, my dad and I didn't always exactly get along," Emma said, glancing at Toby with a slightly uncomfortable look as she started to tear the label off her juice bottle and rip it into pieces. "He was a good man but some things he was so damn stubborn about and when I was younger it used to piss me off. First I couldn't be a mechanic 'cause I was a girl and then when I started going to school for it and realized it wasn't for me, I was a disappointment when I changed my major."

She shook her head. "The last few times we talked I was pretty mad at him and said a lot of things I shouldn't have, and he said some things I'm sure he didn't mean either. So when I got the call about the hospital I ignored it and then he was dead." She shrugged and eyed the steadily growing pile of paper in front of her. "So it was sort of all of it combined, you know? I wish I'd said a lot of things, like I loved him and I didn't actually mean those things I'd said."

"Well," Toby replied in a reasonable tone. "I'm sure he knew. Nobody gets along with their parents but generally both parties still have love for each other. My father died from the lung sickness and we weren't even on speaking terms at the time. I think he understood where I was coming from, though."

"A strangely compassionate speech from Captain Wanker," Jon murmured.

"Yeah, I hope so..." Emma trailed off thoughtfully, staring at the destroyed label, then looked at Toby again with a smile that was partially self-conscious and partially sad. "I also think of it as a lesson, I guess. I didn't want it to happen again so it ended up affecting how I dealt with people. I started looking at things like, do I really want this to be the last thing that person remembers of me?" She shrugged. "When you think that way, it's a lot harder to get pissed off about stupid little things when they really aren't important."

Toby stared at her for a long moment before averting his gaze, lips turning down slightly. "I suppose that's a good way to view things..."

Emma's lips quirked in a quick, slight smile that still seemed a little reserved. "So what about you, Toby? What's your greatest regret?"

Appearing to notice that everyone was looking at him again, Toby jerked out of his brief reverie. "Oh. That's easy. I would have gotten my doctorate."

Emma blinked, apparently expecting a different answer.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down. "Can't you still do that?"

"How?" Toby asked dubiously. "I would never go to one of these pathetic local colleges and they'd never give me leave just to go get a degree they'd likely feel that I don't need. I'd have to resign and deal with harassment and phone taps and shadows for the rest of my life."

Boyd considered that. "What would it be a doctorate in?"

"I'd like to get one in International Relations." Toby shrugged. "Oh well."

Boyd was silent a moment as he thought about it. As far as he was concerned, International Relations was perfectly in line with Toby's job and it wouldn't hurt for Toby to have a doctorate because it could potentially open new doors for him. But the secrecy of the Agency was really what was holding Toby back, so he could see Toby's point about that.

On the other hand, he felt that if Toby cared enough about it he should be able to find a way-- going to a local school in his off time, although that was unlikely due to the nature of a field agent's schedule, or checking if any colleges allowed online doctoral programs. But the problem was ultimately that Toby had too much pride for the solutions that would be readily available to him so it probably wouldn't happen.

"Why do you want it?" Boyd asked instead of suggesting any other options.

"I like school. I like education," was the simple reply. "That probably makes me odd but I don't mind."

That hadn't been the answer Boyd had been expecting; he'd thought Toby wanted the prestige. Boyd shrugged. "It's a good trait to have."

Toby made a noncommittal sound before turning to Jon expectantly but the other agent simply raised an eyebrow and said, "I haven't got any regrets to be quite honest. I don't do anything that I'm not completely sure about."

Boyd gave Jon a doubtful look. "Never? Not even when you were younger?"

"If I did have some, I don't remember them now so it must have been trivial. My life started when I joined FFI and after that I feel every decision I made was good. Even if it turned out like shite it was the best choice at the time." Jon gave them a small tight smile; a smile that was prone to secrets. "And that's all I've got to say about that."

"If FFI was your calling," Boyd said in confusion, "then why did you join the Agency? Why not just stay with FFI? Why wouldn't that be your regret?"

Toby gave him a long look. "You really are clueless. FFI fell apart a few years after the war. All the leaders were killed and things went bad from there, right?" He looked at Jon for confirmation who just nodded.

"Oh." Boyd leaned back in his chair. "I didn't know."

There was a brief moment of awkward silence before Toby said slowly, "Well, I suppose you were young at the time. I only knew because of a class I took in school about Ireland."

Boyd was surprised by how gracious Toby was being, especially since Toby was only a few years older than him. He nodded thoughtfully. "That makes sense. Although it's odd since we were in the middle of the war, we didn't talk about the war much in school. I don't even recall taking any classes in college that touched on it."

"People don't talk much about history until after it's happened. How can they spin things to make the United States look good if they did?" Toby asked rhetorically.

Boyd made a slight noise of agreement. "True."

Jon looked up at the clock on the wall and gestured to it vaguely. Somehow in the past few moments he'd shifted back to his typically stoic self; the change had been quick but it was incredibly obvious when he spoke. "It's nearly midnight. I think I'll go now."

Toby frowned slightly at the statement but after a moment he shrugged in agreement. "He's probably right. Too bad. I'd already thought of a question for the next round."

Emma looked at Toby curiously. "Really? What is it?"

"I'll tell you next time," he assured her, only a little hesitantly, before standing up.

"Alright," Emma said easily and looked at each of them in turn. "We'll all have to hang out again even after the training. No matter who goes 10, if any of us-- sometime after the last test or announcements we should have a celebration. You know, to say we made it through."

Jon looked intrigued by the idea. "It will be interesting to see if we are all nearly as friendly at the end of this thing."

Toby nodded slightly in agreement. "I was thinking about that earlier myself. We're all, well except Cade, amiable now but just wait until results are announced and someone makes it and someone else doesn't. Some people will inevitably think they've been given the unfair end of the stick."

Emma leaned her head against her hand and watched them, an almost serene smile on her face. "You know... I want this promotion as much as anyone, so maybe saying this makes it seem like I don't since I know people get really competitive about this stuff-- we have to be; even a tiny mistake at this point could end our chance. But the way I look at it, there's us as trainees, and there's us as us. If I don't make it, I won't be happy, but I'll chalk it up as lesson learned. I'll know what I need to work on harder for next time and this will all have made me a better 9 anyway. But just 'cause, say, Harriet makes it..."

She shrugged idly. "I dunno, it doesn't mean to me that suddenly all that time we were able to spend together is meaningless. If Harriet goes 10 then she deserves it. I'll still want to hang with her. Maybe I'd get jealous right away, I don't know. But, hey, if nothing else I can just be spiteful later on and have no sympathy for her when a really hard mission makes her have a bad day." She grinned to show she was mostly joking and Toby actually laughed in response.

When no one immediately responded, Emma spoke again as if to explain. "It doesn't mean I'd suddenly hate Harriet as Harriet... maybe I'd be jealous of Harriet the trainee, but that's only one part of her, you know? The rest of her can hang out with me regardless of our scores. For me, same goes with everyone and I hope you'll all still consider me someone to talk to whether or not I make 10."

"I wouldn't have thought so before," Toby replied honestly. He seemed thoughtful and Boyd couldn't help but note that this was the first night that Toby was so candid with everyone. He'd retained his arrogance through the start of the training even though it'd severely dampened over time but he'd never actually talked about himself or his opinions on life after training before.

"But I think I would," Toby continued. "Boyd knows more than anyone what my first opinions of everybody were but now that I've talked to you and spent two months living every waking moment with you all, it's easier to see you as actual people and not just trainees. Besides," he added with a grimace, "I'm not nearly as sure of myself as I was in the beginning so if Jon got promoted and I didn't, at this point I wouldn't be surprised." Toby looked at Jon and rolled his eyes. "Mister Perfect Agent. Kassian Junior."

Jon studied him for a moment before grunting quietly. The chatterbox version of Jon had all but disappeared. Maybe he only got talkative when the topic was women. "Nothing is certain."

Silently, Boyd thought about Emma's offer. Despite how much he wanted this promotion, he liked Emma's perspective that it wouldn't change who they were on their own. He wasn't accustomed to wanting to reach out to other people, to offering to spend time with them just because, but he had to admit that he'd come to appreciate the presence of the other candidates.

Boyd liked that Jon was quiet like him so he didn't feel like he was the only one who spent a lot of time in his head; he liked how accepting and forgiving Emma was which made him feel more comfortable being around her; he'd been getting along better with Toby and Harriet lately and had come to enjoy their company on some level. He wouldn't mind spending time with Andrew and Pat again, either; both had been good men.

Even Cade wasn't as offensive as when they'd first met but Boyd still didn't see himself asking the man to hang out for the evening. At the same time, if Cade happened to be there with everyone, he wouldn't mind. The man was an ass for the most part but when Boyd thought about Cade chasing after him, those strong hands pulling him up and steadying him, and that grumbled comment of waiting until it really was Boyd's time to die... it made Boyd not mind Cade as much as he had previously.

What it really came down to was that when he imagined an evening spending time with all of them after the training was over-- relaxing with these people that he'd sometimes been competing with and sometimes been allied with on missions-- he realized that the idea actually appealed to him. He wanted to know more about them and, to his surprise, to an extent he even wanted them to know more about him.

He didn't want to go back to being completely isolated from everyone; he didn't want to have no one to talk to, no one to smile or laugh with, no one who was interested in him. He didn't want to have worked so hard to get along and then revert to his default

behavior; to prove exactly what Toby had said when they'd first spoken, that he was unwilling to reach out to others and it made him seem like he felt he was superior.

Before, he'd felt like he had nothing in common with others. But that wasn't the case anymore with this group-- he'd spent the last several months at their sides, even going around the world with them. Regardless of who made Level 10, he could see what Emma was saying: it didn't change where they'd been together; it didn't change who they were on their own.

"I'd like to," Boyd said, and the brief silence before he spoke combined with the fact that he was typically so quiet and reserved made it seem somewhat abrupt.

Emma looked over at him in mild surprise that quickly changed to a genuinely happy expression that she then turned to the others with as well. "Fantastic," she said with a bright, pleased smile. "Let's plan on it, then. After all, we'll deserve it, right?"

"Yeah." Toby nodded. "We'll deserve more than a night of hanging out after dealing with Doug's shit for three months. We'll deserve a night of getting completely plastered."

Emma threw her head back and laughed. "I know, right? I'll start saving up."

Boyd smiled slightly and looked down at his tea as he finished it. He found he was actually looking forward to that night.

Chapter 21

The scene was not unlike the last time Sin had sat in Carhart's office with Ann and Schwartz but this time instead of gracing them with his sarcastic repartee he simply stared at the wall in blank indifference.

As far as he was concerned, the meeting was a waste of time. His sole reason for wanting to get better was so that he could be with Boyd. Now that Boyd hated him, there was very little purpose to any of it.

Two weeks had passed since their confrontation and Boyd had made no effort to contact him. Sin knew there had to have been a break in the past week but Boyd never called him, never showed up and when Sin had gone to the training center in sheer desperation he'd run into Doug.

The man had been decidedly more irritable than usual and for some reason it had flared up drastically when Sin had asked if Boyd was around. The brief exchange had gotten Sin nowhere and Sin had wandered back to his apartment where he'd chain smoked two packs of cigarettes while idly wondering if he'd live long enough to get cancer.

"Sin?"

Sin didn't even look over. "Yes?"

There was a brief moment of silence and he imagined the three of them exchanging exasperated looks.

"Just making sure you're actually paying attention," Carhart said dryly and Sin could practically see the annoyed expression forming on the general's face.

"Ah." Sin had nothing to say to any of them. He could feel Ann's cool gaze moving over him critically, trying to figure out what had happened to cause this complete about-face, probably paranoid that it had something to do with her, worried about how it would affect her life professionally.

He wondered if it would somehow get back to Vivienne that he and Ann had screwed around. If it did, he wondered if Ann would think it'd been worth it after their actions came falling down around her as they had for him. Sin certainly didn't think it had been. What he'd gained during the brief distraction meant nothing in comparison to the outcome of it all.

Over the past two weeks he'd been able to think a lot more clearly and had been forced to grudgingly accept the fact that whatever Ann had prescribed was actually working. Boyd was the only reason that Sin even cared about his own life and he would have expected to fall apart completely once Boyd walked out of it.

As the weeks had gone by, after the break passed, as things began to look more and more doubtful, Sin kept waiting for himself to just give up. He kept expecting to lose all hope just like he had that night in Boyd's house after he'd woken up from the coma. He'd kept waiting to pick up one of his guns and once again come to the conclusion that it just wasn't worth it. But Sin hadn't and he found that for some reason he was thinking very logically about everything and coming to much less drastic decisions than usual. He just kept telling himself that he wouldn't do anything stupid until he actually spoke to Boyd.

At a time in his life when he really did feel at his lowest point, Sin could only attribute the relatively calm state of mind to the medication. But even though he wasn't rushing off to die, it didn't mean that Sin didn't feel completely hopeless and pathetic.

He'd lost the only part of his life that made it worth living because of a couple random fucks. How ridiculous.

"Well, everything is looking good," Carhart was saying when Sin finally turned to the trio. "I've been sending Vivienne the occasional update and she pretty much stated that she'll clear you for active duty if your doctors okay it."

Sin just shrugged apathetically.

"Dr. Schwartz's report puts your physical health back at 100% and Dr. Connors has stated that you're on a strong combination of medication that will keep you stable as long as you continue to take them regularly," Carhart continued, giving Sin a hard look. His blue eyes narrowed slightly before shifting to Ann, suspicion evident on his face as if he wondered if she had something to do with Sin's sudden disinterest.

Ann just looked at Carhart with calm neutrality and didn't respond to the unspoken question.

"So within the next few days you can expect to be cleared entirely and will be available for assignment again. It's actually perfect timing since you're expected to be there for the final Level 10 training test."

At that, Sin's interest finally sparked and he sat up straighter. "I thought Kassian was doing all of that."

Carhart shook his head. "We want you for the combat test. You're the best person for it. At first Doug wanted Kassian, he thought you might show... preferential treatment for Boyd. But in the end he also knew that you were the best choice."

Sin frowned slightly, lifting one hand to run it through his unruly hair thoughtfully. The only good part of this entire situation had been managing to avoid the training process but if he did the test, Boyd would have no choice but to come face to face with him.

"Fine," Sin said. "When is it?"

"About three weeks from now. Unless an assignment comes up, you'll be informed of the time and day."

There wasn't much more to the meeting after that and Sin started off to his building in a slightly better frame of mind than he'd been for the past couple weeks. With Janus assignments at a standstill and Boyd avoiding him on the training breaks, Sin previously had no idea when he'd get the chance to speak to his partner. The fact that Boyd would undoubtedly be present at the final test gave him a slight glimmer of hope that he would be able to talk to him about the whole fucked up situation.

Sin shoved his hands in his pockets and started to stride away from the Tower when he heard someone approaching. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Ann following him, trying to catch up while buttoning her long black trench coat.

"Can we talk?" she asked when she made it to his side.

He shrugged. "I guess."

"This is only going to work if you talk to me, Sin," Ann said, cutting right to the chase. "The only way Vivienne agreed to this is if you continue medication and therapy because the only way we're going to make progress on depersonalization on a long-term scale is through sessions."

"You already told me that," Sin replied blandly, not looking at her as he continued his long-legged stride.

She hurried to keep up, frowning as she grabbed his arm and tried to force him to stop walking. "Just tell me what the hell happened and stop being so goddamn hardheaded. Don't try to blame me for your troubles, Vega. No one forced you to fuck me. You were using me just as much as I was using you."

Sin finally came to a halt, glaring at her. "I never said I was blaming you for anything."

"Well your attitude says otherwise," she snapped back.

They glared at each other for a moment before he just shook his head and looked away. Ann sighed and buttoned the top of her coat, hunching her back slightly as the wind blew violently. It was well below zero degrees and the courtyard was all but deserted.

"Are you and Boyd in a relationship?" Ann asked finally, looking Sin square in the face. "Is that what this is about? You told him about sleeping with me and he got angry and now you refuse to cooperate?"

Sin made a face. "How'd you come up with that theory?"

"It wasn't too hard," she returned dryly. "There have been rumors around the compound for a long time and I ignored them for the most part but now I'm starting to think that some aspect of them is correct. The fact that you were doing this solely for him made it obvious that you cared for him beyond simply being partners. I didn't think you were necessarily in a relationship or that you were even sleeping together but I never crossed it out as a possibility. After you told me he suddenly wanted nothing to do with you, I guess it just clicked into place. Why else would he get so angry with you when the only things that happened lately were you beating some guys up and sleeping with me?"

Sin shook his head in frustration, crossing his arms over his chest. "I didn't think he'd want me to go around telling people we're having sex. I didn't even think it mattered enough to bring it up to you anyway."

"Well if you'd told me, I would have never come onto you in the first place," Ann said pointedly, narrowing her eyes. "I don't do the whole man-stealing thing."

"Well I didn't even think it'd be a fucking problem. I guess I'm an idiot or something but whatever me and Boyd had going on, we never talked about it, I didn't think he would get angry about any of this. I was just learning as I went. I didn't think it'd be some big betrayal if I slept with you. I don't even like you all that much." Sin started automatically

searching his pockets for a cigarette and Ann grabbed his arm to prevent him from taking one out.

"The General doesn't want you smoking anymore, remember?"

"I must have missed that part of the meeting." Sin scowled more deeply, glaring off into the distance. He vaguely remembered Schwartz and Carhart nagging him about cigarettes but he'd ignored it for the most part.

Ann let out an explosive sigh and stared at him evenly. "This is a problem."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"No," she said impatiently. "I'm not talking about your love life. This is a problem for the Agency. For my job. For your unit. You and Boyd are partners and now the unit is going to be in jeopardy because of a lover's quarrel. It's going to get back to Vivienne that it started because of me."

"Well, I'm sorry but I don't know what to do." Sin growled in frustration, raking both hands through his hair this time. "I wish I would have just fucking mentioned it in the first place and then at least you would have brought the possibility of it being a bad idea to my attention since I'm obviously socially retarded."

"It's not entirely your fault." Ann's gaze strayed in the direction of the training bunkers; the roof of the building was visible in the distance. "He should have told you what he expected of your relationship."

"Well he was making a big deal of the fact that he told me he loved me," Sin admitted with a humorless laugh. "But I don't really know what that's supposed to mean."

Ann looked at Sin again, eyebrows raising. She looked somewhat surprised but not as much as he would have expected. "Do you love him?"

Sin glared at her. "I just fucking told you I barely even know what it means."

She continued to stare at him patiently, used to his outbursts and rude behavior by now. "I've never experienced such an emotion myself but I suppose it means you care about him, that you would basically do anything for him, that he means the most to you out of anyone in the world."

Sin threw his arms up in the air in aggravated exasperation. "I tell him that shit all the fucking time! Just because I didn't consolidate it into a four letter word means I feel less about him than he does about me?"

He'd known that Boyd was the most important person in his life for a long time, long before Boyd had even admitted to being attracted to him. It hadn't been something that was a big deal or something that shocked him; it had just been the way it was. Sin had such little knowledge of normal human interaction that he'd figured the feelings he had for Boyd were a normal part of friendship, not something as profound as Boyd and Ann were claiming it was.

And even if what he did feel for Boyd was love, Sin still didn't understand why doing what he did meant that his feelings were somehow false. It wasn't like he wanted to care about anyone else the same way or be as devoted to anyone else. He'd only had sex with Ann to put everything else out of his mind, to temporarily forget all the bullshit that plagued him, not because she was more important than Boyd.

And that's what Sin thought should have been important. Even knowing that he loved Boyd didn't make the situation any more logical to him. It was obvious that he was missing something that everyone else was in on. Some critical piece of the puzzle that most people were raised to understand and believe.

Ann rolled her eyes at him. "I didn't say anything like that and I doubt you not saying you love him is why Boyd is so upset. He thought you understood what he wanted and now he feels betrayed. If my husband found out I was sleeping with you, he would most likely kill me," Ann admitted bluntly. "Relationships come with expectations but Boyd's only mistake was expecting you to understand what that meant."

Sin stared at her incredulously. "Why the hell would you sleep with me if your husband is going to kill you because of it?"

"Because I hate my husband," Ann replied blandly. "In fact, I just started divorce proceedings. If anything, our little trysts prompted me to want to get rid of him."

"How is that?"

"I don't know." Ann held out one gloved hand as snow began to fall. A large snowflake landed on the black wool of her glove and melted. "Maybe finally doing something I wanted, something forbidden, gave me the courage to do other things in my life that I've been wanting to do for a long time."

"Uh huh," Sin said doubtfully. He sincerely doubted his dick had such a profound effect on her life. "Or maybe you just want to be able to have sex with whoever you want and not have to worry about him killing you."

"That is also a possibility," Ann agreed with a smirk. She shook her head and wrapped her arms around her torso. "Listen, Sin, I understand that you're in a tough spot with Boyd right now but my advice to you is to work it out before it causes trouble for all of us. If you won't come in for sessions I can't help you and I'm not going to make fake progress reports. I can try to get you another counselor but..."

"No one wants to be bothered with my psychotic ass," Sin finished dully.

"Right." She shivered violently. "I'll give you until after the training to figure out what you're going to do. Try to explain to him that you didn't mean him any harm and that you really do love him. Throw in the fact that you think I'm ugly for all I care. Just get this sorted out before Vivienne comes down on all of us for making such a mess of everything. And if you still think he's going to be pissed off if I stay as your doctor..."

Ann trailed off and sighed, looking discouraged. She frowned and seemed genuinely upset about having to give him up as a patient when she'd finally made a breakthrough in his progress. Sin no longer had to wonder about whether or not she regretted at least partially what they had done. "Well then I guess we'll have no choice but to try to find you a new one."

Sin stared down at her and felt mildly guilty for potentially jeopardizing her career. None of this was really her fault and he knew Vivienne would be unforgiving about another Connors sister getting involved with him. But even then, if Boyd still refused to have anything to do with him, Sin didn't know if he'd want to be bothered with another doctor. The whole thing would be pointless.

He just couldn't imagine a scenario where he would suddenly decide that it was worth it to go through with the therapy and the medication and try to be a better person, a normal person, if Boyd wasn't in his life anymore.

What was the point if everything was going to go back to the way it'd been before Boyd had been his partner? Things would be even worse because now Sin knew what it felt like to have someone care for him, to have someone to talk to and depend on. Before he'd met Boyd it had never even occurred to Sin that he was missing out on those things.

Sin looked away but decided not to go into the details of his thought process with her. "I was going to try to talk to him anyway."

"Good." Ann patted his arm and began backing away towards the parking lot. "For all you know, he'll pass the training with flying colors and be in such a good mood that he'll forgive you without much fuss."

"Heh. Maybe." Sin watched her walk away as the wind began blowing more fiercely.

If only things were that easy.

===

"Thierry Beauvais is the second."

The man made it a statement; his voice was smooth and calm and still as utterly unrecognizable to Boyd as the first moment he'd heard the man speak.

Boyd slid his eyes closed, not that it mattered, and tilted his head toward the floor. He wished he'd never admitted that he'd slept with three people throughout his life; not if the man was going to figure them out and tick them off one by one.

The terror of being chained in place had faded a little in the past... however long he'd been there; although whether it was due to numbness taking over or if he was somehow getting over his phobia, he didn't know. Naked, chained spread-eagle against a cool wall and with a rough black hood completely encasing his head, he'd never felt more vulnerable or demeaned in his life.

"You don't need to answer; we know all about it." The sound of paper shuffling, muffled and disjointed through his hood. "You slept with him for information and were immediately upgraded to valentine op, homosexual designation." A pointed pause. "You know, most people wait to be ordered before they make that kind decision but you leaped right into it..."

Boyd could hear the man stand, his measured steps as he walked across the room. The silence was as deafening and harrowing as the loud, confusing jumble of techno music he'd been subjected to every time he thought he was left alone. Even though during the music he wanted nothing more than for them to shut it off, it somehow felt worse being

left with just the sound of his own harsh, quick breathing caught behind the rough fabric of the hood and the man's questions and calm footsteps.

During those times when the man was just leaving and the silence hadn't yet been replaced, Boyd could hear his own heartbeat too loudly and the disturbing clanking of the metal chains against the wall when he started to grow weak from standing. There had been times already when his knees had buckled and he'd sagged painfully with his arms stretched up at an angle that made it feel like his shoulders would pop out of their sockets and his wrists would become bloody from the biting handcuffs.

He hadn't been able to sleep, hadn't been able to think for days. The terror and uncertainty of the situation was mixed with exhaustion, resentment and numbness, and it all left him feeling weak, demeaned and pathetic.

Even knowing this was just another agent grilling him didn't make it any better; didn't make his vulnerability any less disturbing. And it didn't make him want to talk about this topic any more than he would have with an enemy. If anything, in the darkness when he was alone with his chaotic thoughts, it made it worse to know that every little bit of information the man got out of him ticked him down one point at a time, bringing him that much closer to failing.

He'd known that they'd have training on resistance to interrogation but he hadn't expected it to happen this way.

He hadn't expected to be walking down the hallway in the training compound and for people to suddenly ambush him from behind, one person throwing a suffocating black hood over his face as he'd struggled in alarm while someone else had shoved a needle in his neck that had knocked him out almost immediately. He hadn't expected to wake an unknown time later, stripped naked, chains encasing his wrists and ankles as he was held mercilessly against the wall, a thick hood tight around his head that didn't allow him to see where he was, who was there with him, whether he was even alone...

He hadn't even known he was in an enclosed room for the longest time; he'd hoped, but he'd had no way of knowing except that he didn't feel a cool, open breeze against his bare skin.

They hadn't given him a toilet of any sort and he never would have realized how incredibly humiliating and dehumanizing it was to not be able to hold it any longer, to have to just go the bathroom at his feet and deal with the mess and smell that came

with it. To be fully aware that somewhere there could be a tape recording of this; that someone could be standing right across the room and he wouldn't even know it.

Even knowing it was just normal bodily functions, when he heard his own piss splattering against the floor and he couldn't even cover himself, couldn't even move his feet away to keep it from splashing up against him-- He couldn't help the sharp feeling of shame, of disgust with himself; not just because of that but because of the entire experience.

He felt like an animal that someone had leashed to a tree and periodically forgot about.

He was incredibly disoriented-- from the hood, from the overwhelming techno music, from the entire experience-- and he had completely lost all concept of time.

Sometimes people came into the room and held him against the wall, as if he could move anyway; they pushed the bottom of the hood up just enough for his mouth and nose to be uncovered but never enough for him to see anything, to know who was there with him. They held his nose until he gasped for air and then they forced a foul-tasting liquid down his throat that made him gag and want to throw up. He'd been told it was some sort of liquid diet with all the essential vitamins and minerals but all he knew was that he'd rather starve than be subjected to it.

But he couldn't even make that simple of a decision on his own.

Everything had been taken from him; his sense of dignity, his freedom, his movement, even his ability to choose when and what he would drink or eat. For someone who was usually incredibly controlled, who needed that sense of power over his own life to feel like he could keep moving, this was a devastatingly disturbing experience.

He hated his vulnerability, this feeling of exploitation, and most of all he hated how alarmingly susceptible he was to it.

He wished he could at least know the amount of time he'd been there; be able to judge how many more harrowing days he'd have to spend like this before he'd be released. But he couldn't even judge how much time had passed by going according to the feeding times because he didn't think they were on a regular schedule. That, or his temporal sense was completely off balance; to him, it sometimes felt like just a handful of hours before they appeared and others almost a day.

He never would have realized how vulnerable this would all make him feel; how raw and uncontrolled and terrified. How he felt subhuman, humiliated, worthless and forgettable. Even knowing this was part of training, he couldn't help spikes of fear in the middle of what he thought must be night-- the paranoid questions of, "What if they forget about me here? What if I fail and they never let me go?"

The first time he'd woken, he'd been left completely alone for a full day-- at least, he thought it was a day, but he didn't know anything anymore.

The uncertainty and terror that had built over what felt like long, disorienting hours had inevitably made him relive his time with Shane.

He'd been chained down then too, but at least he'd been able to wear clothing. And he hadn't known at first what was worse -- being able to see but being constantly subjected to what he had with Shane, or being encased in the disorienting, suffocating darkness of the hood; this creation that took away any feeling he had of humanity, any chance of connection with anyone else. That made even the simple act of breathing feel claustrophobic and frightening as the cloth smothered his open lips and blocked any light from his wide, darting, unseeing eyes.

And after those long, hard hours when he'd struggled not to hyperventilate, not to let the intensity of his powerlessness and imbalance make him feel crazed and out of control, when he'd felt on the very edge of sanity, like he hadn't had the chance to prepare himself for this and it was too much at once...

That was when the man had appeared. No name, no face for Boyd to see, no explanation.

Just the questions. The relentless, intrusive questions.

"What I want to know," the man said as he stopped in front of Boyd, "is why."

When Boyd didn't immediately answer, the man stepped closer, invading Boyd's personal space and making him feel incredibly uncomfortable. It was alarming, being naked and blind and immobile in front of someone else; not knowing where they were looking, what they were doing, what would happen next. Boyd unconsciously pressed himself against the wall to get away and curled his fingers uselessly; the handcuffs dug into his wrists at the movement in a sharp reminder of his position.

"Was he that good?" the man asked near Boyd's ear; Boyd didn't know if it was coincidence or if, with the way the hood was fastened, the man could see which direction Boyd's head was facing. "Were you just that hard up?" The man stepped even closer and Boyd felt his own breath automatically quicken, disturbed. "Or was there another reason?"

Boyd could feel the heat from the man's body and the sound of the man's voice was overwhelming. Boyd grit his teeth and tried to focus on making his breath even; as it was, each deep inhale made his chest brush against the man's clothes and this bothered him on a scale he never would have anticipated. It made him almost feel claustrophobic, made the familiar feeling of fright rise at the realization of just how trapped he was; of how he was powerless and completely at a stranger's whim.

With the man so close and the wall unrelenting and merciless at his back, he couldn't help reliving the fear and helplessness of being held down.

"Stop..." Boyd whispered without meaning to, his eyes squeezed shut as he tried to regain some sense of balance, of power.

"Was it because you knew he was a homosexual like you?" the man persisted, shifting his weight just slightly to speak more to Boyd's face. "It gave you the excuse to mix work with pleasure?"

"No," Boyd muttered, although he didn't know if he was answering the question or trying to deny the man's proximity.

"After all, it must be difficult finding a partner here," the man continued as if Boyd hadn't said anything. "Maybe you just wanted to fuck him from the start and the information was a good excuse."

"No, it wasn't..."

"Or maybe you *wanted* to be a valentine op and Beauvais was your chance." The man's calm voice was growing more intense, somehow closer. In the darkness that the hood provided, it made the man's words seem like they surrounded Boyd. "A well-timed one night stand and you have yourself a new title on your resumé. Quick and easy and you're that much more indispensable, you feel that much more important."

"No," Boyd said more firmly than he'd intended. "I didn't-- It was my job..."

"It wasn't your job," the man said simply. "No one told you to sleep with him."

"The information," Boyd insisted, pressing himself as firmly as he could against the wall as he tried to get away from the man. "We needed..."

"There's always information," the man said pointedly. "You'd been on a number of missions before and Thierry was the first informant you fucked. Unless you haven't told us about others..?"

"No," Boyd said, shaking his head. "Thierry was the only..."

"What made him so special?" The man asked the question intently, nearly cutting Boyd off.

"It was more important this time," Boyd said loudly. He could feel his heartbeat increasing as the questions came quicker, sharper, as the man's proximity continued to eat away at Boyd's resolve. "We only had so much time and we had to get the info-- and Thierry was notoriously difficult..."

"So you thought you'd take the easy route and fuck him." The man said it as a blunt statement.

"It wasn't easy, I just--"

"Had more faith in your skills in bed than in negotiation?"

"No," Boyd said, but even to his own ears the word sounded weak. "It just made the most sense..."

"How calculating," the man observed. "You would compromise your morals for the mission."

"I wasn't comp--"

"What else would you compromise?" the man continued intensely. "The Agency? The safety of your comrades? Your partner?"

"No, I'd never--"

"Wasn't there something else happening in your mind at the time?" the man asked keenly. "You needed that information but you were also frustrated, weren't you? You needed release, wanted someone to fuck and your partner wasn't helping at all. Maybe it really had to do with Hsin Liu Vega."

"No!" The word came out strong and sharp and Boyd tried to calm himself and the shaking of his limbs.

The man was silent for a breath before he said intently, "When did you last see Beauvais?"

"What?" Boyd said, surprised by the sudden subject change. "I didn't..."

"When did you last see him?"

"I saw him in spring, when we rescued--"

"You saw him more recently than that. When?" The intensity only grew stronger and sharper in the man's voice, as if he was digging in Boyd's mind, making it impossible for Boyd to escape the rapid questioning.

"I-- a few months ago I stopped by--"

"What were you doing there?"

"I didn't have a reason, I was just saying hi..."

"Why?" The question was quick.

"I don't know, I just--"

"*Why* did you stop by?"

"I don't know," Boyd said more insistently, starting to feel frustrated and resentful, and trapped like an animal. "I just wanted--"

"You had a reason."

"I didn't! I just--"

"You just what?" the man interrupted and Boyd felt his frustration rise uncontrollably.

The constant, quick questions and the way Boyd was repeatedly cut off drastically heightened his feeling of helplessness, of absolute powerlessness. Every question drove deeper into him, burrowing into parts of him that he didn't want to see-- didn't want to acknowledge. He didn't want to know his own answers to some of these questions, to have to admit aloud thoughts he'd never meant to feel.

He felt off-balance and raw and alarmed and his breath kept growing quicker, faster-- The hood dragged against his mouth, the cloth rough and harsh against his chapped lips and he felt like he was suffocating beneath the hood, every breath making it hotter, and when he tried to shift to the side the handcuffs dug into him sharply.

The wall was cold and unyielding against his back and he wanted to jerk to the side, he wanted to rip himself free and run away but he couldn't. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think, he couldn't see, he couldn't move-- his heart was beating so furiously that it ached in his chest and all he could hear was the terrified hint of his voice in the harsh sounds of his breath and-- no, no, he couldn't *move*--

"I just wanted him to know he wasn't alone!"

Brief silence greeted his outburst and it took a moment for the heightened feeling of panic to diminish enough for his mind to get back under control, for Boyd to realize his mistake; that in his weakness he'd let information slip out. He squeezed his eyes shut and tilted his head toward the floor, trying to quell his quickened breathing and the disturbing feeling of wanting to lash out; trying to ignore the feeling of shame and irritated disappointment with himself.

"But he *is* alone," the man replied calmly after a moment. "Far from his homeland. Everyone he's ever known or associated with is either using him or plans to kill him. He has no future and no point to his existence. There's no one alive who loves him and no one who will mourn him when he's gone. He has nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. He's trapped. Do you disagree?"

Boyd remained studiously silent and the man was quiet a moment.

"What part of that do you identify with?"

The question was asked mildly enough but it stung Boyd deeply for reasons he couldn't immediately understand. As if his subconscious felt wounded by the realization that,

right then, he identified quite a bit with parts of that description. He refused to answer; he simply drew in a breath that was just a hint shaky and raised his head as if he could look at the man, as if it gave him some sense of strength to stand taller.

"Why did you stop by to see him?" the man continued. "What did you say?"

Boyd shook his head and didn't answer. The cloth of the hood felt constrictive in the movement, as if it could choke him if he did that enough.

"You were in there for over twenty minutes and voices were heard on the other side of the door. You spoke with him extensively. Were you leaking Agency secrets?"

"No," Boyd said firmly, not wanting them to think he was agreeing by staying silent to that.

"Were you telling him how to escape?"

"No," Boyd repeated.

"What did you say to him?"

"Nothing," Boyd said stubbornly.

The man came closer once more, increasing Boyd's feeling of being trapped. The man's clothing was crisp and cool against Boyd's skin as his shirt brushed Boyd's side and chest. It disturbed Boyd deeply, making him feel nauseated to realize that the man was in any way touching his scars. Although Boyd's old phobia of letting anyone see or touch his scars had faded quite a bit in the last year, it didn't make it any less distressful to him in these circumstances.

"You said something to him; you can tell me now what it was or," the man drew even closer and Boyd pressed himself, highly disturbed, against the wall, "we can do this the hard way."

Every quick, staccato exhale made the moisture from Boyd's breath turn to heat, making the hood seem smaller and smaller, more suffocating. His eyes were wide but all he saw was black, like he was blind and would never see again. The feeling of a body against him on one side and the cold, unrelenting wall against the other made his hands automatically jerk and when the manacles stopped the movement he felt even more trapped.

The old feeling of hysteria stirred in the distance and he turned his head to the side, grit his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. His heartbeat was loud in his ears and he couldn't help wondering what 'the hard way' meant, what they would try to make him do again.

Sometime earlier-- days, hours, he didn't even know-- after he'd been captured and left alone in the disorienting darkness, the man had appeared with his questions. Boyd had tried to resist but in the end the man had gotten everything out of him about Lou, about Boyd's suicide attempts, about his early life.

Boyd had thought it was over but then they'd brought in the chair.

Two men had appeared at his sides, unshackling him from the wall and manhandling him into the center of the room where he'd been thrown onto a chair and tied with his legs spread apart and upper arms tight at his sides. He hadn't understood at first why they'd left his lower arms free until one person had stood behind him and suddenly yanked the hood off to reveal a completely dark space.

Boyd had tried to look to the side but his head had been violently and firmly pushed until he faced forward. Strong fingers had dug into his temples and upper cheek, tangled somewhat in his hair, and he'd been held firmly in place as pale light had stung his unaccustomed eyes, causing him to squint in pain.

He hadn't understood at first what was happening but then he'd heard the scuffling of shoes and with a sinking, terrified feeling, he'd realized they were forcing him to watch Lou's death video again, just like Shane had.

This time they'd had it on a television that had been rolled in front of him; the dim light from the screen had cast relief against the floor before it but nothing else. He still hadn't been able to tell if he was in an interrogation room for sure and he hadn't been able to see anyone; just the television and that same hateful, terrifying scene of Lou on the last day of his life, calmly walking into a trap with a younger, unsuspecting Boyd at his side.

At that time Boyd had felt his breath and heart rate already quicken at the knowledge of what they'd planned to force him to watch again, but he hadn't felt truly overwhelmed or horrified until the man's voice had whispered in his ear, "Now jerk off."

Despite the way Boyd had reacted in shock and disgust at the order, despite how hard he'd struggled and the way he'd shouted and tried to turn his head from the screen-- he

hadn't been able to get away; he'd been immobilized. They'd kept forcing his head toward the television and every time Boyd had tried to slide his eyes shut, someone had reached forward and forced his eyelids open; made it impossible for him to even blink as his eyes had burned with shame and tears tracked down his cheeks.

Every time he'd tried to look away despite that, the man's words had been there in his ear, like a hateful, shameful voice in Boyd's mind that whispered luringly that all he had to do was masturbate and this would all end. That Lou had been his lover so why was it so hard to touch himself thinking of him; that they were even providing him with a mental image of his deceased boyfriend to make it easier to recreate the memory of his hands on Boyd.

Or maybe, the voice had murmured sinuously, he could think of a different ending to the scene; a threesome, a foursome-- whatever Boyd's preference was, he could make it happen in his mind.

The nausea and horror that Boyd had felt at even the idea of touching himself while watching Lou's blood and gore splatter across the street had been very nearly enough to make Boyd throw up.

Boyd had grit his teeth, breathed heavily through his nose as he'd tried to keep himself from feeling any sense of hysteria every time he'd tried to move and strong hands had held him in place, as he'd had to watch himself on screen get shoved to the ground while the gang members laughed idly and acted bored as Lou was murdered and Boyd's entire life had been wrenched away from him for such petty, stupid reasons.

When Boyd had shown no intention of listening to their demands, the man had started to vary his words. He'd walked back and forth behind Boyd, explaining in great detail exactly what Lou must have felt at each point in the video, asking Boyd about times he'd been similarly hurt as well and in the process forcing Boyd to identify with Lou, to relive the murder from Lou's side; to remember what it felt like to be stabbed and to be unable to forget it each time he saw the knife plunge into Lou's body.

The man had talked about rates of decomposition, of autopsies, of the typical procedure for removing the organs, of how interesting it was to think about how each of those chunks of meat had once been inside a warm body Boyd had pressed up against. Of how a person's mind was what gave them their personality but in a corpse it was just a somewhat gelatinous mass of wriggled, grey matter.

He'd asked Boyd about his memories of making love with Lou, if he'd ever thought at that time about how the parts of Lou's body that he'd run his mouth over, that he'd let into his body, would become just so much rotting meat.

"Just touch yourself," the man had crooned after a pause, one almost gentle hand whispering along Boyd's skin where his shoulder met his neck and Boyd had shuddered deeply, nearly unable to see anything clearly through the tears that had clouded his vision. "Just do it and this will all be over."

The caressing fingertips had trailed along his arm, slid down to his forearm and laced with his fingers, the man's palm against the back of Boyd's hand as he'd gently guided Boyd's hand closer to his genitals. The man's breath was warm and moist as he had whispered intimately into Boyd's ear, "If you don't, we'll play this over and over and over..."

Boyd had shuddered and let out a helpless sound he hadn't been able to stop in time; a low keening moan of distress and fear. Tears had streamed down his cheeks and fell onto his bare thighs and arms as he'd held himself rigidly, doing his best in the weak position in which he was tied to not let the man press his hand any closer.

He'd felt utterly humiliated and vulnerable and everything private had been wrenched from him for all to view-- naked and tied down with his legs spread, there was nothing physical about him that couldn't be seen.

But it wasn't just that.

It was also the fact that his scars and tattoos were visible, physical reminders and representations of the mental anguish he'd once gone through. Being forced to watch the video of Lou's murder showcased in lurid, disgusting detail the loss of Boyd's mental stability-- pulled out into the open one of the absolute worst times in Boyd's life. And being unable to look away or hide his expression as he'd had to watch took away any emotional privacy he'd had in response.

He'd found it difficult to breathe as his lungs had felt clogged and he couldn't even clearly remember everything that had happened. Even then, the man's voice had been there to bring him back to himself; the constant smooth, calm words that painted such horrific thoughts in Boyd's mind.

In the end, he'd absolutely refused to touch himself and they'd done exactly as promised; they'd shown the video repeatedly, so many times that Boyd couldn't even

count. The casual, offhanded litany continued of Lou's death, his corpse, questions about what Boyd had been thinking in this part or that, of what he thought Lou had been trying to say to him as Lou had choked on his own blood...

Exhaustion had taken over Boyd's mind and body and the only saving grace had been that as time had passed, he'd finally started to grow numb to the video, to the sounds and sights, even to some extent to the memories. He'd realized that whatever his reaction was here, tied down like an animal and forced to repeatedly watch his childhood best friend and lover's murder, it didn't change the outcome.

Lou was dead.

Every time Lou's body fell to the ground on screen, every time the man murmured details about the autopsy, it was underscored.

Lou was dead and he'd never smile or laugh like he had again, he'd never run his hands along Boyd's arms or face or hair; he'd never show up with a small present that he evaded answering where he got it. He'd never try to protect Boyd from anyone ever again.

He was dead.

Nothing Boyd did or felt in that room could have changed that fact and even though it still hurt to see the video, Boyd had told himself that he had to get over this. He'd been struggling so hard to remember Lou for only the good parts and he'd had to become stronger than this.

So he'd started to try to look at the video a different way and, each time Jared ridiculed them on screen and drove the knife viciously into Lou, it had helped to know that Jared was dead now too; that he'd finally gotten what he'd deserved for that day and for every other person's life he'd carelessly, mockingly decimated.

When they'd finally thrown the hood back over Boyd's head, it had been a welcome respite. He'd almost been glad when they'd shackled him to the wall again because at least it had meant maybe they'd leave him alone for awhile.

But now...

There was no video they could show him of Thierry that Boyd knew of, nothing that could turn his mind as raw and distressed as they had with Lou. At the same time, Boyd

didn't think he wanted to know what 'the hard way' could potentially entail. Yet he didn't want to tell the man anything; he didn't want to give away more than he already had.

"Why did you care if he felt alone?" the man pressed.

Boyd shook his head, body tense and jaw nearly hurting from how hard it was clenched. Still, he refused to answer.

"Do you love him?" the man asked quietly.

Boyd only made a soft noise that neither agreed nor denied and for a moment he thought the man wasn't going to do anything, that maybe he'd step away and try it from another angle. But then there was the sudden, unexpected feel of rough fingertips trailing along the scars on his upper left chest, the fingers brushing past the areola of his nipple and down along the scars that wound across Boyd's stomach like angry snakes.

Boyd jerked at the feel, the manacles abrupt and painful against his wrists, and he couldn't help a harsh release of breath. "Don't--"

"Such self-destructive tendencies in the name of those you love," the man was saying softly as he ran his fingertips down the length of each of Boyd's scars one by one, as if he was drawing a picture using only the lines left behind by the strokes of the knife Boyd had turned against himself six years ago.

"Don't touch me," Boyd hissed as he futilely tried to twist away but the man didn't seem to hear him.

"You're a child of war; you've never known anything but this world after the bombs." The man's tone was idle and conversational despite the way his hand rested against Boyd's mutilated tattoo then slid across his belly toward the scars Jared had left when he'd plunged the knife into Boyd's stomach. "You were born within days of the first bombs that hit America and your father and Lou's parents were taken by the second wave."

The man's voice dropped quieter, a tinge of pity sliding in as he leaned forward. "You probably don't even fully remember what it's like to see true, unfiltered sunshine. To feel that heat on your skin." His hand trailed up Boyd's chest and stopped at his throat, resting against the pounding pulse of blood rushing through his carotid artery. "Do you?"

Even though Boyd told himself not to answer or react, he couldn't help a quick jerk of his head as he tried to get the man's hands off him. He didn't like the man's proximity, the rough slide of a stranger's hands along his skin, along his scars.

When it was his own decision he didn't care anymore if people saw the scars but this was taken out of his hands. This wasn't him telling Thierry it was okay while they were about to sleep together. This was an agent he didn't even know reminding him at every step that he was completely powerless and alone, that no one was going to come rescue him, come take him away. That it was just the two of them and the questions in that room.

That the man could do whatever he wanted and Boyd would be utterly powerless to stop him.

"Lou was the same, wasn't he? If he'd lived, you'd have been able to feel like you weren't alone." The man's hand slid down and stopped over Boyd's heart. "But you were." The man said it as a gentle, simple, undeniable fact. "He died and no one cared, did they? No one but you." His voice grew even quieter, more insidious in the way it slid into Boyd's mind. "What if you really had died then? Who would have noticed, who would have cared?"

Boyd let out a lightly shuddering breath and tried not to be bothered by the absolute truth of the words. At that time, there really hadn't been anyone who would have missed him when he was gone. He truly *had* been alone.

"And if you died right now..." The man's hand slid down and the points of his fingers pressed once again at the scar Jared had left Boyd; it almost felt like the man was mimicking the feel of a knife. "Who would care?"

The question was whispered simply but the gaping hole it left for an answer in Boyd's mind felt almost cruel on top of everything else. Boyd let out a low breath that caught slightly and he tried not to think about it but he couldn't get away-- from the man, from his touch, from his voice... from his questions.

When Boyd tried to think about who would truly, honestly care if he died right then-- he didn't know.

He hadn't been able to see Ryan for months and although he knew it would upset the other man, Boyd didn't know anymore how much. Thierry would lament the fact that

someone young and attractive who he'd slept with had died but Boyd couldn't imagine it would bother the man for long.

The other trainees seemed to like him by now but the only person he could imagine actually being upset by it was Emma, and she would be upset by anyone dying, probably even Cade.

Kassian seemed to enjoy his presence but Boyd had very little to do with him. Even though Kassian had apparently been upset when he'd thought Boyd had died after Monterrey, that had only been due to his own guilt and actions on the mission.

And Sin...

"Is that why you felt drawn to Thierry?" the man asked, thankfully disrupting Boyd's thoughts. "Alone just like you, a fellow Frenchman. An orphan of the war as much as you ended up being in your own way, though of course in entirely different manners. Did you feel a sense of connection with him? Or was it just physical-- you wanted him again and you thought if you stopped by he'd give in to you; caught in his position with no alternatives, he'd be an easy fuck?"

"No," Boyd said finally, wanting the questions to stop, wanting the topic to be over. "It wasn't like that..."

"What was it like, then?" When Boyd didn't immediately answer, the man went on. "Maybe you truly do love him after all-- some sort of Montague and Capulet syndrome?"

"No," Boyd said more firmly. "I don't love him."

"But you care about him," the man said calmly.

"I don't-- I--"

"If you didn't care then why would it matter if he felt alone?"

"I don't know, I just..."

"Why would you go out of your way to talk to him if he didn't matter to you?" The man's voice was reasonable and intense. "If you slept with him the first time just for your job, what were you doing at his doorstep without further orders?"

"I don't-- I didn't think--"

"Sometimes the actions we take when we're not thinking are most telling of what we feel." The man's voice lowered confidentially. "I think you truly care about him."

"I don't."

"I think he means a lot to you."

"No, he--"

"I think when you heard he was still alive and you had the ability to save him, you jumped on the chance because part of you had missed him."

"No, Jesus, it wasn't--"

"I think you can't forget him when he's gone."

"It's not like that," Boyd said sharply.

"Or is it," the man continued astutely, "that he can't forget about *you* when you're gone and you're just taking advantage of that?"

Boyd was struck silent in guilt for just a portion of a second too long, inadvertently telling the man without words all he needed to know.

"Ahh," the man said knowingly and Boyd immediately shook his head, furious with himself for continually giving information away. The hood rubbed roughly against his face in the movement.

"No, it's not--"

"Are you using him?" the man asked immediately.

"I'm not--"

"Did you go there to get in his good graces? To determine how you wanted to use him now?"

"It's not like--"

"What did you say to him when you were there?"

The man's questions were growing quicker, sharper, and his hand seemed to burn against Boyd's skin over his heart. Boyd knew the man would be able to feel each time Boyd's heart sped as the man grew closer to the truth and as if it wasn't a horrible enough feeling, being naked and powerless in front of the man, now the man was using Boyd's uncontrollable reactions against him too.

"I *told* you--"

"What did you say to him?"

"That he wasn't alo--"

"What did you say?"

"That he wasn't--"

"What did you say?"

The man's voice was so intent and repetitious that Boyd felt that same frustration and powerlessness rise again and he wanted to lash out. He wanted to give the man what he wanted so he'd go away, so he'd stop touching him and talking and Boyd was tired and exhausted and unbalanced and he couldn't fucking breathe with the hood and he didn't want to think anymore--

"Fuck!" Boyd yelled. "I told him we weren't enemies! I said-- When I remembered Shane and what he'd done to me, I didn't want Thierry to feel alone if the same had happened to him. And-- And I wanted to know..."

Boyd trailed off, almost coming back to himself enough to know to stop talking, but the man's hand dug into his chest and his voice was like a snake weaving through Boyd's mind. "You wanted to know what?"

"I wanted-- I..."

"What?" the man asked intensely.

The man's hand started to slide toward Boyd's scars again, as if he knew exactly how much that hiss of unfamiliar calluses against Boyd's skin unnerved and disturbed him, and Boyd burst out before he could stop himself, "Whether he'd planned from the start to give all that info to the Agency! Why... Why he'd done it then, why so much at once."

"What did he say?" the man asked, his tone casual and digging into Boyd's defenses as Boyd felt weak and pathetic from all the questioning.

"He said he had but not all at once like that," Boyd said. "Not in a way that made it impossible for him to return home."

The man was quiet a moment before he said astutely, "There was a reason you asked that specifically."

Boyd shook his head at first, not wanting to talk about this, but the man pressed on.

"Why?"

Again Boyd didn't immediately answer but the man was persistent.

"*Why* did you ask that?"

Boyd knew the man wouldn't stop until he got an answer and he felt another wave of exhaustion, of hopelessness; why keep fighting it when the man would get it out of him anyway? "I-- I just wanted--"

"What?"

"I wanted..."

"You wanted what?"

"I wanted to know if I'd made a mistake," Boyd admitted abruptly, his tone somewhere between lost and defeated. The man was very still as Boyd shook his head and looked away; he couldn't see the man anyway but he felt better if he felt like it was his own choice, like he was just staring off into shadows and it wasn't that he couldn't see anything because in reality he was hidden anonymously within a hood. "If... If he would've given all that information anyway even if I hadn't fucked him in France. If I'd... If I'd fucked up."

"What did he say?" the man asked smoothly.

Boyd drew in a deep breath that, when he let it out, became a little ragged. He sagged against the wall, feeling like it was too much work to keep holding himself up. His head tilted down enough that the hood pressed against his nostrils with a nauseating, sweaty, dirty smell. His eyelashes brushed against the cloth as he closed his eyes and he shook his head, feeling weary.

"He said..." Boyd's voice was heavy with tiredness as he spoke. "He said he would've given it to me anyway, regardless of if I'd slept with him. But that he wasn't always cooperative with any agent sent his way, that he sometimes sent agents away empty-handed if he didn't like them. So because he liked me, that's why he would've given it to me no matter what."

The man hummed thoughtfully. "How did that make you feel?"

"I don't know," Boyd said automatically but the man made a noise of dissent.

"You know," he said without a hint of doubt in his voice. "It made you feel something."

"Look, I just-- I really don't..." Boyd trailed off, not knowing how exactly he wanted to end that sentence.

"You were informed that you became a homosexual valentine operative for apparently no reason," the man pointed out calmly. "That from that day forward you could be called upon to seduce complete strangers and you would be expected to follow through with it. That the harassment you endured upon the deed becoming public was not, in the end, something inevitable. That any parts of your life that changed in response to the night you spent with Thierry Beauvais could have easily been avoided. That all these events within your life, whatever ripple effect may or may not have started when you agreed to have sex with him, was unnecessary in the end."

Boyd was silent for a long moment but the man was either for once exercising some sense of restraint or he could tell from Boyd's body language that he was thinking about what was said.

What *did* he feel?

At the time Thierry had told him that, he'd thought it was okay still; he'd thought at least he hadn't known that Thierry would have given the information to him regardless so his actions had made sense at the time.

But he felt like he didn't know anything anymore; like the darkness and disorientation, the exhaustion and rapid-fire questions, the whispers in his ear of things he didn't want to feel or think about... it all added up, piled one on top of the other, until he felt like he was getting pressed down, suffocated with the weight.

"I used to think it was worth it anyway, in the end," Boyd whispered, not entirely realizing he'd said it aloud.

He used to think that even if the repercussions of the night with Thierry had been terrible for the first few months, ultimately the information he'd received had given Sin and him an opportunity to connect. It had given him the chance to get closer to Sin; it had given him someone to love.

But knowing that if he'd just said no to Thierry, if he'd just asked for the information... knowing he and Sin would have still had Monterrey but everything in between wouldn't have happened... The fight in France, the cold silence, Boyd's utter and complete feelings of worthlessness and despair, his provocation of Harry, Alexis...

Alexis.

Someone had been killed because Boyd had been in a foul mood. Alexis had been willing to negotiate, she would have been an ally, but Boyd had shot her straight in the head while she'd held her gun to the side.

How many people had Boyd killed and gotten killed on that mission? How many people had lost loved ones because he'd been selfish and felt sorry for himself, all of which had resulted from his own decision to follow Thierry to his home?

Alexis had been just another Warren Andrews, except in Canada Boyd had been the one in charge. Even Sin had done a better job with Warren by at least keeping him alive for negotiation. True, he'd broken the man's legs and killed a number of his men and threatened the man, but Warren had ended up living despite the fact that he'd had every intention of killing Boyd.

Yet Alexis hadn't and Boyd had killed her for nothing she'd done.

And for what?

Information that had given Boyd the opportunity to start sleeping with Sin, to develop feelings for someone who ultimately couldn't even wait a month before sleeping with someone else just because it was something he 'thought he needed to do?'

At that moment, Boyd felt utterly sick with himself, with the situation. He couldn't say he exactly regretted sleeping with Thierry because it was true that he hadn't known any of this at that time. But if he'd just tried harder, if he'd just asked, if he'd just...

"And now?" the man asked softly.

Boyd's dismal silence was answer enough.

The man was quiet for a moment before he asked calmly, "And your first valentine op mission? What will you do?"

Boyd shook his head but said after a heavy pause, "Don't worry; I won't betray the Agency."

He still didn't know if he'd actually accept the mission but he didn't feel like going into that here. He didn't even want to think about how sleeping with Thierry when he ultimately hadn't needed to would now probably force him into uncomfortable missions in the future. The entire situation just felt so ridiculous and stupid.

Another long pause followed and the man's hand thankfully slid away from Boyd's skin. Boyd let out a quiet breath, releasing some of the tension he hadn't realized he'd been storing the entire time the man had been touching him.

The man walked across the room and silence fell between them, broken only by the man's calm footsteps and Boyd's hushed breathing caught behind the hood. Boyd started to regain his bearings, to remind himself that this was all a test.

He felt like he had the chance to dig inside and try to gather the will to be resistant, even if part of him still whispered hopelessly that there was no point to any of this-- to resisting, to answering, to the training, to his entire situation.

"You saw him again after that." The man's voice was calm and abrupt.

Boyd's fingers curled briefly, uselessly, and the chains clanked quietly against the wall. He wished he could see more than the faint texture of the weave in the black cloth, visible only when the man was there, when Boyd thought the lights may be on.

"I didn't," Boyd lied steadily, choosing to omit the fact that actually Thierry hadn't even mentioned until the second meeting that he would've still given him the disc.

"Don't lie to me. Witnesses saw you both return to his building together. The guard was there when you went in." Silence met the man's observation, apparently prompting him to continue. "What did you do in there?"

Boyd didn't want to admit to what had really happened; he didn't want to give them that information to use against him. "Nothing."

"You were in there for over an hour. What did you do?"

"We talked."

"Talked." The way the man repeated the word, it was clear he didn't believe Boyd. "What did you talk about?"

"Nothing important."

"Oh, but everything's important," the man crooned.

His voice had come from across the room but within seconds the man was suddenly so close that Boyd could feel the heat of the man's breath through the hood, and his clothing pressed against Boyd's bare skin on his side. Boyd jumped, extremely unnerved by the fact he hadn't heard the man approach, by the knowledge that he apparently couldn't rely on even the footsteps as a gauge of where the man may be.

"What did you do with him?"

"We talked--" Boyd started to say, trying to pull away from the man's proximity but he had nowhere to go, no way to give himself more personal space.

"You did more than that," the man said firmly. "Did you fuck him?"

"No--"

"Did he fuck you?" the man asked immediately, intently.

"No!"

"What, so you fucked each other?"

"No," Boyd said loudly. "We didn't do anything-- we just talked--"

"How did it feel?" the man asked smoothly. "Was it the same as before?"

"We didn't--"

"The guard heard loud moans and gasps so you must have liked it."

"I didn't sleep--"

"But when you left, you looked unhappy," the man continued, sounding as though he was idly putting together pieces of the puzzle. "Wasn't it as satisfying as the first time?"

"Fuck," Boyd hissed in frustration. "Stop--"

"Or do you always look that displeased after sex?"

"Don't--"

"That must be discouraging for your lovers. Did Lou ever comment on it?"

"Fucking--" Boyd started to say in anger.

"And what about your third lover, did he ever say anything either?"

"Stop it!" Boyd nearly yelled. "We didn't fuck!"

"I can hear the lie in your voice," the man said in a tone that seemed invasive and familiar, as if he knew Boyd intimately. "And see it in the way you're holding yourself."

The man moved back slightly, a hand barely brushing against Boyd's side very briefly. The touch was casual but Boyd didn't know if it had been accidental or not; more likely, it was a reminder that he was at the man's mercy.

He hated this. He hated this, he hated this, he wanted to get away--

"So how did it happen?" the man asked calmly, as if nothing had happened. "Did he come onto you or you to him?"

"Neither," Boyd said firmly, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

"You admitted you're usually the bottom. And Thierry Beauvais is known for his flirtation and his conquests." The man stepped back just enough so he could walk back and forth in front of Boyd. "But then, you used Thierry for information before. Is that what this was about?"

"No," Boyd said steadfastly.

"Did he have something you wanted and fucking him was the easiest way to get it?"

"No."

"Maybe you thought you could gain points with the administration if you got something out of him that all the interrogation hadn't yet," the man observed idly.

"No, that wasn't--"

"After all, you'd done it before. Sex means nothing to you, right? An even exchange. But what did Thierry compensate you with this time?"

A sharp twinge cut through Boyd at that comment. "That didn't--"

"Was he whispering secrets in your ear as he penetrated you?"

"Stop--"

"Do you get off on that? The feeling of someone forbidden pounding into you?"

Boyd didn't even realize that his breath was quickening again, that he was growing more agitated by the moment. "That doesn't--"

"Did you agree on a price? A certain amount of information for a certain amount of time?" The man paused briefly each time he turned to walk the other direction in front of Boyd.

"No! We didn't..." Boyd trailed off, unable to finish his sentence.

"Or maybe," the man said thoughtfully, "it's that the amount or importance of the information grows according to how far he can go with you, how willing you are to experiment."

"There isn't some fucking scale for this," Boyd snapped.

"Tell me; I really am curious how this works," the man said, switching topics so casually that it was off-putting. "How did you get Thierry to give you so much information in France? Did you let him do things to you no one had before?"

"No, we just had sex," Boyd insisted.

"He penetrated you?"

"Yes," Boyd said, willing to go with this if it got them off the topic of the second encounter. Besides, he knew a certain amount of the information had been put in the report anyway.

"How many times?"

"What?" Boyd asked in incredulous confusion. "How the hell am I supposed to know? I didn't sit there counting."

"How many times did you have sex that night," the man clarified patiently.

"Oh." Boyd felt stupid for having taken it literally, thinking that the man had wanted to know how many times Thierry had moved in and out of him. "Once."

"Where?"

"His house."

"Where in his house?"

"On a rug in front of his fireplace."

"What floor?"

"Second."

The man's questions came quickly, one after another, lulling Boyd into a habit of immediately responding with short, simple answers, just to give the man what he wanted, just to make him go away.

"Did he do anything first?"

"Made dinner."

"What was it?"

"I don't remember. Pasta?"

"What position did he use on you?"

"Missionary," Boyd said dully, not even thinking for the moment about why they even needed or wanted any of this information.

"Did you perform fellatio?"

"No."

"Would you have?"

"Yes."

"Did he use a condom?"

"Yes."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"Yes."

"What?"

"That I was beautiful and he wished I wasn't an agent."

"So he had you on the floor on your back."

"Yes."

"In his house on the rug by the fireplace."

"Yes."

"And later, in his apartment?" the man asked, so completely casually that Boyd, lulled into the question and answer game, automatically started to reply.

"By the cou--" Boyd stopped abruptly as he realized what he was doing, but with a sinking feeling in his stomach he knew it was already too late.

"By the couch," the man finished for Boyd, his tone simple and satisfied.

Boyd tilted his head toward the floor, feeling frustrated and impotent.

"What position was it that time?" the man asked calmly. Boyd didn't answer at first so the man repeated more firmly, "What position?"

"He-- behind," Boyd admitted grudgingly, knowing there was little point in holding off with this anymore. The man already knew he'd slept with Thierry; who knew, maybe there were even cameras inside Thierry's apartment so more of Boyd's life could be caught on tape to be forced upon him repeatedly later. "He was behind me... at first..." His voice was quieter the second time.

"Did you perform fellatio?"

"He did."

"And a condom?"

"No."

"How many times?"

Boyd shook his head. "I don't-- I don't know."

"You don't know."

Boyd could almost imagine the man raising an eyebrow. "Look, I don't-- It-- He just... he held off... a few times. He... varied it." Boyd's voice trailed off, growing softer bit by bit.

The man hummed again and started to walk back and forth idly in front of Boyd. "Sounds like he was enjoying it."

"I guess," Boyd said quietly.

"Taking his time, doing it slow and right," the man continued as if Boyd hadn't spoken.

"I don't know, I guess."

The man continued to idly pace back and forth in front of Boyd. "You didn't sleep with him this time for your job," he observed idly.

"No," Boyd agreed.

"You enjoyed it the first time he fucked you, back in France?" the man asked curiously.

"I don't-- I don't know. Yes," Boyd said after a moment. "I guess."

"But you didn't this time," the man said thoughtfully.

"I didn't say that," Boyd said pointedly.

"You didn't have to," the man said and there was shifting of fabric, as if he'd shrugged. "I already told you, you were seen."

Boyd just shook his head and didn't answer.

"Why did you go there the second time?" the man asked after a moment.

"He invited me."

"For sex?"

"Espresso," Boyd said, turning his head away from the man. "Company."

"And you said yes," the man said in contemplation and he paused in his pacing.

"Yeah, so?" Boyd asked, feeling a little defensive about the whole thing. "Is there a crime in that?"

"No, no, of course not," the man said calmly and started walking again. "Nothing wrong with casual sex. Of course," he added thoughtfully, "you went straight for the possible traitor."

"He'd been cleared before I even talked to him the first time," Boyd said pointedly.

"Do you know what many people do on their breaks during Level 10 training?" the man asked in an apparent non sequitur.

"Relax, I imagine," Boyd said unconcernedly.

"That they do. Many of them go straight for comfort, for their vices." The man's measured footsteps back and forth was constant; the tempo of Boyd's interrogation.

"Some like to just rest all day and of course there's always the occasional hardcore nut who spends all day training just in case," the man said, his voice smooth and calm. "But the stress of that schedule puts the fear of God into most of them, makes them realize the next day they go back to training may be their last on Earth."

The man slowed his steps until he stopped right in front of Boyd. "Fear of death and extreme duress do strange things to a person; make him desperate for some sort of connection. Make him go straight to his loved ones first chance he gets."

Boyd didn't answer and the man seemed to anticipate it. He just asked quietly after a short pause, "Other than Thierry's, where did you go on your breaks?"

"Just-- around."

"It's interesting to note," the man said a little louder, talking over Boyd, "that on your second break, you were seen going into Hsin Liu Vega's apartment."

"He's my partner," Boyd said, as if the explanation should be obvious. "I was just checking up on our unit."

"And leaving," the man continued as if there had been no interruption, "looking a lot worse for the wear. The guard said you looked pretty hesitant before you went in and

when you came out... Well. There are witnesses across the compound who could swear to just how angry you seemed."

Boyd felt his stomach clench, not wanting this to be brought up too. "I was stressed out from training, that had nothing to do with Sin."

"Quite a coincidence that it all hit you so clearly inside his apartment," the man observed contemplatively.

"Sometimes coincidences are just that," Boyd said steadily.

"And then your next break," the man continued calmly, "you went to Thierry's for company. Espresso. Sex. And left looking troubled, dissatisfied."

"I wasn't dis--"

"Why was that, I wonder," the man said, as if thinking aloud. "You liked it just fine when Thierry had you on your back in France. Maybe you just don't like the angle from doggy style? You'll have to excuse me; I don't have gay sex so I don't know, maybe one is better than the other."

"Look, I liked it just fine at Thierry's," Boyd said a little impatiently. "I don't know what that guard thought he saw but I was just stressed--"

"I hear your story and you know what I think?" the man asked idly. He actually waited for Boyd to give a mumbled 'no' before he continued. "I think all that time Thierry was taking his sweet time with you, making you really feel it, really know it was him-- you wanted it to be someone else."

Boyd felt his heart clench at the words, his skin go cold, and he stayed very still in order not to betray any emotions with his body language. "I don't know what you're--"

"Are you fucking Hsin Liu Vega?" the man asked casually.

"What?" Boyd asked, trying to get an incredulous tone into his voice despite the shakiness he was starting to feel inside. "No."

"Were you?"

"No, never. Look, he's just my work partner. All those rumors--"

"Many times, rumors start with a bit of truth," the man pointed out.

"And sometimes the truth is so far from the end result that it's not recognizable anymore," Boyd said firmly, setting his jaw and gaining some strength in his posture as best he could in his position.

His fingers curled into fists and he stood with his back straight against the wall. His eyes narrowed even though he knew the man would never see it through the hood but he knew that the sentiment would get across in his body language.

He was damned if he was going to let the man trick him into spilling information on Sin like he had with Thierry.

"Hmm."

Boyd wished he could see the man, wished he knew what that simple, calm syllable meant, why the man had gone completely quiet and what the man's expression was. But Boyd had absolutely no way of knowing what was happening; whether the man was coming closer on silent footsteps or whether he was still standing in the same area.

It felt like a fair portion of a minute passed before the man finally said simply, "Sweet dreams," and, without another word, walked out of the room and shut the door behind him.

Boyd stayed perfectly still, his heart thundering in his chest. What had that meant? Why did the man give up on the topic so easily? Boyd didn't dare believe that he'd actually managed to evade any questions about Sin like that but he couldn't help hoping that he was lucky after all, that maybe they'd let it go at that.

Just as Boyd was starting to feel some of the tension leave his body, as he was starting to think that maybe he actually would be able to get some rest after all, the techno music suddenly blared so loudly in the room that it was all he could hear, all he could think about. With a helpless, hopeless feeling, Boyd slid his eyes closed and dropped his head back against the wall, preparing for another long, uncomfortable, sleepless 'night.'

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It was impossible for Boyd to sleep chained standing up like he was, even without the horrible techno music in the background. Every moment that passed made him feel that much further from reality, that much less in control. Even so, exhaustion had made him black out for periods at a time. And each time when he woke it was to the painful, stretched feeling of arms at an angle insufficient for holding his dead weight; of wrists slick with a fine line of blood and fingers that tingled and jerked.

Even in the jumbled chaos that passed for dreams, he had no respite. The constant feel of the manacles against the wall, the knowledge that he was held still with nowhere to go, caused his sleep to be plagued with fear; stunted nightmares of him trying to escape while something terrible moved closer and closer and he knew with ice cold certainty that he'd never get away.

He dreamed of Shane and Lou and dead bodies around him; Alexis walking closer with a bullet in her head and the haunted, ghostly question of 'why' shifting around him like currents without her lips ever moving. He dreamed of a bed beneath him and whispers surrounding him and the insanity that had once taken him over; his own raw-throated screams as he arched off the sheets and black eyes glinting in the darkness, watching impassively as he nearly tore the limbs from his body trying to escape.

He dreamed of the suction-cup sound of blood sliding along the floor and marionette lovers moving with jolting, empty-doll movements; eyes rolling over first before their heads followed, blank mouths held in place with stitches and blood that painted their lips red. Brilliant arcs of gore and blood, splattering across the room, the floor, the buildings, the ground; paintbrushes across the sky and the clouds were turning crimson, vermillion, and it wasn't the sunset that made it that way, it was the blood-red rain falling heavily and nauseatingly against his skin.

And through it all, the *thump, thump, thump* of heavy bass resounding in his chest, shaking his internal organs and rattling his ribcage. The noise became a monster's footsteps in his dreams, a creature that he never quite saw but he knew wanted to suck the meat off his body and splay him, naked-boned skeleton flat against the sky for all to see and laugh at.

Boyd was in the middle of a restless nightmare when his knees suddenly slammed onto the floor. He jerked his head up, exhaustion and confusion combining with a just-woken feeling and he couldn't understand what was happening. The world blindly tilted and twirled around him and he felt like every open-mouthed breath he tried to take filtered through the hood was harsh and filled with half the oxygen he needed to stay alive.

He'd barely registered that his knees felt bruised and pained before strong hands gripped his arms mercilessly and he was twisted up off his feet, delirious and weak and not even certain he was awake.

He couldn't even understand that someone had unshackled him until he felt a new surface slam against his back; something flat, rough and hard. He just started to try to move when he was held down mercilessly as something was wrapped around his waist, like a belt that was cinched tightly and uncomfortably. Before he could do anything, his arms were pushed against his sides and new manacles snapped into place; when he tried to move, he felt his wrists tug at the belt as if they were connected.

He made a noise-- a question, a sound of alarm and confusion, but it was drowned out by the music resounding painfully in his head. A *thud, thud, thud* that threatened to drive every sane thought out of his mind.

Within seconds, the hands holding him down had secured him mercilessly to the new, slanted surface that placed his head lower than his heart. Something scratchy was wound around his ankles, his legs, his upper chest, his waist... He struggled but was caught like a fly in a spider's web.

The music was gone as suddenly as it had been turned on and in the painfully resounding silence, Boyd became aware of other noises below it bit by bit; the sound of footsteps around him; his heartbeat heavy and racing in his chest; the confused, frightened noises emitting from his own throat; the sound of water sloshing in some sort of container. The hood was on his head as securely as ever and now it made him feel vulnerable all over again, terrified by how quickly the little black world he'd just grown accustomed to had changed.

"Wh-- What?" Boyd gasped.

"We're going to try something new," the man's voice said calmly at Boyd's side as rustling of cloth and the thump of items against some sort of surface alarmed Boyd even more.

Before Boyd could speak, the extra footsteps grew closer and suddenly something heavy was placed directly over his face and pulled down tight, forcing his head in place as he stared upright. Boyd jerked, his heartbeat skyrocketing in fear, and he automatically tried to struggle, tried to get away but he was caught absolutely immobile with nowhere to go. He could barely keep his eyes open with the new pressure pushing

the scratchy hood against his face and he felt like he couldn't breathe, like they were trying to kill him.

"I'm going to ask you some questions," the man said conversationally, "and you're going to answer them. The longer you take, the longer you lie, the more we do this. Now," the man continued calmly, "are you sleeping with Hsin Liu Vega?"

Boyd didn't answer, eyes as wide as he dared without scratching them on the hood's fabric; he tried to tell himself he was okay, he was okay, this was just a test and he didn't need to answer that, he didn't need to compromise everything about his relationship with Sin. He'd become alert enough to know what they were going to do; he knew what was coming and he told himself to ignore the panic that was clawing its way up from the very depth of his being, to calm his nerves and just hold his breath and he'd be okay.

He'd just drawn breath before he could feel water pressing against his nostrils; the slow, torturous feel of that relentless current against his face. He immediately let out a distressed noise deep in his throat, tears already gathering in eyes that he squeezed shut against the thundering of his heartbeat and the sharp clutching of his throat in terror.

He was okay, he was okay, but the water wasn't stopping and his lungs burned with sharp wildfire that spread through his body, starting in his chest and quickly sliding along his nerves to the very ends of his fingers, his toes. He desperately tried not to let it bother him but he suddenly tried to gasp in a breath without his brain okaying it and the wet cloth sucked up against his face like a vacuum and oh God, *oh God*, he couldn't do this--

Boyd threw himself against his restraints blindly, gasping and choking and letting out utterly petrified noises. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't breathe, he was drowning and held down at the same time and he'd never in his life felt anything so absolutely horrifying, so gut-wrenchingly terrifying that he lost all sense of thought, all ability to think, and he simply became a creature that struggled and screamed and cried against his restraints.

He couldn't understand or care about anything except getting away-- he didn't care that this was a test, that he would fail, that he'd barely lasted a handful of seconds, that he would be compromising himself or Sin, that he was showing exactly how terror-stricken and susceptible he was to this. Nothing was as important as getting away, as making them stop, as making the claustrophobic feeling of drowning disappear.

The extra heaviness over his face lifted just enough for him to draw frantic, hitched breaths through the hood and he didn't even care anymore if it felt like he was only getting half the oxygen he needed; at least it was enough to bring frightened and thankful tears to his eyes. Every time he exhaled he felt a moment of paralyzing fear that he wouldn't be able to inhale, that it was all going to end like this, strapped naked to a table and drowned by water from a jug.

"Please," Boyd pleaded, completely uncaring about how desperate and afraid he sounded, of the way he shook along the entire length of his body as he choked and coughed between gasping sobs. "Please, no..."

"Are you sleeping with Hsin Liu Vega?" the man asked again calmly.

In his absolute terror, Boyd couldn't get his mind together fast enough to answer the question and the heavy cloth was pushed down on his face again. Boyd screamed and struggled immediately, tears pouring furiously down his face, staining the hood as he tried to get away.

Water poured over the towel again and this time Boyd hadn't even had the chance to take a breath before the damp cloth pressed against his nostrils and his lungs ached like they were being sucked out from within him and he couldn't breathe-- he couldn't move and he couldn't breathe and he was going to die--

The cloth was removed again in the middle of a frantic, choked scream from Boyd, who barely even gave himself the chance to catch part of his breath before he cried out desperately, "I was! I was! Please, God, don't...!" He cut himself off with hitched coughing.

"When did you stop?"

"Before training!" Boyd said immediately, frantic to keep them from doing that again.

"Why did you stop?"

"I-- We couldn't while I trained," Boyd said, his mind working chaotically as his words almost fell over each other to get out.

"Why didn't you spend time with him or sleep with him on your breaks? Why did you go to Thierry instead?" The same calm, casual tone that did little to quell Boyd's terror.

Boyd hesitated just a moment too long and the cloth was immediately over his face again. He tried to scream no; he tried to get away, causing rope burns and abrasions on his bare skin as he struggled violently against his restraints, but there was absolutely nothing he could do.

The water came again, longer this time even as he choked and tried desperately to breathe and even if he hadn't had the hood on, even if there hadn't been cloth over his eyes, he wouldn't have been able to see anything through the tears cascading down his cheeks. His lungs burned hotly and his heart was beating so fast that it felt like it was going to rip itself out of his chest and destroy him from the inside out.

There were no words for the hysteria that overtook him as he was subjected to his two greatest fears at the same time, as he felt like each time they pressed that cloth against his face and with each breath he couldn't draw, a little more of his sanity was forcibly wrenched from him like the oxygen he so desperately craved.

The cloth was pulled away and Boyd, shaking and crying and choking on every frightened breath he managed to draw, answered immediately. "He slept with someone else! Please," he gagged on an inhale and for a moment all he could do was sob uncontrollably. "Please stop, please..."

There was a brief moment of silence that greeted that revelation before the next question was calmly asked. "Who?"

"Ann-- Ann Connors." Boyd nearly stumbled over the words.

"Anyone else?"

"No, just-- just her, I swear I don't know of anyone else..."

Another brief pause followed by the smooth question, "When did you start?"

"Monterrey," Boyd hissed almost before the man had finished. He didn't want to seem like he was hesitating again, giving them the excuse to start it all over again.

"Who started it?"

"I-- I don't," Boyd stammered in urgent fright, not knowing how to answer the question. He heard them shift toward him and he threw himself violently against the ropes, already screaming, "No! No, no, please! I'll tell you anything, *please!*"

"Then who--" the man started to ask but Boyd was already thrashing his head back and forth.

"I don't know, I don't know!" Boyd moaned. "He kissed me first, he tried to have sex with me in France, but we didn't, I swear to God we didn't! I was the first one to come onto him in Monterrey but it was only after I knew he wouldn't turn me away!"

"How did you know?"

"I saw him jerking off and he said my name," Boyd admitted with a hitched breath.

He shuddered and couldn't stop crying; he felt weak and pathetic and utterly ashamed for giving away all this information, for giving away anything about memories that had been private and special for him.

But he couldn't go through the water again-- he couldn't let them place that cloth over his face and he couldn't let them steal his breath away again. He couldn't, he couldn't, even now he could barely keep his thoughts together with the restraints holding him down. Each hitched breath from crying drew the hood up against his mouth and if they tried to drown him again--

"Why didn't you in France?"

"I-- I was afraid!" Boyd tried to talk through his gasps, through the terror that still made his heart pound so loudly he could barely hear his own words. "He-- He was drunk and he didn't stop when I wanted him to slow down and he was holding me down..."

"How many times have you slept together?"

The question was simple enough but once again Boyd hesitated as he tried to think of the answer and before he had the chance to react, the cloth was over his face and water was blocking his breath. He didn't know anymore if he was breathing out or in, if he was screaming or choking, if his eyes were wide open against the black nothingness or if they were squeezed shut in denial of what was happening. For a moment, he lost all sense of dignity, of his own sense of self, and he was nothing but a hysterical mess once they pulled the cloth away again.

"How many times?" The question was sharper this time, more intense.

"I don't know!" Boyd practically screamed as he threw himself against his restraints. "I don't know, I don't know, I swear to God, *please!*"

"Give me an estimate," the voice demanded, and Boyd was so far gone he couldn't even recognize anymore that this was the same man who had been talking to him for days.

"I don't know a number! A lot! Sometimes several times a day-- Please," he shuddered violently from head to toe, shamelessly sobbing, "please stop. I'm sorry, I'm sorry..."

"Who's usually the instigator?"

"Both of us! A lot of times it's him but-- but the last time was me."

"Who penetrates who?"

"I was always bottom at first but it changed a few months ago," Boyd hissed immediately between gasps. "Sometimes I top."

"What did you do to seduce him in Monterrey?" The same calm, clipped tone to the question.

"I-- I read from an erotic book, I... I teased him, I gave him a blowjob." Boyd rambled frenetically, trying to get as much information out as possible so they wouldn't come at him with the cloth again. So he couldn't accidentally freeze up again at a question. "We kissed, we... He was afraid of hurting me but I said I wanted it. He-- he said--"

Boyd had to stop himself as the memory swept over him; as he recalled that first confusing, hot morning when they'd run hesitant hands over each other, when he'd begged Sin to let him touch him. When the kitchen floor had been cool against their knees and it was the first time he'd felt like he could kiss Sin with all the passion that had been growing inside him.

"What did he say?"

Tears welled in Boyd's eyes for a different reason this time; he felt a sharp twinge of shame for disgracing that quiet moment between the two of them by speaking of it aloud

to strangers. At the same time, he felt a profound sense of loss, reliving a memory that reminded him so cruelly of what it had once been like between them, of when he'd felt like there had been more than sex between them. When he'd felt like there had been emotions and conversations too.

"He... He said he'd wanted me since November," Boyd murmured with a quiet sort of sadness tingeing his urgency.

"What else did he say?"

Boyd slid his eyes closed and thumped his head back against the board, feeling broken and lost and utterly, completely alone. The tears wouldn't stop streaming from his eyes and a distant, delirious part of him thought that maybe if they tried to drown him again he could just cry out all the water in his body to save himself.

"He said he'd been intrigued by me from the start." Boyd's voice was subdued as the memories overwhelmed him, somehow growing strong enough to even overcome his immediate fear of being tied down. "He said-- he'd become possessive of the idea of me. He said... he'd never had sex with anyone before."

"What did you say to him?"

"I-- I said I'd been attracted to him for months, I said... I'd assumed he'd been with his other partners before or, or at least someone. I said I knew he'd never hurt me on purpose."

"Then what happened?"

Boyd's breath quickened as part of him wanted desperately to stop talking, to stop betraying the relationship he'd had with Sin, to stop giving them so much. Even if everything had fallen apart lately, even if he was furiously upset with Sin for what he'd done, that time in Monterrey had been special to Boyd. Those feelings had been powerful and unique and had driven him to greater heights as a person and... And here he was, saying everything, telling them--

The feeling of Sin's hands through Boyd's clothing, against his skin, and that sexy voice whispering, *"Do you like when I touch you?"*

Boyd made a noise of distress and hesitated too long before answering. The cloth closed over his face again and the way his heart spiked and skipped a beat was an

aching pain that resounded throughout his entire body. Boyd was immediately crying-- desperate and terrified and caught between loyalty to something that didn't exist anymore and mind-numbing anxiety. He struggled and screamed and coughed and couldn't breathe--

The water was there even longer this time and he surged against his restraints like a body jerking underwater as the water threw it about playfully, dragging it under. Boyd's eyes were wide open, blind, and he was reliving the water, reliving half-hidden memories of currents snatching him under and the blue sky too far above and that terrible, horrifying feeling of burning lungs that forced his body to breathe when his mind screamed no, no, you'll kill us--

Of his eyes wide open and hair everywhere as rough fingers held him down and of bubbles heading toward a surface he'd never reach again. It was all there so fresh and violent in his mind. Only this time, this time he couldn't move either; he couldn't even flail his limbs as if to gain purchase, as if to tell himself he still had a chance, he still had hope, he could still make it through--

He didn't even realize at first when the cloth was removed; his lungs kept freezing in paralysis when he exhaled and a few times he forgot to breathe in or maybe he just couldn't.

He was hyperventilating and each frantic, quick breath brought the hood closer to his face, reminded him that much more that any second now he could suffocate, he could lose all chances he ever had at living through all this. Muffled, terrified noises drew themselves out of his half-filled lungs and his face and nose tingled and burned with the lack of proper oxygen.

It was a long time before he came back to the moment enough to understand that he wasn't being drowned anymore, that he wasn't underwater, that even though it was scratchy and difficult he could breathe through the fabric over his face. He was shuddering and shivering constantly now, unable to control it, not even entirely aware it was happening. He was so frightened that he felt it as a physical ache in the very core of his being and at that moment he wanted to die just to make this stop.

"Then what happened?" The voice was so calm, so conversational; completely unaffected by everything Boyd was going through.

Boyd shook his head and shuddered so violently that it almost made his teeth clack.
"I..."

He had to stop because for a moment he couldn't even understand the question, he couldn't even remember what he had been so unwilling to talk about. He felt several steps removed from his life, from any understanding of who he was or what this was or why anything had ever mattered to him more than keeping that suffocating water from drowning him again.

"I-- We went to the couch," Boyd said hoarsely as soon as he could, shaking so much that it made it into his voice as a frightened tremble. "We kissed and we jerked each other off. We fell asleep against each other."

"Hmm." The same simple, monosyllabic sound Boyd had heard before he'd fallen asleep, before he'd been woken to this terror, and Boyd shuddered deeply in response.

The interrogation continued for some time after that; increasingly invasive questions were asked about his sex life with Sin until finally, at a point when Boyd felt like he was barely holding his sanity together by a few frayed, breaking threads, they suddenly released him from the restraints and dragged him, unresponsive and willing, back to the wall.

Time passed as Boyd sagged against the wall, shuddering violently; a frightened, fragile mess that couldn't seem to stop spontaneous tears from rolling down his cheeks. The music had returned, chaotic and loud and forcing all coherent thoughts from his mind. He eventually fell into an exhausted half-sleep again and in a terrifying, disorienting display of déjà vu, he was woken the same way.

Realizing where he was being dragged, he screamed and pleaded and cried uncontrollably and couldn't even care about his complete lack of dignity. They grilled him again-- question after question, and each time he hesitated just a hint too long, each time they thought he was lying, the cloth was smothering his face and he was sobbing and struggling and absolutely terrified and it never got better, it never got easier, it only got worse.

It felt like forever was caught in that schedule of waterboarding and being chained against the wall; like time slowed and stretched just to throw him off balance, just to keep him there in that horrifying nightmare for as long as possible. Sometimes he awoke screaming and struggling and crying only to realize he wasn't on the board. He never would have thought he'd feel such relief from knowing he was chained to a wall.

When they started interrogating him again, they varied the questions-- asking about everything from his mother to even more detailed questions about his past and his life.

When the topic turned to his relationship with Sin, the questions became harder for him to answer. Why had he been nice to Sin in the first place (he didn't know, it'd just seemed right), were Sin and he actually together as a couple (no, he'd broken it off), had his relationship with Sin ever affected the missions (yes, in Monterrey and Annadale Beach), what would he do for Sin (he didn't know, he didn't know, he used to think he'd do anything but now he knew he wouldn't let himself be used)...

And when that smooth, conversational voice had asked if he loved Sin, he shivered and cried pathetically and said yes, yes he had. And when that same voice asked if he still did, he hesitated too long and the water was there, torturing animalistic screams and sobs out of him and he wasn't able to recognize himself anymore, not this utterly pathetic, broken creature that would do anything to avoid pain and fear.

And when the cloth was finally pulled away, he was only able to drop his head against the board, tears clogging his voice and eyes, heart heavy as he whispered in defeat, "*I think I do.*"

Chapter 22

The small room was quieter than it had been in weeks. Despite the fact that Toby and Boyd were both in it, neither of them spoke and it almost seemed like the good-natured acquaintanceship that had developed between them had never existed at all.

Toby sat on his bed, hunched over a book as he turned the pages stiffly, quickly, obviously not even reading the words. His posture was tense, defensive and he seemed to be trying to shield himself from Boyd as he sat partially turned away. It was possible that he was trying to hide his appearance; the evidence of how rough his resistance to interrogation training had been.

Toby was paler than usual, a sickly pasty white color that made the bruises on his face and arms seem lurid. He seemed to have had more physical torture than Boyd but then Doug had likely realized that physical abuse was more likely to work with Toby, who had consistently shown a low pain tolerance during combat training.

Whatever had happened during R2I, it was obvious that it'd had a profound effect on Toby. His hands had taken on a slight tremble and his eyes kept darting to the door as if he was waiting for the guards to come haul him off to the interrogation rooms again.

The silence wasn't awkward but it was uncomfortable and somehow just seemed to underscore and continue to remind Boyd of all that had happened in the previous week. They'd only been released from the R2I training the night before and Boyd had no delusions of putting the entire ordeal out of his mind any time soon, but sitting in the room with a living, breathing reminder of how traumatizing the training had been for all of them was only going to make Boyd think about it more.

Every time a noise emanated from the hallway, Toby would jump and skitter backwards on the bed. And every time Toby jumped, Boyd automatically jumped too, thinking someone was coming after him. That led to automatic, short flashes of memories of himself trying to evade the interrogator's touch, the suffocating hood, the constant flow of water drowning him...

It was a cycle that went on for the entire morning of their fourth break but both agents continued to sit on their respective sides of the room and stared at code books and notes about explosives and pretended like they could actually focus enough to study for the final training exams. Solo missions would be starting the next day but Boyd wanted

to get a head start on studying for everything that would come after. Even if he wasn't retaining anything at the moment, it was all he had to distract himself with.

After what seemed like an eternity of silence broken only by the rustle of pages turning, Toby spoke. His voice was cracked and hoarse and Boyd could only imagine that it was from a week filled with screaming.

"I don't know if I can do this."

Toby didn't look at Boyd when he said it but his hands tightened around his book.

Boyd watched Toby a moment then quietly looked down at his book, trying to ignore the way his own hands wanted to tremble now and then. He knew Toby meant 'this' to equate to everything, from finishing the Level 10 training to actually being able to handle being a Level 10 if promoted; from getting over the R2I training to just being a functional human being for the moment. And even though Boyd wanted to ignore it, he had to admit that a scared, uncertain part of him felt exactly the same way.

He hadn't been able to sleep at all the night before; each time he'd started to pass out he'd suddenly jerked awake-- Because the sheets had wrapped around his feet, because a blanket was just a little too close to his face, because he forgot he wasn't in the interrogation room anymore and he was terrified they were coming to drag him to the board again...

He'd managed to keep any noise out of his voice each time, he thought, but even though his outward appearance had returned to the default blank expression out of protection for himself, he truthfully felt as skittish and unbalanced as Toby looked. Like he was barely holding himself together, like the books and notes and the plan he'd created for himself to study was all he had to keep himself going and even if he felt shaky and afraid, he couldn't afford to lose it these last two weeks.

So he wished Toby hadn't said it aloud, even though in the depths of his mind he'd been whispering the same thing in fear. Because as soon as the words were out in the open, it was that much more difficult to pretend that these books and studying were enough to hold off the inner demons from that room, from everything that had been happening in the last few months.

"You can," Boyd said after a moment, his own voice scratchy from the last few days spent screaming and crying and he wasn't going to think about it because as soon as he did it would suck him in. "It's hard now but give it time..."

Toby shook his head and closed his eyes briefly, expression pained and more vulnerable than Boyd had ever seen. "I don't know if I could handle that if I was--" He broke off to swallow heavily. "I sound weak but I can't help but fear... what if I really was captured and I break that easily and give up everyone?"

Boyd shook his head, wanting to end this conversation as soon as possible. Part of him felt the same way as Toby; he was ashamed by how weak he'd been and he knew... Honestly, he knew if he was really captured by an enemy, if they threatened to waterboard him again... He didn't think he'd be able to stop himself from giving them everything they wanted to know.

"You're..." Boyd began, then stopped and had to start over. "I don't know how many people could... go through all that without giving information..." *Sin could*, a dark voice whispered inside him; *Sin was nearly killed in Monterrey without giving them anything and you couldn't even make it through a test.*

Boyd grit his teeth and tightened his fingers on the book, shame burning sharp and strong within him. He forced himself to continue as if nothing had occurred to him. "We just... If we make it, we'll get more training..." *I don't know if I can handle more training, I don't know if I can do it*, the same voice whispered frantically and Boyd viciously ignored it. "We'll learn what to do..."

"I don't know if I want to learn how to deal with that!" Toby burst out and threw his book across the room. It hit the wall and slid down, some of the pages ripping in the process. Toby swore and pressed a hand over his face. "I should have just gone back to school. I'll never get through this. I'll never make my grandfather proud. I'm a fucking failure and I hate it."

Stop talking, stop talking, Boyd thought urgently. "You're not a failure, Toby-- you made it this far. We're almost done..."

Toby just shrugged and looked miserable.

There was another long stretch of silence but this time Toby seemed to calm down some and he shook his head back and forth as though he was trying to get a hold of himself. It was only after he managed to mask most of the unhappy hopelessness from his expression that he gave Boyd a wilted smile.

"Well," he started in a forced joking way. "If anything, maybe the fact that we know people on the inside will make up for how R2I went. And I heard Sin is going to be at the final exam for combat, so..." Toby let the implication hang in the air even though it was obvious he wasn't being entirely serious.

Boyd was already annoyed enough at the implication that his connections would have anything to do with his scores when the rest of Toby's sentence translated in his mind. He looked over at Toby sharply; in everything that had happened, he'd completely forgotten about the fact that Kassian had mentioned Sin's presence in the tests.

"What?" he asked with a little more edge than he'd intended. "Are you sure? How do you know he'll actually show?"

Toby got up and grabbed the fallen book. "I was going to go down and talk to Doug awhile ago..." He trailed off for a moment and cleared his throat, shooting Boyd a look. "Anyway I changed my mind and left but I overheard him talking to someone on the phone about it."

"And he said-- You actually heard him confirm that Sin's coming?" Boyd pressed.

"Yeah, definitely."

Boyd leaned over his book and felt a spike of tension, frustration, something nearly like fear-- an almost claustrophobic feel that he was trapped into this, that he was going to be forced to see Sin before he wanted to, before he was anywhere near ready for it.

He wanted nothing to do with Sin during the training; he'd been trying so hard to get the man out of his mind and already he'd fucked up twice. He could have gotten himself kicked out of training or worse for the Annadale Beach fiasco alone, he'd already realized how much he'd changed and how frustrated and pathetic he felt after Thierry. And then the interrogation-- Sin's name repeatedly whispered around him as they made him relive memories about the relationship; his own strangled, desperate screams as he'd told them everything and all the while they'd tied him down, they'd kept returning with more and more water--

No, no, even at two weeks away, it was too soon. And what if he fucked up that last day? What if he'd made it through everything and they even weren't going to fail him for how much he'd given away in the interrogation and then, because he had to see Sin, because he had to fight him and they'd end up having to touch and-- Fuck, fuck, he couldn't do this--

Toby glanced at Boyd again, unaware of what was going through Boyd's mind. "Maybe he'll let you win so he can get back in your good graces."

For some reason, the comment made Boyd's tenuous hold snap. "That's not *fucking* funny, Toby!" he suddenly shouted, grabbing his book and throwing it across the room just as Toby had earlier. He curled forward, his hands over his temples and eyes squeezed shut.

"*Fuck*," Boyd hissed and he was trembling but he didn't know if it was due to anger, frustration, stress, fear... Everything was a jumble within him, everything was jagged and in shards and falling apart.

And now there was this, the idea that after everything, after all he'd gone through just to try to prove himself as his own person, that he could fail because of his issues with Sin or even if he didn't, it could be because Sin let him win...

Toby stared at him, looking a mix between surprised, guilty, and pleased that he wasn't the only one so shaken by R2I. Even so, he didn't say anything.

Boyd stayed hunched in on himself for a long moment before he realized that even just sitting in that room was too much for him. There was no way in hell he'd be able to study and he couldn't think; he couldn't handle this. He didn't even want Toby's eyes burning into him from the side because it felt like Toby knew too much, like Boyd was too transparent and Toby would be able to see too far into his mind--

With a sudden movement, Boyd stood and looked around the room briefly, distractedly, avoiding eye contact.

"I-- I can't--" Boyd cut himself off when he realized he didn't know how to finish the sentence. Shaking his head to himself, he was out the door before Toby had a chance to react.

Thankfully, he didn't run into anyone as he strode out of the training grounds. Walking across the compound, he went well out of his way so he wouldn't be anywhere near a place he could imagine running into Sin or Thierry.

He would never be able to tell anyone how long he walked or how he managed to navigate the streets in a coherent fashion. Not when he felt like he was completely

falling apart and he had nowhere to go, no one he could see who felt safe. No one who he could trust and who would understand.

His fingers clenched within his pockets, his face tilted toward the sidewalk as it passed beneath him. Cold wind blew past him but he barely noticed; he unconsciously hunched forward, eyes sliding shut briefly as he tried to still the occasional trembling that had nothing to do with the temperature. But he was off-balance and unstable and when he stepped onto the street without looking and someone abruptly slammed on their horn, swerving to avoid hitting him, he felt a sudden jolt of fear that tore into the very depths of him.

He jerked his head up and looked around frantically, for some stupid reason thinking that he was back in that room, that the sound was the music starting again and maybe he'd never actually made it out, maybe this was all just a dream, maybe any second now his knees would hit the floor and they'd drag him--

Boyd moved faster, striding so quickly it was as if he thought he could literally run from the thoughts in his mind. He barely saw where he was going, barely understood anything except to react on a basic level to the environment around him; stop when cars flew by, run when they weren't there.

The city stretched and skewed in his peripheral vision, like grinning, toothless skyscrapers that arched and crowded around him. He felt at once highly sensitive to what was happening in his vicinity and incapable of properly interpreting anything.

He found himself automatically walking toward his home but that was the last place he wanted to be. He knew he wasn't in the right state of mind to be capable of dealing with an empty house with too many charged memories of Lou and Sin.

He started to feel the frustrated hysteria build-- The utter loss that hit him when he realized he didn't know where to go, didn't know what to do; he felt completely alone and he was afraid of what would happen when he lost even the little bit of control he had left.

The feeling crackled and surged within him, a wildfire that threatened to overtake his logic and made his eyes ache with the pressure of holding everything in, of trying to keep going even when he felt like he'd used up all his strength long ago and he was about to crash and burn from the momentum. Just as it almost became too much, just as the intensity made his hands hurt from his clenched fingers, Kassian's voice suddenly flashed through his mind, inviting him over again sometime.

Boyd seized onto those words almost desperately, like grasping a rope that suddenly appeared just as he was falling over a cliff. He couldn't even think about what he would do if Kassian wasn't there or if the man didn't want to see him. He simply headed toward the only person he felt like he could see.

It was fortunate that Kassian lived so near Boyd, close enough that even in that chaotic state of mind he could remember where to go even if he accidentally turned down the wrong street at first. When he stopped in front of Kassian's house, Boyd stood on the sidewalk for a moment, struggling to pull himself together enough to make sure he would not seem like a crazed lunatic on Kassian's doorstep.

He felt weak and pathetic for feeling so upset yet at the same time he was at a loss as to how to stop it now that it had started.

As soon as he felt like he had as much control as he was likely to gather in this situation, even if it felt like next to nothing, he walked up to Kassian's door with a thundering heart. He saw Kassian's truck in the driveway but he didn't let himself feel hope; Kassian could have gone somewhere on foot.

With a hand Boyd tried hard to stop from trembling, he hesitated then knocked loudly.

Now that he was close to the door he could hear booming rock music coming from somewhere inside the house. After a brief moment the music lowered and the door swung open.

Kassian gave Boyd a slightly disturbed look and appeared a mix between utterly bewildered by Boyd's frazzled appearance and caught off guard when he'd obviously not been expecting company. Kassian was barefoot, clad only in a pair of loose cotton pants and he looked damp, as though he'd recently gotten out of the shower.

He barely hesitated before stepping aside and gesturing for Boyd to come in. "What's wrong?"

Boyd automatically started to walk into the house, gaze darting around as if he couldn't figure out what to focus his attention on. "Kassian, hi, I-- I'm sorry, were you busy?" he rambled, feeling off-balanced and uncertain of himself. "I didn't-- I don't know where else to go."

"I'm not busy at all." Kassian frowned slightly and stopped just inside the living room. He stared at Boyd but when he didn't sit down, Kassian pointed at the sofa. "Just chill for a minute, you look like you're about to have some kind of breakdown."

Boyd let out a short half-laugh that didn't sound entirely sane. "I think I might be," he said distantly.

Boyd walked over to the sofa and, after a second of staring at it, he sat down, leaning forward with his head in his hands and his elbows resting on his knees. He felt shaky and out of sync with everything around him but at least knowing he was around someone else, in someone's home, made him feel just a little bit better.

Kassian sat down at the other end of the couch and studied Boyd silently. Kassian's fluffy cat Peaches jumped up between them and curled up against Boyd's side. She rubbed her head against his thigh for a moment before blinking up at him curiously.

Boyd slid his fingers apart just enough to look down at her, at her brilliant green eyes as she watched him without judgment or reproach. Her fluffy white and grey fur made her look larger than she was and her tail twitched curiously behind her.

After a moment, he reached down and ran slightly trembling fingers along her soft fur. She was warm and small and leaned into his touch with a pleased, muffled purr, and his heart clenched painfully at the knowledge that there was a creature out there that wasn't judging him, expecting anything from him; that just existed and wanted his love.

Suddenly he felt like it was all just too much; tears welled in his eyes and he couldn't stop them anymore, he couldn't hold everything in. He leaned forward, his fingers curling against her fur and she arched her back insistently, trying to get him to pet her. A strangled breath escaped him and he started crying.

"Kassian," he whispered abruptly with a hoarse voice, "I-- I don't know what to do."

Boyd was utterly incapable of hiding just how lost and overwhelmed he felt, of how close he felt to breaking apart completely and never quite managing to mend himself back together again. He leaned forward again, his free arm automatically sliding down in an old protective gesture across his stomach.

"I feel like I'm falling apart." Boyd's voice twisted with distant fear and desperation and he could feel the tears falling harder. He knew he must look pathetic as he sat there crying, curled forward on the couch, but he felt too chaotic to be able to do anything

about it. "I can't-- I can't think, I can't sleep, I'm so-- Everything's too much and I don't know if I can do it anymore, I don't know if I can handle this, and I-- I'm so fucking scared..."

Kassian shifted on the couch but he hesitated before actually moving any closer. He didn't really seem to know what to do but surprise was clear on his face before something seemed to occur to him. His blue eyes narrowed slightly in understanding and he leaned forward to put a hand on Boyd's shoulder. "Did you have torture training this past week?"

Boyd's breath hitched as he tried to inhale a little deeper and he covered his face with the hand he'd had resting on Peaches. He just nodded silently, unable to come up with words.

Kassian squeezed Boyd's shoulder sympathetically before removing his hand and sitting back again. "Yeah, that was the worst fucking part of training for me. I'm pretty sure I was begging for them to kill me by the end."

Boyd let out a helpless, mirthless half-laugh that was partially muffled by his gasps for breath. "You too?" he asked, voice thick with emotion as he struggled to regain any sense of stability.

"Heh. I was a mess." Kassian picked up an empty beer bottle from the end table and stared at it before setting it back down. His lips pressed together slightly before he looked at Boyd again. "They have a way of getting things out of you, don't they? Of getting all of your secrets, every possible thing they can use against you in the future if you don't follow their orders."

Kassian snorted softly and added almost bitterly, "They call it training for interrogation but really it's just an excuse for them to suck you dry before they promote you. So they can find out every little detail about what makes you tick."

Boyd shook his head. "It was-- it's fucking horrible."

It took some time but he slowly started to quiet down as he began to almost feel too tired even for tears. There were several moments of silence as Boyd struggled to regain some sense of control; although he hadn't cried for long, it had been enough to give him the release of emotions he'd needed. But if he let it go for too long, he didn't know if he'd be able to stop.

Kassian was quiet, giving him a chance to recover.

Boyd finally managed to get his breathing back to normal for the most part. He almost didn't want to ask the question that came to mind, the thing he'd been wondering about since he'd mentioned it to Toby, but he felt compelled. "They don't... If I get promoted, do they... Does it happen again?"

"Unfortunately it does," Kassian admitted apologetically. His clear blue eyes stayed trained on Boyd, taking in every movement as Boyd slowly got himself back together. "But the more in-depth training is actually training, not straight torture. So it's not as disturbing."

Boyd slid his eyes closed and nodded, his face tilted toward his lap. Honestly, he'd been almost positive that they would train them more; after all, everything in the Level 10 training was basically a precursor for more intensive training later. But some small part of him had hoped that maybe they wouldn't, maybe this would be enough. At the same time...

"Good," Boyd said quietly. "I mean, if it happens, at least..."

At least it would serve some purpose next time. He wondered if they'd make him go through waterboarding again, if they'd try to teach him how to resist it, and if he'd ever be able to last more than a few seconds before he was begging for release. The thought made him shudder deeply and he brought a hand up to his temple again, desperately wishing that he could get this shaky, weak feeling to leave him completely.

Kassian reached out to pet Peaches but she jumped off the couch and darted off across the room. He made a face at the cat before turning his attention to Boyd again.

"Everyone goes through this but really, even if they do have their motives, it's good to experience it first here and not elsewhere. You know?"

It was true; even if it had been horrible, even if he'd rather never have had to go through it at all, at least Boyd knew they wouldn't do anything permanent to him. At least they wouldn't have actually killed him. Probably. At least it was allies getting this information and not enemies who could use it against those around him. At least the majority of the information he gave away was going to mostly just affect himself. Unless the information on Sin somehow got back to affect him too...

Boyd nodded slightly before he dropped his hand lifelessly onto his lap and stared blankly at his curled fingers. His arm remained against his stomach but at least he wasn't holding it in closely, protectively, anymore.

"It's all..." Boyd started to say quietly, not entirely aware at first of the fact that he was speaking aloud. "All of it was bad enough, but I just... It's... Everything with Sin, and-- and all the shit they got out of me about him and then..."

He fell silent briefly before he finally looked over at Kassian. His honey brown eyes were red-rimmed from the tears and he still looked somewhat lost, somewhat afraid, but now it was tempered with weariness that made him seem paler, features heavier. "And then Toby said he's coming to training and I just... I guess I freaked out."

Kassian ran a hand along the stubble that covered his jaw, eyebrows drawn together slightly. After a moment he stood up without questioning Boyd further on the topic. "You want something to drink? I have beer and water. And two day old coffee but I think it's still technically good. There may be some tea hanging out in a cabinet somewhere too."

Boyd barely even considered the choices; although it was against his typical tastes, he felt so off-kilter that even tea didn't sound good to him. Instead, the idea of something that would just get his mind off everything and make him relax suddenly sounded very appealing. "You know, I-- Can I have a beer?"

"Of course."

Kassian turned around and headed towards the kitchen. Boyd looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of Kassian's retreating back and he noticed a large tattoo of a crucifix between Kassian's shoulder blades and what appeared to be an image of a serpent or snake looped twice around his midsection.

There was another tattoo on his lower back that appeared to be a few lines written in Russian but Boyd couldn't make out the words, not that he would have been able to translate or read them even if he could. Boyd looked after Kassian blankly and belatedly realized that Kassian's front had also been covered in several tattoos but Boyd had been so distracted he'd barely noticed.

Within a minute, Kassian re-entered the living room with a beer in each hand and wearing a faded band t-shirt. He sat down next to Boyd and handed him a tall black bottle of Guinness, the cap already having been removed.

"Thanks," Boyd said automatically, staring at the beer in his hands briefly before he took a long drink and leaned back. He kept himself from making a face and dropped his head against the back of the couch, sliding his eyes shut. Although he'd never much liked the taste of beer and doubted he ever would, it was still better than nothing and somehow fit his mood.

Kassian drank from his bottle, eyes once again trained on Boyd intently. After a moment, Boyd slid his eyes open and they just looked at each other; Boyd couldn't help but notice that the silence wasn't tense at all. Despite the fact that he'd burst in on Kassian without warning, there was no tension, no awkwardness and it felt almost natural.

Boyd's gaze was caught by the way Kassian's intensely clear blue eyes studied him closely without reproach or expectation, and at that moment it made Boyd feel somehow better or safer; as if he could trust Kassian to look out for him even if he fell apart again.

The mood was a welcome, far cry from the first time he'd been invited to Kassian's and Boyd found that he truly appreciated it. He didn't know what he would have done had it been strange and awkward like before.

The silence stretched only awhile longer and finally Kassian cleared his throat and spoke again. "It's almost over, kid. I know it's not easy but you can't let that part of the training get you down. Whatever happened, whatever you told them, none of it matters anymore and it's probably something that would have been found out sooner or later anyway."

Kassian tilted the neck of his beer bottle at Boyd. "The easiest part of dealing with torture is the physical part. When it's over, it's over. The mental part, the memories, that's what sucks and you have to figure out a way to push it all to the back of your mind."

Boyd sighed heavily and nodded, rubbing his eyes with his free hand before he leaned over his beer and stared at it. "I know," he said wearily. "I just-- I hate how it makes me feel. I wish I could just flip a switch but I can't. And as soon as tomorrow hits I have to be on top of everything again for the solo and then after that the testing. I can't afford to fuck up but it feels like, how will I not?"

"Because that's what they want you to do," Kassian said bluntly, taking another gulp of his own beer. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Why do you think they put

R2I right before the final tests? To see how badly it affects your head, how much you let it get to you. I know it's not easy, Boyd, I'm not trying to say it is, but you have to find a way to take it and use it to your advantage."

Boyd nodded distractedly, staring at the nearly black color of the beer. "You're right," he said a little distantly, thinking about what Kassian had said.

It was true; the R2I really had been placed at the worst time. But when he thought of it that way, of them using his reactions against him even more than they had already, of this just being another test as they toyed with him, he felt a distant spark of resolve that he'd feared had been lost to him forever.

Boyd clung to the feeling of determination and let it grow inside him.

He could do this. He could.

He'd made it through difficult times before and he'd lived. If they wanted to rip him apart slowly from the inside out, fine. They'd done that quite well during R2I. But that had been their week, that had been on their terms. He wasn't in that room anymore; he had some sense of freedom again, he had some sense of power.

If he let them break him down, let him lose everything at this critical point, then he was letting them win. He was falling back on the weakness he often resorted to.

How long was he going to let others break him apart? How long was he going to let it be an excuse for his own weakness, his own inability to keep moving when he still had the strength, still had the freedom and opportunity? Hadn't all this been about growing stronger, becoming more independent? And, what, he was going to let the first sign of trouble completely derail him? Let something inconsequential like his phobias overcome everything he'd been working so hard toward?

He'd be damned if he was going to give Doug more to mock him about, he'd be damned if he'd let the following two weeks be something he looked back on with regret. It was just fourteen more days. He could do that easily, one step at a time. A plan for each day, a goal to move toward. What happened after training didn't matter right now. He'd make it through this; after all, he'd survived worse than their games.

Boyd's eyes narrowed in stubborn determination and he repeated, more firmly, "You're right."

A small grin turned up the corners of Kassian's mouth and he almost looked proud of Boyd; of the transformation that had taken place in Boyd's expression and posture in the brief span of time. The younger agent no longer looked broken and beaten down.

"There you go."

They sat in silence again and Kassian gulped down the rest of his beer. He set the empty bottle down next to the other on the end table and finally asked, "So what's Sin got to do with all of this? I know you said you broke it off with him but is shit really that bad?"

Instead of answering immediately, Boyd took a deep drink of the beer, the taste unpleasant and tingling on his tongue but keeping him even further in the moment. He rested the bottle in his lap and shook his head, although it was more out of frustration with himself than anything. With the imminent feeling of overwhelming fear now somewhat subdued by his determination, there was nothing to stop the frustration from surging regarding Sin.

"I'm just such a fucking idiot when it comes to him," Boyd said in annoyance. "I just-- I know everyone told me not to, I know it was probably a bad idea from the start, but I just kept going for him, like a moth to the flame. I kept believing in him, I kept..."

His eyes narrowed and he took another drink and then stared at the bottle. "And you know, I actually fucking loved him," he continued in a burst of irritation. "I felt-- I've never felt anything that strongly before and I fucking *told* him I loved him. Jesus Christ, I don't know what the hell else I was supposed to give him; I would've died for him, I would've done anything. And then the first chance he gets, he's fucking someone else and can't even bother to give me a reason other than he felt like he needed to at the time. I mean-- What the fuck is that?"

Kassian looked taken aback by the sudden outburst and scratched the back of his head. "Wow. I... honestly don't know what to say about that."

"Well, I don't either," Boyd said with a bit of an edge, half caught up in his rant. "I don't fucking understand him. He kept saying he didn't get why him sleeping with someone else had anything to do with us. Apparently all along I could've fucked whoever I wanted and it wouldn't have been a problem for him. He tried to say we had to talk some other time even though he refused to say why. And he wouldn't get why I couldn't trust him anymore or why I was upset; he just said I was jealous and fucking unreasonable. I don't know who's stupider between us-- him for thinking I wouldn't care about this, or me for fucking caring in the first place."

"Oh." Kassian paused briefly and seemed at a loss. "I'm not the best person to comment on this. I've never had a successful monogamous relationship."

"Yeah, well, apparently I don't know how to have one either," Boyd grumbled in frustration.

Kassian went back to rubbing his blond stubble, studying Boyd carefully and obviously picking up on the fact that this was a sensitive topic. "Why do you think he wanted to talk later?"

"I don't know," Boyd said in frustration. "He said he didn't feel comfortable talking about it then and I was misinterpreting everything. But if I was, why the hell couldn't he talk to me? Or at least give me more of a reason than he just felt like it?"

"Huh." Kassian shrugged his broad shoulders, his handsome face genuinely baffled. "That sounds pretty strange. Are you going to actually talk to him about it all or just say screw it?"

"I'm sure I'll talk to him at some point, it's just..." Boyd trailed off, trying to put in words how he felt about it all.

"I don't even know if anything he has to say matters at this point," Boyd said honestly after a moment. "I already told him we were over. I just... I thought I was important to him but now I can't help feeling used. We used to actually talk, I used to feel like there was a connection. But then again even right after we started sleeping together, he had no problems kissing a woman in front of me. I should've said something or thought more of it but at that time I didn't realize how I felt about him. And he kept saying he needed me but for what? Ever since I told him I loved him, he was less likely to talk; suddenly all he wanted from me was sex and he even got more impatient with that, like I was mostly there to make him come. And then even sex wasn't just between us."

Boyd was quiet briefly. It didn't even occur to him that maybe Kassian didn't want to hear details about his sex life with Sin; he just needed to talk to someone about this and Kassian was the only person he had to turn to.

Kassian's eyebrows rose slightly. "Why didn't you say something about the other chick he fooled around with?"

Boyd didn't immediately answer; he stared at the beer for a long moment before he finally sighed and looked up at Kassian. "I don't know, maybe I felt... guilty. He's just wanted to be normal for so long and there I was, introducing him to gay sex simply because I was hot for him and... I mean, I'm gay, I can't be any other way. But in Monterrey he had a real chance. People saw him as just another person for the first time in his life. He really could've been normal, he really could've experienced life the way a person's supposed to."

Boyd shook his head to himself and asked Kassian almost somberly, "How could I take that away from him? If he was attracted to her, was it because he wasn't actually gay, was it because he was bi, or was it because he'd never been attracted to men in the first place and I'd just wormed my way in? He told me he'd almost had sex with her but had stopped and that night was the first time I was positive he was attracted to me. So at first I thought maybe he really did want me, maybe I was special, but then later he was kissing her in front of me... I didn't know I loved him, I just knew I wanted him to be happy regardless of how I felt. I didn't think I had the right to stop him. But I just didn't realize how much that mindset hurt me until later."

Kassian rubbed a hand over his short hair and made a sound in the back of his throat that sounded like a cross between a scoff and an uncomfortable chuckle. "I got to say, Boyd, it's really weird hearing shit like this about Vega. I mean... I guess I understand why you got mixed up with him but who are these other people? Where the hell did they come from?"

"He worked with them for his cover in Monterrey. There was a woman, his boss, who wanted him from the start. And..." Boyd trailed off briefly. "They gave him a going away party when he left and it was like they really were his friends. He didn't want to leave so I guess... that's why I felt like I shouldn't pull him away more than I already had."

"I guess that makes sense? I can't really picture him making friends with his attitude but okay." Kassian looked doubtful. "But what about this woman you saw him with recently?"

Boyd grimaced. "That was someone else-- Ann Connors. I guess he was fucking her while I was in training."

"What!" Kassian sat up straight and shook his head in denial, expression incredulous. "No way. Her? What the hell?"

"Hell if I know," Boyd said somewhat bitterly. "They don't even like each other, I'm gone for a fucking month, and they're in each others' pants. Hence why an explanation would've been fucking nice. But all he'd say was he didn't give a damn about her and him fucking her shouldn't have anything to do with me."

"Wow. That's just really... bizarre. Maybe that's why he was at her office that day," Kassian suggested thoughtfully. "I don't know, kid. I don't even know what to say about any of this. It's just odd."

"Her office?" Boyd echoed, confused. "Was he visiting my mother?"

"What? Oh, Ann doesn't work for Vivienne anymore. She went back to the psychiatric department awhile ago. I'm not sure when but when I got back from Russia she was assigned as my doctor so before then I guess."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. How ironic that Sin decided to start sleeping with Ann as soon as she was back into psychiatry; apparently there was a Vega gene that kicked in with the Connors girls as soon as they worked as a shrink. Although that explained why Sin had been on the Ninth floor on Boyd's first break and, to some extent, why Ann and Sin were even on speaking terms in the first place. Boyd just shook his head, not even knowing what to say about that.

"I wonder if she and Philip are splitting up or something," Kassian continued, standing up and picking up the empty bottles.

"Who's Philip?"

"Captain Scott," Kassian replied as he dumped the bottles in the garbage. "He's... Well he's kind of an unimportant douche so it's no wonder you don't know him. He's Ann's husband as far as I know. No one really expected them to last after her father kicked the bucket and I guess this is evidence enough that everyone was right."

Boyd raised his eyebrows briefly then finished off his beer. He hadn't known Ann was married; nice to know that he wasn't the only one who this affected. "What did Connors have to do with it?"

"I dunno. It seemed like some kind of marriage of convenience for Philip. Like she's his meal ticket. I don't know the whole deal though so I don't have much to say on the subject other than what it looked like on the outside." Kassian sat down again and extended his long legs, digging his toes into the carpet.

"Hmm." Boyd leaned forward to set the empty bottle on the table then settled back into the couch as he slowly felt some of the effects of the alcohol.

It didn't really matter to him what kind of marriage it was and he didn't care that much about Ann. However, the question did briefly pass through his mind of why she would have married in the first place if it was only for Philip's convenience. It didn't sound like she loved Philip, but then, who knew anymore? Sin said he cared about Boyd more than anyone else but look what happened with that.

"So anyway," Kassian said after awhile. "Why did you come here of all places? I didn't think you'd ever actually come over, to be honest."

Boyd smiled mirthlessly to himself and looked over. "I thought I was about to lose my mind," he said frankly, "and you were the only one I could think to turn to. The only other people I normally would've even considered are indisposed or not anyone I want to see right now. I needed to be around someone; I already tried forgetting about things more physically and that was an abysmal failure so..."

Boyd shrugged. "I guess it came down to the same reason you invited me over in the first place."

Kassian had once told him that he felt comfortable around Boyd because Boyd had no expectations of him, so it wouldn't matter if Boyd saw the side of Kassian that he normally couldn't let himself show anyone. That same mentality was exactly what Boyd had needed now.

Kassian arched an eyebrow at Boyd and gave him a curious look. "More physically?"

Boyd grimaced briefly and wondered why he'd even brought that up; it was possible that part of him just wanted to get everything out there to someone. What he'd realized that night still bothered him and after already giving Kassian way too much information about his sex life, it wasn't like it mattered if Kassian knew he'd slept with Thierry again.

"Yeah, I... visited Thierry last break," Boyd said simply.

Kassian just gave him a blank stare that slowly morphed into an unimpressed frown. "What's with you and banging these feminine-looking dudes?"

"What?" Boyd asked, taken aback. He hadn't been expecting that response at all and it took him a second to think of an answer. "I don't, really. I mean-- okay, Thierry, but Sin has a really masculine body." He thought about that briefly and it occurred to him that when Sin was wearing clothing people probably couldn't tell how built he was because he was otherwise so slender. "When you see it."

"I guess. He's still a scrawny bastard though. He could afford to gain a pound or thirty." Kassian frowned disapprovingly at the idea of how underweight his rival was. The expression on his face was actually almost comical. "So is that your type or something? Skinny dudes who look all exotic-like and semi-feminine?"

Boyd couldn't help a rather bemused expression as he actually considered that. Admittedly, two of the three people he'd slept with did fit that criteria perfectly, and Lou had been thin and 'semi-feminine' as well, he supposed, especially with that shock of curly hair. But he also found Patrick and Kassian to be attractive and neither of them were feminine at all.

"I never really thought about it, I guess," Boyd replied after a moment, thinking aloud. "But-- No, I don't think I'd really say that. I guess I go more by personality than looks. Obviously I find those criteria you listed attractive but by now I've come to like muscles too so I don't know where that puts me."

"Able to appreciate all shapes and sizes?" Kassian suggested with a laugh. "It doesn't really matter, I was just joking around. Trying to get your mind off the serious stuff."

Boyd let out a short, amused sound. "It helps. Now I know I'm an equal opportunity gay lover," he said lightly. "The sky's the limit from now on."

Kassian shook his head with a grin. "If only that were actually the case. For us, the Agency's ceiling is the limit."

The senior agent pointed at Boyd, changing the subject before Boyd could reply to that statement. "So do you actually have something else to do today?"

Boyd blinked. "Me? No. Well," he amended, "I have to study for the finals..."

"No. I say studying today is a bad idea."

Boyd quirked an eyebrow. "Really," he said, making it an intrigued statement. "Why? I may not have time this week."

"Do you really think you're going to be able to magically cram all of this knowledge into your head in one day?" Kassian scoffed. "Doubtful. Slim chance. Very unlikely. Especially not when you're already stressed out and upset. I say you spend the day, or at least most of it, taking it easy."

Boyd had to admit that Kassian had a point. Although he was feeling a lot more stable now than he had back at the compound, he didn't relish the idea of returning to that room with Toby probably still in a dismal mood. He was too tired for working out and when he really thought about it, if he did try to study hard right then he'd probably end up stressing himself out all over again and lose the calmness he'd managed to gain.

Even so, he didn't really know what else to do.

"True. I guess I could go read at my house," Boyd said slowly, thinking aloud.

"You could," Kassian agreed with a shrug. "Where do you live, anyway? I know you said it's right around here."

"Oh, that's right, I never told you." Boyd raised an eyebrow and said wryly, "Guess it's only fair so you have the opportunity to suddenly show up freaking out on my doorstep too. I'm over at 508 Magnolia Lane. Off 5th."

"We'll see," the blond man said with a neutral smile. "But for now, why don't you just stay here and hang out for awhile? I have nothing to do other than spend the day playing first person shooters that I've already beaten fifty some odd times. There used to be a way to play on the Internet a long time ago back when the Internet was a commodity but now that option is nonexistent so it gets pretty repetitive after awhile."

Boyd hesitated only briefly; he hadn't expected for Kassian to actually invite him to stay. When he'd first come over, he hadn't had a plan in mind, he'd just needed to get away. But since he did just sideline Kassian's day for an hour, he'd thought the man would want to get back to what he'd been doing.

Then again, Kassian *had* already invited him at the training compound and the idea of sitting around playing video games and not having to think was very appealing.

"Alright," Boyd said, tilting his head and smirking slightly. "As long as you don't get mad when I beat you."

"Ha!" Kassian stood up and walked over to the entertainment center, squatting down in front of it as he fiddled with one of the systems. "You wish, kid. I've *heard* about the way you shoot."

"Hey," Boyd said in mock indignation, "I've had more training. And besides, maybe I'm a stellar shot on games, you don't know." His smirk became teasing. "I used to beat my friend a lot. If you win it's just because you've had no life the past few days so you're at an unfair advantage."

"I just have inherent skill," Kassian replied confidently. He turned on the television and the game logo blinked on the screen.

"It's too bad about the online function," Kassian added in a mournful tone, pointing out the 'Live' option on the select screen. "If you're any good we could have played teams online with other people and kicked ass. I remember when I was a kid, I used to play online with all of these military dudes and they thought they were really incredible. They'd get their asses handed to them now."

Kassian handed Boyd a wireless controller. "If you haven't noticed, I'm really competitive about... everything."

"You?" Boyd asked with raised eyebrows, looking amused. "Competitive? Nah." He settled more comfortably on the couch and added, "I believe you're good but I'll believe you're *that* good when I see it."

Kassian sprawled in an armchair and lifted one side of his mouth in a grin. "Allow me to enlighten you, kiddo."

Chapter 23

Boyd set the folder on Doug's desk. "I don't understand why she has to die too."

Doug didn't even look up; instead, he continued to study his laptop. He was hunched over the screen with his face resting against one hand as the other scratched at his unruly mop of jet black curls.

"You don't have to understand."

"But... with all due respect, sir," Boyd said carefully, "he's an alcoholic and a cop. He could die any number of ways; he could get shot on the street, he could just kill himself... Why are we involving a civilian?"

Doug idly clicked the small button below the trackpad on his laptop, still not looking at Boyd. His brilliant blue eyes almost appeared bored although his mouth was set in the customary line of impatience and irritation. "He's a civilian too."

Boyd couldn't disagree with that; he wasn't happy with the fact that Patrick Finley was being targeted at all. But at least with Patrick, Boyd could see the reason. "I know. But she's not the one digging into an agent's cover. She's just his ex."

"Is the outline written in a language you don't comprehend, Agent?" Doug asked in a droll tone. "Do you not understand her role in this operation?"

"But why does it have to be a murder-suicide?" Boyd persisted, trying to keep his tone neutral to avoid annoying Doug more than he was by simply having this conversation. "If Finley's the target, I can get him some other way. I can do it so no one would know. We could make it seem like alcohol poisoning or I could shoot him and make it look like suicide... It doesn't have to be domestic."

Doug gave a long suffering sigh and looked up at Boyd finally. His expression was anything but friendly and his lip actually curled in a sneer at the sight of the younger man. "If you don't want the assignment, fuckin' say so and stop standing there crying like a big girl."

"It's not that, sir," Boyd said evenly. "I'm just wondering if it's possible to deviate from the outline provided that the target is terminated in a manner that does not jeopardize our cover."

"No." Doug leaned back in his chair and wiped the back of his hand across his nose. "If you want to turn it down it's not the end of the world. You'll just be marked down and then Vega or Trovosky will do it. Likely Vega since he's active again."

"Active again, sir?" Boyd echoed, confused. He hadn't known Sin had ever been anything but.

Doug picked a piece of foil-wrapped candy up off the desk and began slowly opening it. The crinkling sound seemed deafeningly loud in the silent room. "Do you want the assignment or what?"

"I'll take it," Boyd said, picking up the folder again without hesitation. It would do him no good to refuse; the two would still be killed, the children would still be orphaned, and Boyd would probably just lose his chance at promotion. The only thing he would accomplish would be making Sin or Kassian do it instead.

Doug gave him a smug look before dropping his gaze back to the laptop. "Don't bother me with useless shit again."

Boyd inclined his head, keeping his expression neutral. "Understood, sir," he said calmly and, without another word, he dismissed himself.

It took Boyd a few days to figure out his target's schedule, to get to know the man and his ex-wife better through surveillance.

He knew from the outline that Patrick Finley was a 48-year-old sergeant who worked as a homicide investigator at the local police precinct. Finley had been on the force for twenty-six years, five of which were in sex crimes as an investigator and fifteen in homicide. He'd spent the last twelve years tracking Darren Jones, a man he was convinced was the rapist and murderer of four women and two girls, ranging in ages from 9 to 19.

Although Finley was convinced that Darren Jones was responsible, he could never quite get enough evidence as proof. And since Darren was the son of a prominent politician, all the cases kept sliding on technicalities. Finley had been told repeatedly by the department to drop the issue but he'd refused and it had cost him his home life.

His wife, Heather, had apparently grown tired of Finley's long hours away from home, part of which was simply due to his job. She'd started to cheat on Finley with a man

named Joe, an affair that lasted well over a year before Finley and Heather had divorced. The divorce resulted in a long, vicious custody battle over their two children, Annie, now 13, and Damien, now 10. Heather had managed to keep the house in the divorce and now lived there with Joe and the kids.

Finley had become an alcoholic and had thrown himself into his job even more, ignoring further demands by the department to give it up. He'd even gone so far as to stake out places he thought Jones would be, hoping to catch the man off-guard or in the act.

Completely unsuccessful in the endeavor, Finley had seemed to settle down on the matter until three and a half months ago, when Level 5 Agent Linda Rodriguez had nearly been raped on the street in the same Modus Operandi that had resulted in six females' murders prior to her. Linda had fought back and a witness had interrupted the crime, resulting in the suspect fleeing and the witness calling in the incident to 911. Linda had fled as well without making a report or leaving contact information.

Realizing that for the first time a victim had survived and would be able to give a good description, confirm he'd been right all along, testify in court and bring the perpetrator to justice, Finley had shifted his obsession toward the new case. After a lot of investigation, including searching hundreds of drivers license photos against the single grainy shot he'd gotten from the camera, he eventually tracked down Linda Rodriguez. When the Agency leaned on the police department to make him stop, Finley started working on his own time.

The problem had culminated when, unable to contact Linda, Finley had tried to contact her at the job he understood her to have: an employee of Johnson's Pharmaceuticals. When the guards turned him away, he'd started to stake out the place and at that point, his life had been forfeit. There was no way the Agency would let anyone live who was showing so much interest in the cover stories of its agents or the compound.

The end result was Patrick Finley being targeted for assassination when all he'd been trying to do was bring a rapist murderer to justice. Jared had been much the same as Darren; but while there was someone like Finley to hound Darren to bring him to justice, there'd been no one like that for Jared.

It was one reason Boyd didn't like that he had to do this, that he wished Finley had never caught the Agency's attention. Who knew how many Boyds and Lous were out there who now wouldn't get the closure they deserved because the one man who would have cared enough to follow up was going to be assassinated. It was a sad state of the world that it wasn't the criminal who was scheduled to be killed.

It wasn't just Patrick who would be killed, though; his ex-wife's death was a specific part of the mission outline and now two children were going to be orphaned. And the man who was out there raping and murdering women and girls, who had tried to do the same to an agent, was going to escape unscathed.

Boyd was extremely frustrated with the situation. Thinking back on Doug's smug smile and the fact that Doug would know every dirty little secret Boyd ever had after that week in R2I, along with the fact that Doug's apparent hatred of Boyd hadn't distilled at all, Boyd wondered if Doug had purposefully chosen this assignment for him because he knew Boyd wouldn't want to do it, that it would bother him.

Boyd wished Finley had just given up Linda's case, had never found Linda's picture, or had listened any of the dozens of times he'd been told to drop it. What made it even worse was that Finley was going to be remembered as a murderer and, unfortunately for the family, it would be believable.

Finley had been known to have a temper, he and Heather tended to scream at each other any time they were in the same room. Boyd had found old cases of domestic disputes including a single incident when Finley had hit Heather. She had apparently been telling the kids that the entire divorce was all Finley's fault for having been such a workaholic in the first place and that he'd been useless as a father and husband. Just over the weekend, Heather had been awarded sole custody of the children after arguing that Finley was unfit due to his alcoholism.

There was nothing Boyd could do to stop Annie and Damien from losing their parents but he'd hoped that he could at least do the hit somewhere that the kids wouldn't have to see the bodies. Boyd had studied Finley and Heather's schedules relentlessly, searching for some sort of loophole, trying to figure out how to make it turn out as a believable domestic murder-suicide far away from Heather's house.

But when the perfect opportunity had arisen he'd had to take it.

When the police department had realized that Finley hadn't stopped his clandestine surveillance, they'd suspended him for a month without pay. The information had come to Finley on the same day he'd been alerted to the fact that Heather had won sole custody. Infuriated, already somewhat drunk and probably feeling like his life was falling apart around him, Finley had driven to Heather's while the kids were at school and Joe was at work. Finley had practically broken down the door to get inside.

Boyd jumped the privacy fence in back of the house and slid into the home undetected after picking the lock on the back door. He was completely prepared for the kill; he wore gloves, his hair was held back and completely covered by a bandanna and plastic bags covered his shoes so he wouldn't leave shoe prints.

After all the work put into reading up on the couple and their issues, of watching them for days to determine their schedules, and after having assumed that Level 10 assassinations were all complicated, it was almost disturbing how logistically easy it was for Boyd.

Finley and Heather were already screaming at each other by the time he'd made it to the entrance of the living room as he hid around the corner.

Accusations like, "You fucking cunt! I want my kids!" were met with "Why? So you can ruin their lives too with your drunk fucking craziness? Just get the hell out!"

Boyd waited to the side, listening as the argument grew in intensity until Heather couldn't take it anymore.

"Fuck you!" she screamed, her voice cracking in the middle. "Fuck you, you worthless piece of shit!"

She turned and immediately stalked toward the kitchen while Finley shouted after her, "Heather, what the hell do you think you're doing!"

"Calling your boys to see how big you look in front of them, threatening women and smelling like booze," she sneered. "I'll get a court order so you can never come back here again."

"Heather, don't you--!"

Boyd was behind Finley before the man could finish the sentence; Finley was half-drunk and so intent on his ex-wife that he had no idea his gun had even been stolen from its holster until Heather turned just as she reached the phone. Her eyes widened in a mixture of surprise, confusion and fear as she saw Boyd.

"Pat--" she started to say urgently just as Boyd quickly shot her twice in the chest, the way officers were trained to aim at the main part of the body.

She looked shocked, blood spreading across her pale white sweater, and she crashed back into the kitchen table. Her body hit a chair that upended and she fell, head violently slamming against the floor, her eyes wide and unseeing.

"What the *fu--*" Finley started to say in shock, his reflexes already kicking in before his mind had processed exactly what had happened.

He started to look to his side immediately but Boyd didn't give him a chance to properly react. Boyd slid behind Finley, expertly twisting the man's left arm behind him at a painful angle, pressing the gun against Finley's temple. He forced the man a few steps closer to Heather's body, about the distance away a person would stand to stare in shock at a murder they hadn't meant to commit.

"Who-- *Darren?*" Finley demanded, as if scrambling for an answer that made sense in the new reality he'd just found himself in.

"No," Boyd said in his ear, making sure to stay out of Finley's sight. It didn't matter, since Finley was about to die but somehow Boyd didn't want Finley to see him. Or maybe Boyd didn't want to have to look Finley in the eye before he had to kill him. "But I think you're probably right about him."

Finley stood very still, not bothering to pull at his arm. He just stared down at Heather's body. "Jesus," he said distantly.

Boyd didn't answer. He knew he should pull the trigger; he knew he should just kill Finley and get the hell out of there before one of the neighbors called the police, before the squads rushed to the location and he got caught.

But he couldn't.

Finley was a good man despite his faults. He was the sort of person Boyd had wanted for years to go after Jared, the sort of person who didn't hesitate to give everything up in pursuit of righting the wrongs he saw in the world.

He was an alcoholic and obsessive, he'd hit his ex-wife once before, and he had problems with authority; he wasn't perfect by any means. But he wasn't someone who deserved to die like this. And Heather hadn't been either. She hadn't even done anything wrong; although she'd seemed to have a cruel side, she'd still been someone's mother and now she was just...

Dead.

"You really did kill her," Finley said quietly, sounding strangely almost sad and relieved at the same time. "So many times I thought about how much I wanted that bitch dead and now..."

Boyd silently urged himself to just do this, to not care, to simply end it. But...

"You're not fighting me," he observed.

"Why bother?" Finley asked dismally. "No one'll believe me anyway. Not with my rep at work, and not my kids..."

"Do you... want to write a note?" Boyd asked, knowing how utterly stupid that suggestion was-- it would just give Finley a weapon, give him time to think of a plan. This was ridiculous-- he just needed to pull the trigger, he just needed to leave... How many people had he killed without problems before but now he suddenly couldn't?

Alexis' face flashed through his mind and he felt a sudden stab of guilt at the idea of killing another good person, of taking away someone's parents.

"You too scared to cap me now?" Finley asked, tone lost between derisive and depressed.

"I can kill you right now." It was clear from Boyd's voice that it wasn't a bluff. "I could let your kids have nothing to remember you by except how you killed their mom."

"You're not doing me any fucking favors as it is, letting them come home to this," Finley said with narrowed eyes. Despite that, he seemed to hesitate.

"If that's what you want," Boyd said and reached for Finley's arm but Finley started to turn his head toward Boyd with a frown. Boyd forced Finley to look forward again, although the man avoided looking at his dead ex-wife.

"Fine," Finley said quickly, as if to make sure he got the word out before Boyd could pull the trigger. He continued more slowly, "I will."

A note would cement the murder-suicide facade, Boyd thought as justification as he jerked Finley closer to a nearby table where there was paper and pen. "Try any shit and

"I'll pull the trigger," Boyd said seriously but Finley just shook his head as best he could with a gun against his temple.

Boyd watched on high alert as Finley quickly scribbled out a note then signed it, 'love Dad.' There was nothing suspicious about it; he basically wrote that he was sorry for everything and loved them. Finley probably meant it as an apology for everything he'd done wrong in their lives but it worked as a note of remorse over Heather's death.

Finley stayed where he was and there was a brief moment where it looked as though Finley was considering resisting; his fingers tightened on the pen in a way that could have flipped it around to be used as a weapon, maybe to jam it back into Boyd's neck or face. Finley's shoulders tightened and his eyes narrowed, a dark look overcoming his expression as he stared at the words he'd written; at the condemnation he'd leave behind in his name.

But when Boyd pushed the gun against Finley's temple to make him move, Finley's fingers clenched then released and the pen fell to the table. His mouth was drawn down and his shoulders were slumped. Boyd didn't need to ask to know what the man was thinking; to know that he saw no reason to resist anymore now that everything was already done.

He seemed depressed and at a loss and he and Boyd both knew that even if he tried to resist, Boyd would kill him. Intoxicated and without a weapon, Finley had too much of a disadvantage and all the life seemed to have sucked out of him when he acknowledged on paper that he wasn't ever the father he'd meant to be.

Finley let himself be maneuvered near the entrance to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry," Boyd whispered and he truly meant it.

There was a beat of silence.

Boyd let go of Finley's left arm, then grabbed Finley's right hand with both of his, wrapped Finley's fingers around the gun and held it to Finley's temple. Finley stayed still, his posture defeated. Without giving either of them a chance to reconsider, Boyd made Finley pull the trigger.

Finley's body jerked as blood, brains and skull fragments sprayed across the living room, a grisly pattern against the leather couch and thick cream carpet. Boyd was careful to step out of the way as Finley's body fell to the floor in a heap so that it would

look natural. The angle of the gunshot had kept the blood away from Boyd. Although he'd worn black clothing to hide any stains, he hadn't wanted to leave any suspicious evidence behind like a void in the blood pattern to point toward there being an outside attacker.

After half a second spent staring at the scene, Boyd didn't let himself acknowledge feeling anything as he quickly circumvented the blood and gore and headed toward the back door.

Along the way, he saw picture frames of Annie and Damien that he hadn't noticed before; they were smiling widely, pale blond hair tousled in the wind, eyes the identical hazel of Finley's glazed, lifeless ones. Blood splattered across the frames, concealing part of Annie's face and Damien's bunny ears he held behind her head.

Boyd felt something shift in him at the sight but he didn't stay to examine what it meant; he simply slipped out as quickly and silently as he had entered. Although it may seem odd that the back door was unlocked, he didn't think it would matter enough since many people in this area of the city seemed prone to simple mistakes like that.

He already knew his way through the back alleys and thickly vegetated yards and was able to easily escape without anyone having a chance to see him. He removed the gloves, plastic and bandanna, putting them in his pockets before he casually slid behind a resident's back yard and walked out into a park a few blocks from the assassination.

There were enough people strolling around that he wasn't out of place as he meandered toward his parked vehicle. Boyd was just sliding into the driver's seat of the car when he heard the distant wailing of sirens.

Like everyone else, he ignored them.

Driving back to the Agency, he felt somehow sickened by the whole affair. It wasn't the sight of dead bodies or necessarily even the act of killing that bothered him because he was used to it by now.

It just bothered him that he felt something in response, that he'd felt conflicted about it. That he hadn't wanted to kill them but, even more, that it wouldn't have mattered regardless of what he may have tried; they were still going to die, just by someone else's hands. He'd had no way of saving them since the moment they'd come to the Agency's attention.

In that regard, he was almost glad he'd been the one, even if he couldn't help feeling guilty about the hit. But at least he'd let Finley write a note, at least he'd given the man a chance to talk a little. At least...

At least what? Finley was still dead.

Boyd was surprised that he didn't feel more about the entire situation. He felt guilty and he wished he hadn't had to do it but the overwhelming intensity of emotions he would have expected to feel were just... not there. Like there was an emptiness where they were supposed to be.

He felt far more together than he would have thought he would be and he didn't know if it was a product of that stubborn resolve he'd managed to scrounge up in Kassian's living room or if he was just automatically compensating with the cold distance of emotions that he'd learned from his mother.

Even so, there was something that just didn't sit right with him; Boyd just didn't understand what.

It wasn't until he'd pulled into the Agency parking lot and was halfway across the compound toward the training building that he realized some part of him had honestly hoped that in the space of breath after his whispered apology, Finley would have said it was alright. That somewhere amidst it all, Boyd could have received the forgiveness he didn't deserve.

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Boyd leaned his head back against the gym wall and squeezed his eyes shut; they burned from overuse.

He was beyond exhausted.

Nights spent cramming in as much study material as he could before day-long testing periods had turned him and the others into walking zombies.

The tests had been far more difficult than Boyd had anticipated despite the fact that he'd thought he'd been planning for worst-case scenario. He thought he'd done decently on all of them but he couldn't be sure; everything was a blur and he didn't even know anymore what parts he'd actually screwed up on and what he'd only dreamed he had.

The only test he felt for sure he'd aced had been the cryptography portion. Reading an entire book on cryptography, spending so much free time obsessing over encryptions and decryptions, had given him a full range of knowledge for the final.

Boyd opened his eyes partially and looked around.

They were now down to five trainees.

Cade had disappeared sometime between R2I and the finals, and it had taken a few days to figure out exactly what had happened. They'd learned that Cade's solo mission had gone completely awry and although Boyd still didn't know the details, all they'd been told was that Cade had very nearly been killed. He was currently in the long-term medical building in an induced coma and the doctors weren't sure yet whether he'd make it and if he did, whether he'd fully recover.

The information had come as a shock, mostly because Cade always seemed too hardheaded to even know when he was hurt. It seemed strange to imagine how mortal he really was; how that intense arrogance and offensive nature could actually be quelled.

Perhaps more surprising, Boyd found himself actually wondering if Cade would be okay.

The man had been rude, insulting, and cruel to each of them at one point or another in the duration of the training and, in most cases, this had occurred more times than Boyd could count. Yet... Cade had saved Boyd's life during the Ethan mission and Boyd couldn't help tolerating the man as a result.

Regardless of that, Cade was getting the help he needed and Boyd had to focus on the one test that he had left. It was bizarre to think that he actually could see the end of training, that the next morning Boyd would be free to go wherever he pleased once again and he wasn't bound by a twenty-four hour rule of needing to return.

Yet this test was the one he'd been dreading the most.

To get his mind off the thought, he glanced around idly at the others as if to gauge how they felt they were doing. Emma had her legs drawn to her chest, her arms wrapped around them as she rested her forehead on her knees. He couldn't see her face from his angle but he thought she may be trying to gather her strength.

Harriet and Jon were off to the side speaking quietly and although Boyd couldn't hear what they were saying, it almost seemed like Jon was trying to reassure her of something. Harriet's eyebrows were creased slightly and she looked a little anxious but other than that, she didn't seem nearly as nervous as Toby did.

Toby looked like he was going to throw up. He was pale and sweating and he kept shooting Boyd disturbed looks until he finally leaned over and hissed, "What if he kills me?"

If it hadn't been for the fact that they really could have died any number of times during training so far, as well as the fact that they were all stressed and exhausted, Toby's question would have seemed overly dramatic. As it was, Boyd shook his head, thinking Toby was being paranoid.

"He won't kill you," Boyd said reasonably. "The worst case scenario is he overpowers you. And he's going to do that to all of us."

"How do you know for sure?" Toby persisted worriedly. He was paler and thinner than he'd been at the start of the training and none of his previous confidence remained. The thin young man who was staring at Boyd with a panicked look in his eyes had very little in common with the haughty Ivy League graduate who had mocked Boyd on the first day of training.

"He'd have no reason to," Boyd said. He watched Toby and added, trying to make him feel better, "And anyway I don't think Doug would let him."

"But he doesn't wear the collar anymore, how the hell would Doug stop him?" Toby sat back and ran a hand through his hair roughly. It was unruly and looked like he hadn't washed it in days. "I don't want to do this. After all of the shit I've lived through in this training, I don't want to be killed by some psycho for no real reason."

"He wo-- Look at me, Toby," Boyd said calmly but firmly, trying to project confidence to give Toby something to latch onto.

He waited until Toby looked over. "Listen, it'll be alright. Just remember your training. He won't kill you. He may hurt you in the process of the fight-- he may hurt any of us. But it'll be no worse than we went through with Krav Maga. Just a little longer, one more test, and you can relax."

Toby didn't look entirely convinced but he shrugged. "I guess..."

Boyd figured that was as good as he was going to get and looked away after a moment, dropping his head back against the wall. He sighed quietly to himself. He wasn't worried about the fight for the same reasons Toby was; he knew the odds were severely stacked against them, that there was no chance he'd beat Sin.

He just didn't want to see Sin in the first place.

They waited for another few moments before the door to the gym opened and Doug strode inside, followed by General Carhart and Sin.

Sin's hands were shoved in the pockets of his faded black cargo pants and a long-sleeved black thermal shirt hugged his broad shoulders. He looked relatively healthy but his green eyes were devoid of all emotion and his face was drawn, blank. He didn't even look at the trainees scornfully as he normally would have.

It wasn't entirely obvious why Carhart was there but he looked from Boyd to Sin more than once.

Boyd automatically ran his gaze over Sin, not knowing why except that he hadn't seen Sin since their last argument. Maybe part of him wanted to see how Sin was, whether he'd been affected as much as Boyd had. Or maybe it had more to do with the part of him he hadn't quite been able to completely bury; the part that shifted at the sight of Sin and wanted to watch him more, to reacquaint himself. Yet Boyd didn't let that thought go any further than that.

When Boyd realized that he was staring, he immediately looked away in annoyance with himself and refused to make eye contact with Carhart or Sin.

It wasn't until Sin, Carhart and Doug were standing in front of the trainees that Sin's hollow-eyed stare finally settled on Boyd but even then he quickly averted his gaze, likely more than aware that Doug and the other trainees would be closely watching him for any signs of favoritism.

"This is it," Doug said, staring hard at them all. "This is the last test but don't let that make you lazy. I know you all are thinking that there's no way you're gonna beat Vega so this test can't matter that much, right?"

Sin didn't even look at Doug, he just stared at a point on the wall above the trainees' heads.

"Well, that kind of attitude is dead wrong. It's not about winning, it's about showing your skill in the fight, showing if you really learned what you were taught against an opponent that you don't know what to expect from." Doug's eyes flicked from each trainee's face, resting on Boyd's slightly longer than the others.

Carhart walked off to the side, crossing his arms over his chest as he surveyed the scene.

Sin sighed, disgust making it into his voice. "Let's just get on with it."

Boyd made it a point to look between Carhart, Doug and Sin equally, so it wouldn't seem anymore like he was avoiding Sin. He knew Doug was right about what he'd said but strangely, he wasn't worried.

He knew he wouldn't beat Sin so he didn't have the stress of that looming over his head, yet that didn't mean he intended to just give up. Instead, it helped him; he had a bit of an advantage over the others because he'd seen Sin in action. Boyd reminded himself that he was doing this to show his skill, not to win.

And for all that he'd been dreading this, he found himself strangely calm now that Sin was actually in the same room, now that the moment was much closer. He felt like he really could do this.

The first one to fight Sin was Harriet.

They met at the center of one of the sparring circles and Harriet moved in on him as soon as they were inside the circle. Her strategy seemed to be trying to catch Sin off guard but her strike at the side of his throat missed by several inches when he almost casually backed out of the way.

She went entirely on the offense, her attacks coming quickly and efficiently but Sin fended her off almost lazily and after a moment Harriet just stared at him in frustration, backing off to the corner of the circle to catch her breath and glare.

"I thought you're supposed to fight me, not block the whole time," she growled from between grit teeth. In her rush to get the ordeal over with, she hadn't picked up on what Sin was doing.

She seemed to have forgotten that Sin wasn't the one who had to show off his Krav Maga skills. He was allowed to sit there and turtle the whole time and in doing so, he had the opportunity to study every single one of her moves and her fighting style.

Unfortunately for Harriet, she wasn't very good at creativity in a fight once she was in the heat of the moment. She thought of the most logical attacks and what should work textbook style but against Sin that was a big mistake.

Harriet rushed Sin again, almost immediately spinning to the side and kicking the side of his knee. She moved with enough force to seriously disable him if it would have landed but Sin dodged, grabbed her ankle and yanked her leg out from under her.

Harriet kicked out her free leg wildly, actually planting one boot against Sin's pelvis but the angle was off and she couldn't put enough force into it for the blow to be as damaging as it could be. Harriet twisted the leg Sin had hold of and tried to escape but he hefted her up and spun in a circle, still gripping her ankle, until she was literally up off the ground as he swung her in a wide arc.

"Shit!" Harriet shouted as her ankle was abruptly released. She went slamming into the opposite wall and crumpled to the mat.

Sin stared at her blankly. "Next."

Harriet groaned across the gym and wearily sat up, rubbing her forehead.

When Doug gestured at Emma to get up, Emma's eyes seemed a little wide and she couldn't seem to help glancing between Harriet and Sin in mild alarm. It was pretty clear from her expression and the light sheen of sweat on her forehead that she was thinking if Harriet was taken out that quickly she didn't stand much of a chance.

Despite that, she walked up to Sin with her head held high and didn't look like she had any intention of giving up or putting any less effort into this than she otherwise would have.

Sin looked at her evenly and didn't appear to be judging her based on her appearance. Instead of holding back, he took an entirely different approach than he had with Harriet and attacked Emma first. She'd barely made it into the circle before he sent a powerful open-palmed strike directly to her solar plexus.

He hit her so hard that she was on her back and gasping for breath within the first couple seconds of the fight. The wind was knocked out of her but Emma tried to ignore it, coughing violently as she performed a clumsy back flip and barely escaped Sin's boot before it came stomping down on her face.

The sound of his foot slamming against the floor clearly disturbed Emma; if she'd moved a second slower her nose would have likely been crushed under his weight. Emma's face was chalk white as she skittered backwards, still coughing and gasping and trying to regain her breath as Sin stalked towards her casually, slowly; almost like a cat toying with his prey.

Emma seemed to steel herself and sprang up suddenly, grabbing Sin's wrist as his fist came rushing at her face; she tried to twist his wrist sideways to flip him but her lack of physical strength made the move impossible. Sin's fist crashed into the side of her face and as she careened backwards, Sin caught her before she could fall, spun her around by the arm as he twisted it violently behind her back and pointed two fingers at the side of her head as if his hand were a gun.

"Dead."

Emma froze, wisps of hair catching against her lips as she panted. She looked shaken and disturbed by the entire situation. Sin let her go almost immediately and as she walked out of the circle, she looked disappointed in herself.

She glanced around as she walked away and ended up heading toward Boyd and Toby. As she sat down near Toby she mumbled, "He pulled the punch a little."

Boyd knew Sin hadn't used all his strength; he knew Sin's fighting style enough to recognize that there had come a point almost immediately in which Sin had realized how he was going to win the fight so he'd seen no reason to completely obliterate her. Boyd thought she'd probably come over to say that after she'd seen Toby's pale face, as if she'd wanted to reassure him that it wasn't quite as alarming as it looked.

Doug's gaze fell on Boyd. "You're up, Beaulieu."

As Boyd walked into the circle, he could tell by the intensity of the gazes that the others were paying special attention to this, most likely to see if Sin would go easy on him. He ignored that all as extraneous information and instead kept his expression completely neutral, as unreadable as he'd be able to make it to Sin who would be able to read his thoughts probably more than anyone else.

Sin stared Boyd in the eye, who evenly returned the gaze.

Boyd quickly examined Sin's stance, finding it easier than he expected to think of Sin as just another opponent, most likely because he was so aware of others watching their every move. Unsurprisingly, Sin had no visible weaknesses or openings; Boyd knew from experience that even if there had been any, Sin would easily be able to compensate faster than Boyd would be able to react. The best way to handle this would be to take the offensive and try to be unexpected.

Without showing what he was about to do, Boyd feigned a quick strike toward Sin's throat. Sin immediately brought an arm up to block but Boyd had already slid behind him, attempting to knee him in the kidneys. Sin twisted and grabbed Boyd's leg, flipping Boyd in the air to throw him to the floor.

Boyd caught himself on his hands and rolled, jumping up. He was already looking up and had just realized he didn't see Sin when he suddenly felt Sin behind him, so fast and silent that Boyd had no warning.

Sin roughly grabbed Boyd's throat to hold him still and reached up with his other hand toward Boyd's face, obviously intending to simulate snapping Boyd's neck. Not wanting to let Sin finish the fight so quickly and not being in a good position for using his arms or legs, Boyd did the first thing that came to mind: he suddenly bit Sin on the hand, hard enough to draw blood.

The bite was so unexpected that even Sin was surprised enough to falter. In the fraction of a second Boyd had, he slammed Sin's arm away and twisted out of the loosened grip on his throat, using the momentum to spin around behind Sin and knee Sin as hard as he could in the kidneys. He got a solid strike in and moved back immediately, knowing better than to stay within Sin's reach.

But Sin was faster; he was in Boyd's personal space before Boyd could react. Sin rapidly and powerfully struck Boyd repeatedly in the torso, varying the targets but moving so quickly that despite Boyd's best efforts, he was unable to keep up. Sin used all his strength, causing Boyd to nearly lose his breath simply from the powerful flurry aimed at him. His body automatically jerked with the hits, his torso burning in pain, and he could barely manage to block a single strike.

Forced back and stumbling as he tried to catch his balance, Boyd had no warning before Sin finished the hits with an especially hard strike to Boyd's solar plexus, causing

him to lose his breath and lean forward slightly. Sin immediately kicked Boyd in the head, hard enough to snap Boyd's head back but without the full force Sin was capable of.

Sin snatched Boyd out of the air before he could fully fall, the difference in their strength like a child playing with a toy doll. Sin grabbed Boyd's arm violently, jerking Boyd around and twisting his arm up behind him so quickly and powerfully that Boyd felt his shoulder spike in pain.

Before Boyd knew what was happening, he was spun around and slammed face first onto the floor with Sin landing on his back. The movement put considerable strain on Boyd's arm, enough that he couldn't help a startled gasp of pain as it felt like his muscles were stretched nearly past their limit.

With no way of getting out of Sin's hold, Boyd squeezed his eyes shut and panted against the floor. Sin's body was hard against Boyd's back, close enough that Boyd could feel Sin's powerful muscles pressed firmly along him, with hot breath warming his ear.

It was impossible not to vividly remember the feel of that body sliding against him skin to skin, the mixture of pleasure and pain from the nearly violent sex they used to have, those pale green eyes intense with lust and focused only on Boyd.

But they hadn't been, had they?

Sin had been that close to Ann too; those same powerful hands had probably run along her body too, had held her in place or moved her around as he'd wanted. That same intensity had probably been in Sin's eyes as he'd fucked her. And when Sin had reached orgasm with her, had he hissed incomprehensibly in Mandarin as well? Had Sin panted against her ear just like this, had he made Ann scream in pleasure the same way he'd made Boyd?

Boyd felt an abrupt, overwhelming surge of emotions that ranged from fury and resentment toward Sin for causing all the conflicting feelings in the first place, to disgust with himself when he realized part of him darkly whispered that he was still attracted to Sin, that he still wanted Sin. He was angry that after everything he could still be so easily affected just by Sin's proximity, by the memory of those hands sliding along his body.

Sin lingered briefly, holding Boyd down longer than was necessary; it was subtle and would have been meaningless if it weren't for all the people watching or for the circumstances.

Boyd jerked against Sin impatiently, who immediately stood up so Boyd could flip over onto his back. Boyd looked up to see Sin holding his hand out as if to help Boyd up and for the first time since the fight had started, Boyd paid attention to Sin's expression. Sin's eyebrows were drawn down slightly and although he would seem expressionless to others, Boyd met Sin's eyes briefly and could see that Sin was clearly unhappy.

But that knowledge didn't matter to Boyd; he was angry with Sin, himself, and the situation. The only thing that stopped him from glaring at Sin was the fact that he didn't want to show any emotion in front of the others and that he appreciated the fact that Sin had actually been harsher on him in the fight than he had with anyone else so far.

Boyd gave Sin a narrow-eyed look that made it clear he didn't want Sin's help or pity and, completely ignoring the offer, he stood on his own. His arm twinged furiously in the movement and he knew at that moment that it was probably sprained.

Without so much as a glance toward Sin, Boyd turned and walked back to his place near Emma and Toby.

He could feel Sin's gaze burning into his back but Boyd sat down and refused to look at the other man, focusing his attention on Doug as they waited to see who would be next.

To everyone else, the frustration must have finally begun to look obvious on Sin's face. Everyone was watching him carefully and despite Sin's efforts to remain expressionless and indifferent, Doug's eyes were moving slowly between Sin and Boyd. Although the Instructor was obviously picking up on the tension, he only looked amused, not suspicious.

"You're up, Toby."

Toby's face was white as chalk as he stood up shakily and approached the circle. He looked at Sin cautiously and gained little comfort by the frown that was now etched into the senior agent's features. When Toby entered the circle and Sin dropped into his typically loose fighting stance, Toby raised his hands as though he had a particular move in mind but he didn't strike.

Sin stared at Toby and Toby stared at Sin but despite the fact that sweat had broken out on the trainee's forehead and he was breathing heavily, he didn't move a muscle; his fear had practically paralyzed him.

Sin stood up straight after half a minute and lifted his hand, once again aiming his fingers at Toby as if they were the barrel of a gun. This time he didn't even have to announce that Toby was dead. It was obvious that within the first fraction of a second of the fight beginning, in reality Toby would have been killed.

Toby backed out of the circle and appeared genuinely shocked by his own reaction. He shot a look at Doug, maybe wondering if he could try again, but Doug's response was cold.

"You're lucky he went that easy on you," the Instructor growled and was clearly disappointed with Toby. "I'd hoped that you'd go above everyone's expectations. That you'd end up being more than your granddaddy's little kiss ass but you're bloody pathetic. A pathetic little girl. Even Emma did better than you, you scrawny little wanker."

Toby swallowed noisily and looked away, shamefaced. "Can I please be excused."

Doug scoffed disgustedly. "Get out of my sight."

Toby fled the gym and Doug glowered at the trainees before turning his stare onto Sin. "And what the fuck do you think you're doing, huh?"

Sin didn't even look at Doug. "What would you have liked me to do?" he asked tonelessly.

"Pfft." Doug shook his head, black curls bouncing around wildly. "You beat the hell out of your little boyfriend but let Toby get off scot-free."

Boyd kept his expression completely neutral despite the annoyance and frustration he felt at the words. He wasn't about to visibly react and lend any credence to what would otherwise seem like one of Doug's typical casual, baseless insults. But it bothered him immensely to be reminded that Doug knew every sordid little detail they'd wrenched out of Boyd about his relationship with Sin. And that Doug would so blithely use such personal information in public; he just hoped that everyone would think he was being irreverent.

Of all the people who Boyd would have wanted to know so many shameful or deep secrets about his life, Doug was about the last on the list.

The look that Sin gave Doug would have stopped the average man's heart and despite the fact that Doug hesitated briefly in his tirade, it didn't stop it entirely. "This is a test, Vega. You're supposed to be trying to kill these fucking kids. If I wanted you to fuck around with a pathetic little pussy I'd have given you some condoms at the door."

"I see." Sin stared at Doug, not keeping the dislike out of his expression. "I didn't realize you actually wanted me to crush the girl's face. Tell her to come back out here and I'll do it just for you. Will that satisfy whatever voyeuristic thrill you get out of watching me kill people who are no match for me skill-wise?"

Emma glanced between the two with an expression caught between wary and unnerved.

Doug looked like he wanted very much to crush Sin's face but he said nothing and it was General Carhart who finally spoke up. He'd been so silent on the sidelines that it'd been easy to almost forget he was there.

"Get on with the last fight," he snapped at the two bickering men. "If you had a problem with him pulling his punches you should have said so from the beginning."

Doug made a face at the General but just speared Jon with an annoyed look. "Get over there, Logan."

Even after Jon was in the circle, Sin's angry gaze remained on Doug. When Jon made his first attack, Sin fended it off without even looking at the trainee but after that first moment the fight got more serious.

It was obvious that Jon was the best and most experienced fighter among the trainees and the fact that his fight with Sin lasted well over a full minute was evidence enough of that. While he only managed to land three solid strikes on Sin, none of which seemed to really cause serious damage, he launched a string of unrelenting attacks and kept up the steady pace for quite some time while continuously evading and blocking.

By the end of the fight Jon was by far the most physically abused, which was evident enough by the blood that oozed from his mouth and nose. Still, he'd done the best and everyone knew it.

Doug looked incredibly pleased that at least one of his trainees were living up to his standards. Despite the fact that Boyd was obviously the second best in this test, Doug didn't acknowledge it at all. Boyd was completely unsurprised; he'd long ago given up any delusions that Doug would stop being so disgusted with him.

Boyd was equally unsurprised by Jon's prowess; the man had consistently been by far the best fighter since their first day in combat training. The only part that frustrated Boyd was that it made him feel like he was a poor fighter; that even with knowledge from two years he'd spent alongside Sin, he was still no match for Jon's natural abilities.

When Boyd looked up again, Carhart was speaking to Sin in low tones and Doug was telling them that they could return to their rooms and start packing up. They would be informed of the results of the training in the next several weeks.

Emma looked carefully at Boyd as if she was about to say something but he didn't want to hear it; he didn't want to talk to anyone. He just avoided eye contact with her and stood, immediately heading toward the door.

Before he could get out, a strong hand grabbed his good arm and pulled him back even though he hadn't heard anyone come up behind him.

"We need to talk," Sin said quietly, mindful of the others nearby but obviously determined.

Boyd was annoyed that Sin continued to try to make these things happen on his own terms. Sin could have easily waited a few days for Boyd to return to his home, to give Boyd a chance to de-stress from his training where no one would see their conversation. Instead, Sin did whatever he wanted regardless of how it would affect Boyd.

Although Boyd had meant it when he'd told Kassian that he'd probably talk to Sin sometime, that didn't mean he wanted to do it now. It was still too soon for him. After three grueling months of training and a devastating break up, he felt far too jittery, raw, exhausted and unbalanced to be able to have whatever conversation Sin wanted. He couldn't even look at the man.

The longer he was in Sin's vicinity, the harder it was. He'd been able to concentrate solely on the test when in the circle but now that he didn't have that immediate goal it was harder to easily adopt the mindset of them as work partners and not something

more. It was harder not to think about all the things that had gone wrong and how it had felt to go through it, harder not to want to blame Sin for all of it, to vilify him.

Boyd knew that if they tried to talk right then, he'd just end up getting angry and resentful. Even if he listened to what Sin had to say, Boyd would probably be mocking the reasons in his mind or feel like they weren't good enough. Sin had ripped out Boyd's heart when he'd betrayed Boyd's trust and Boyd hadn't had nearly enough time to recover from everything he'd been through in the last three months to be able to deal with this now too.

So Boyd didn't look at Sin as he jerked his arm out of his grasp. Saying nothing, he strode away.

Chapter 24

Boyd hunched against a burst of cold wind, his hands buried in his pockets as his trench coat billowed out behind him. He found himself wishing he'd thought to grab gloves and a scarf before he'd left his house.

At the time, walking around the neighborhood had just been a way to clear his mind but it wasn't working as well as he'd wanted. He found himself second-guessing his attitude toward Sin then defending himself in his mind.

They had a definite history of miscommunication and Sin had claimed Boyd had been misinterpreting everything. At the very least, now that Boyd was out of training, he and Sin were work partners again so they had to be able to get along professionally. With their history, Sin at least deserved the chance for Boyd to hear him out.

Boyd just wanted to make sure he was rational about it, that he didn't go into the conversation already stressed or without an open mind because otherwise they would just end up arguing and probably making it worse than if they hadn't spoken at all.

After receiving a notice that in four days he was to come in for his first Insurgency Unit meeting in months, Boyd had decided maybe it would be best to wait to talk to Sin then. That way it gave Boyd enough time to make sure he was in the right mindset. But another part of him wondered if he shouldn't wait, if it was better to contact Sin sooner.

Boyd shook his head to himself, frustrated with his indecision. He looked up just as he passed Richmond Road and it occurred to him that Harkey Street was just the next block over, that maybe Kassian would know what he should do.

Kassian had so far seemed to be surprisingly objective about the whole ordeal and at that moment, Boyd really needed a second opinion.

Within a handful of minutes he was walking up to Kassian's house, noting that the man's beat up old truck was sitting in the driveway. Keeping one hand firmly in his pocket for warmth, he knocked on Kassian's front door with the other.

The door opened almost automatically and Boyd saw that Kassian was wearing his coat and looked like he'd either just returned home or was about to go out. The taller man raised his eyebrows and gave Boyd a friendly smile. "Hey kid. What's up?"

"Hi, I was just-- Am I interrupting anything?" Boyd asked, distracted by Kassian's coat. He also hadn't thought of how he was going to bring up the question he wanted to ask without seeming completely random.

"I was about to go out," Kassian admitted with a shrug. "It's not a huge deal though. I could wait or you could come with me if you want."

"Where are you going?" Boyd asked curiously.

"Car shopping." Kassian made a face as he said it, obviously not that thrilled with the idea. "My truck is useless. I'm gonna make the switch to electric or a hybrid or whatever."

Boyd hesitated briefly. He hadn't planned what he'd do at Kassian's-- whether he'd just run in and ask the question or if he would've stayed for awhile-- but he did enjoy spending time with Kassian. He had no intention of making Kassian delay his errands to talk to him and anyway this would make it easier to lead up to getting Kassian's advice.

Besides, he'd been thinking about how much money he was wasting on gas and especially after his training with other motor vehicles, he'd come to appreciate electrics even more.

"Actually," Boyd admitted, "I've been wanting to switch too but I haven't had the chance to check the dealerships..."

"Awesome." Kassian stepped out of the door and shut it behind him, his keys jingling as he locked it. "There's really only one dealership in the city that sells new model electrics and I don't want to travel somewhere else so hopefully they have something good there."

"Where's it at?"

"On the outskirts of town kinda, over near the hospital." Kassian went down the front steps and zipped his coat all the way up. "I was actually going to walk or something since I'm not going to bother with trading my truck but I don't know if you're cool with that."

"Are you insane?" Boyd asked Kassian incredulously. "A twenty mile walk in this weather? No wonder you didn't want me to feel bad in Russia; this is apparently a hobby of yours."

Kassian laughed, his light blue eyes twinkling with amusement as he paused at the bottom of the steps. "I like walking. Do you want to take the bus?"

"No," Boyd said decisively, "I want to take my car." He tilted his head as a gesture for Kassian to follow him as he headed back toward the sidewalk. "I won't be able to afford an electric completely on its own so I'll probably trade in my Audi."

"Makes sense," Kassian agreed, leaving the gate and putting on his gloves. "I'm prepared to spend at least 100k to be honest and I don't even plan to get some fancy ass car. They don't make shit cheap for anybody anymore."

"I know," Boyd said. "Especially not electrics. I don't even entirely know what I'm looking for but I'm already fairly certain it'll end in me making monthly payments for three lifetimes."

Kassian arched a brow at Boyd as they made the short walk to Boyd's house. "You have no idea at all? I'm looking for an SUV of some kind although I'd prefer another truck. I can't drive those tiny ass cars they make now. I feel like if I get in an accident I'll be crushed instantly."

"That's why I want one that's fast and easy to handle," Boyd said wryly. "To get out of the way of you crazy SUV drivers."

"Ha! Funny. If you end up getting some kind of sports car I don't want to hear any talk about crazy drivers. I've yet to meet one dude in a sports car who isn't a total hard-on."

Boyd smirked. "You can admit what's really going on here; you're just jealous in advance of how much sexier my car'll be."

Kassian snorted, ignoring one of his neighbors as they turned onto Sixth Avenue. "Maybe if I actually liked the way sports cars were designed, which I don't. I don't like the way SUVs are designed either but I don't know how plausible an electric truck is. It'd probably get no mileage from a charge. Maybe they have a hybrid, though."

"No idea," Boyd said honestly. "We can ask the dealer. I don't even know how fast they make their sports cars."

Kassian shrugged, looking dubious. "Who knows."

They walked down Sixth Avenue and after only a few moments they turned on Magnolia Lane. When Boyd stopped at his gate, Kassian raised his eyebrows. "We literally live like five minutes away from each other."

"I know; it's strange." Boyd walked up to his house; he'd brought his house keys with him but had left his car keys inside. He paused at the door to unlock it then walked inside, leaving the door open for Kassian. "You're welcome to come in, I just have to find my keys. And I have some stuff in the car I'll have to dump inside too, so it may take a minute."

A mildly disturbed look briefly crossed Kassian's face as he followed Boyd inside, eyes moving over the interior of the house as he shoved his hands in his pockets. He closed the door behind him to keep out the cold air and watched Boyd quietly for a moment before asking, "What made you come over today anyway?"

"Oh." Boyd glanced at Kassian then disappeared down the hallway to grab his messenger bag from his room.

He almost felt hesitant, or maybe embarrassed, to bring the topic up. It seemed like every time he talked to Kassian it was about Sin, which probably made him seem obsessive, especially since Sin happened to be Kassian's rival, for lack of a better term. However, since he had no one else to ask he wasn't about to pass up the chance.

Boyd returned to the entry area near Kassian and distractedly started searching for a pair of gloves. "I guess I wanted some advice."

"Advice, huh?" Kassian made a 'hmm' sound, still watching Boyd move around the room. "Unless you're planning to take up alcoholism and need tips on drink combinations, I'm not the best guy to go to for advice."

Finally locating his gloves somehow buried in the closet under a layer of shoes, Boyd put them on then shut the closet door. He turned around and looked at Kassian in bemusement, hesitating very briefly before saying, "I realize how repetitive and annoying it must be for me to continually talk to you about Sin and I really hope, for my sake as well, that this is the last time. But I don't know who else to ask and I mostly just need a second opinion..."

Kassian tilted his head slightly and gazed at Boyd, seeming half-amused and half-curious. It almost seemed as though he wanted to say something or ask something but

instead he just shrugged with a brief shake of his head and a small smile. "What's up with Mr. Vega now?"

"Well," Boyd said slowly as he searched through his messenger bag for his keys. They were in the small pocket he tended to keep them and they jangled quietly as he took them out. He looked up at Kassian again as he held the keys in his hand loosely at his side. "I told you before he wanted to talk to me." He said it as a slightly leading statement, as if wanting to make sure Kassian remembered the conversation.

"What did he say?"

"I didn't exactly talk to him yet," Boyd admitted. "That's the problem. He came to training for our final test. So of course I had to fight him. Doug was just waiting for him to go easy on me, I could tell."

"Did he?" Kassian raised both eyebrows at Boyd and looked genuinely curious about the answer.

"Not exactly." Boyd watched Kassian a moment then turned and opened the front door, walking out into the cold air. He waited for Kassian to follow him before he shut and locked the door. "Actually, he went harder on me than anyone but Jon."

"Really." Kassian looked at Boyd skeptically. "I find that hard to believe. He can tear people apart and there's not a scratch on you."

"I know." Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear and looked at Kassian sidelong as they headed to his car. He dusted off the light layer of snow on his car from two nights before, using his good arm. "Well, my shoulder is sprained and my chest looks like a kid got entirely too excited with purple paint, but I'm fine. He did go harder on Jon because he could handle it, but the rest... Toby froze and Sin didn't even touch him."

"Sounds like he went easy on all of you, to be honest," Kassian said with a shrug, waiting for Boyd to unlock the car. He ran his gaze over the Audi before glancing at the house again. "But then again when I fought him for my training, he didn't go full capacity either even if he did act like a jerkoff the whole time."

Boyd opened the back door and grabbed the few items sitting inside his otherwise clean car; a black scarf, a half-full water bottle, and a long ice scraper with a brush on one side. He walked around to the trunk and, holding the items in his good arm against his body to balance them, he unlocked the trunk and opened it.

"What did he do?" he asked curiously, looking at Kassian.

Kassian thought for a moment before standing up completely ramrod straight and narrowing his eyes at Boyd in an annoyed expression before saying in an almost perfect imitation of Sin's low, deep voice, "Is that the best you can do, Trovosky? They must be pretty desperate for another Level 10. Watch as I beat the life out of you and then stand over your bruised and bloody body while laughing mockingly. If you notice, I haven't even broken a sweat."

Boyd gave Kassian a startled look then threw his head back and laughed. "That's a disturbingly good rendition," he said with a grin, shaking his head. "He didn't actually laugh, did he?"

"Nah but there was a smirk." Kassian shook his head as he thought about it. "I didn't really have anything against the guy until that."

"Understandable," Boyd said, still smiling faintly to himself in amusement as he dropped the scarf, water bottle and ice scraper into a three-quarters full box he had sitting in the trunk. The only other items he had in the box were parts of a winter kit with emergency supplies, a first aid kit and jumper cables.

"He does have a way of pissing people off," Boyd continued mildly as he grabbed the box and set it on the driveway near his car's rear tire. His shoulder ached in the movement but it wasn't something he couldn't handle.

"Uh huh." Kassian waited patiently for Boyd to finish with what he was doing, scrunching his face slightly when a particularly strong gust of wind blew by. "Anyway, finish telling me what happened."

"Hold on." Boyd closed the trunk then quickly brought the box into the house, locking the door again behind him when he left. He returned to the car, got in, and waited until Kassian was sitting in the passenger seat and had shut the door before he continued.

"After the test, when Doug dismissed us, Sin stopped me and wanted to talk, but..." Boyd paused. "I couldn't then, I wasn't in the right mindset. He just... He keeps showing up at bad times for me, when I'm far too stressed for that sort of conversation. It's like he wants me to drop everything for him." He shook his head to himself. "I didn't give him a chance to explain anything."

The car roared to life and Boyd backed out of the driveway before turning onto the street. Kassian reclined the seat so that he could lean back further and reached out to turn the heat up. "So what do you need my opinion on then?"

Boyd was quiet a moment as he adjusted the rear view mirror. He knew he had to tell Kassian more in order to get to the question he really wanted to ask. He hadn't thought he'd ever willingly feel the need to tell anyone any details about this but he trusted Kassian with the information.

"When Sin recovered from his coma after Monterrey," Boyd said calmly, "he came to my house. I thought I'd gotten him killed, I thought I was bad for him so I tried to turn him away but he was really upset with me. He said he needed me and when I didn't listen, he tried to kill himself in front of me."

Kassian's eyes snapped over to Boyd and he stared at him in surprise. "That's pretty extreme."

"Yeah," Boyd said soberly. "I wasn't expecting it." He paused very briefly, remembering the desperation both he and Sin had displayed. "He said he couldn't go on without me, that he wished he could hate me for just dropping him when things got too hard. That I'd made him feel things and then just took it away."

Boyd glanced at Kassian. "He'd asked me long ago to believe in him, to not give up, and he was angry, he said I had. At one point he stormed off with the gun and I thought I'd never see him again so I stopped him, said I was sorry, it was all my fault. I was really... upset. I said I didn't know how not to hurt him, how not to fuck up, that sort of thing."

"Uh huh..." Kassian's eyes were trained on Boyd as he waited for him to continue.

"The thing is," Boyd said carefully, "at this point I think it's probably true that he didn't know what he was doing, that he just made a stupid mistake. I do plan to talk to him, to hear what he has to say. But..."

Boyd trailed off briefly and then sighed. "I don't know. I have a unit meeting in four days and I'd planned to talk to him after that, to make sure I have time to be in the right mindset, to be rational. To give myself time to even just de-stress from training. But... Sometimes I think I end up making really selfish decisions, especially when it comes to Sin. It would seem really petty in retrospect if I'm stalling to give myself time and he does something crazy in the meantime. But at the same time, if I go over there earlier than I feel comfortable, it's like I'm still thinking of him first, doing what's best for him and

not me. That obviously hasn't worked well for me in the past and it just... Maybe my pride stops me from liking the idea of that anymore. But I'd feel so guilty if something happened while I waited... like it was my fault..."

"Nah, don't think that way." Kassian sat up and adjusted the seat again. "If he was going to kill himself he would have done it already. You're better off waiting until you're not going to automatically get pissed off and not even listen to what the dude has to say, you know?"

Considering that for a moment, Boyd fell quiet. He slowed the car to a stop at a red light and stared at the semaphore. It was true that Sin would have done something long before if he'd intended to. And Sin had seemed to be in a more stable, healthier condition at the test than he had the times Boyd had seen him previously.

Besides, Boyd had just walked away without saying anything so he hadn't told Sin he *wouldn't* listen to him, he just hadn't at that time. Boyd couldn't quite rid himself of the faint, nagging question of whether he was making the right decision, but he felt better knowing that Kassian agreed with what Boyd had planned: to wait until it was best for him. Any earlier than that and Boyd was worried that his own frustration and irritation over the entire situation would make him unintentionally lash out.

"Yeah," Boyd said finally, turning his attention to Kassian. "You're probably right. And it'll be better in the long run for us both, anyway. Maybe it won't even end in an argument." He said the last part dryly, not expecting that they'd actually manage that.

"You're better off trying not to argue," Kassian said with a shrug. "The reason I divorced my ex is because she was always accusing me of shit and not trying to hear me out. I mean it wasn't entirely her fault but it made me not even give a shit anymore because it was so aggravating. So I say wait until it's more likely that won't happen. If you want things to work out between you anyway."

Boyd made a noise of assent as the light turned green and he started driving again.

"The dealership is at the end of Victory, by the way. Behind the hospital." Kassian gestured in the general direction.

"Okay," Boyd said, thinking of which streets to turn down to get there quickest at this time of day.

There was a brief silence before Kassian glanced over at Boyd again. "So, do you plan to get back together with him?"

Boyd looked over, searching Kassian's expression before returning his gaze to the road. He looked mildly perturbed as he considered the question. He'd been wondering the same thing and he hadn't yet come to a conclusion. He was going to listen to what Sin had to say but he just didn't know if it would change the decision he'd already made when they'd argued in the bunker.

He felt like overall, since the very first moment he'd met Sin, the two of them went in cycles. Everything was great, everything was terrible, Boyd trusted Sin who didn't believe in Boyd, Sin trusted Boyd who didn't believe in Sin...

Not to mention Boyd had a history of affecting the missions due to his involvement with Sin. The fact that this bothered him wasn't entirely about the missions; he didn't want to do a poor job and of course he didn't want to fail but the far more alarming part was that their missions were often literally life or death.

Even before they'd started sleeping together but after they'd gotten closer, Boyd had made poor decisions on missions because of Sin. At one time the risk had seemed worth it, but now...

How did he weigh someone's life against this? Alexis', Jessica's, Sin's, his own, anyone else's...

Boyd didn't even know if he and Sin were capable of not being dysfunctional around each other, if they were even doing themselves a favor by sticking it out. Sometimes it seemed like they were caught in a self-destructive spiral that did more damage to themselves or others than it did any good.

It made him wonder if it wouldn't be better to back off, to be business partners, to maybe try for friends. Their relationship had been off from the beginning and by now, Boyd almost felt like it was far too tangled to be right anymore.

"I don't know," Boyd said finally, honestly. "Right now..." He hesitated and then admitted, "I don't... know if I think it's a good idea."

Kassian nodded in understanding although it wasn't obvious if he was actually agreeing. "Well whatever you decide, I suggest going in with a decision made. Work it out

beforehand, weigh the pros and cons. Don't let the heat of the moment decide for you and all of that."

"Yeah, it's true." Boyd tilted his head and smiled sidelong at Kassian. "Thanks."

"No prob, kiddo." Kassian's gaze fell to the glove compartment and he pulled it open. "You have stuff in here, you know."

"Shit, I completely forgot about that." Boyd looked over distractedly as he turned onto Victory Street. "Can you take it all out for me?"

Kassian nodded and began digging through the glove compartment, setting stuff on the floor at his feet and listing the items he found. "Manual, envelope with... I guess insurance type papers..."

He leaned forward and yanked out a handful of yellowed papers that appeared to be old receipts of some kind. Behind the receipts and another envelope there was a metal CD case that was zipped shut. It was wedged sideways in the glove compartment and Kassian actually had to wrestle it out.

He sat back in the seat and unzipped the case, flipping through the sizable collection of CDs before making a face. "Gross, who likes Incubus? I remember them being terrible back in the day."

"Incubus?" Boyd echoed in confusion.

He hadn't been paying attention to Kassian but when he glanced over, he was truly surprised to see the CD case. It was Lou's old case; Boyd hadn't seen it in years, he'd completely forgotten it had even existed. He felt a rush of mixed emotions at the sight; nostalgia, sadness and regret... Even faint exasperation and amusement at the memory of Lou shoving the case into the compartment behind everything else, threatening to throw out the manual and proof of insurance since he'd said the music was more important.

Boyd and Lou had liked a lot of the same bands, which hadn't been surprising since Lou had liked just about every music genre. Boyd hadn't bothered to keep music in the car but Lou had insisted; he'd enjoyed having a soundtrack for his life. Lou used to flip through the case, finding songs that fit his mood or their situation. He used to sit in the passenger seat, singing along while Boyd had sometimes in exasperation turned the volume down and asked what was wrong with silence.

"Ah. Wow," Boyd said belatedly. "That's... old. It's not mine."

"Whose is it?" Kassian flipped through and raised his eyebrows. "Someone who definitely likes techno. Serious stoner music in my opinion. I can appreciate that."

"It was my friend's."

"Oh." Kassian made a face at whatever band he flipped past. "Are they dead or something?"

"Yeah," Boyd said calmly. He looked at the CD case contemplatively. At that moment, he was almost perversely grateful that, if the Agency had felt the need to force him to watch Lou's death video, at least it had been played so many times in front of him.

The realizations he'd had in that room had given him more reason to try to put the past behind him, to find closure in Lou's death. Being almost desensitized to the murder, watching it so often that he'd finally found a way to distance himself from it-- like that wasn't really him on the screen, like that hadn't really been Lou-- gave him more reason to look at sudden discoveries like the CD case as a way to remember even more good things he'd forgotten.

"He was killed six years ago." Boyd paused then added, "I guess that makes them mine now..."

"Oh, that sucks. I'm sorry, dude." Kassian paused in his search through the CDs to look at Boyd. "I wasn't even being serious. I just said that since you used past tense... I thought maybe you just weren't friends anymore."

Boyd smiled humorlessly to himself. "That would be nice." He shrugged as he saw the hospital loom before them; the dealership had to be in the area so he started paying more attention. "It's okay. It doesn't bother me the way it used to. It's not like being sad ever changed anything." He glanced at Kassian. "Better to remember the good anyway, right?"

Kassian graced Boyd with one of his genuine, kind smiles and nodded. "Right. And besides, you inherited some decent music even if he also owned some terrible shit from the past two decades. Although I guess it's pretty hard to score decent tunes these days. After all of the shit that happened, there's not too many new bands coming out."

Boyd had to smile to himself, looking fond and amused. "Lou liked everything, anyway. He was a pack rat with music. Some of that stuff... I almost think he got it just to annoy me in the car. I'm with you, though. There really hasn't been good music I've heard lately."

"What do you like?" Kassian held up a hand before Boyd could respond. "Wait, I want to figure it out. I'm usually good at reading people's music preference through their personality."

With a bemused smile, Boyd quirked an eyebrow and glanced over at Kassian. "Do you need to see my palm or anything?"

"No, no. I try not to be that mystical about this all," Kassian said with mock seriousness, squinting at Boyd through his eyelashes. "I go purely by personality."

"Right," Boyd drawled, drawing the word out. He tried not to let his amusement show any more than it already had. "Let me know when your analysis is complete."

"Oh I already have it done," Kassian said in a very wise voice, grinning at Boyd knowingly. "Judging by the fact that you're hardcore introverted and probably the type of person to analyze everything three times over because I suspect you spend a lot of time in your head... Which is not criticism by the way so don't take it as that. It's merely an observation."

Boyd didn't respond because it was true so it didn't bother him. Coming from Kassian, he probably wouldn't have been offended by it even if it had been criticism.

Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd and held up the CD case as if it was some kind of sacred item as he continued, "And since a person's taste in music can be a window into their personality, I'd say you're pretty picky about what you listen to, you pay more attention to lyrics and the meaning behind songs than whether or not it sounds catchy. But I don't really think you're the type of person to be familiar with a ton of genres or bands."

"Hmm." Boyd saw the entrance to the dealership and pulled in; he parked in the visitor's parking lot then turned his full attention to Kassian. He watched Kassian expectantly without giving any indication as to how accurate he felt the analysis was so far.

"Okay, so this is what I'm going to do." Kassian began flipping through the CD case again. "I'm going to pick out a CD and tell you which one I think is a band you like."

For a moment the only sounds in the car were the sleeves of the case rustling before Kassian made a low 'ah-ha' sound. "Modern rock, pseudo avant-garde, definitely not that mainstream... Awesome lyrics. I'd say this one is one of yours."

Kassian held up a Radiohead CD.

Boyd barely kept the surprise from his expression. Kassian was exactly right with his entire analysis. And he'd managed to choose one of the very few CDs that Boyd actually did own in the case. He studied the Radiohead CD then met Kassian's eyes with a mock intrigued expression.

"Not bad, Mr. Trovosky," Boyd drawled, letting some drama enter his tone. "Not bad at all... But can you possibly find my other CDs before it's too late?"

"Putting pressure on me, eh?" Kassian flipped through the case some more. "Definitely Deftones, has to be. Nice, Static X... but definitely not yours. I don't see you listening to industrial type metal. Hmmm." He glanced at Boyd from the corner of his eye and smirked slightly. "I could definitely see you listening to this one though. Sister Machine Gun. Moody music."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "I don't know whether I should be impressed or disturbed," he said lightly, then smirked. "Are you sure you haven't been stalking me?"

"Of course I have. That's how I get through my boring days off. Peering through the non-windows in your bunk and hearing the imaginary music you listened to on the imaginary boom box you shared with the Tobster." Kassian winked at Boyd and got out of the car, looking up at the fortress-like building that housed the dealership. None of the cars were on an outdoor lot-- due to the high crime and demand for the overpriced electric vehicles, everything was kept on lockdown inside.

"Aha," Boyd said triumphantly as he stepped out of the car and locked the doors. "I *thought* I'd felt your presence. And here I was, thinking you'd just been waiting for us to undress..."

"Toby wishes," Kassian replied dryly as they approached the building. "Is it me or does this place look like a prison?"

"That's because it basically is. I'm pretty sure they do a strip search on the way in," Boyd deadpanned. "And we don't get to leave until we buy something. Otherwise, they'd have to kill us. Their inventory is top secret, you realize."

"I don't know who they think is going to buy most of the crap they have," Kassian said. "Only 10% of this city can probably afford the prices car manufacturers charge these days. You'd think they'd lower stuff so everyone could afford it but whatever."

"Yeah but who knows how expensive it is to make anymore. Although I'm sure there's quite a mark-up. They're probably in with the oil companies and make money off the poor people who have to buy the fuel-based in the less genteel dealerships. And for the rich they get to make a few hundred k each purchase." Boyd fell quiet as they approached the main door and were within hearing distance of the two security guards who stood outside watching them.

Kassian and Boyd actually had to show identification and sign something to get in and when they were buzzed into the building, it was an entire process before they were finally admitted access to the actual viewing rooms.

The building was set up like a very high-tech garage. Each floor housed a different manufacturer and the show cars were displayed with only a limited number of each model for sale. Some models were so limited that they were only on display with a hologram.

"First stop, BMW?" Kassian asked Boyd as they got on the elevator.

Boyd nodded. When he'd originally chosen his Audi A4 Saloon, he'd been trying to decide between Audi and BMW models. His tastes had changed since then and he was interested in what BMW's electric choices were.

"So your mother bought you your old car, huh?" Kassian asked as the elevator whooshed up to the third level of the building.

"Sort of." Boyd looked over. "It was her money but I chose it from the price range given." He tilted his head and added, "Well, of course she had to give her input so it would meet her standards. Make sure I wasn't getting something that'd look embarrassing in our driveway."

"Pretty nice for a first car," Kassian observed mildly as they stepped off the elevator and into the indoor BMW lot. The room was decorated in silver tones and lined with tinted

windows, giving it a sleek, modern style. The car models and holograms were spread throughout the room. "My first car was an ancient El Camino that barely lasted half a year. Although my other option was a yellow Fiesta so... yeah."

Boyd smirked and looked around to determine which area he wanted to head toward. "I can't even imagine the extremity of Mrs. Hensley's duress if we'd actually come home with something like that. Assuming my mother would've ever agreed to a Fiesta."

Kassian gave him a blank look. "What?"

"She's this crotchety old woman who lives across the street," Boyd explained mildly. "When I was a kid, she used to sit there staring at us from the window between the blinds." Boyd mimicked an intense, disapproving glare, his hand up by his face as if he was pushing blinds apart.

"She was dead quiet except when she thought we were doing something wrong, then she'd do something passive aggressive. She used to even criticize my mother... Not to her face, of course. But I'd hear her loudly talking on the phone about this horrible rose bush the neighbor got, or how her neighbor hadn't mowed her lawn, or the nasty looks she got from 'that woman'... She's been quiet lately but at that time? I'm just saying. Yellow Fiesta." Boyd raised his eyebrows.

Kassian snorted and began walking aimlessly through the lot, not really stopping to focus on the sedan models. "Well, not everyone can be spoiled..."

Boyd looked at Kassian sidelong. He'd been joking about Mrs. Hensley and the Fiesta, although he was sure the woman would have had plenty to say about it had they actually bought something like that. He hadn't meant to be offensive but Kassian seemed serious about the comment. In retrospect, it probably hadn't been a good response, rubbing in Kassian's face how much nicer Boyd's first car had been.

There were a lot of people who'd probably had to work quite a bit even just to afford something cheap and half broken but the significance to them would have been far greater than a car Boyd had suddenly had paid for him. Boyd didn't necessarily know if Kassian had to work for his car but it sounded more likely than someone suddenly offering him one for free.

"Sorry," Boyd said, looking off toward the rest of the sales floor.

"You should be, punk," Kassian replied amiably, with no real bite in his tone. "Mr. High Maintenance slumming it with working class Kass."

"Fuck you," Boyd said lightly, a grin pulling at his lips.

Kassian arched a brow at Boyd and opened his mouth to say something, then seemed to think better of it because he just snickered to himself.

"So, what--" Boyd started to say but then he noticed the coupes in the corner. "Oh."

His attention immediately zeroed in on them as he automatically headed in that direction. He didn't even fully notice Kassian trailing along behind him until he stopped near the coupe that had initially caught his eye. It was silver, sleek, and before he could tell anything more about it a woman descended on them from out of nowhere.

She was tall and slender with pin-straight black hair and startling green eyes that were currently focused very intently on the two potential customers. An automatic smile curved her lips as she absently straightened the purple blazer she wore. "Hi, my name is Christina. Can I help you with anything?"

Kassian automatically gave the woman a discreet but appreciative once-over and smiled politely. "Maybe you can help him. BMWs aren't my thing."

"That's too bad," Christina said with an exaggeratedly disappointed frown although it quickly morphed into another hopeful smile as she turned to Boyd.

"What are the specs on this?" Boyd asked, gesturing to the coupe.

"All of the stats for the Z12 are listed on that kiosk." Christina indicated a small touch screen computer kiosk that was off to the side. "You can view the stats on all of the coupes from it and also you can use it to compare and contrast the different models. It's a new feature and especially useful for the MX80 which we only have on the floor in holographic image."

Kassian walked off a bit to the MX80; it was white and because of the additional length and width to the model as well as the larger wheels, it had a more muscular build than the Z12. Kassian studied it critically before going back to the Z12 where Boyd and Christina were standing. "This one's probably faster."

"Oh it is but that's because the MX80 is built more for performance than high speed," Christina said with a smile and began rattling off facts about the vehicles before Boyd could even get started with the kiosk.

The Z12 was lighter and smaller than the MX80 and had a higher top speed by nearly thirty miles as well as better mileage, getting almost two hundred and twenty miles out of a single charge. However, the MX80 had all wheel drive and more kilowatts.

"But then we have our third model, the M36, which is a slightly bigger but more powerful version of the Z12. Although it's a longer charge with less mileage on a fully charged engine, it has the speed of the Z12 but higher kilowatts than the MX80 while still achieving a sleeker build."

Kassian looked at the comparisons over Boyd's shoulder. "Yeah and a full twenty thousand more than the Z12 for that extra power," he said with a derisive snort. "You people are such thieves."

Christina just smiled at him innocently and Kassian returned the look with a smirk. He obviously had a tendency to be an incorrigible flirt.

Boyd looked between the three models contemplatively, having been listening to their conversation while studying the comparison. He was primarily interested in a car that handled very well, that he knew he could trust to respond to him. But he definitely wanted speed; the Z12 topped at about 20 miles per hour faster than his current Audi A4.

Although he liked the specs on the M36, the M36 looked far less sleek than the Z12. The Z12 was smaller, shorter, more sculpted; it looked more like a race car with a longer front than the cab in back. The M36, on the other hand, had a more conventional build; there were still the smooth lines of the BMW brand but it was tempered by the proportions.

The mileage he would get off the Z12 was a little better than the M36; even if it was cheaper overall to charge electrics, that didn't mean it was free. The fewer times he had to recharge the car, especially with the erratic utilities, the better. Then again, if the M36 was more for the money than it may be worth it.

Turning away from the screen, Boyd walked over to the Z12 and stared at it a moment before looking over at Christina. "I can examine the model, right? Open it, get inside..."

He suspected he could but he didn't know how strong their rules were in this high security dealership.

Christina nodded. "Of course, but you can only test drive on the indoor track."

Boyd nodded distractedly, already looking at the car again. He opened the door and sat inside, leaning back in the surprisingly comfortable seats. He really liked this car; it was comfortable, the specs showed it should be high performance and he liked the sleek design. At \$150,000 it was quite expensive, a little more than he would have hoped to spend, but with his Audi as trade-in that should temper the price somewhat.

He spent some time inside, adjusting the seat and mirror, checking the dashboard, putting his hands on the steering wheel and shift to get an idea of how it would fit. He twisted in the seat to look into the truncated back seat; it wouldn't properly fit a third person unless the person had short legs or sat in an uncomfortable position but how often would he even have one passenger, let alone two?

On the other hand, if he ever needed to haul anything or if for some reason he had to use his car as a stakeout car, the Z12 wouldn't be very comfortable for long periods of time and it would stand out a lot more than the M36 would. Boyd wasn't interested in flashiness so much as he was interested in quality. And even if he didn't foresee having two passengers at once, that didn't mean it would never happen where he'd need them. Not to mention, he'd have to investigate further which one would be better for driving during the different seasons or if they were comparable.

He barely even heard Christina and Kassian talking outside the car; he was so focused on the Z12 that he may as well have been alone. After a few minutes, he popped the hood and got out of the vehicle, walking around front to examine the engine and the inner workings of the car. He was by no means a mechanical expert but he knew enough to like what he saw. Closing the hood, he leaned into the car briefly to open the trunk and walked around behind the car; he was curious to see how much space he'd have.

"You know what the best way to gauge trunk space is?" Kassian asked him suddenly, turning his attention from Christina and their debate about the best truck manufacturer to look at Boyd.

Boyd looked over, startled out of his thoughts. "No," he said, intrigued. "How?"

Boyd's only warning was a subtle eyebrow quirk and a sly smirk before Kassian slipped behind him. Before Boyd could comprehend what was happening, Kassian grabbed Boyd, lifting him off the ground. Boyd twisted automatically to evade but the movement only resulted in his coat tangling between them and Kassian's hands slipping beneath Boyd's shirt as he tried to keep a grip on the flailing younger agent.

The feel of Kassian's strong callused fingers sliding up his bare skin was so unfamiliar that Boyd nearly recoiled from the touch, not because it was unpleasant but because the feeling was reminiscent of Sin's hands. Although a few people had touched Boyd's bare skin since Sin, Thierry's hands were relatively smooth and the man from the resistance to interrogation training had a different feel, not to mention his touch had been completely unwanted. Kassian's hands had the same rough texture and strength as Sin's.

Kassian dumped Boyd neatly in the trunk and grinned down at him widely as Christina stared in horror in the background. Obviously her wealthy clients typically did not behave in this fashion.

"Too small in my opinion. You're a scrawny little guy and I had to practically fold you in half to fit you in," Kassian said with an important nod.

Boyd stared at Kassian in surprise, hair slightly disheveled and clothing askew. That had been so unexpected that he didn't even know how to react at first. After a moment he managed, "Wha-- Do you-- *What?*"

"What?" Kassian asked innocently, blue eyes twinkling with amusement at his own antics.

Glancing briefly between Christina and Kassian, Boyd tried to regain his sense of composure after a moment. Crawling out of the trunk, he straightened his clothes and said dryly, "That's your scientific method, is it?"

"It's wonderful," Kassian replied with a smirk.

Christina shook her head at Kassian although a slight smile managed to make its way onto her face. She'd been deflecting Kassian's slight flirtations but now she seemed genuinely amused by him although she was obviously trying not to show it.

Christina looked at Boyd and raised a slim eyebrow, obviously intent on pretending the incident had never occurred. "How do you like the vehicle?"

"I like it," Boyd said, studying the Z12 thoughtfully. "But I want to see the M36."

When Boyd got inside the M36, Kassian appeared to have finally grown bored with Boyd's research and started idly conducting his own. It mostly consisted of him frowning at the SAVs and Sports Wagons and despite Christina's attempts to warm him over to them, he denounced BMW as a manufacturer who was not capable of making a decent truck.

"The SAVs--"

"If I had two kids and another on the way I'd consider those SAVs. And also if I grew a vagina," Kassian interrupted with a snort as he eyed the vehicles in question.

Christina looked startled by the comment and a surprised laugh burst out of her. "Are you one of those guys who will only drive an American truck?"

"No," Kassian replied and made a face. "At least I don't think so anyway. The first and only truck I bought for myself was an ancient Chevy but that was just because I liked the look of it and it was cheap. But these aren't even trucks, Christina. Come on now."

Christina shook her head with a grin. "Well let's look at some other stuff while your friend checks out the M36. Give BMW a chance. We've made so much progress with electric vehicles in the past few years..."

The conversation began to fade away as Kassian and Christina moved further away from the coupes.

Boyd spent even longer with the M36 than he had with the Z12; he examined the inside and outside, adjusted the seats and checked the trunk as well. This time he found himself glancing up briefly just before he leaned into the trunk to make sure there wouldn't be another surprise attack.

Kassian and Christina were safely across the room so Boyd returned to his task, smiling to himself now that he no longer had an audience. Kassian's test for trunk space had been pretty amusing, even if at the time Boyd had been so dumbfounded that he hadn't been able to react. Kassian was an odd person; sometimes he was so serious and other times he suddenly showed an almost mischievous sense of humor.

After a thorough examination, Boyd stopped by the kiosk again to check the comparisons one more time. After careful deliberation, he determined that the M36 was actually superior to the Z12. Although the M36 had a shorter charge life so it wouldn't have as good of mileage and it was about \$20,000 more, the M36 had more power, it would handle a lot better, and there was a lot more space in case he ever needed it. The Z12 looked far sleeker and more attractive to him but as for performance it wouldn't stand up to the M36 based on the specs.

Boyd decided he wanted to test drive the M36 and looked up to see Christina and Kassian a few feet from where he'd last noticed them. He headed toward them and as he drew closer, he could see that they were looking at the motorcycles. From what Boyd could tell of Kassian's body language from this length away, he thought Kassian was a lot more interested in the bikes than he had been in the trucks.

Walking up beside Kassian, Boyd looked across the motorcycles taking up part of the corner of the floor. "Found your niche?" he asked with a slight, bemused smile.

Kassian's hand was idly caressing a black and silver sport motorcycle and looking a lot like he'd just fallen in love. "This thing is fucking sweet," he said in a low, excited voice, blue eyes glued to the machine as he squatted down and studied it closely. "I've missed having a motorcycle. My wife..."

Kassian glanced up at Christina and winked. "Ex-wife..." She reddened slightly and he continued with a grin. "She made me give mine up. She wasn't even afraid of me crashing. She thought someone would do some kind of running tackle, knock me off it and steal it."

Boyd found himself rather entertained by the mental image that gave him.

"Wow." Christina didn't look too impressed with his ex-wife's concern.

"I know, right?" Kassian stood again, shaking his head. "I'd love to get it but it doesn't make sense for me, really."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "Why not?"

"Because it's not always just me when I go out. Sometimes I go out with people who don't have cars of their own. Also when my sisters visit, I need space for them," Kassian replied as he backed away from the bike.

"I didn't know you have sisters," Boyd said, interested.

"I have three younger sisters so I don't think they'd all fit on the back of a bike. My mother would probably try to kill me if I even put one of them on it." Kassian rolled his eyes.

"Do they visit often?"

"Eh..." Kassian made a vague hand gesture. "Kind of. It's a long story. I'll explain later." He looked at Christina and it was obvious that he didn't want to talk about it in front of her. "So, are we going to look around more before deciding? You may as well since I need to go further up anyway."

"Yeah," Boyd said easily. "I want to compare with other manufacturers."

Kassian nodded and Christina gave each of them her card in case they decided on BMW after all, so she would get commission on the sale. Kassian and Boyd spent the next few hours checking out the rest of the dealership, having idle conversation between examining models made by different manufacturers.

Kassian ended up with a truck after all; it was a GMC Denali XTX Plug-In Hybrid. Kassian and the GMC salesman spent a lot of time discussing the engine; it apparently had once been dual electric with ethanol support but since corn crops were not as abundant as they once were due to the wide expanses of radioactive land, GMC had gone back to gasoline. Despite the fact that it wasn't entirely electric, the vehicle still got triple the mileage of Kassian's Chevy. He got the truck in gunmetal grey with huge 23 inch custom wheels, rims and an extremely expensive sound system that Kassian still claimed he was going to tweak later.

Before Boyd made his decision, he discovered that he was interested in two electric Mercedes AMG series vehicles. The looks were a little too angled for his preferences but he liked the specs. When he was able to test drive both his BMW and Mercedes choices, he determined that the 2022 BMW M36 was better for him.

He traded in his Audi, finding himself almost a little sad when it actually came time to hand the keys over. There were a lot of memories with his Audi and it had been his first car.

But nostalgia shouldn't come in the way of practicality, not if he was going to continue working on living in the present rather than focusing on the past. It had been a great car

but letting it go wouldn't mean he had to forget any memories made in connection; it just meant he would be able to focus on saving money in the present and future, hopefully to make new memories.

Maybe it was part of trying to push himself out of his routine and comfort zone or maybe it was just the design of the car, but in a rare decision for him, he chose the silver color rather than black. Boyd was pleased with his purchase and as he drove home he couldn't help a quiet, satisfied smile.

Chapter 25

"Do you want me to cut your hair?"

Cynthia stared at the man in front of her and eyed him critically, taking in the fall of straight black hair that was now long enough to touch the back of his neck. The look became him but it would have been more attractive if he ever bothered to comb it.

"Sin?"

Sin's intense green eyes rose to her face in disinterest. "What."

She sighed and swept auburn hair over her own shoulder, brandishing her trimming shears at him. "Do you want a haircut or not?"

"No."

"That's all you had to say," she replied impatiently and worked her fingers into his hair, going about the process of making it look unclean as well as disheveled as she applied products that would take away the natural glossy shine.

Sin said nothing and stared down at the PDA that he held, skimming over the mission outline that Vivienne had just given him. It was an assignment of unknown length although he didn't think it should take more than a few weeks. It wasn't an assassination mission but since it involved snatching a high-ranking political figure's runaway son, it was equally classified.

The boy had no idea that his father was also a benefactor and informant to terrorist groups but the Agency wasn't concerned with the fact that he was an innocent. The Agency was only concerned with the fact that the boy's father, Ernest Wick, would do anything to get him back.

"So you're playing a street kid, huh?" Cynthia queried curiously, massaging something called 'texture dirt' into Sin's hair.

"What makes you say that?" Sin asked dully, tilting the PDA away from her further although he didn't think she'd been able to see the words anyway.

Cynthia snorted and wiped her hands on her apron. "The hair, the earrings, the outfit--" She indicated his undercover attire; ripped and faded jeans, scuffed combat boots with

a bandanna wrapped around one of them and a leather jacket that looked like it had survived ground zero of a nuclear explosion.

Sin just grunted and shut off the PDA. He had no interest in discussing his role with her. He had no interest in the role or the mission in general.

The brief time he'd had near Boyd had been such a tease; despite the fact that they'd been fighting, it was as much contact as he'd gotten with the younger man in months and it'd been during a ridiculous sparring match. Sin had deliberately rushed the entire process just so that he could get a moment with Boyd, just to apologize, just to try to make some sort of headway to an explanation, and Boyd had rebuffed him without hesitation.

Ever since then, Sin had very little interest in anything; his life seemed very empty and he felt like he wasn't really living so much as existing.

It wasn't that much different than it'd been three years ago before Boyd had come into his life. It was strange how easy it had been to slip back into that frame of mind.

"You look so much like your father."

The comment was so unexpectedly sudden that Sin's eyes jerked up to the mirror, staring at Cynthia's reflection with narrowed eyes. "What did you say?"

"I said--" Cynthia hesitated when she caught sight of Sin's expression and her hands froze in midair for a moment until she dragged her eyes away from his chilly stare and cleared her throat. "I said you look like your dad. It was just an observation, honey. No need to go on the extreme defense."

Sin stared at her for a moment longer before he closed his eyes briefly, trying to calm himself down. Even though the hallucinations had ceased, the memories were still there and the mention of his father brought to mind the horrifying image of blood, dimming green eyes and the look of stunned surprise in them...

"Not a lot of these new kids remember your father," Cynthia went on, although there was something more careful about her tone and the way she chose her words. "I mean agents don't typically live to old age anyway and even when they do, the Agency retires them once they stop being useful, whatever *that* means. So people know who your father is but not a lot of people remember what he was like, you know?"

"I don't care," Sin replied flatly, turning his gaze back to his own reflection. "I'm uninterested in speaking to you."

"Hmph."

Sin fingered the smooth surface of the PDA idly, trying to push everything else to the back of his mind and just focus on the mission; if he didn't think about his father or Boyd, it was almost possible to do that but it wasn't easy.

Every night he dreamed of his father and even if the nightmares didn't chase him to daylight anymore, the memories haunted Sin. And even though he tried to tell himself that Boyd couldn't avoid him forever, he couldn't just pretend Sin didn't exist, that they had to see each other and be near each other for missions and meetings, the realization that their relationship ended there hurt painfully.

But at least it was something. At least Boyd was still in his life in some way and maybe some day... Maybe Boyd would fo--

Sin cut off the line of thought viciously before it could continue, eyebrows drawing down over his eyes. Wishful thinking wasn't going to get him anywhere. It was obvious that Boyd had no intentions of forgiving him.

"Your hair is almost as long as your partner's now," Cynthia piped up once again. "I could give you a cut like I gave him if you recons--"

"Shut up."

Cynthia flicked Sin's reflection an irritated glare and she sighed woefully. "You may look like your dad but your personalities are as different as night and day, junior. That man could talk the ear off a telemarketer."

Sin stared at her stonily and didn't reply.

"Wow." An amused smile tugged at the corner of Cynthia's lips as she used one booted foot to turn the chair around so that Sin was facing her, eyeballing his hair critically. "I sure hope your mission doesn't require too much talking."

"My mission is not your concern," he retorted and stood up, grabbing the pile of clothes that were laying nearby.

"Wait." Cynthia held up a hand to stop him, eyes narrowing as she eyed him critically. "You may want to loosen up," she advised. "All jokes aside, if you're really going to make an effort to pass as a seventeen-year-old punk, that rigid posture and your tendency to speak in formal and complete sentences isn't going to fly."

"Don't tell me how to do my job." Sin gave her a scathing glare before adding, "It's stupid for them to pass me off as a teenager anyway."

Cynthia ignored his first comment and raised her eyebrows. "Well, I don't know about that. You look like you're in your early twenties and most orphaned kids who've lived through this post-war shit of a world tend to look older than they are."

"If you say so." Sin picked up a black backpack that was covered in safety pins and patches; it was carefully crafted to look old and worn. "Are we through?"

With another exasperated sigh, Cynthia waved him off and turned towards her desk with a quiet mutter that he wasn't interested enough in to discern.

Sin stuffed the clothing in his backpack and left the wing that the civvie squad was located in, not intending to change until transport dropped him off closer to the site. Gregory Wick was said to be staying in a youth home called The Bowery, which was government-run and located in the ruins of old New York City.

The Bowery had a lot in common with a place called Brighton Community Prison. Both were located in ruined and abandoned cities and both had become overrun by outcasts that the government wanted to round up before the lawlessness of a ghost town taken over by civilians could get too out of hand.

However, Brighton had become overrun by criminals, drug addicts and people on the edge of society while the homeless, surviving orphans of the five boroughs of NYC had congregated by word of mouth in the area where The Bowery was located. At least, until the government once again swooped in to get a handle on them.

Brighton turned into a living, breathing prison that was nothing more than a severely locked down city. The Bowery became a severely locked down group home for street kids; the place bordered on a juvenile hall due to the strict atmosphere and tendency for the kids to act out.

Sin had no idea how a senator's son had wound up in a place like that but the mission outline stated that the child had run away at the early age of ten years old and his father

had been searching for him ever since, apparently desperate to find his only living family member even if the child apparently had no desire to be with him in return.

All Sin had to go on was a seven year old picture and a whisper from an Agency informant inside The Bowery who had heard rumors of Gregory Wick residing there. Although, the information was only 83% substantial according to the Agency's analytic unit.

For all Sin knew, this whole thing was a wild goose chase and he would have to spend weeks searching for someone who was miles away, assuming the kid was even still alive. The tendency for kids at The Bowery to use aliases and refuse to tell the staff their government names would make the mission all the more difficult.

Sin grimaced and took the elevator up to Carhart's office.

The area was emptier than usual considering Carhart usually had a variety of field agents, captains and generals coming in and out for one reason or another, but the people who were nearby gave Sin discreet looks of distaste.

He ignored them, once again numb to the treatment, and opened the General's door without knocking. As usual, it was unlocked.

"--much longer is he to be interrogated? If he hasn't broke by now--" Carhart broke off and his eyes rose to Sin. He froze slightly and his words caught before he frowned at Sin and turned his seat slightly, lowering his voice.

"If he hasn't broken by now, he either won't break or he has nothing to tell. Dragging this out is going to damage him and make him useless to us."

Sin sat down in the chair in front of Carhart's desk, uninterested in the discussion of their newest detainee.

"This is not about-- Listen, I'm being realistic here. My opinion is to make the decision to utilize him or to end this once and for all."

Sin could hear the faint sound of a woman's voice on the other end of the line but his gaze drifted out the window and his thoughts began to wonder so although he could hear what was being said, he didn't really pay attention to the words.

Carhart hung up a moment later. He spun the chair and fixed Sin with an intense stare before saying, "If you're not complying with the agreement, you shouldn't even be on this assignment."

"I'm taking my medication," Sin replied with a flat stare. "They even put me on some new dosing system. Shots that I take every so often instead of pills every day. I'm fine."

"But that's for one thing," Carhart snapped, leaning forward. "Not for the true problem-- not for the way you go batshit crazy and start slaughtering people around you in a blind rage. For that you're supposed to see Ann and I don't care what ridiculous love triangle you got yourself tied up in, boy. This is not something you can play around with."

"Whatever." Sin dropped his gaze and glared at the floor, unsurprised but still angry that as usual Carhart was too involved in his life.

"It's not 'whatever!'" Carhart yelled, slamming a fist on the table and truly losing his cool in a way Sin hadn't seen in a long time. The General ran a hand through his hair angrily and stood up, turning towards the window and staring down at the city, at the wasteland that stretched out beyond the east side of it.

His gaze rested on the destroyed bridge, the completely mutilated military base, the squares of land that had once been suburban neighborhoods in the southeast. "If you think Vivienne is going to go easy on you because of Boyd, you're wrong. And if you think that you're going to get away with the shit you get away with now when the new administration comes in and takes over, you're really wrong."

"Ah. The new admin." Sin raised an eyebrow and began to pick at a loose string in his cargo pants. He had no delusions about Vivienne ever going easy on him. He had no delusions about anyone in the Beaulieu family giving a shit about him anymore.

"When's that whole thing happening anyway?" Sin asked more out of a desire to get off the topic of Ann and Boyd than real interest.

"Within the next few months," Carhart said stiffly, slipping his hands in the pockets of his pants. "And from what I know of the woman who's coming over to run this place, she doesn't take chances for anyone. She is strictly by the book and for the book and she's bringing over a hand selected group of her own people. Don't be surprised if she brings her own super assassin. A real replacement for you. Someone to make you an unnecessary risk."

"Doesn't sound too bad to me."

"This is not a fucking game!" Carhart shouted once again, turning to glare daggers at the younger man. "Why don't you grow the fuck up and stop sulking like a little boy! You made the choice to screw your psychiatrist and now you have to deal with the consequences of that! You shouldn't have done that and you shouldn't be carrying on a relationship with your goddamn partner anyway! As far as I'm concerned all three of you are wrong and I don't want to hear about any more of this foolishness. When we're in the conference room, I don't want to see any traces of a fucking lover's quarrel!"

Sin grunted, eyes narrowing as irritation built inside him.

Carhart exhaled slowly and sat in his chair again but the frustration was still evident in his expression as he changed the subject stiffly, "Do you understand the mission profile?"

"To an extent," Sin replied flatly, gaze fixed on the window. "I want to know how we're going to extract."

"You'll have to get him to leave the facility with you and draw him far enough away so that our movements aren't conspicuous during extraction. Once you figure out a way to do this, use your comm unit to contact us and we'll send transport to a designated pick up spot."

Sin scoffed and shook his head. "How do you propose I get him to follow me?"

"That's your problem," Carhart replied pointedly. "And I would advise against throwing him over your shoulder and making a huge scene of it unless you want Vivienne to terminate you on the spot."

"Heh." Sin stood up, mouth in a tight line as he hefted the backpack over one shoulder. He turned to go but Carhart stood up again and crossed the room, grabbing Sin's upper arm before he could leave the room.

Sin turned and stared at the General, his eyes narrowed slightly.

"I'm not trying to be exceptionally hard on you," Carhart said unexpectedly, his grip on Sin tightening even as his blue eyes dropped briefly to the floor before meeting Sin's steady gaze again. "I know it seems that way but there is a lot going on. More than you know."

"It doesn't matter to me, General," Sin said flatly. "Your treatment of me isn't going to hurt my feelings. I don't expect anything from anyone anymore."

Carhart dropped his hand and stepped back, brow furrowing. "I know I've been impatient with the progress but--"

Sin began shaking his head, scowl darkening.

"--I'm just as dedicated to helping you as I've always been and--"

"Carhart--"

"--I want you to get through this but--"

"Just fucking stop!" Sin snarled so angrily that Carhart did just that. "I'm so fucking tired, *tired*, of you people and your fucking explanations and your reasons. I don't give a shit anymore, I'm sick of it. I'm sick of everyone. I don't *care*."

Genuine confusion clouded Carhart's surprised expression. "What are you talking about? I'm just trying to explai--"

"I don't want your explanation!" Sin shouted. "Fuck your explanation! You think I don't fucking notice how you've gone out of your way to get me to trust you all of these years but when the shit hits the fan and I'm really trying to confide in you, trying to trust you, trying to have *someone* fucking understand what I'm going through, you backed off? You were all for being my confidant until you realized how genuinely fucked up I am just like your stupid bitch girlfriend said!"

Carhart fell completely silent, at a loss of what to say, unable to deny it, and Sin continued angrily.

"You and Boyd are exactly the fucking same. I wish I had never let either of you make me believe that trusting anyone was worth it, that depending on anyone was fucking worth it. I needed you just like I needed him and both of you didn't want to hear what I had to say. But when I turn to someone who actually paid attention, I'm the bad guy, I should have known better, I should have taken societal moral standards and Agency policy into consideration when I have fucking voices talking to me and all I wanted was to forget things in the only way I knew how."

Sin shook his head, seething and angry; all the pent up frustration spilling out of him. "It's so fucking ridiculous that for years he's made ten thousand excuses for my violent behavior but I have a little sex with someone else and he acts like my actions are completely fucking evil and inexcusable and he writes me off completely. After all the times he's said people were stupid for expecting me to react like a normal fucking person, the first time it has something to do with him, he's fucking done, right? But at least in his case, he didn't know what the fuck was going on! You *knew* and you still didn't want to hear it!"

Carhart opened and closed his mouth a couple times before reaching for Sin again but the other man jerked away violently, his eyes burning like green fire as he glowered at the general.

"I swear to God, Carhart, if you fucking touch me right now I'll rip your arm off."

"Just calm the hell down, damn it!" Carhart exclaimed in aggravation. "You're saying Boyd won't listen to you but now you're the one refusing to listen to me. Just shut up for a minute and cool the hell down before you do something we'll both regret."

"Oh, I won't regret a damn thing," Sin growled. "I don't give a fuck anymore about what happens. If they hadn't switched me to those fucking shots I wouldn't even waste my time with medication anymore because I just. Don't. Care. Fuck everything and everyone. I wish I had never let either of you get to me. I wish I had just stayed the way I was before because then I wouldn't give a shit that people are so disappointing and selfish."

"Sin--" Carhart grabbed for Sin again and this time Sin pushed him backwards forcefully with both hands but Carhart just narrowed his eyes and grabbed the younger man, pushing him down into the chair again. "Sin, calm down and shut up."

"Go to hell."

Carhart ran his hands through his hair and exhaled loudly, staring down at Sin and looking at a complete loss. There was a tense silence between them for several long moments but after awhile, the anger bled out of Sin and he slumped down in the chair; he once again stared out the window in his now-typical empty despondence.

Looking guilty and helpless, Carhart crouched by the chair and forced Sin to meet his eyes. "You know I care about you, Sin. You're like my son--"

Sin glared at him. "Don't say that ever again."

"You can hate it all you want, but it's true," Carhart retorted unflinchingly.

"The only reason you give a shit about me is because of my father," Sin replied coldly.

"Out of some ridiculous sense of loyalty to him because you two were so *close*. Isn't that it?"

Carhart's eyes narrowed briefly. "No. That's not it."

"Bullshit."

"Don't tell me what the hell I think, kid. You have no idea what you're talking about. You just want to assume the worst about everyone right now because you're pissed off and angry at the world and I don't blame you but don't project your bullshit onto me." Carhart sighed in frustration. "I had a child before I came here and he died. My wife died. I had nobody and yes, Emilio became a really close friend of mine but that has nothing to do with why I want to help you, why I feel responsible for you."

"Oh?" Sin asked scornfully. "Then what was it, Zachary? What made you care so much about some random kid then?"

"Because I knew all of these years that what they did to you, what your father did to you, was wrong. They fucked you up so bad and I feel like I didn't do enough to stop it; if anything, I made it worse. I don't know how else to explain it to you, Sin. I really don't. I just wanted to look after you because I knew no one else wanted to do anything but use you because your father made sure you were such a good killer. And for all you think I worship the ground Emilio Vega walks on," Carhart said acidly, "I will never forgive him for fucking up a young child like that."

"Oh, well then it shouldn't bother you to find out that I killed him," Sin said coldly, eyes drilling into Carhart's in expectation for his response.

Carhart drew back quickly and this time he did flinch. A pained look crossed his face and he stood up, pressing a hand against his forehead as Sin watched him closely.

The General's hand slid down and pressed against his eyes as he sighed low and deep before saying quietly, "What happened wasn't your fault."

Sin's eyes narrowed into slits and he stared at Carhart suspiciously. "What are you talking about?"

"Your father-- Emilio--" Carhart broke off and looked at Sin finally but his eyes quickly moved away, his hands moving agitatedly through his hair as he struggled with his words, struggled to keep his eyes on Sin but was unable to.

"You weren't there, you don't know what happened," Sin snapped. "Don't try to tell me what happened so it's a version of events you're more comfortable with so you won't have to deal with the truth."

"I do know what happened," Carhart growled back, wiping a hand across his now flushed face. "This is all news to me-- I only found out after the raid... Emilio found out some things that he shouldn't have-- things about Connors. And instead of keeping his mouth shut, he tried to blackmail him with it and Connors sent a hit squad out for him. I don't know what happened after that-- I don't know how you escaped or why Connors still took you into the Agency although it was probably because he knew you didn't know he was behind it and you were too good an assassin to give up. But whatever the case was, Sin-- it wasn't your fault."

Sin just looked at Carhart evenly and didn't seem terribly surprised by the revelation. Ever since he'd remembered that night, the possibility of it having been an Agency hit had made the most sense. Sin just hadn't known why Emilio would have had a hit out on him and now that Connors was dead, it didn't really matter anymore.

"But that's not why he died," Sin grit out finally, shaking his head. "I shot him. I killed him. I went nuts and completely lost control and I killed two of them and him because I was too fucked up to distinguish between enemy and... and whatever."

"It wasn't your fault," Carhart repeated stubbornly as he turned away, tugging at the collar of his shirt and loosening his tie, sweating and red-faced and looking very much like he wanted to be very far from the conversation.

"Are you listening to me!" Sin shouted, jumping up and slamming his hands down on the desk as he glared at Carhart. "Stop fucking making excuses for me just because you don't want to accept the fact that I killed your friend! Why can't you just accept what I am, goddammit?"

"Is that what you think this is about?" Carhart asked with a hint of incredulity in his voice, turning to face Sin again. "You think I'm playing ignorant-- I'm ignoring the facts,

because if I don't I won't be able to look at you anymore? That I'll be forced to turn my back on you?"

Sin didn't respond automatically and he averted his gaze, not wanting to admit that yes, those were his thoughts and yes, he did fear that being the case.

After years of not believing in Carhart, somehow in the past two years he'd started thinking of the man as one of the few people he could trust. Sin didn't know when exactly it'd happened or why things had changed, but somewhere around his return from Monterrey and the coma, Sin had come to terms with the idea.

"I told you, Sin. This is all so complicated, you have no idea how complicated it is and I can't-- I can't explain it to you right now," Carhart said, voice heavy with regret and frustration. "But when I say it wasn't your fault, I'm not trying to deny some dark truth-- I'm not looking at you through rose-colored glasses."

Sin looked at Carhart again, brow furrowed.

"I see you for what you are and what you can do and I still love you like my own flesh and blood no matter how much you want to deny it," Carhart continued, his voice raw and honest and determined. "I know you've made mistakes, I know you've killed people and I know you're capable of ripping my throat out right now if you slipped into an episode and it doesn't change a damn thing. I still care for you, I still want to protect you and I'm not trying to make one excuse for you except for the fact that you're a messed up kid."

There was a sadness in Carhart's face, in his clear blue eyes, that made something in Sin's chest twist and ache. He didn't know why, he didn't even understand exactly what Carhart was feeling-- but the words had a profound effect on him and for a moment it was difficult for Sin to speak.

It was difficult for him to understand acceptance-- it was difficult to understand Ann forgiving him for Lydia, Carhart not blaming Sin for his father-- but the expression on Carhart's face made his words undeniable, genuine and even in that moment when a lot of heaviness should have lifted from Sin's shoulders; he still felt low and it all went back to Boyd.

He wondered what Boyd would have said had he found out the truth. Sin wished once again that he'd told him from the start; that at least he'd been able to tell him that day in the barracks. Things could have been so different but now it was just too late.

Sin and Carhart stared at each other in tense silence for a long moment before the intercom on Carhart's desk buzzed and a voice rang out, "They're ready for you in Conference Room 11, sir."

"Damn it all," Carhart swore and the moment was effectively broken.

Sin cleared his throat and was almost relieved by the interruption-- the situation and conversation had gotten too confusing and now Sin honestly didn't know what to think. He ran a hand through his hair and grimaced when it came back greasy from all of the product that Cynthia had put in it.

"I have to go-- we both have to go, actually. Your transport leaves in fifteen and you haven't even been down to the supply room," Carhart said distractedly, looking simultaneously embarrassed by his previous words and extremely aggravated by whatever else was on his mind. "Just don't go on this mission thinking the world is against you. Don't deliberately fuck it up like you used to in the past."

Sin's lips lifted in a humorless smile and he shrugged. "I'll try."

"I know self-destructive behavior is your strong point," Carhart replied dryly although his face was still intensely serious. "But things can get better. I really believe that, Sin. Just give it a chance. And even if..."

The General trailed off for a moment before continuing sternly, "Even if this inappropriate relationship between you and Boyd doesn't work out-- maybe you should take into consideration that it may be for the best. You still have to see each other for work-- he can't ignore you forever. I don't believe he will go on pretending to hate you forever if he truly thought of you as a friend and even if he did, the world doesn't end with Boyd. You have more to live for."

"Heh." It came out as a scoff and Sin lifted the backpack again. "I only cared about my life after he was in it. Why should I care now that he's not anymore?"

"Just because Boyd made you realize how life could be if you had a friend, a lover, doesn't mean those things end with your relationship with him. If anything, you're doing yourself and him a huge disservice by using him as your only saving grace. Do you know the kind of pressure that is to put on a twenty-two year old kid?" Carhart asked,

shaking his head in disapproval and Sin just looked away again, never having thought of it that way.

"Boyd isn't out of your life. He isn't dead and neither are you. He helped you, you may have even helped him, but don't use that as an excuse to give up. There are other people out there who may give you what he gave you. All Boyd did was show you that it was possible. And the way you two behave together-- the way you think of each other, it's unhealthy. Until things change, until both of you grow the fuck up and stop being so dramatic, you don't need to do more than go on missions together."

Sin frowned slightly, confused and intrigued. "Unhealthy? What do you mean?"

"For God's sake, Sin how could it not be? You're both so dependent on each other, it's ridiculous. The only reason you even think you need each other so much is because when you met, neither of you had anyone else. But you don't need each other. You don't need anyone. You may want each other but you won't die without each other. He's obviously come to that realization finally after all of the shenanigans with Harry and the Canada mission and Mexico-- now it's your turn to wake the hell up."

"But--" Sin gave Carhart a truly hopeless look and clenched his fists open and closed. All of it made sense; it really did. But even so... "But what if I can't? I'm not like him-- I don't know how to move on. He's all I have."

Carhart shrugged and began smoothing his tie and shirt. "You have to try to figure out how to be an autonomous being; until you become someone who can function fully on your own and who doesn't go down a spiral of suicidal thoughts whenever Boyd gives you the silent treatment, you don't deserve to be with him or anyone. It sounds cruel but it's true. If you think your issues are hard for you to deal with, how do you think it feels to be on the outside looking in and having no idea how to help or what to do?"

Sin didn't have an answer for that and if he did, he was sure it wouldn't be one that weighed in his favor.

The intercom buzzed again and Carhart walked out of the door with Sin. Carhart stopped Sin short in the lobby before he could head to the elevator bank.

"Take care of yourself out there. The kids at The Bowery are a product of war. The ones who aren't completely messed up from radiation poisoning are messed up from seeing more death than probably even you have. So watch it."

"I'll be fine," Sin muttered, ignoring the watchful eyes of the people in the area. "I've dealt with worse."

"Still." Carhart looked around quickly and stood up straighter, assuming a more authoritative posture. Despite the fact that everyone knew he was protective of Sin, he typically tried to be discreet about how casual they really could be. If anyone had heard Sin cursing and yelling at the General, they likely would have died of shock that Carhart stood by and let him do it.

But even then, Carhart hesitated and held Sin's gaze. He looked hesitant to let the younger man out of his sight; he appeared almost nervous, anxious, about something. "Will you keep what I said in mind?"

Sin shrugged and looked off down the hall to the elevators. "I guess." Now that the moment between them had passed, now that they were out of the confines of the office, Sin was uncomfortable with the conversation.

He was uncomfortable with the fact that Carhart's confession of caring for him like a son had such a profound effect on him, even more so than Boyd's confession of love had.

When Boyd had said he loved Sin, Sin didn't entirely know what it meant. He didn't know how to reciprocate and he obviously hadn't known what he was supposed to do in response or what Boyd had expected of him. But when Carhart said it... Somehow it seemed more unconditional and the fact that it mattered to Sin at all was startling.

Beyond that, Sin didn't entirely know what to make of Carhart's advice regarding Boyd except to recognize truth when he heard it. How could he expect anyone to go on wanting to be with him when he put so much responsibility in their hands-- when they constantly had to deal with their problems as well as all of his shit? How could he expect Boyd to be happy with him when Sin's entire life was a never ending rollercoaster of unexpected twists and turns?

But even though he knew it was true, Sin still didn't know if he could care anymore. Because he didn't want to get better for anyone else; he wanted to get better for Boyd. It was difficult to see the point of going through with it if Boyd wanted nothing to do with him, if he was going to become cold and silent unless they were forced to speak in meetings or on missions.

At the same time, it was better than nothing and there was still the glimmer of hope that someday their relations would improve through the forced communication...

Sin shook his head, feeling conflicted, and Carhart gave him a sympathetic look. "It's hard for me. I don't think he understands that. I don't know what to do."

"You'll figure it out. Look how far you've come in just a couple of years after fifteen years of living like a caged animal." Carhart raised an eyebrow. "Give yourself credit. You made a mistake. If he really means what he says and your situation isn't as superficial as I make it out to be, he will see that. If he doesn't, live with it, take what you can get from being partners and move the fuck on."

"I guess."

Carhart sighed and clapped Sin on the back. "Good luck with your mission."

Sin watched Carhart walk away and stood in the lobby for a brief moment before turning away from the direction of the elevator bank and moving towards the stairs.

The next several hours passed in a blur.

Sin moved automatically, collecting his comm unit and gear from the supply room and mindlessly putting on his ragged undercover outfit in the back of the transport van. The driver tried to avoid looking in the rearview mirror at the infamous Hsin Liu Vega naked, although he was obviously morbidly curious about the scars and tattoos that the senior agent had.

Before Sin could really even focus on the mission or figure out what exactly his plan was, they were arriving in Brooklyn. The van dropped him off and was driving away in a matter of seconds, leaving Sin to look around at his surroundings blandly.

The last time he'd had a mission in New York City was nearly a decade ago and it didn't look any better now than it had then. The van had dropped him off in a park across the East River from Manhattan and he had a very good view of what had once been one of the biggest travel destinations in the country as well as the shattered remains of what had once been the Brooklyn Bridge.

If he had an aerial view, Sin knew that he would see a large radius of scorched earth in what had once been midtown Manhattan; the damage was wider than the actual island itself. Water from the East and Hudson rivers had rushed up onto the damaged and

sunken borders of the island and although uptown Manhattan still existed in mainly one piece, he was sure the radiation damage had been incredibly high.

Sin shook his head briefly and turned away from the view, looking around and shoving his hands in his pockets. This particular area of Brooklyn had also sustained damage during the war and since it had been largely abandoned by the inhabitants, the military patrolled it diligently. The government didn't want another repeat of the Brighton incident; they didn't want bands of criminals taking over yet another city.

He walked down the road and looked around, wondering when the next patrol would come by and idly putting together a cover story although he knew it didn't necessarily have to be a good one. His role was to be a juvenile delinquent drifter and kids like that rarely told authority figures the truth.

His only real goal was for them to pick him up since it was way past the curfew for the area. After they would find his false identification which claimed that he was only seventeen, he would get carted off to The Bowery. He felt that posing as a teenager was a huge stretch but he didn't care too much either way.

Walking in the darkness of a ghost town should have been spooky but Sin just found the eerie silence calming. It gave him time to think back on his argument with Carhart but no matter how closely he dissected Carhart's words and advice, Sin came up empty.

He just didn't know what to do or what to say to Boyd to make the situation better. He didn't even know how to explain everything that had happened now that things were so tense between them. He didn't even know if it would matter anymore.

It was entirely possible that Boyd agreed with Carhart's assessment of their situation and even though Sin had already come to the conclusion that things would never be the same between them again, the possibility that Boyd could think so negatively of their time together made Sin feel even lower than he'd already felt.

Frowning, Sin squinted into the distance and saw headlights of what looked like a jeep coming towards him. Relief flooded through Sin and he continued his casual stroll along the street, waiting in anticipation for the patrol guards. He was quite thankful that the show was about to start and he would have something to distract him from the miserable mess of his real life.

Chapter 26

It seemed like a lifetime ago when Boyd had sat in his customary space in the conference room as Sin had covertly molested him beneath the table. So many things had happened between that day and the present meeting that it was hard to even think of that moment as something that had actually happened in reality.

The more Boyd reflected on it, the easier it was to realize that the current situation was more like reality than that incident. Monterrey had always seemed like a dream; his entire sexual relationship with Sin had always seemed so unbelievable. The current issues; the tension, the drama and the dysfunction was a lot closer to the reality Boyd had grown accustomed to from the beginning.

Boyd glanced at Sin's empty seat and couldn't help feeling anxious about the idea of seeing the other man and their impending conversation. It wasn't something he was necessarily looking forward to but it was something he knew he had to do.

He looked at Jeffery and Owen but they seemed oblivious to Sin's absence, as if they had never really expected him to be there. It was slightly odd and Boyd wondered if maybe they knew something that he didn't.

After a moment, the door opened and Carhart came in. The General looked weary and aggravated. His black button down shirt looked slightly wrinkled and his hair was unkempt, a distinct difference from the typical way the man carried himself during work.

When Carhart shut the door, it was with a finality that implied the meeting was starting now and he wasn't in the mood to procrastinate.

"This isn't a briefing," he said automatically before even sitting down. "There's no mission at the moment; we're still in a state of purgatory with Janus information which is probably good for all of you considering you've all been busy with other things. But it's lousy for me since I actually care about finishing with them for good."

Carhart exhaled slowly and narrowed his eyes. His tone, his posture, everything about him screamed impatience and irritation even if he gave no indication as to why. His last comment almost seemed accusatory, as if he thought no one in his unit actually took what they did seriously.

Owen's somewhat bleary expression twisted slightly in paranoia, as if he thought the comment was especially aimed at him.

"Anyway, Sin is unfortunately on assignment at the moment so he won't be here for this." Carhart shook his head, eyebrows drawing together and he seemed especially irritated by that.

"I hadn't realized he was cleared for active duty again," Jeffrey commented idly.

Boyd had just been wondering when Sin would get back when he realized what Jeffrey said. "What do you mean?" Boyd looked at Jeffrey initially but when he turned to Carhart it was clear he was really asking his superior. Doug hadn't explained but Boyd thought Carhart would. "When wasn't he active?"

Carhart looked at Boyd evenly for a moment before shifting his gaze, an almost warning stare, to the other two men in the room. "For the past three months he has not been active. It's something that isn't going to be discussed now."

Jeffrey looked like he wanted to say something but he remained silent and stiffly nodded while Owen just stared at them just as sleepily although once again, he didn't appear very surprised.

Boyd looked between the three with slightly narrowed eyes, feeling suspicious and confused. He didn't like being the only one who didn't know a crucial bit of information and for some reason in this unit that only seemed to happen when it was about Sin. It was just like when everyone had known that Sin had killed Jessica and Boyd had only learned of it because of Jeffrey's casual comment.

It was frustrating; people automatically distrusted his ability to function or be professional when information about Sin was presented to him. Maybe it wasn't an entirely unfair assessment given some of his reactions in the past but when there was something affecting the unit then it didn't seem particularly helpful to leave only him out.

And the knowledge about Sin's status just raised more questions for him-- why hadn't Sin been active, what had changed that made him active now and was that what Sin had wanted to tell him? But Carhart seemed far more serious than normal and Boyd knew enough not to ask. He would wait until later, when he could at least get an estimation from Carhart as to when Sin would return.

"If this isn't a briefing then why are we meeting?" Boyd asked instead.

Carhart steepled his fingers together and stared hard at Boyd. His eyebrows were drawn slightly together and he seemed to be picking his words very carefully before speaking. "In the past several months the Agency has begun working with a certain individual and that individual has agreed to act as an informant for us."

Before anyone could speak, Carhart held up a hand to stop them. "At this time I won't be telling you the identity of the individual because this person is currently on the premises, being interrogated thoroughly..." Carhart trailed off for a moment and cleared his throat with a frown.

"The situation is volatile," he said after a moment, choosing a different path of explanation. "And the entire arrangement may fall through for a number of reasons: How trustworthy this person turns out to be, if this person lies and whether or not Vivienne thinks it is worth it to bring them into our unit."

Boyd stared at Carhart in a mixture of surprise and confusion. "Bring into-- Wait, what? Is this person going to be an informant or a partner?"

All their other informants had simply been people they consulted with externally; it wasn't like Warren Andrews ever saw the inside of the Agency. Boyd was caught so off guard even by the implication of someone new joining the unit that it took him a second to realize Carhart had mentioned the person was being interrogated.

That could be any number of people, including probably a staggering amount Boyd didn't even know about-- but it made him wonder if Carhart was referring to one of the three people he did know of: the detainee he'd interrogated, Ethan Bruce, or Thierry. Since Thierry was no longer being interrogated, could Carhart possibly be referring to "Jane Doe" or Ethan?

"It's still up in the air. It all depends on cooperation and it ultimately comes down to what Vivienne thinks is best for the Agency and what makes the most sense for the unit. It's entirely possible that we will work very closely with this person but it's not definite yet," Carhart replied vaguely. He seemed extremely hesitant to say anything specific or to give away too much information.

Boyd watched Carhart seriously for a moment, trying to discern from the man's expression and mannerisms what exactly this was about.

The possibility of an unknown person joining the team was completely bizarre to Boyd, simply because it was so out of the norm. Even just imagining an agent transferring from another unit was strange. It had been clear from the other trainees that even the other Level 9's knew next to nothing about what happened in Carhart's team. For Boyd's mother to be considering something like this, there had to be a lot more going on than Boyd knew about.

What worried him was the timing. Sin had apparently been off duty for awhile and, knowing Sin and the Agency, it couldn't be for a good reason. Boyd still thought it was possible that Sin had been placed on forced leave after going into the medic wing but now he wondered if there was something far more serious going on.

"If this person cooperated fully and worked very closely with the team, if it all went completely smoothly... Would this person be a replacement or an addition?" Boyd asked finally, keeping his thoughts out of his expression and his tone calm.

"If things remain stable, they would be an addition," Carhart replied without hesitation. "But as of now, I'm still not sure how much of one. I'm not sure if they will be inducted as a full-fledged agent as you were or if they will just sit in on meetings and help with information."

"Hmm." That made Boyd feel better at least, as did the thinly veiled surprise on Owen and Jeffrey's faces when he glanced at them. At least the two of them hadn't been aware of this either. "When will we know?"

"I'm not sure of that either," Carhart admitted with a grimace. "A few weeks, maybe longer. Hopefully it's sooner. If this person has information on Janus, we need it now. Too much time has gone by and I'm starting to have doubts that they're just off licking their wounds."

Boyd nodded; he had to admit that by now he was feeling that same doubt. Janus wouldn't stay quiet for this long without a very good reason; they were too committed, too organized.

"How did you find this person?" Jeffrey spoke up, his expression tight as he watched Carhart. "And even with interrogation, how can we trust them? I know it will be up to the Acting Marshal, but what if they turn on us?"

Carhart's gaze seemed to unconsciously shift to Boyd before he focused on Jeffrey entirely. "Those are questions I really can't answer at the moment, Jeffrey. I don't know

if we can trust this person, I don't even know what their true motives are and really this decision isn't up to me. When I started-- When this all came about, I did not expect that they would become an informant at all."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly. "What did you think they'd be?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Boyd saw that Jeffrey glanced at him before returning his gaze to Carhart, likely having been wondering the same thing. Owen was watching the three of them with a surprisingly alert gaze considering how tired he had seemed before the topic came up. He looked confused but also contemplative.

Carhart shook his head, beginning to look impatient. "That isn't relevant to this discussion or relevant for you to know."

Boyd watched Carhart a moment before he nodded and looked away.

There was something odd about the entire situation, although maybe Carhart was just annoyed because he'd already pointed out he could only say so much and they kept asking questions. Boyd didn't understand what Carhart had expected but Boyd decided not to dwell on it. This would probably all make a lot more sense at a later date and there was no point stressing himself out trying to figure it out ahead of time with little to no information.

"If this person ends up working with us, there will be a surge in missions because they have a wealth of knowledge that could help us and not just with Janus, but with Di Zhi. So prepare yourselves." Carhart's eyes flicked from Boyd to Jeffrey to Owen and then back again before he nodded curtly and excused himself from the conference room, seeming to be in a hurry to get out.

As soon as the door shut, Jeffrey, Owen and Boyd exchanged a look.

"What the hell was that about?" Boyd asked them with raised eyebrows.

Jeffrey looked at Owen, who frowned distractedly. "I got nothin'," Owen said, leaning against the table with his head resting on one hand. "He's been like this for awhile. Crankier by the meeting, too."

"We've had a few meetings with minor updates on Janus," Jeffrey explained when he saw Boyd's quizzical expression. "Nothing major has occurred but I did notice about a month ago he seemed to become especially tense."

"Tense?" Owen said incredulously. "The dude's super stressed, man! He's like," he waved his hands around, "up to the ozone, ready to snap."

Jeffrey raised an eyebrow. "If I could decipher that I'm sure I'd say you're exaggerating."

"I'm not talking code here, Mr. Crypto-bot," Owen said lazily. "I'm just saying, he's impatient and things aren't funny to him like they used to be."

"What happened a month ago?" Boyd asked before Jeffrey could respond to Owen.

"No clue," Owen said, drawing his eyebrows down. "One meeting he's mostly normal and the next he's looking at us like we suck for even thinking funny thoughts." He perked up slightly and eyed Jeffrey and Boyd in a mixture of seriousness and paranoia. "I'd lose that game, by the way. Hardcore. If he goes psychic I'm screwed."

Jeffrey rolled his eyes. "I really don't think you need to worry about General Carhart developing telepathic powers."

"Hey, you don't know what they do in the medical buildings," Owen insisted. "It's like sci-fi central over there. I've heard stories you wouldn't believe--"

"Let's not test that theory," Jeffrey cut Owen off impatiently then turned to Boyd. "We don't know. No one does. The only stresser I know of recently was Sin flipping out and that was well before General Carhart acted this strangely."

"Sin what?" Boyd asked sharply. He looked between the two of them; Jeffrey stared at him evenly and Owen seemed confused.

"What, they actually managed to keep the rumors out of training?" Owen looked as though he didn't know whether to be impressed or disappointed. "Crazy. They must've put some force field in place..."

"What happened?" Boyd asked more seriously when it wasn't immediately explained.

"I dunno, man," Owen said with a frown, looking mildly uncomfortable. He waved a hand around helplessly. "He just... snapped. Took a lot of people out but no crazy nasty injuries. Freaked the shit out of everyone. Guess he'd just been on an elevator." He looked pointedly at Jeffrey. "Maybe the music made him nuts. Could've been a trigger for brainwashing..."

"The music didn't do anything, he's just acting exactly the same as usual," Jeffrey said impatiently, then turned to Boyd with narrowed eyes. "I don't know why you always act so surprised when he goes crazy. He's a psychopathic killer and it doesn't matter how many collars and drugs we stick him with, he's always going to be that way. It's mere luck that no one was killed."

Boyd stared at the two of them, his expression blank as he tried to figure out what he felt. He was too dismayed and surprised by the information to know how to react.

He'd thought Sin had been doing better aside from the insomnia. In fact, it had seemed like every time he saw Sin since starting training, the man was looking healthier and more in control. Boyd hadn't suspected that in fact everything was going backward.

"When?"

Jeffrey and Owen looked at each other as if to help each other remember.

"Probably... three months?" Jeffrey said.

"Yeah, weird," Owen said thoughtfully, looking over at Boyd. "It wasn't that long after you were sucked into the vortex."

Boyd thought about that. Three months? Nearly the entirety of the time he'd been in training?

How had he not heard about it before then? Not Thierry, not Kassian, not anyone he'd overheard talking the times he'd been on compound... It seemed pretty obvious to him that Kassian must not have known because he would have said something but still... How could Boyd have been completely out of the loop on something so important? And what had happened to Sin during that time? What had triggered an episode?

This didn't make sense to Boyd. If that had happened so early and if Sin had really dropped off the radar for a bit, why had he shown up at the training center not too long after that? Whatever the Agency had decided to do with Sin must have worked pretty quickly. Had they used the box?

Had that actually been what Sin had wanted to talk about that first time he'd shown up? That he'd snapped and hurt someone? Or had it been something else, something related to why he'd felt the need to sleep with Ann?

Every time Boyd thought he knew what Sin may have wanted to say, something else seemed to come up. It just underscored to him how much went unsaid between the two of them, how many issues there really were underneath it all.

It shouldn't be this difficult to figure out what Sin would have wanted to say. If they'd been less dysfunctional, if they'd trusted each other properly, if they'd treated each other like equals, if Sin had actually believed in him and hadn't been keeping secrets... then there should have only been one issue this could be. There shouldn't have been a new, plausible answer every time Boyd considered it.

How much more didn't he know about?

"Details," Boyd said firmly. "What happened? Where?"

"Look, we don't know much, seriously," Owen said with a somewhat apologetic expression. "It's all rumors and conjecture and all that jazz. Basically we heard he was on an elevator, he started talking to himself or something? And then he freaked out--"

"Freaked out how?" Boyd persisted.

Owen made a face. "I wasn't there, man, I'm sorry. I just heard he freaked out and then all these people got involved and he took 'em all out before the cavalry arrived."

Boyd felt weary all of a sudden. He tilted his face toward the table and rested his forehead in his hand. "How did he stop?"

"I dunno. Drugs?" Owen offered.

Boyd's immediate thought was, *'I should have been there,'* but following that he wondered whether that was true.

He had his own life to live; he couldn't afford to drop everything every time Sin seemed to be having trouble. Not because he thought Sin was unimportant but because somewhere along the line he'd come to think of that as his role when it really wasn't.

At one time he'd thought that was an acceptable way to live; he'd thought what they had between them was important enough to preclude anything else. At one time he may have even felt guilty for not being available this time, for not helping Sin when he'd needed it.

But Sin had been at the Agency long before Boyd had been involved so it wasn't like Boyd's presence was necessary.

Although in the past Boyd had been able to stop Sin from getting too out of control and Boyd thought that if he'd been there this time maybe he could have helped again, part of him felt like it wasn't his problem. There was a lot he didn't understand about what had been happening with Sin but something Boyd had come to realize in the past several months was that the co-dependence he and Sin had started to form between them wasn't particularly healthy on either side.

"Then what happened?" Boyd asked, tilting his hand enough to peer at the two of them.

Jeffrey shrugged. "Who knows? He was taken off active duty and disappeared for awhile, we still had meetings here and there without him, and General Carhart became increasingly irritable. The fact that Vega's on a solo now is news to me. Clearly whatever he's been up to is acceptable for the Powers That Be to return him to duty."

"I just hope he's okay," Owen said with a frown. "Especially if we're getting some new person. Last thing we need is some long drawn out drama as he gets all angry-face at the noob who gets pissed back. No offense," he looked at Boyd, "but it was bad enough with you. I'm not sleeping nearly enough to wanna go through that again."

Boyd straightened in his seat as the topic turned to one he was more interested in talking about right now. As much as it did concern him to find out Sin had had an episode, it had happened months ago and he couldn't do anything until Sin returned. The more pressing issue now was trying to find out what that possibility of a new person had been about, since Owen and Jeffrey were the only two people he could talk to about this.

"Do you have any idea who it is?" Boyd asked them.

Jeffrey shook his head, looking annoyed. "No." He frowned and absently straightened a stray sheet of paper in front of him. "We hadn't heard anything of that either."

"Maybe it's Carhart's arch-nemesis," Owen offered helpfully. "Could explain why he's so touchy. We're about to be infiltrated by a bad guy and Carhart's the only one standing in the way. He'll have to finesse his way around doing his job while keeping our enemy in the dark. It'll be like Lex Luthor joins the Justice League."

"Can you ever be serious?" Jeffrey snapped.

Owen stared at him. "No?"

Jeffrey gave Owen a disgusted look and grabbed his briefcase from the floor to put away the few sheets of paper he'd had in front of him. "This is a waste of time. We don't know anything." He sounded personally affronted that he hadn't known before this meeting about the possibility of a new person.

"Carhart said they'd be an addition," Boyd said contemplatively. "But who has that sort of knowledge on Di Zhi *and* Janus, and could equally be used as an informant or a field agent? Not to mention who had to be recruited, who wasn't already in the Agency, and who had to be interrogated first?"

Boyd drew his eyebrows down thoughtfully and met Jeffrey and Owen's gazes. "That's not normal, is it? If the Agency recruits they don't typically interrogate before clearing for higher confidentiality, right? They'd just vet the person first and let them earn the chance for a place like this?"

Their silence and even stares was all the answer he needed and Boyd leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed. Although it was possible they would be dealing with the woman he'd interrogated it didn't seem quite right; why they would trust her as an agent? But it did make sense why she'd need to be interrogated first...

And as for Ethan, Boyd hadn't heard anything to imply the man knew about rebel groups; then again, Ethan had been running Terra for awhile now so he probably had some sort of connections. But could he be an agent? The man had held his own against Boyd well enough, he supposed, but it still seemed strange...

"This doesn't make sense," Boyd said.

"Tell me about it." Jeffrey flipped his briefcase closed and stood with finality. "I'm far past the point of trying to understand the Admin or wanting to waste my time sitting around chatting about it. They'll do what they want, we'll deal with it as needed. What we think is meaningless."

He didn't give either of them a chance to respond before he walked out and shut the door a little harder than normal behind him.

Owen looked at Boyd with exaggeratedly wide eyes and raised eyebrows. "Ooh, he's pissed," he said under his breath, seeming a mixture of entertained and bemused. "Taking it personally, our little code collector."

Boyd shook his head with a sigh and grabbed his messenger bag. "I suppose he's right, though. There's no reason to wonder about it when our input is irrelevant at this point."

"Irrelevance shmirrelevance," Owen said dismissively with a wave of his hand. "And you can quote me on that and say it three times fast when plastered."

Boyd felt a faint sense of amusement despite himself. It was good to know some people hadn't changed at all in the last three months; Owen was still as random and unaffected as ever. "It sounded difficult enough when sober so I think I'll pass," Boyd said dryly.

"Exactly," Owen said with a satisfied smirk as he pointed at Boyd. "Imagine the shenanigans a slur would entail."

Sliding his messenger bag's strap over his shoulder, Boyd tilted his head and watched Owen a moment in bemusement before he turned and headed toward the door. "I'll see you later."

"You bet your momma's sweet pie you will," Owen said with a yawn that distorted the last word. He frowned sleepily. "That kinda disturbs me, actually."

Boyd paused at the door and quirked an eyebrow at Owen. "The double entendre?"

"The baking," Owen said and shivered lightly. "The Marshal in an apron is like... Carhart in a tutu. Also, I'm terrified of her pie and I've never even seen it."

"I don't think she makes pie," Boyd said, slightly bewildered as to whether Owen was actually taking this seriously or if he was just going with a tangent like usual.

"Well she wouldn't put enough sugar in it regardless," Owen said decisively then dropped his forehead with a thunk onto his crossed arms on the table, looking as though he was ready to take a nap.

Boyd stared at Owen and had no idea how to even respond to that so he just shook his head to himself and left, quietly shutting the door behind him.

He was alone in the elevator bank as he waited for an elevator to arrive. He'd thought about tracking down Carhart to determine when Sin would return but it seemed pretty clear to him that Carhart wouldn't be very helpful right now given his mood so he decided to wait.

He was idly staring back down the hallway he'd come from when he heard the ding of the elevator behind him and he turned. It was a complete surprise to find the elevator empty except for Ann Connors, who met his startled gaze without much of an expression.

He hesitated briefly, waiting to see if she was getting off on this floor but when she simply held a hand out to hold the elevator door for him he paused then stepped into the elevator, hit the button for the ground floor, and leaned against the opposite corner from her.

Boyd avoided eye contact with her, feeling uncomfortable with her proximity. Although that feeling didn't surprise him, what did was his lack of anger.

With Jessica, even the implication of any intimacy with Sin had made him jealous and irrational. But with Ann the situation should have made him react far worse; he knew for a fact she'd slept with Sin and it had happened after Boyd had acknowledged and confessed his feelings to Sin.

He would have expected to feel furious and agitated right now; to feel jealous and upset. Instead, all he felt was the same sort of vague dislike and discomfort that he would have felt around her regardless of whether she'd ever had sex with Sin and a sense of weariness about this all.

Although he felt mildly irritated, more than anything it was the fact that of all the elevators that had to appear, of all the times for no one else to be in there, it had to be Ann Connors who was there on this day. He would have preferred to avoid her entirely, especially since he hadn't had the chance to talk to Sin about anything yet.

"Hello, Boyd," she said politely, studying him evenly. "I was looking for you."

Boyd blinked and looked at her sidelong, studying her in return. He really hadn't been expecting that response but he couldn't read anything in her expression. "Why?" he asked, mildly suspicious.

Ann raised her eyebrows slightly and opened her mouth to speak but the elevator stopped and several people got in. She pursed her lips briefly, folding her hands neatly behind her yellow trench coat and said, "Would you like to go for coffee? I need to speak with you privately about a mutual acquaintance."

Boyd watched her a moment before looking away. He didn't recognize the other people who had gotten on the elevator and they didn't seem to be paying attention to the conversation but since no one else was talking it would be pretty difficult to ignore.

He knew she was referring to Sin and he thought about saying no; even if he didn't feel outright enmity for her it didn't mean he wanted to be around her any longer than he had to. But he was at the point where he just wanted his questions addressed, regardless of what the answers may be. And given his history with Sin it was possible that despite their best efforts when they talked about this it could turn into another pointless argument.

"Okay," he said simply, keeping his expression unreadable. Hopefully anyone listening would think they were talking about Ryan instead.

She nodded and appeared pleased although it was barely discernible in her expression. When they exited the elevator and started towards the main exit, Ann cast him a sideways glance. "Would you mind going off the grounds? This is an Agency matter but one that would be more likely to be ignored by random civilians than the staff here."

"That's fine," Boyd said, uncaring. He preferred that anyway since regardless of what she had to talk about, if it had anything to do with Sin he didn't want to be discussing it on compound.

They walked into the frigid coldness silently and didn't exchange two words during the five minute walk it took to get to the main parking lot. The silence was awkward and although Ann looked carefully neutral, her posture was very stiff and gave away the fact that she did feel some measure of discomfort.

However, it wasn't until they reached her silver Bentley that she spoke again. "There's a cafe five minutes from here. A lot of agents frequent it but it's also popular with the litigators and CEOs from the financial district, which is likely the reason why it hasn't closed down like most other privately owned restaurants in the city."

Boyd nodded. He didn't feel like having an inane conversation on the way over and he didn't particularly care where they went. He just got in the car when she unlocked the doors and he idly looked out the window during the short drive.

Cafe Milan was a lot nicer than he expected it to be but Ann had likely been right in her assumption that it only survived due to the high-end patronage. Not very many private businesses had survived the economic collapse and restaurants had been one of the largest casualties due to the inflation and rarity of fresh meat and produce.

They were seated in a back corner near the window where their conversation was likely to go unnoticed. The place was half full although there were several people waiting at the counter for orders to go.

Ann and Boyd stared at each other blankly for a moment and it seemed as though Ann would finally speak but the waitress arrived. Neither of them were there for the purpose of eating but Boyd ordered black tea and an English muffin regardless while Ann just got black coffee and a blueberry muffin.

"This is awkward," Ann said finally as she watched the waitress leave. "As much for me as I'm sure it is for you but regardless I needed to speak with you regarding your partner."

"Then talk," Boyd said simply, not wanting to beat around the bush. "I'm listening."

"Well." Ann leaned back in the seat and crossed one knee over the other as she gazed at him critically. "I realize you've been below radar these past few months-- how much do you know?"

"About what? You sleeping with him or the fact he apparently hurt some people and was only recently cleared for active duty again?" There was no cruelty or accusation in his words or expression as he met her gaze evenly.

Ann nodded briefly. "Then you don't know."

It was a statement more than a question and she paused as the waitress returned and set down their orders.

Boyd waited until the waitress left before he asked, "Know what?"

Ann took a sip of her coffee and made a face. Obviously the gourmet wasn't very gourmet but he didn't know why she was surprised about that. "Sin is my patient," she replied. "After his episode at the medical wing, he was put into the Fourth Floor Detainment Center and into the box. Your mother wanted him terminated."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly and he watched her seriously. He wasn't terribly surprised by what she said about the usage of the box, and although initially he hadn't expected her to say she was Sin's doctor, he supposed it made sense. After all, she was Kassian's psychiatrist and that would explain why Sin had been at her office. It did nothing to explain why Sin and she had slept together but he would wait on that.

What he found somewhat surprising and a little alarming was the fact that his mother had been willing to terminate Sin. When his mother made a decision she kept with it, so obviously there had been more to it; she'd changed her mind somehow before she'd made a final declaration or she'd given an alternative to his termination.

Before Ann could elaborate with the obvious 'but' hanging in the air, he asked, "How bad was it? All I heard was he snapped in an elevator and hurt some people."

Ann pursed her lips again and seemed to consider the question carefully. "It actually wasn't as bad as it could have been but it was a question of whether or not it would matter to continue on with an agent who is obviously so mentally unstable. In the end she agreed to give Sin one last chance before termination. The conditions were that he would undergo extreme psychiatric care and take medication."

"Medication?" Boyd echoed, partially doubtful and mostly confused. "For what? Why would he need psychiatric care for responding to something that happened?"

Ann stared at him oddly. "What do you mean?"

"Well, what happened in the elevator? He doesn't just randomly attack people for no reason," Boyd said patiently. "There's typically a catalyst, many times involving some sort of abuse or threat toward him. He reacts violently because that's the way he knows how to respond and subdue the danger."

"There was no catalyst," Ann replied evenly, eyes focused entirely on Boyd as she seemed to analyze everything from his expression to his posture.

Boyd searched her expression, partially confused by the answer and partially frustrated by the fact that she wasn't explaining this better. "There had to be," he said calmly.

"Something happened in there, I don't know what. Maybe it wasn't blatant, maybe it was just his claustrophobia combined with something else. He isn't some psychopathic asshole who just decides to hurt people for no reason. Something made him snap."

Ann chewed a piece of her muffin slowly as she studied him. "That is exactly what happened but it doesn't make him an asshole. It just makes him someone who needs help. Sin has severe psychiatric problems, Boyd."

Boyd was becoming mildly irritated by the way she wouldn't just bluntly explain. "How does he have severe psychiatric problems?" he persisted with just the slightest hint of frustration.

"No psychiatrist has ever been able to help before and every diagnosis I've heard of him receiving has been largely unfounded. DID, schizophrenia... he doesn't fit those categories," Boyd continued. "I'm not saying he's in the same mindset as everyone else but so far it's pretty much seemed like cause and effect with extreme reactions on his part that don't fit with society due to his upbringing. I don't see how nothing at all happened in the elevator and he suddenly had a psychotic break. If you have an actual diagnosis that makes sense or if you know something I don't then tell me because otherwise I'm not going to believe you."

There was a brief silence as Ann studied him clinically before saying neutrally, "I find it baffling that you think him ripping someone's throat out with his teeth because they threatened and mocked him is sane behavior. I'm not excusing the behavior of the captain in question but it was an unwarranted response and even Sin is aware of that." Ann set down her coffee firmly and shook her head. "You've seen him when he has an episode. He told me it's happened in front of you on more than one occasion. Are you denying that the behavior he displays is psychotic?"

Boyd opened his mouth to immediately deny what she was saying. He wasn't trying to argue that it was normal behavior, but rather that humans gauged their reactions based on the society or way they were raised. If, due to Sin's upbringing, his response was to rip people apart when threatened then it didn't necessarily make him psychotic. Or maybe it made him psychotic by a 'normal' person's upbringing but not necessarily to Sin, who knew no other way. It was, in a way, Sin's understanding of the world.

But he stopped himself before he spoke, made himself really think about that argument.

Was it true? Had he ever heard of a society where that example would be accepted?

Boyd had always excused Sin's behavior because he knew how Emilio had raised him. But hadn't Sin told him that he'd had issues even before Emilio had arrived, that he'd thought it was only Emilio's intervention that had allowed Sin to deal with whatever darkness he had inside?

Boyd had always thought that if Sin had been raised in a horrible environment, who could blame him? Yet even the little bit Sin had told Boyd about life with his mother at the prostitution parlor in Hong Kong hadn't involved anything with ripping people apart.

If Boyd's argument was because of how Sin was raised, wouldn't it make more sense if Sin dealt with issues through sex? Which, actually, could have been partially what had happened elsewhere in Sin's life but not related to the incident in the elevator.

Boyd suddenly remembered Sin in his kitchen the night Sin had returned with Lou's necklace; Sin's eyes had been nearly glowing in the dark as Boyd had crouched next to him, not knowing who or what he was dealing with. That had been the first time Sin had spoken while still displaying that rather crazed look in his eyes. He'd told Boyd that he couldn't control himself when it was like that; he'd said he'd felt one step removed.

Boyd brought one hand to his head, lightly putting pressure on his temples.

So many people had been telling him for so long that there was something seriously wrong with Sin but Boyd had never wanted to believe them. Maybe he'd thought that they were just trying to dismiss Sin, that they didn't understand him; that they wanted to label him and shove him away.

Had Boyd been too close to Sin, too defensive of someone he felt was vulnerable? Had he seen himself in Sin? Had he subconsciously wanted to be Sin's Lou, to be the person who appeared out of nowhere as the protector?

His stomach clenched as he realized that he still wanted to believe there was nothing wrong with Sin, but...

But now that he was a few steps away from Sin, now that he wasn't letting himself get carried away by the notion of injustice and mistreatment or even love, now that he was talking to someone who had a background in psychology and who had been in the position to determine what was really happening...

Now he had to admit that through pure textbook definitions, the episodes Sin had could be described as some form of psychotic.

Maybe he'd always been too afraid to acknowledge that, as if he would be giving up on Sin. Maybe he'd been incapable of seeing 'psychotic' as something that was just an illness and not something inherently bad. Which was ridiculous since he'd gone to college for psychology, and yet...

And yet after that, he'd basically had his own psychotic break and his mother had condemned him for it he'd become ashamed of what he'd seen as his own weakness and he'd gone into denial about what had really happened.

Part of him had probably always been unwilling to acknowledge any part of what others thought of Sin because he'd thought he'd be giving up on Sin; that he'd stop being Sin's protector and Sin would stop trusting him as someone who was willing to look beyond instant judgments. But if Sin truly did have an illness, then Boyd's mindset hadn't been any more fair to Sin than anyone else's had been.

In trying to support Sin, Boyd had learned to automatically deny a basic part of Sin; a part that Sin couldn't control.

"Fuck," he whispered, so quietly that he didn't even know if Ann would hear him.

He drew in a deep breath and looked up to meet her gaze evenly. "What's his diagnosis?" He seemed more open-minded this time, less likely to immediately deny her opinion.

"Well there's two," Ann said with a slight frown. "Honestly, I'm having trouble with this discussion and I hope you don't make it public knowledge that I've approached you with the intentions of betraying confidentiality but I felt it was imperative that you know everything."

Boyd shook his head, feeling tired by the revelation. "I won't, I'd never do that. I just... I want to understand." He looked at her more sincerely. "Please. He and I... We're terrible at communicating. We always manage to get into arguments when it's something that actually needs to be said. He's tried to talk to me already and I didn't give him the chance precisely because I knew that would happen. I was going to talk to him today but he's gone."

He leaned against the table, his hands absently wrapped around his tea mug to feel the warmth although he didn't break eye contact with her. "I just want to remove all possibility of misinterpretation and miscommunication. I'm tired of it. And if I tried to ask

him what his diagnosis is to try to actually understand what's happening with him, I don't know if he'd even be able to tell me. If you can't tell me the diagnosis then I'd like at least some guidance as to what's going on."

Ann frowned slightly and looked a combination of troubled and disturbed by his sincerity. After a moment she sighed and turned her gaze out the window briefly. "I came to you despite the circumstances because you're his partner and you are the only person who will have a lasting effect on what he does, who will be able to influence him. I didn't want to bring up the other stuff but it's unavoidable. I don't want you to think I have feelings for Sin other than what I would feel about any other patient. I know it's hard to believe given what happened but it's true. Had I known the two of you were in a relationship, it would not have happened at all, not that I'm attempting to shift blame to Sin. If anything the fault is mine more than anyone."

She picked up her cup again and looked at Boyd. "I came to you because as his doctor, I worry for him and he will not speak to me and has ignored my calls and his sessions since you and he fought. I worry about what that means or what it will mean for the future when his medication runs out and what that will mean for Vivienne if he has another episode. I realize I haven't answered your question but I wanted you to know my reasons for speaking with you."

Boyd couldn't understand how she possibly could have slept with Sin and still considered him to be just another patient, that there was nothing special about him to her that made her go beyond the typical roles. But he didn't know the whole story still and he almost didn't care anymore. What was done was done. He was tired of feeling betrayed by something that was apparently insignificant to everyone but him.

And what was more important at this point was the fact that Sin was potentially in danger. Boyd could be angry or dismayed all he wanted about what Ann and Sin had done but what the hell would it matter if Sin was actually terminated?

Boyd sighed finally and looked away, absently watching a man in a perfectly pressed business suit become increasingly haughty as he demanded a replacement for a drink that he said was made incorrectly.

"I already planned to talk to him but I don't know what you think I'll be able to do," he said evenly. "Of course I don't want anything to happen to him and I'll support him getting help but if I don't even know what his issue is or why exactly he stopped seeing you then I'm not very useful."

"He refused to come in for sessions when it became apparent to him that his actions hurt you," Ann said frankly. "He decided that this entire thing was pointless without you."

The sense of weariness weighed even heavier on Boyd although he kept it out of his expression and posture. So it really did come down to the same thing Sin had concluded after the coma.

Boyd felt almost trapped by the knowledge; he couldn't abandon Sin. At a time when he felt for his own health he needed to distance himself from the source of his former obsession, he was now being told that Sin's life or death could potentially, literally rest on his forgiveness or proximity.

If he had to weigh his own health against Sin's life, of course he would choose Sin's life, but the more he stayed around Sin with everything broken the way it was, the more it hurt him in the long run. Boyd wanted the freedom to be able to move past the rather destructive relationship he and Sin had shared and get back to a point where he could just enjoy Sin's presence and not have to worry about all the dysfunction.

"If he's so concerned about me then what the hell was he doing sleeping with you in the first place?" Boyd asked, not entirely bothering to hide his frustration. "Why wouldn't he explain anything to me?"

"I have no idea why he didn't explain things to you," Ann admitted. "But he doesn't care for me, he isn't even attracted to me. I was merely a distraction that he didn't realize would offend you and when he realized that it did, he cut all ties to me."

"A distraction from what?" Boyd insisted.

He couldn't understand the situation, the reasons anyone had for doing something that to him seemed so stupid and hurtful and senseless, and he felt a surge of frustration that made it impossible for him to stay quiet about the illogic. He needed to understand what was going on or he'd never feel any sense of closure; there would always be part of him that was angry, hurt, and resentful without any chance of receiving an answer of why.

"Ann, this just-- it doesn't make sense to me. You say you feel nothing for him yet you sleep with him and, I'm presuming, no one else. Which in itself is bizarre since you berated me for even having the gall to work with him as a partner and see him as human. Yet you're telling me that of all your patients, of all the people you could have slept with, you choose the one who you have the most reason to hate?"

His tone was reasonable, if frustrated with the lack of sense this made, and he didn't give her the chance to respond because he needed to get this off his chest. "Not to mention the fact if my mother was involved she must have approved you as Sin's psychiatrist and I'm sure she thinks he's high profile. Which means she'd be watching you like a hawk. So first of all you're breaching some serious doctor-patient protocol which, granted, I don't know you very well but seems odd to me given what Ryan said of you. Then, of all your cases to potentially fuck up, you choose the most high profile, with the person who is a reason your sister is where she is now, and also who you used to yell at Ryan for even sympathizing with? That's a pretty long way to go for no reason."

Ann just watched him neutrally, seeming to sense that he wasn't finished and Boyd raised his eyebrows, keeping his voice low; he didn't care if no one around them would know who Sin was, it wasn't their business.

"And suddenly in a month's time Sin needs a distraction so much he's sleeping with you because it's something he felt like he needed do at the time. Yet later on he feels like he had no way of knowing this was a bad idea. He doesn't typically even like people touching him yet he jumps right into bed with you despite your history of antagonism? How could there *not* be anything special going on? Was there just some strange meeting of extreme desperation? Or did it have something to do with Lydia? It's not even that I necessarily think you do give a shit about him. But I can't understand how the hell this all happened when you both keep saying you don't care about each other yet you chose someone who you'd have to have a damn good reason to sleep with to get past the animosity. If it was just some random fuck then why not choose someone easier?"

"It was a distraction from what is going on with him at the moment," Ann replied calmly, ignoring the last question. "From the things going on in his head that made him snap in the elevator. In the past several months his mental stability has grown progressively worse and right around the time you went for training, it reached its climax. He was beginning to doubt himself and whether or not he deserved to be free, whether or not he deserved to live, whether or not he was really human and not a monster like everyone says."

She sighed and signaled the waitress for more coffee. "In the past few months Sin has been suffering from something called psychotic depression. In addition to depressive episodes it causes insomnia, extraordinary guilt and it can cause hallucinations. He suffered from all of the symptoms in a very intense way."

Boyd stared at her for a long moment and the waitress came and went during the time that passed. Of course he'd noticed Sin's insomnia but how could he possibly not have known about the other issues? Could that guilt have been the only reason Sin had brought up Lydia, because he'd been unable to forget what had happened with her?

But more importantly, hallucinations? Boyd was so shocked by the thought that Sin had been dealing with something that serious and had managed to keep it completely quiet that at first he didn't even know how to respond. Finally, he managed, "He-- hallucinations? What kind, how intense?"

"It was very bad for him." Ann threaded her fingers together and didn't touch the coffee as she maintained eye contact with Boyd. "He saw the people he's killed, people he's hurt. My sister, the civilians and police killed during the melee in the city, Agency staff... the list goes on. He became quite disturbed and even suicidal at times."

Boyd looked down at his untouched English muffin and knew he wouldn't be eating it; he wasn't hungry, especially after finding out how much Sin had been going through. He wasn't even thirsty for his slowly cooling tea.

He almost felt in shock; he couldn't believe that something like that had actually been going on without his knowledge. There had been times when Sin had been in pain or duress and Boyd hadn't initially known, but that had been long ago, when Sin had hidden weaknesses from Boyd the same as he had with everyone else. In the last year, Boyd had thought they were beyond that; even if they had frequent issues with miscommunication, he hadn't ever thought that Sin would hide something so significant.

It was hard for Boyd to realize and accept. Had Sin actually been walking around feeling that way, seeing those things? How could Sin have handled that, how could he have been so composed throughout it all?

It bothered him to know that Sin didn't trust him with that knowledge; especially since in doing so, Sin was stressing himself out even further by struggling to put on a front for Boyd. Was he so untrustworthy that Sin would hurt himself further rather than tell Boyd what was happening?

"Where did he see them? How often?" His voice was calm despite how somber he was, how terrible he felt inside.

"Everywhere I imagine," she replied with a shrug. "That's what happened in the elevator. He saw his fa-- his victims taunting him."

Boyd looked up at her sharply. He knew she'd been about to say something else and the only word he could think of that made sense in that context was 'father.' But what did Emilio have to do with Sin's victims? "What about Emilio?"

"Ah..." Ann began to look truly uncomfortable and she shifted, looking away. A glimmer of irritation crossed her face and she shook her head sharply, perhaps annoyed by her own loose tongue. "We may be going too far here. He had his reasons for withholding information from you and I'm afraid that me telling you everything will cause his fears to come to fruition."

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "What? What reasons? Why?"

Ann exhaled loudly and brought a hand to her forehead. "I'm getting myself in deeper with every word," she murmured mostly to herself before sitting up straighter. "Well, it's too late now. I've started this all, I may as well finish."

She toyed with the sugar packets and met his gaze. "If you think about it, Sin has no reason to trust people. He has no reason to understand people. So when you tell Sin you love him, he doesn't understand what that means. He doesn't understand that if a person truly loves another, they would do anything for them and stand by them through anything if possible. Sin knows he can trust you in a fight, he knows you wouldn't do something malicious to him, but he thinks so low of himself that he can't trust you not to mirror his own feelings. He thinks that if you know all of the things that he's done, if you find out about all of the things that are wrong with him, you will fear him and turn away like everyone else."

Boyd watched her, considering that with everything he'd been through with Sin. He understood that fear to an extent; it had been a large reason why he hadn't told Sin about his scars earlier than he had. But he'd also realized that it had been unfounded after Sin had reacted so calmly. After everything he'd learned and had seen of Sin, he knew Sin had to have felt whatever he'd wanted to hide was especially terrible.

There was really only one conclusion to draw; after all, Ann had mentioned Emilio as one of Sin's victims. And if Sin was seeing hallucinations it must have been impossible for him to believe Boyd's theory of everything being based around circumstances.

"He killed his father, didn't he," Boyd said, more as a statement than a question. He met her gaze evenly, his expression and body language completely calm. "He thought that

made him a monster or unforgivable, killing the person who he feels saved him. He thought if I knew that, if I knew he had a diagnosable mental illness, I'd leave him."

"Or fear him," Ann replied. "I never knew of your sexual relationship but from the beginning he made it clear that your friendship meant everything to him. He didn't want to change how you reacted to him I suspect. Even a hint of wariness or unease on your part would shatter him."

Boyd made a soft, humorless sound. He knew that, too, from the way Sin had reacted after that first fateful birthday present when Boyd had unconsciously recoiled from Sin's touch. He hadn't realized Sin was in such a perilous state of mind so he hadn't known that those same rules applied to now. There had been plenty of time in between then and now where such minute interactions hadn't seemed to have such catastrophic consequences.

If anything, that actually made him glad that he hadn't talked to Sin when he'd been so stressed out. Even if Sin probably didn't take too well to the fact that he'd jerked his arm away, it would be far better than Boyd having snapped something he didn't mean out of anger or exhaustion.

He briefly ran a hand over his eyes, trying to put this all in context. It was bizarre to be sitting there discussing this with Ann, of all people, but in truth he was glad she'd sought him out, that she was telling him this. The most ironic part of it all was that this entire mess-- Ann and Sin, Boyd breaking away from Sin, all the frustration and resentment and anger-- none of it would have likely happened if Sin had been the one to tell Boyd in the first place.

Boyd wouldn't have feared or condemned Sin for knowing about Emilio. In all honesty, that information didn't mean much to Boyd. He could understand how Sin would be upset about it but Boyd knew there was no way Sin had purposefully murdered his father in cold blood. Boyd suspected that Sin wasn't looking at it that way, thought; that all Sin could see was that he'd killed the person who had saved him and so he had to be condemned.

"Did he tell you how it happened?" Boyd asked. "Emilio?"

Ann tilted her head to the side and poured some cream into her cup as if that would make it taste better. "No. He didn't even say it outright but I'm positive that it occurred during a dissociative episode. He has something called depersonalization disorder; it occurs mostly among people who have been abused, especially sexually."

Boyd leaned back in his chair as he tried to remember if he'd heard anything about either of the diagnoses she mentioned. The psychotic depression was clearly what caused the hallucinations and the dissociative episodes were what Sin must have been referring to when he'd said sometimes he felt like he was watching himself without being able to control his actions.

The co-morbidity of those two illnesses must have been making Sin feel extremely desperate, guilty, depressed, and out of control. There was no longer any question in Boyd's mind as to why Sin had slept with Ann, why anything had occurred the way it had. Sin had obviously been feeling so upset that he'd tried to forget his mental issues through something physical.

The same thing had happened with Boyd and Sin in the past, like in Monterrey when Sin had used sex to forget about the questions Boyd had been asking about Emilio and Sin's life. If anything, this made more sense to Boyd now as to why Sin had seemed more frantic or impatient with sex in the months before Boyd had gone to training.

Boyd just wished Sin had told him all of this from the start; if he'd known Sin had been dealing with such serious issues he would have been a lot more understanding about the situation.

But then, that was easy to say. With his own stress and exhaustion to deal with, maybe at the time Boyd wouldn't have been able to properly handle the news anyway. Or maybe in his need to give Sin excuses, he wouldn't have believed Sin that it was as bad as it really was.

"If the depersonalization stems from childhood, what about the psychotic depression? Why did that only start a few months ago? Or," Boyd added, "has that been happening all along?"

"He said it started shortly after the Monterrey debacle. It started with flashbacks and grew progressively worse." Ann shrugged and shook her head. "I'm not sure why."

Boyd was confused as he tried to fit that information in with why Monterrey was apparently the trigger. "What typically causes it?" Boyd asked. "Is it possible extreme duress could cause psychotic depression? Or is it primarily depression with psychotic undertones, so to speak, so the cause could be anything that would cause depression?"

"I can't say for certain," she admitted with a frown, obviously not thrilled with having to admit it. "Studies say that high levels of cortisol contribute to it and his blood tests do back that up but there are likely unknown issues that contribute as well as possible hereditary illness. His mother was quite disturbed and he has a history of mental illness in his family going back to his grandparents on his father's side."

This was news to Boyd and his eyebrows rose. "Who else had an illness?"

"You can look into this yourself if you have clearance," she replied with another minute shrug. "I'm not sure if you do. It's all in Emilio Vega's file which is how I got access to it. Sin's grandmother was schizoaffective. She murdered Emilio's siblings in front of him when he was a child. He only survived because his father proceeded to murder her."

That was certainly a cheerful family history. No wonder Emilio had had his fair share of issues as well. "Did Emilio have any disorders?"

"Other than the fact that he was a narcissist who cared only for his own desires and needs? Not that I'm aware." Ann took a long sip of her coffee and set the mug back on the table, cradling it with both hands. "But Emilio's issues are entirely beside the point. I don't want you to misunderstand and think that I'm trying to get you to go running back to Sin and forget what he and I have done. I merely wanted you to have knowledge of what was going on with him before you made a decision because then you would be making one based on all of the cards and not just a few of them."

Boyd nodded absently, his gaze dropping to his cold tea. He had no more intention now of just forgiving everything and blithely getting back together with Sin than he had before the conversation. But this had done exactly as she'd hoped; it had given him the information necessary to make an informed decision. And it was doing what he'd hoped; he'd wanted to understand Sin's reasons and now that he did, he was able to let go of some of the resentment and betrayal he'd felt about Ann and Sin sleeping together.

Although it did little to make him feel better about knowing that Sin didn't trust him with such serious, life-changing information, at least the reason for Sin's avoidance of telling Boyd had been fear of losing him rather than simply not trusting him in general.

He hesitated, thinking about what she'd told him about Sin's illness. "He's on medication now, though?" He looked up at her again.

"For the psychotic depression, yes. For the depersonalization? No. It's very difficult to treat that and he needs therapy for it. I'm not even one hundred percent positive that he

definitely has depersonalization and not just a form of it or something similar. Typically people who suffer from these episodes don't get psychotic like he does and then there's the fact that he blacks out after a while..."

Ann frowned. "It's impossible for him to be treated for it until he agrees to therapy so I, or someone else if they find someone willing, can properly diagnose him and figure out a treatment."

"Before he stopped working with you, how was he doing with the meds?" Boyd asked. "Obviously psychotherapy is needed along with any medication, but... Was it helping?"

"It was. He cycled between depressive episodes but the hallucinations ceased after a time."

"What does that mean for his future?" Boyd idly rested his hands on his tea mug as he watched her. "For the rest of his life he has to be in therapy and take medication? Will he be dealing with psychotic depression from now on?"

Ann's eyebrows drew together slightly and she narrowed her eyes, deep in thought. "I can't say this early on. For some people it's a lifelong condition but for some people symptoms dissipated over time. Episodes typically don't last longer than a couple of years but at this point it's a wait and see game and he isn't even giving me much to see. I haven't seen him very much since he started the medication." The frustration was evident in her voice.

"To your knowledge, do you think the therapy and medication could help aside from coping?" Boyd absently twisted the mug back and forth between his fingers and he tilted his head thoughtfully as he continued to watch her. "For instance, if he doesn't get regular help, is it possible that would make it more likely it would all have lasting effects or return more frequently compared to if he does? Or do they have no relation?"

"I don't have en--" Ann stopped in the middle of her sentence, gaze frozen over Boyd's shoulder. "You've got to be *kidding* me," she hissed quietly.

Boyd followed the direction of her gaze and very casually tilted his head enough to see a stocky Caucasian man in a dark suit stalking toward them with an angry look on his face. Boyd shifted his gaze neutrally back to note that Ann looked disturbed. That heightened his curiosity but he was careful to keep his body language unchanged, as if he hadn't noticed the man.

"Who's that?" he asked quietly.

Ann gave him a small tight smile and said from between grit teeth, "My husband."

The man came closer and Boyd realized that he actually recognized the man from the Agency although he'd never known his name or rank. This was apparently the Captain Philip Scott that Kassian had mentioned.

Ann stood and stared at her husband without bothering to mask the disdain on her face and he automatically picked up on it.

"Don't give me that haughty Connors look, Ann," Philip sneered at her. "I know what you are even if nobody else does."

Ann just made a face and stared at him from under her long eyelashes, crossing her arms over her yellow trench coat. "What do you want, Philip? Are you following me now?"

Philip glared at her. "Don't flatter yourself, bitch," he said in a quiet but cruel tone, fire in his eyes. He seemed to have the art of discreet meanness down to a science. "I saw your car outside when I was driving to work."

"Okay. So, what can I do for you? I thought I made it clear that from now on we'd be speaking through our lawyers." Ann looked at Boyd almost involuntarily, a hint of embarrassment in her otherwise expressionless face.

Philip followed her gaze and finally seemed to notice Boyd. He stared at him blankly for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "What are you doing here with him?"

"Discussing a private matter," she replied in a clearly uninterested tone.

Philip ignored her and pointed at Boyd, his finger barely an inch from the younger man's face. "What are you doing here with my wife?"

"Don't answer him, Boyd," Ann advised as though she were telling him not to rile up a wild animal.

Philip speared Ann with a long look that undoubtedly promised violence or would have if they were alone. His hand actually jerked as though he wanted to hit her but he

managed to restrain himself at the last minute. Despite that, the movement was not lost on Ann and she took an automatic step back.

"Just go," she said quietly, dropping her previous attitude and looking more than a little weary as she stared at her husband. "We can set up a time for you to pick up the rest of your things but I haven't been staying out at the house so it won't be right away."

Philip continued to glare at her with obvious animosity, once again ignoring her words. "Here discussing your little boyfriend, huh?"

"I asked her here to talk about Ryan," Boyd said calmly, watching their interaction with a neutral expression.

Even though Ann had advised him not to speak it was pretty clear she wasn't going to be able to get Philip to leave easily. There was no way Boyd was going to bring Sin into the discussion, especially since he didn't know what Philip knew or even if he was specifically referring to Sin.

Ann looked at Boyd in veiled surprise but Philip just rolled his eyes upwards. "Ah. So maybe you're her faggy brother's little boyfriend then."

"Why don't you just go?" Ann hissed at him, reddening. "If you want to get your crap you can contact me about it later."

"What's wrong?" Philip asked mockingly. "Defensive over asthma boy? Who gives a shit, he'll be dead in a few months anyway."

Ann brought up a hand to her face, massaging her temples as her jaw clenched and unclenched. She was obviously grappling with anger and fighting the desire to lash out at him. "Philip, I will not ask you again to leave. And if you don't, I'll make a huge scene and have my lawyer get statements from the staff here later about how you came in here to harass me. And believe me, I know how to put on a good crying act."

Philip scoffed at her but he looked around uncertainly and backed out of her personal space a bit. "Fine but don't think you can avoid me forever. I know every single place to find you, Annabelle."

Ann just shook her head silently and he finally turned to leave.

Boyd watched Philip as he walked out the door. Although Boyd had been aware that Ann was married, that it probably hadn't been a marriage of love, he was surprised by the fact that Philip obviously abused Ann. She seemed like such a hard-headed, stubborn person that it was strange to think of her ever putting up with something like that.

Even though he didn't like Ann, he could understand why she would want to get away from someone like Philip. Of course, he would have greatly preferred if her breaking up with her abusive husband hadn't had anything to do with Sin but considering the fact she apparently hadn't realized Boyd and Sin were involved and she'd gone out of her way to track Boyd down to give him information about Sin, he didn't dislike her as much as he would have otherwise expected to.

And seeing the crack in her cold exterior and the hint of a more vulnerable side of her made her seem a little more human.

He returned his attention to Ann and asked with an intent expression, "What did he mean about Ryan?"

Ann sat back down and appeared genuinely upset by the entire incident although she was obviously taking pains not to show it. She picked up her lukewarm coffee and brought it to her lips as she tried to gather her thoughts. "Philip knows nothing of Ryan other than what he makes up in his cynical little brain."

She sipped the coffee and put it back down, pushing hair out of her face absently. "Ryan is not in danger of dying in a couple of months. However he did receive news that his illness was no longer responding to treatment so it's unclear how many years he has left..."

"What?" Boyd stared at her in a mixture of surprise and worry. "How-- When did he hear that?"

"A year ago, just about," she replied with an unhappy frown. "He's been doing better lately, though, or at least he seems stronger. He should be out of the medical wing in the next couple of months I suspect."

Boyd looked down at his tea, feeling troubled and wishing he'd have been able to see Ryan. A flash of guilt went through him and he couldn't help but wonder if he and Andrew had worsened the condition by dragging Ryan through Complex C.

"Why did it stop being treatable?" He looked up at her again.

Ann shook her head and sighed. "I don't know. Even his doctors don't know. This sickness... it's still something they don't entirely understand even over a decade after the bombing. There's still a chance that they'll have a new medication discovery in the next few years but I don't know. It's all very frustrating."

Boyd wondered how Ryan had taken the news, how he was feeling now after months in the medic wing. Ryan was going to lose a year of his life to that area and if he already knew he had little time left, that must be devastating for him.

"I want to see him," Boyd said firmly. "I've tried for months and they keep sending me away since I'm not family."

"Oh." Ann stared at him. "I didn't realize you wanted to."

"He's my friend, why wouldn't I?" he asked rhetorically. "Andrew and I were the ones who found him in the raid. He was... in really bad shape. I was worried about him but after he was in the med wing they wouldn't let me see him, they wouldn't tell me anything."

He drew his eyebrows down slightly. "I'm not the only one. Andrew's tried too, maybe others. I'm surprised the staff didn't inform you; I'd always thought they did."

"Since no one asked me to lift the restriction I had no way of knowing anyone really cared to visit him," Ann replied with little inflection.

Her entire demeanor seemed to have changed as soon as the conversation turned to Ryan, as though a defense mechanism switched on and made her more guarded. "Besides, even if I put you on the list, Agent Torres won't be on it. The mention of him just aggravates my brother and Ryan made it clear he has no interest in seeing the man for anything other than work."

Boyd shook his head. "I'm not advocating for Andrew, I was just using him as an example of people who care. I know you want to protect him but... I'd like to be on the list. Ask Ryan first if you want, make sure it's okay with him. If he says no then forget it; I don't intend to further stress him. But he must feel isolated enough on his own simply due to the circumstances. I don't want to be contributing to that feeling if I can help it; I don't want him to think no one aside from family really cares."

Ann shrugged and looked away from Boyd briefly. "I'll put you on the list but don't be surprised if you find my brother to be quite different than when you last spoke with him."

He didn't need to ask why; he imagined getting the kind of news Ryan had, coupled with being holed up in the medical wing for the majority of a year, would change anyone's attitude. Boyd just nodded and briefly stared at his tea.

This conversation was becoming exhausting; he'd just learned that two of the people he'd cared about the most at the Agency both had serious illnesses which, in their own ways, were potentially fatal. Ryan's was an illness that could actually kill him and Sin's was one that could get him killed.

He sighed quietly then returned his gaze to Ann. "I'm sure you want to get back to whatever you were doing but I have two more questions about Sin. My mother... She must have allowed him clearance for active duty. What is her current stance? You said before she wanted him terminated; has that officially changed or is he still in trouble?"

"When he was cleared again, he was officially taken out of consideration for termination but if he continues to be a problem and his condition does not improve, she will without a doubt have him eliminated from the Agency," Ann replied in a matter-of-fact tone.

"That's why it's imperative that he continue to take his medication and cooperate with us. He isn't on anything for depersonalization at the moment but he is for the hallucinations and that was what caused the episode in the medical wing to begin with."

Boyd nodded again; he'd suspected as much, especially since it fell in line with the way his mother thought. That just reinforced his determination to contact Sin, to try to reach some sense of equilibrium between them so he could encourage Sin to continue with his medication and psychotherapy.

"About the depersonalization," Boyd said slowly after a moment, trying to figure this out.

"When he's having an episode he can't be reasoned with. But if I say his name or sometimes touch him, it seems to stop him. Why would that be?"

Ann studied Boyd and seemed to be thinking about the question carefully before she asked, "Do you call him Sin or by his real name?"

"His real name," Boyd replied. "Why?"

Ann nodded. "Well, people with depersonalization disorder typically have an episode when they are under extreme stress or duress-- in Sin's case it's when he feels trapped or threatened in a way that he feels he cannot handle on his own, when it takes him back to a time in his life when something unpleasant happened and he couldn't protect

himself. He shuts down and it's a form of protection. His mind and body separate so that he can't feel what's happening. His case has very unique aspects of the illness but that's essentially what's going on."

Ann paused for a moment, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. "I also suspect that it happens when he is doing something or experiencing something that traumatizes him in some way. Sin's biggest fear is that he will become the monster that everyone says he is, that he will become truly inhuman because of the acts he commits-- that he is forced to commit. I think that when something like that is going on, his mind shuts down so he won't have to deal with it."

Boyd thought back to the times he'd seen Sin act that way; the moment in his kitchen stood out most clearly, after Sin had killed Jared in an especially brutal way. It made sense if Sin would fear becoming a monster if he knew he was capable of doing such a thing, regardless of the reason, such as what Jared had done to others and how much, in Boyd's opinion, he had deserved it.

"So to answer your question, Boyd," Ann started to say as the waitress came over and once again refilled her cup. Ann didn't continue speaking until after the woman had left. "He responds to you when you touch him or say his name because he recognizes your voice and your touch as something nonthreatening, something calming and safe. When you say his name you're humanizing him in a way that nobody ever has. He has been demeaned to the lowest extent at the Agency. When you treat him like an equal when he is in that state, it evokes emotions in him that brings him out of that panicked and frightened place that causes the episode to occur."

Boyd considered that. "So if anyone else did that too, it would have the same result?"

"Not necessarily." Ann finished her newly refilled cup of coffee in a few gulps and set it down on the table. "He responds to you because he trusts you. He doesn't trust anybody else so they wouldn't have that result. Maybe General Carhart but even that's not guaranteed."

Ann raised her eyebrows slightly and looked at Boyd. "But the day you cease to become safe for him, I would run very fast in the other direction were he to have an episode in your vicinity. I'm still unsure of many things regarding this diagnosis and your safety should come first."

Boyd nodded but he wasn't sure how he would know that he was no longer 'safe' to Sin until it was probably too late. Sin had trusted him before and since the next time Boyd planned to see Sin was to talk to him about all this, he could only assume that it would continue.

Ann glanced at her watch and opened her purse, extracting a few dollar bills. "I'm sorry to cut this short and for the interruption from my husband but I need to be getting back to the compound. I have a session scheduled in twenty minutes."

"It's fine; I should get back too." Boyd pulled out enough money to cover his part of the check and tip and tossed the bills on the table. He stood and waited for Ann and the two of them left the cafe.

The ride back to the Agency passed in silence but when she parked and they both got out, there was a moment that was almost awkward.

"Thank you for taking the time to listen to me," Ann said calmly.

Boyd could only think to say in return, "Well, I... appreciate the information."

They stared at each other for a moment before Ann said goodbye and left.

Boyd watched her go before he turned and slowly headed toward his car, his hands slid into the pockets of his coat. The wind was stark, strong and cold and his skin felt chilled within a minute of standing outside.

He didn't know what to think about any of this; it bothered him a little that Ann apparently felt that Sin was her responsibility now. Although he meant what he'd said, he didn't know what to think about her.

He didn't really like or trust her but he didn't think she'd lied to him. Even so, he wondered what made her suddenly care what happened with Sin. Was it because she was his doctor and she took that role seriously? Or was it because she'd slept with Sin that she felt she somehow had more invested in him? Yet she claimed she felt nothing more for Sin than she did anyone else.

At this point he didn't hate Ann or Sin and he was tired of feeling hurt over what had happened, but at the same time when he really thought about the situation, it still bothered him and part of him still felt a little bitter and resentful. A large part of that was because he knew Sin hadn't trusted him with such vital information.

Boyd didn't know if that feeling was likely to completely go away, at least not for awhile.

And despite the fact that he now understood how Sin had come to have sex with Ann, it didn't stop the pain that clenched his heart when he thought about it. He'd completely trusted Sin and that had been turned against him; the love, belief and energy he'd

poured into Sin had suddenly been yanked out beneath him, had all been put into question. Even if Sin hadn't realized what it meant, even if Ann hadn't known what she was getting into, it didn't make the feelings magically disappear.

And Ann obviously hadn't really regretted what had happened; she hadn't apologized despite the fact she'd been cheating on her husband and in the process Sin had cheated on Boyd, yet she also didn't try to deny what had happened.

He couldn't feel anger toward her when she'd gone out of her way to help him understand the situation but it was just so... odd. Part of him felt partially possessive of Sin; after all, Boyd had been there for Sin when no one else had, when Ann had been like everyone else in condemning him. But now she was the one who was watching out for Sin, she was the one who Sin trusted to turn to with his darkest secrets?

Then again, as Sin's psychiatrist, there was a legitimate reason for her knowing that. But even if he tried to tell himself that, Boyd felt like Ann hadn't earned that trust the way he had. Another part of him felt like it didn't matter anymore; he and Sin weren't what they used to be to each other and may never be again so what did it matter who Sin told what?

Boyd didn't know what he felt about this all but he knew he definitely didn't like the position he was in. Had Sin seriously believed that Boyd would have abandoned him if he'd found out he had a mental illness? The fact that Sin had honestly thought that was insulting on a very deep level. Boyd had believed in Sin from the beginning, even when he'd had no reason to, yet this made it pretty clear that even after so long, Sin had never truly believed in Boyd in return. That may not have been for malicious reasons but it was a stark reality nonetheless.

But another issue that was nagging at Boyd was the fact that he'd been so blinded by his feelings for Sin that he'd missed a lot of signs, to the detriment of them both. He never should have let himself get so involved that he missed the forest for the trees. In that regard, he'd let them both down.

He'd let himself believe in something that may never have existed the way he thought it did and in the process he'd pulled Sin in as well. Yet he couldn't claim full responsibility for their subsequent attraction since they'd both ended up reaching out for each other without fully knowing why.

Boyd nearly walked past his car, still not quite used to looking for the brand new silver BMW. When he sat in the driver's seat and shut the door, the cold silence of the car surrounded him and he closed his eyes briefly, dropping his head back against the seat and covering his face with his hands for a moment.

He was so tired of this all; he just wanted to tie up the loose ends and move on with his life.

He felt like he'd been precariously balanced since training had started; he'd had so much going on in his professional life and then his personal life had been turned upside down as well. He'd gone through so much emotionally and now just as he was finally trying to gather some sense of normalcy, this conversation turned everything around again. He had to rethink his entire knowledge of Sin and on top of that he learned just how close Sin was to his mother giving up on him for good.

The thought made Boyd drop his hands from his face and dig in his messenger bag for his phone. He flipped the cell phone open in front of him and stared at it a moment. It struck him that Sin's name was still on speed dial and for some reason that seemed at once painful, confusing and sad. The last four months hadn't happened as far as his contact list was concerned; Sin was still the number one name just as it had been over a year ago when they used to have those late night phone calls.

Shaking his head to himself, Boyd pressed the speed dial for Sin's phone and was unsurprised when it went straight to voicemail. He'd doubted that Sin would answer while on a mission but he wanted to leave a message for when Sin would return.

Sin's voice was gruff and familiar as he demanded a message be left and Boyd closed his eyes again as he listened. He felt a pain in his heart that he couldn't fully identify but it was almost a sense of loss at the knowledge that the times in the past when he'd listened to this message would never occur again exactly the way they once had.

After the beep, Boyd spoke, his voice smooth but slightly hesitant. "Hey, it's me." A brief pause. "I know you're busy now, but... I want to talk. I wasn't ready before but I am now. So just let me know when you get back, okay? When you're ready. It's... I know how important it is, so..." He trailed off briefly. "So call me. We'll meet and... I'll listen this time. I promise." Another pause before he added almost awkwardly, "Alright... Bye."

The phone flipping closed sounded especially loud in the cold, silent car.

Chapter 27

The staff in the medical building had decorated for the holidays, apparently trying to bring some sense of warmth and cheer to the people who were stuck there for long term-care. A wreath was hung on the main door and Christmas lights were strung along the reception desk as well as around the windows. A small Christmas tree sat on a table in the corner with tiny wrapped gifts beneath it, each the size of a ring box. Boyd shivered as he walked into the waiting area, hunched forward as he stomped a few times on the rug to loosen some of the snow that was caked on his boots.

It had been two days since he'd spoken with Ann and since then he'd learned that she'd stayed true to her word; when he'd called to ask if he could visit Ryan they'd told Boyd that his name was on the list.

Christmas Day had dawned bright and as clear as it ever got; snow had fallen overnight, coating the city in several inches of pristine, sparkling white. The day was beautiful enough that Boyd hadn't even minded having to brush all the snow off his car. Someday, he'd mused to himself, he was going to have to clean out the garage like he'd been cleaning out the attic, so he could finally use it as it was intended.

He hadn't heard from Sin yet but that didn't mean a lot considering Sin's mission was still in progress. Boyd had decided that he'd just wait until he received word from Sin and not worry about it in the meantime. He was confident that Sin would still want to talk so he knew Sin would contact him as soon as he received the message upon returning from the mission. Obsessing about it in the meantime would accomplish nothing except probably making Boyd anxious and irritable.

Instead, he'd focused his attention on what to get Ryan for Christmas. He'd wanted it to be something special, something that told Ryan he cared enough to think about him and put effort into their friendship. Especially since for the last half year Ryan may not have even known that Boyd had been trying to see him.

The same receptionist that had so often turned him away smiled at him as he approached. Her long dark hair was pulled back in a low ponytail and she wore a green cashmere off the shoulder sweater and small candy cane earrings that nicely complemented her caramel skin. He thought he remembered that her name was Vanessa.

"You came," Vanessa said warmly, her dark brown eyes bright as she smiled. "I was hoping someone would visit him today." She slid toward Boyd the visitor sign-in sheet and a pen with an obnoxious snowman on the end that made it unwieldy to work with.

He smiled slightly in return as he wrote down his name and the time. He slid the sheet back to her and adjusted the strap on his messenger bag to make it a little more comfortable. "Can I go in?"

Vanessa nodded, seeming overly pleased with the entire situation. Between her strangely good cheer and her themed outfit, Boyd suspected that she was just in an incredibly festive mood.

"Room 130," she informed him with a larger smile.

Boyd thanked her and followed the signs until he got to Ryan's room. The door was mostly shut, although there was a space that he could peer inside enough to know that Ryan wasn't in the side of the room that he could see. He hesitated, hoping Ryan wouldn't mind him suddenly appearing, then lightly knocked on the door.

There was a brief pause before Ryan's confused voice called out for him to "just come in."

Boyd pushed the door open slowly, stepping inside and letting his gaze focus on Ryan, whose eyes had opened wide in surprise.

"Boyd!"

Ryan's face split into a large smile at the sight of his friend but the rest of him was too distracting for Boyd to be able to focus on the happy expression.

Ryan was thinner than usual and he looked lost in his over-sized sweater. His black hair was longer and wilder than it had been a year ago and the darkness of his unruly spikes only made his face look paler. His cheeks were gaunt and dark circles lined his eyes, giving him a sickly, sallow appearance.

However, it wasn't just his external self that was alarming to behold. Ryan's large indigo eyes, usually so expressive and full of good cheer, had become dull.

Ryan slid off the side of his bed and continued to grin at Boyd although it dimmed considerably. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his cotton pants and shrugged almost awkwardly. "What brings you here?"

"You," Boyd said with a smile, keeping the worry and alarm out of his expression and body language. He stepped inside and mostly closed the door, the same way it had been when he'd entered. "I've been wanting to visit for awhile but there was some confusion with the name list. I hope you don't mind that I stopped by so suddenly."

"It's fine. I'm glad you're here." Ryan sat on the edge of the bed again and scratched the back of his head. "I'm just surprised."

Boyd nodded, slipped his messenger bag off, and sat down in one of the visitor's chairs near Ryan. "How are you feeling?"

Ryan didn't answer for a stretch; he looked so simultaneously distracted and thrown off by Boyd's sudden appearance that he seemed almost in a daze. When the silence went on a beat longer than necessary he looked at Boyd with an apologetic grin. "Sorry. It's just weird to see you. It's been almost a year now..."

Boyd nodded in agreement. He hadn't seen Ryan since just after being reinstated as an agent the previous spring but it seemed like it had been even longer. Although Ryan had looked somewhat sickly at that time, and during the raid when he'd been unconscious he'd looked worse, neither time compared to the gaunt man sitting in front of Boyd now.

The movements, the expressions... something about Ryan was less kid-like now; less innocently happy. He seemed more his age, a little more mature, but in the process it only seemed to emphasize how ill he looked.

Boyd leaned back in the chair. "Yeah. It's been awhile, hasn't it?"

Ryan nodded and said in a surprisingly matter-of-fact tone, "Sometimes I wondered if you guys just phased me out. Like, just got used to me not being around or something. Forgot about me."

Boyd didn't know how to answer that at first so he searched Ryan's expression. Although Ann had warned him not to expect Ryan to be the same, this was still somehow more awkward than he'd hoped for, as if their personalities didn't flow as well

together as they once had. But that wasn't surprising, given everything that had happened.

"I'm sorry I wasn't able to contact you sooner." He smiled humorlessly to himself, a faint expression. "I actually tried to visit you at one point during all that but it didn't work out."

Ryan shrugged and waved his hand vaguely. "It's no big deal. I didn't really want anyone to come for a long time anyway. I barely even see Ann."

"Well, now that I know where to find you, you're stuck with me," Boyd said lightly. "Maybe I'll start popping up when you least expect it just to keep you on your toes. I could even go undercover as staff. Too much of the same thing for extended periods of time could otherwise be boring." He shrugged. "That's the way it is for me, at any rate."

Ryan chuckled but it was obvious that his heart wasn't entirely in it; it almost seemed forced. "They say I'll be out in a couple of months anyway."

Boyd nodded then fell quiet briefly. He couldn't imagine what must be going through Ryan's mind, knowing that the illness he'd lived with for the majority of his life was no longer treatable. Ryan was far too young to have to contemplate death but that was exactly what he was faced with.

Initially Boyd had thought that if he didn't focus on the illness or if he tried to stay lighthearted then Ryan wouldn't feel depressed. Now, he was starting to think that he was just forcing Ryan to try to be someone he wasn't anymore, to try to live up to the carefree Ryan of the past.

"Hey," Boyd said more seriously although his tone remained kind. He leaned forward and met Ryan's eyes. "Listen, I talked to Ann; she didn't tell me much but I know enough that you don't have to explain anything. I just want you to know that I'm here for you, Ryan. I know we haven't seen each other in a long time but I still consider you my friend. So I don't want you to think you need to be someone you aren't anymore. You don't have to force yourself around me."

Ryan gazed at Boyd solemnly for a moment before the corners of his mouth turned up into a small smile. "Do you really still think of me as a friend? I thought you'd forgotten about me..."

"I'll never forget about you, Ryan," Boyd said sincerely. "I know the receptionist's name because I bothered her several times trying to get in here to see you. Ann had it set to family-only to protect you and I was only recently added to the list. I would've been here earlier if not for that."

"Oh, that." Ryan sat further back on the bed and allowed his legs to swing lightly against the bed rail. "It's probably not her fault. I implied I didn't want anybody here. I just got tired of the pity, I guess, or people treating me like a child even more than usual just 'cause I'm sicker."

"That's understandable," Boyd replied. "And she didn't know I was trying, either; as soon as she found out she cleared me."

Ryan nodded and looked away with a small frown. "I guess I should thank her for that at some point..."

Boyd could tell by Ryan's expression that he wasn't looking forward to it. "You're not getting along with her lately?" he asked curiously. "Or is it the same over-protectiveness as before?"

Ryan released an explosive sigh and his bangs went flying upwards in an almost comical fashion. He rolled his eyes at himself and finally cracked one of his old grins. "I dunno. She's just... yeah. I just don't want anyone trying to control me anymore. I'm tired of people thinking they know what's best for me, you know? Like the way stuff is right now... I got to start making my own decisions or I'll never get to."

Boyd nodded in understanding. "Do you have any decisions in the making, things you're planning?"

"Kinda..." Ryan sighed and screwed up his face. "But there's no use seriously planning anything until I'm out of this crappy place."

"I don't know about that," Boyd said thoughtfully. "It completely depends on what you're planning. What if you wanted to start a new hobby? Drawing, writing... There's a lot you could start even in here if you were interested in it."

"That's true." Ryan looked at Boyd seriously and glanced at the door before adding quietly. "Honestly, most of my plans revolve around getting out of the Agency."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly, not disapprovingly but simply because it was a stark contrast from the Ryan he knew before who had spent his life on the compound. That Ryan had been nearly agoraphobic about leaving even for a few hours. Boyd opened his mouth to reply but before he could speak there was a brisk knock on the door and a nurse walked in with a smile.

"Hi, sorry to interrupt." She looked at Ryan expectantly. "It's time for your tests."

Ryan looked at the woman unhappily and sighed, sliding off the bed in an almost sullen manner. "Sorry, Boyd..."

"It's no trouble," Boyd said easily. "I can always come back another time. But first..." He leaned over and opened his messenger bag. "I brought you a Christmas present. If it's okay?" He looked toward the nurse who nodded.

"Of course," she said. "I'll just wait outside." She walked out of the room, leaving the door half open where she could still be seen, although she was looking down the hallway to give them some sense of privacy.

Boyd returned his gaze to Ryan briefly before he looked down at his bag and slid out the canvas he'd brought with. It was a small rectangular watercolor painting of the city's skyline with a sunset tingeing the sky a range of red to pale lavender. The sky dominated the painting, taking up more than half the space. There were far fewer clouds than there were in reality and the buildings were silhouettes with faint splashes of color here and there as if to signify light reflected off the windows. In the lower right corner there was a small signature that simply read 'Boyd.'

Boyd held the painting out to Ryan with a mildly self-conscious expression. "I'm not very good with color," he explained a little apologetically. "I usually work with charcoal or pencil. But I didn't know what to get you and then I thought you'd probably seen less of the sky than normal. I remembered how much you liked it, so... I thought I'd bring some of it to your room until you can get out to experience it yourself again."

Ryan's eyes focused on the painting before they slowly rose to meet Boyd's gaze and this time the smile that crossed his face was huge. It lit up his entire face and he looked like his old self again. "It's amazing!"

Before Boyd could reply, Ryan leaned forward and pulled him into a hug. Boyd couldn't help a large smile of his own as he returned the hug. Ryan was skinnier and bonier than he remembered but it felt good nonetheless.

"I'm really glad you came," Ryan admitted quietly against Boyd's ear. "Thank you."

"I'm glad I was able to see you," Boyd said sincerely. He let the hug linger a little longer before he gently pulled away, knowing that the nurse was waiting. He let his hands rest on Ryan's upper arms briefly. "You still have my number, right?"

"Yeah. Listen..." Ryan frowned slightly and looked sheepish. "I don't really-- I mean.. it's just kind of... embarrassing to me for you to see me here. So can I call you when I'm out?"

"Of course," Boyd said, smiling easily, dropping his hands. He could understand that, given how Ryan was about his illness and not wanting to appear vulnerable. "We'll have some sort of nerdy celebration. And if you find yourself becoming bored in the meantime and you want someone to talk to you can always call me. Any time. Wake me up in the middle of the night if you need to."

Ryan looked relieved and he beamed at his friend happily. "Great! I wish I could talk longer... I have so much I wanted to ask you but it can wait until later. I'll be in a much better mood when I'm out of here."

Outside the door, the nurse cleared her throat quietly as if to signal that she was still waiting. Ryan made a face before he placed the painting on his bed carefully. "Thank you, Boyd. Seriously."

Boyd knew Ryan was thanking him for the painting as well as for visiting. "It's my pleasure," Boyd said sincerely as he stood and readjusted his messenger bag on his shoulder. He hesitated before turning to leave. "Just take care of yourself, okay?" He meant the words as much as Ryan had meant the thank you.

"I'll try," Ryan replied with a humorless smirk. "But I dunno if it's up to me anymore."

The shorter man reached up and squeezed Boyd's shoulder before he slipped out the door.

Boyd followed Ryan to the hallway and watched Ryan turn the corner with the nurse; after that, Boyd turned to leave. Despite the somber setting, he was happy that he'd finally been able to see Ryan, especially on a holiday. He hadn't known how long he would be able to visit with Ryan so he was just glad he'd had the chance to see him at all.

It made him happy to know how much Ryan had appreciated the painting; while Boyd had been working on it, he hadn't been sure how it would turn out or even what Ryan's mood would be, whether he'd just think it was a stupid gift. Although there were definite differences, he could still see parts of the old Ryan in his friend, which he was grateful for. When Ryan got out and they met up again they would have more time to get reacquainted with each other and how they had changed.

As Boyd was walking down the hallway he idly looked into the rooms he passed; he was only half paying attention to what he saw and ended up coming to an abrupt halt several steps past Room 100. There were a few other people in the hallway but no one paid him heed as he turned and peered around the door to check if he'd seen correctly.

Cade lay in a hospital bed along the far wall. The curtains on the windows were half drawn, casting little light on his pale face. Boyd hesitated at the door but when he glanced around no one seemed to care that he was there so he walked into the room and stood next to the bed.

It had been nearly a month since he'd last seen Cade and the man looked terrible. He was attached to an IV and his heart rate was monitored on a small screen nearby. His skin was ashen, far paler than Boyd ever would have expected to see given Cade's naturally caramel tone; even his lips looked dry and cracked.

It wasn't immediately clear what exactly his wounds were other than something on his head judging by the bandage; whatever they were, they'd long ago been sewn up and fixed to the best of the medical staff's ability. Cade lay utterly still and if it weren't for the heart monitor and the occasional slightly hitched breath, Boyd would have thought the man was dead.

Boyd stared quietly at Cade's unconscious form, feeling somber. There were times during their training that he almost would have welcomed this simply because it meant Cade was too sick to be an ass, that his recklessness and arrogance had finally gotten him into a position where he couldn't carry on as he had before. There had been times he probably would have thought Cade deserved something like this, just to remove some of his arrogance.

But despite any differences between them or any effort Cade had put into alienating everyone around him, they were still allies. Cade was still a fellow field agent, someone who had saved Boyd's life. In other circumstances, if Cade had been a little slower to

catch up to him at Annadale Beach, that could have even been Boyd in the hospital bed instead. Assuming he wouldn't have just been killed and left to rot.

Although Boyd didn't know what exactly had happened to land Cade in that bed he knew it had happened during the solo mission. Despite Cade's attitude, he at least had to be given credit to have made it that far into Level 10 training; especially since Boyd had honestly never expected the man to last that long given his personality.

Noticing what appeared to be a file folder with some sheets of paper in it resting on a table, Boyd's curiosity got the better of him. He leaned across the bed over Cade's shoulders with the intention of seeing if it was medical information about Cade's condition. In the process, he accidentally bumped the bed and placed a hand on the mattress to steady himself. Just as he grabbed the folder and was bringing it over Cade's face, he was completely startled by a hand suddenly gripping his wrist.

He looked down in surprise and found Cade's eyes barely open, cracked just enough to show a glint of light between his eyelashes. "Lucas?" Cade whispered, his voice hoarse and slurred with drugs or lack of sleep.

"Ah," Boyd whispered in return, too startled to immediately be able to think of an excuse. "I..."

"You came," Cade mumbled, seemingly unaware of the fact that Boyd had said anything. Cade's expression twisted into something sad and regretful, but he also almost secretly pleased. His eyes slid closed again as if it was too difficult for him to keep them open.

"Cade," Boyd said slowly, feeling awkward about the situation. "I'm not Lucas." Boyd had no idea who Lucas even was, but it didn't matter since Cade didn't seem to be listening. His voice was slurred, confused, as if he was delirious or not fully aware that he was speaking.

"I'm sorry. I..." Cade's heart rate spiked briefly as if he was thinking about something that upset him. "I should've..."

"Cade," Boyd said more strongly, dropping the folder onto the mattress so he could put his free hand over Cade's. "Calm down. You were hurt and you're in the hospital."

Cade shook his head blearily. "I know, I know, it's my fault..."

"It's not your fault," Boyd said firmly, even though he suspected it probably had been. Knowing Cade, most likely the reason he'd been so grievously injured on a solo was because he'd let his arrogance lead him to overestimating his abilities or underestimating his enemy's. Cade was clearly in a delusional state and could easily become distressed, though, so Boyd saw no reason to upset him further. "It was an accident. You'll be okay."

"You always..." Cade's expression twisted and he looked almost sad. "Why?"

"Why what?" Boyd asked after a moment when it was clear Cade wasn't going to continue.

"Protect me, you always... care..." Cade drew a deeper breath and seemed to honestly be struggling with an emotional issue far deeper than Boyd would have thought Cade was capable of feeling. Cade had always seemed like such an arrogant, macho, emotionally stunted person that it was difficult to reconcile that with the man lying in the clinic bed, looking like he was ready to cry. "I treated you like shit and still... Why? Just because we're brothers, but I... just watched... If Evan hadn't..."

Boyd fell quiet as he had no idea how to respond to that. Cade obviously thought he was this Lucas, apparently a brother, but it didn't sound like they were close. The entire conversation was completely bizarre to him and, truthfully, saddening. Whatever Cade's history was, Boyd got the feeling that Lucas wouldn't actually be visiting even if Cade wasn't in a secret location.

"I don't understand," Cade whispered, his eyes moving sluggishly beneath his eyelids, as if he was seeing something instead of simply blackness or he was trying to find the energy to open his eyes again. "How'd you find me? How..."

"Cade..." Boyd started to say again but Cade cut him off.

"Does Dad know?" There was something about Cade's tone that Boyd couldn't identify. "About this. Can you... go home?"

"Cade, I'm not Lucas," Boyd said gently, trying to release Cade's fingers from his wrist. "I'm Boyd. I work with you." This was getting too far into the territory of personal information and Boyd didn't want to feel like he was taking advantage of Cade's vulnerability.

"What?" Cade asked, shaking his head again as his eyebrows drew together in confusion. He seemed to be struggling to open his eyes again. "I don't..."

"You need to rest," Boyd insisted, finally managing to get Cade's hand off his wrist and lowering Cade's hand gently to the mattress.

Cade frowned and his eyes barely slid open, not enough for him to appear to be able to see anything. He blinked a few times but Boyd could really only tell because Cade's eyelashes shifted. Cade raised his hand up slowly as if searching for Boyd but when Boyd stayed away from his touch, Cade drew his eyebrows down and after a moment appeared to give up. His hand dropped limply to the bed, the effort appearing to have taken all his energy as his eyes slid closed once more.

"I'm so sorry," Cade mumbled, his words slurring and truly regretful as he seemed to be falling unconscious again. "I thought you'd come back..."

Boyd watched Cade, feeling sad for him without even understanding the situation, and said quietly, "Just rest."

Cade didn't answer and it quickly became apparent to Boyd that he was asleep. Boyd hesitated briefly and started to turn. He remembered the folder and decided he no longer wanted to look into Cade's status; he didn't want to pry into Cade's life any more than he already had. He picked up the folder and carefully leaned over Cade to slide it back onto the table where he'd initially seen it.

Without giving Cade a chance to wake up, Boyd left the room and didn't look back.

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Boyd struggled to carry the awkward load of collapsed boxes as he carefully opened his front door and navigated his way down the steps. The snow was fluffy and not too slippery, which was fortunate since he couldn't see very well where he was going.

He was covered in dust and cobwebs and his arms ached from moving boxes around in the attic, but after he'd left the medical building earlier that morning he'd suddenly felt inspired to tackle the project again.

It had seemed appropriate to sort through memories and old items on Christmas Day.

There were still quite a few boxes to look through but at least he'd been able to start some piles of things to keep, sell, and ask his mother if she wanted; so far, he already had one and a half garbage bags of junk to throw away. The collapsed cardboard boxes had become a nuisance as they'd kept sliding down the wall they were leaned against so he'd finally decided to bring them outside to recycle. The garbage would be collected tomorrow so he'd already dragged the containers down to the end and side of his driveway.

Just as he maneuvered his way to the garbage bins and was trying to bend the boxes so they'd fit in the recycling container, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck raise. He faintly heard the nearby roar of a motorcycle and Boyd looked up sharply, feeling like someone was watching him, and he looked around for the source. After a moment he noticed the motorcycle rider coming down his street, wearing a full helmet. The person parked on the street in front of his house.

Boyd stood and watched with narrowed, suspicious eyes and casually shifted, keeping the container between him and the newcomer. He didn't have any weapons with him but if the person had wanted to shoot him they would have done so already and for defense against any other weapon he stood a decent chance of improvising with any of the items near him.

The rider turned the bike off and sat up, gazing at Boyd through the darkened glass of the helmet for a long moment before gloved hands reached up and pulled it off.

Kassian grinned at Boyd. "Pretty sweet, huh?"

Boyd raised his eyebrows in surprise, both from Kassian's unexpected appearance as well as the fact that Kassian apparently now had a motorcycle. Boyd dropped the rest of the cardboard into the container and let the lid fall closed as he walked over to the bike, his gaze running along it.

Boyd didn't know much about motorcycles but he could tell it was obviously a sports bike. It was black and silver with sleek, angular lines and a low windshield. As he circled to the front, he saw the BMW logo along with K2200 S in light grey letters written along the side.

"Wow," Boyd said, impressed. He ran a hand lightly along the front and looked up to meet Kassian's eyes. "Changed your mind about your sisters, I take it?"

"Nah." Kassian hopped off the bike and smirked, bright blue eyes twinkling. "I got it as a Christmas present for myself. I kept the truck too."

"Nice," Boyd said in definite approval. He looked down at the bike again, impressed by the power it looked like it held. He wanted to drive it just to see how fast it could go.

"How does it handle?"

Kassian raised an eyebrow. "Wouldn't you like to know."

Boyd glanced up at Kassian, wondering if the man was taunting him because he could see how interested Boyd was in the bike. As much as Boyd wanted to pretend he was unaffected, he was far too enamored with the motorcycle to be able to pull it off.

"Oh come on," Boyd said with a quirked eyebrow. "If you came over here just to gloat about your new bike and not even tell me what the ride's like, I'm seriously going to kick your ass."

"You wish you could, kid," Kassian replied with a wink. He shrugged off his backpack and struggled to unzip the bulky canvas bag before producing a second helmet. He pushed it against Boyd's chest and grinned again. "Your Christmas present from me. Wanna go for a ride?"

Boyd automatically reached up to hold the helmet and his eyes widened in excitement. He really did look like a kid getting a Christmas present as he glanced between the motorcycle and Kassian. "Today?" he asked in a mixture of excitement and hopefulness.

"Anytime you want and I'm around, kiddo. The helmet is yours," Kassian said with a friendly grin.

Boyd was strangely touched by the thought and for a second he stared at Kassian, unconsciously hugging the helmet to his chest.

Lately, he wasn't used to anyone giving him anything just to be kind. The only two gifts he'd received in the past six years had been when Sin had given him Lou's necklace, which had been with the best of intentions but had involved so much else that it couldn't really be said to make Boyd happy, and the jasmine tea that Sin had given him in Monterrey to make up for their rather vicious argument earlier.

Not since Lou had someone given Boyd something unexpected, unprovoked and without expectations; something that made him happy simply because.

The gift would have been great enough for one ride but it really meant a lot to him that Kassian was offering more, that he was in effect saying he liked spending time with Boyd and was inviting him to hang out more. Not to mention, this involved a motorcycle that greatly appealed to the adrenaline junkie in Boyd.

A wide grin grew across Boyd's face, far larger and more genuinely happy than he had shown in quite some time. His typically neutral and serious expression brightened considerably and even his honey brown eyes seemed a shade lighter in response.

"That's really... Thank you, Kassian," he said sincerely, then added like an excited little kid, "Are we going now?"

Kassian shook his head at Boyd, looking truly amused and equally satisfied by the response. Instead of speaking, he put his own helmet on and got back on the bike, jerking his head at Boyd in an obvious invitation to hop on as well.

Boyd didn't waste a second. "Hold on," he said happily and started to turn to his house but Kassian called him back, asking him to drop the backpack off as well. Boyd grabbed the backpack and immediately jogged back to his house to grab his coat and gloves and lock the door behind him.

Once outside, he put the helmet on and climbed onto the back of the bike, slipping his arms around Kassian's waist and holding on lightly as they pulled out onto the street. The motorcycle hummed beneath them and Boyd couldn't stop grinning even before they'd left Cedar Hills neighborhood.

Kassian ended up driving them out to the bombed out suburbs that spanned the outskirts of the eastern and southeastern areas of the city like its own miniature wasteland. No one lived out that far except the type of people who were trying to escape notice so no one was there to care about how fast they went. It wasn't until they got there that Boyd truly got a taste of the motorcycle's capabilities.

The bike went from zero to sixty miles per hour in less than three seconds and handled beautifully on the snowy terrain. The further they got from civilization, the slipperier the roads became because there hadn't been traffic or plows to pack it down. Even so, Kassian was able to go fast enough that Boyd had to press against the man's back and

hold him tightly to stay on, and Kassian found enough obstacles to wind around to make it exciting.

Kassian brought them around corners with ease and Boyd actually found himself laughing on more than one occasion simply because he was having so much fun. He hadn't experienced such carefree enjoyment in a very long time; he couldn't remember the last time he'd just done something with someone else to have fun and there hadn't been caveats involved or other things happening that made it impossible for him to simply feel a positive emotion and nothing else.

Boyd found that he actually enjoyed riding more than he thought he would have if he'd had the opportunity to drive instead. This way he was able to look around, to watch the broken buildings blur around them indistinguishably, to throw his head back and stare at the clouds flying overhead as Kassian and he wound through the suburban streets like children in their own personal playground.

Boyd's heart was pounding with adrenaline but it had nothing to do with life or death, it was purely related to enjoyment. He grinned so much that his cheeks actually started to hurt and he still he couldn't stop, not even when Kassian finally turned the bike around and drove them back to the city. By the time they arrived back in front of Boyd's house and Kassian had parked the bike on the street again, Boyd's legs almost tingled as he hopped off and stood to the side, yanking the helmet off so quickly his hair blurred around him as he beamed at Kassian.

"That was fucking awesome," Boyd enthused with a huge grin.

"It's pretty amazing," Kassian agreed, taking off his own helmet. "I had a feeling you'd appreciate it considering your taste in cars and men. Fast, powerful and dangerous and all that stuff, right?"

Boyd laughed. "You got me."

Kassian wagged his eyebrows but let the topic drop after that. "I went and got it last night right before they closed. Remember that saleslady?"

"Christina?" Boyd asked in amusement. "Did she give you a deal for all that flirting?"

"Nah but she gave me her number. I told her I'd take her for a ride. I wonder if she realized what I meant by that though." Kassian leered at Boyd.

Boyd chuckled and shook his head. "You're hopeless," he said good-naturedly.

"I know." Kassian wiped a hand across his face, brushing snow away. It had begun to mist on the way back into the city. "So what are you up to on this wonderful Christmas day?"

"Oh," Boyd said with a bemused smile. "I'm organizing my attic. It's very exciting."

A gust of wind blew suddenly and Kassian turned his face to the side, narrowing his eyes against it as he stared down at the younger agent. "Fun stuff. Want some company?"

"What?" Boyd asked in surprise. At first he thought Kassian was joking but when he looked at him he could tell he was serious. "Well of course you're welcome to stay but don't you have more interesting plans?"

Kassian made a face. "Being depressed and getting drunk was my grand plan for today. With all of my family far away and this city being a big reminder of how lame my life is now, Christmas isn't that fun anymore."

"Well," Boyd said easily, "then I guess my Christmas present to you is an invitation to hang out. I don't even have to work on the attic today, I was just bored. We could do something else."

"Nah, that's fine." Kassian followed Boyd as he headed towards the house. "I don't mind helping out."

Boyd raised an eyebrow, glancing over his shoulder as he unlocked the door and they walked inside. "You do realize attic organizing includes a great deal of energy, dust, cobwebs, and bizarre fads from twenty years ago."

Kassian unzipped his leather jacket and shrugged it off, revealing a heavy sweatshirt. "Don't let my messy place fool you, kid. I'm pretty handy around the house."

Boyd couldn't help an amused smirk. "Well, if you're that intent I'm not about to dissuade you."

He shut and locked the door behind them and with a happy little smile, set his new helmet on a table nearby. He put his coat and gloves away in the closet, holding his hand out for Kassian's jacket so it could be hung up as well.

"So what even made you decide to take on this sudden desire for attic organization today?" Kassian asked as Boyd put his now damp jacket away. Kassian wandered further into the house and looked around, peeling off his gloves and shoving them in the back pocket of his jeans.

"I've been working on it on and off and I didn't have anything else to do today," Boyd replied. "And I guess it seemed appropriate; sort of like spending time with family, even though it's just a bunch of dusty memories." Boyd started to head toward the hallway but paused near Kassian.

"Do you want anything? Food? Drink? A tour?" He asked the last slightly jokingly although he would have no problem showing Kassian around the house.

"I'm good," Kassian replied, following him down the hall although his eyes did sweep over the interior as they went through the house and headed up to the attic.

Everything was just as Boyd had left it earlier to take the boxes out; the second floor and attic lights were still on and the ladder to the attic was still extended. Boyd climbed up into the attic first then stepped back, making sure to stay clear of the single low-hanging bulb. He slid his hands into his back pockets as he looked around trying to figure out how to do this with two people. So far he'd placed most of the boxes in piles according to what he thought was inside and he'd gone through several boxes in what he had assumed was the junk pile.

He turned just as Kassian climbed into the attic. "So how do you want to help? You could supervise from afar, make garbage trips, dig through the boxes with me... The options are endless. Any preferences?"

"I'll go through stuff." Kassian looked around the space and made a face. "It's hot as hell up here."

"I know." Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear as he crouched near a box and peered inside. "It's always been that way but seems to get worse with time."

Kassian just nodded as he started to work on a box of his own, sifting through it with what looked like genuine interest. It wasn't every day he got to go through Vivienne Beaulieu's old junk.

They spent the next hour sorting through the various boxes. Kassian stopped now and then to ask what Boyd wanted to do with particular items and Boyd directed him to the proper piles for each.

There was a comfortable silence between them that was broken after a long while when Kassian chuckled quietly. He was flipping through what appeared to be an old photo album. "You must be like six here."

"What?" Boyd asked, looking over curiously. He set down the papers he'd been looking at and walked over by Kassian. "I didn't know we had any albums..."

"Who's the Goldilocks with the curly hair?" Kassian asked, indicating a picture. It was of Boyd and Lou at the beach. "He's in a lot of pictures."

Boyd peered over Kassian's shoulder. "That's Lou; he was my best friend."

"Ah, the kid who liked Deftones and Static X." Kassian shook his head slightly and a flicker of sadness crossed his expression. "What a damn shame."

Boyd made a sound of assent and crouched next to Kassian so he could see the photo album more clearly. He hadn't realized anyone in his family had ever made a photo album; he could only assume it had been his father's creation, since his mother wasn't the type for memorabilia. It was strange seeing himself so young and even stranger seeing pictures of a childhood Lou. Boyd's last memories of Lou were at age sixteen; a decade before his death, Lou had been just as bright-eyed and mischievous-looking as ever.

Boyd smiled to himself, staring at the picture. "The sad thing is, I don't fully even remember that day... What else is in there?"

Kassian pushed the book toward Boyd. "Why don't you check it out? There are some really old looking pictures in there."

"Really?" Boyd settled down more comfortably by sitting cross-legged and set the photo album over his knees. He started at the beginning and idly started flipping through. The first thing that surprised him was that there were old photographs of his parents, when they'd been even younger than he was now.

The first two pages of the album had what seemed to be a handful of pictures taken in France. There were two pictures that seemed to be taken at the same sidewalk cafe, although on different days. Although the cafe was crowded without even a single empty

table, Boyd was easily able to pick out his young mother in with the unfamiliar faces. Vivienne looked to be sixteen or seventeen years old, her pale blond hair long enough that it tumbled in a loose, low ponytail to her lower back. She wore a crisp white button-up shirt and a skirt that showed off well-toned calves.

Although she was thinner and had fewer curves than she had now, Boyd had to admit that even in a mundane setting she managed to look quite pretty. The light hit her hair in a way that made it shine and her body language was less cold and foreboding than she'd portrayed for most of Boyd's life. She was standing partially turned away from the camera and appeared to be waitressing, judging by the small pad and pencil in her hand as she looked expectantly at the people staring at their menus at the table in front of her.

The picture next to that was an action shot of Vivienne about the same age and location, this time her hair in a loose braid starting to slip over her shoulder as she leaned over one of the few tables without people. The place looked equally crowded as in the first picture and she seemed to be reaching down to pick up some mugs left on the table in front of her. She was several feet away and she was just looking over at the camera with a startled expression, far more caught off guard than Boyd had ever seen his mother be in his life.

"Your mom was hot back in the day," Kassian commented mildly. "She's too mean to be hot now."

"Heh." Boyd stared in bemusement at his teenage mother. "Her personality is rather difficult to get past now," he agreed.

Boyd hadn't realized she'd ever been a waitress; it seemed bizarre to him to imagine her in a position that was in any way subservient to someone else. Although she was adept at public relations, he never would have thought she'd be able to handle customer service on a smaller, more personal scale. She seemed like the type of person who wanted to be in control, not to have others tell her what they wanted.

This made him wonder about his parents when they'd been younger. What had she imagined her life would be? What had his father? As far as that went, he wondered about where they'd come from. All he knew was his mother was from France, his father was from Canada, and that his mother had a Parisian accent when she spoke French but once in awhile it seemed to slip to something else.

He turned the pages and saw a few touristy shots of Cedrick and Vivienne in France, some photographs of the two together and some where one was apparently taking a picture of the other. Boyd recognized some of the landmarks from his time in Paris with Thierry, although Boyd had seen them broken and rundown due to the war while these pictures showed them perfectly intact. The sky was bright blue and clear in most of the pictures, which was unsurprising since the war hadn't started until probably a few years after these photographs.

In most of the pictures, Cedrick had a huge grin and Vivienne looked more reserved; she seemed either bored with the tour or somehow distracted. She smiled quietly in a few but the expression wasn't sincere; it seemed like she was simply being polite for the camera. Despite that, she seemed relaxed and comfortable.

She was dressed casually with a fitted deep blue tank top and a white flowing skirt that went just past her knees and was moving in the wind in most pictures. Her hair was loose although a bandanna with an intricate pattern held it back from her face. Cedrick wore brown cargo pants and a dark green t-shirt that said 'Bruxelles' on it with some sort of graphic that couldn't be recognized from afar.

In one particularly memorable picture, Cedrick must have at the last second grabbed Vivienne around the waist and appeared to be pretending to throw her over an overlook behind them. She was laughing, her feet lifted off the ground with one heeled boot kicked backward a little, her hands gripping his forearms as if she planned to bring him down with her. Even with the distance of the camera it was obvious that her expression had softened considerably from the rest of the pictures.

Boyd stared, eyebrows raised. He had never given much thought to whether his mother was attractive but whereas he thought she'd looked pretty in the waitress picture, in this one he thought she actually looked beautiful. Without a hint of the cold exterior he was used to, in that picture she seemed human and in love. He couldn't think of the last time he'd seen his mother truly smile, let alone look genuinely happy like she did there.

"Wow," Boyd said in bemusement. "She can smile."

"Is your father dead?" Kassian asked unexpectedly. "I assume that guy is your dad, right?"

"Yes, that's my father," Boyd said, staring down at the face that was familiar but a little blurred to him from memory. He looked up at Kassian calmly. "Cedrick. He died in the second wave-- he was a journalist covering a story in New York."

"Ah." Kassian studied the pictures and looked intrigued by them but he didn't say anything else.

Boyd flipped through a few more pages and only paused again when he found pictures of himself as a baby. There were two close-up pictures of Boyd, one where he seemed irritable and crying and another where he looked half-asleep. Another picture was of Cedrick with a huge grin holding Boyd next to the hospital bed, where Vivienne lay with her hospital gown a little askew at her shoulders, looking frazzled and exhausted. They both looked to be in their late teens to early twenties.

But what made Boyd draw his eyebrows down and lean closer to the photo album, intrigued, was a picture of several people around the hospital bed. Vivienne was still in bed; this time she was the one holding Boyd and although in the other picture Cedrick had been holding Boyd tightly and grinning hugely, Vivienne was holding Boyd a little away from her body and looked tired.

Standing surrounding the bed were Cedrick and three people Boyd had never seen before. A stocky man who looked to be in his mid-forties stood beside Cedrick; he had the same huge grin as Cedrick and same chin but he was taller with hazel eyes and his dark brown hair was slowly starting to turn silver on the sides. He had his arm around a woman next to him, looking just a few years older than him with black hair and friendly, deep brown eyes; she had one hand over the man's hand on her waist and she was smiling happily.

Between them and Cedrick was a third man who looked to be a few years older than Cedrick; he had the same brown hair as Cedrick but his eyes were a darker brown and although he was smiling, he looked distracted. He was taller than Cedrick by a few inches and seemed to have a leaner build.

On a table at the edge of the picture, several large vases with flowers could be seen along with a little teddy bear wearing a blue shirt. A balloon could just barely be seen in the upper right corner, reading at an angle, 'Congratulations! It's a boy!'

"Interesting..." Boyd muttered.

"What?" Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd, looking somewhat puzzled. "You've never seen any of these pictures before?"

"No," Boyd said with a slight frown. "I didn't know this existed-- we don't really even keep family photos on display so I never guessed there was an album anywhere."

Boyd let his finger run over Cedrick and the three people he didn't recognize. "I wonder if these are my grandparents? I've never seen them before but I heard a story once... I wonder why he didn't show me this album when he talked about it."

Kassian studied the picture and frowned thoughtfully. "You never met any of them? Your dad seems like a family-oriented guy or at least in these pictures he does."

"No." Boyd's expression was only a little somber as he stared at the faces of his relatives, of people he'd never have the chance to know. His fingers absently trailed along his grandfather's face before he looked up at Kassian again. "They died shortly after I was born."

Kassian nodded and looked at the picture again. "What about the other guy? He looks like your dad."

Boyd frowned slightly and studied the young man standing next to his father. "I don't know. I don't remember hearing about an uncle but I don't know who else he'd be. Maybe I just forgot."

"They resemble each other enough." Kassian began looking through the box again. "No more albums in here."

Boyd nodded and set the album to the side in a pile of items he intended to bring down and look through more closely later. He stood and dusted off his pants. "I'm going to look through the rest of the boxes."

As time passed, Boyd ended up finding stacks of old papers his father had written piled in a box. He lifted them out and held them up to see them better in the light; they were printed pages and appeared to be the beginning of some sort of murder mystery novel. His father's handwriting scrawled across the pages here and there, with notes and grammatical changes in blue ink.

Boyd smiled to himself, feeling a sense of fond nostalgia. It reminded him of the scary stories his father used to tell Lou and him in this same attic as they all hunched over a small flashlight. He set the papers to the side in an empty box, careful to keep the pages in order as they weren't all numbered, and he planned to bring the box down to his room to read the story later.

In a box hidden beneath and behind that one, he found old shirts and sweaters his father had once worn. He held them up in front of him and could see that his father's build had been larger than his own; it was interesting to think about what they would have looked like next to each other but saddening to know it would never happen.

He was just about to push the cardboard box to the side when he noticed a beat-up wooden box hidden beneath the layers of clothing. He pulled the box out, curious, and saw that it had a small lock on the front. "Huh."

"What's up?" Kassian asked without looking up.

"Not sure," Boyd said, carefully turning the box around to study it. The wood was scratched and worn in several places and for the most part it looked wholly unremarkable. If he hadn't found it hidden away he would have thought nothing of it but something about it made him very curious about what was inside. When he tilted the box he didn't hear anything rattle but he could feel something shift. "An old box buried under his shirts."

Kassian looked up from his close examination of one of the pictures and glanced in Boyd's direction. "It's locked?"

Boyd tried opening it just in case the lock was broken but it wouldn't budge. "Seems so." He set the wooden box next to him and looked through the cardboard box again. "Maybe there's a key..."

"We could bust it open," Kassian suggested, sitting up straighter and squinting at the tiny lock.

"Hmm." Boyd continued to study the lock. "Think we can do it without harming the box?"

Kassian shrugged and stood up, walking over to where Boyd was sitting. He made a face and shook his head, pulling off his sweatshirt and tossing it into the corner. He was literally sweating from the intensity of the heat in the attic.

He crouched down next to Boyd and took the box, eyeballing the lock critically. "We can probably pry it off with something."

Kassian looked around the attic and spotted an old toolbox in the corner. He grabbed it and popped it open, rummaging around until he found a screwdriver. It didn't take long

to pry the lock off and Kassian handed the box to Boyd, leaving the actual opening up to him. "You could have done that yourself but whatever."

Boyd didn't look over; he said an absent thank you and pried the box open, peering inside. There was a plastic baggy on top that had a few items that he didn't know the meaning of but probably had been mementos for the owner of the box. Boyd carefully lifted that out and set it to the side.

Underneath, he found over a dozen small leather-bound journals. He picked up the first one and unwound the strap holding it closed. When he opened the journal, he found his father's small, neat handwriting filling the pages. The date at the top of the first page was July 26, 1997 and as he flipped through he found that the entries went through the rest of that year. He let his fingers slide along the page briefly, feeling a subtle connection to his father.

He didn't take the time to start reading because he knew he would get too distracted but he did pull out a few random other journals to determine that they spanned until 2007 and didn't all appear to be only journal entries. Some of them seemed to be parts of articles Cedrick had been writing or notes jotted down on various topics. Boyd decided that he would bring the entire box down to his room with him and read all the journals later.

"They're my father's," he explained belatedly, looking over at Kassian finally.

Boyd intended to just glance at Kassian but instead he found himself staring. It was the first time he realized that Kassian wasn't wearing a shirt; between Kassian's proximity and the sheen of sweat on his body, it was impossible for Boyd not to notice how well-defined Kassian's body was. He could clearly see Kassian's muscular chest and abs and without even realizing it, Boyd got distracted by taking in how attractive Kassian was.

Kassian stood up under the bulb and nodded, not asking about what the books contained, likely figuring that Boyd would tell him if he wanted to. "That's cool. I doubt my father has anything interesting enough to lock up in a box unless it's old copies of Maxim."

He ran a hand through his short blond hair and Boyd's eyes followed the movement, taking in the bulge of Kassian's bicep when he moved his arm. It was only as a side effect of Boyd's staring that he realized that he could finally see the tattoos that covered Kassian's torso.

There was a large tattoo of a spider web wrapped around one entire shoulder and an ornately detailed image of a skull on the other. There was a pointed star at the front and below each shoulder and a tattoo of a snake wrapped around his midsection twice, dipping below his hip at one point. A pair of spades were displayed in the snake's mouth.

Boyd followed the tattoos with his eyes, at once intrigued by them simply to know their meanings as well as admiring the way they looked on Kassian's body. He remembered that he'd seen a crucifix and something in Russian on Kassian's back and he found himself wishing that Kassian would turn so he could see them more clearly.

He was particularly fascinated by the snake and found his gaze drawn to the area where it disappeared beneath Kassian's waistband. It made Boyd want to see Kassian naked, to see the entirety of his tattoos and whether there were any others hidden beneath his clothes. Not to mention he suspected that Kassian would be even more attractive without anything on.

When Kassian didn't immediately move, Boyd looked back up and realized with a start that Kassian was watching him with a slightly raised eyebrow. Boyd fought the urge to look away guiltily since it would just make it even more obvious that he'd just been checking Kassian out. He couldn't read Kassian's expression or tell how long he'd been aware of Boyd's gaze so Boyd tried to cover the awkwardness by bringing up a topic he was curious about anyway.

"Your tattoos," Boyd said only a little abruptly. "I was-- I haven't seen them before. What do they mean?"

Kassian shrugged, mouth twisting slightly to the side as he raised his other eyebrow at Boyd. "How do you know I didn't just choose random tattoos on a whim?"

"That's a lot of whim," Boyd said with a raised eyebrow, gesturing at Kassian's torso and deciding not to comment on Kassian's somewhat suspicious expression. "Not to mention I haven't seen many tattoo parlors with random blocks of Russian text as a choice."

"How do you know I have random blocks of Russian on me?" Kassian continued to look suspicious, as if he thought Boyd had somehow busted into his Agency file to get information on him and his tattoos.

"Because I saw it at your place during training," Boyd said mildly. "You weren't wearing a shirt at first and I noticed it when you walked away. Not to mention," he added, deadpan, to hopefully lighten the mood enough to get rid of Kassian's suspicious look, "I've been stalking you, hiding in your shower, and I sleep in your closet."

Kassian's mouth twitched slightly and he snickered finally, indicating himself with a gesture. "I didn't choose to have them. It's for my ongoing undercover identity. Konstantin Petrov spent time in a prison in Siberia and acquired ink-based souvenirs from there." He said the last part with an authentic-sounding Russian accent.

Boyd raised an eyebrow and returned his gaze briefly to the tattoos, this time making sure he kept his expression and interest purely professional. He was further intrigued by the tattoos now that he knew they were from a Russian prison.

Kassian seemed self-deprecating when he said that and Boyd knew from their time in Russia and the bit he knew about that mission that Kassian hadn't seemed to particularly enjoy the persona, which made Boyd wonder why Kassian still had them if they were a reminder of a mission for which he didn't seem to have fond memories.

"Do you like them?" Boyd asked curiously, meeting Kassian's gaze again.

"Nope. But my opinion doesn't matter. It's just my body but I don't really own my body anymore. The Agency does." Kassian made a face and rolled his shoulders slightly.

Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly. "But Unit 16 could remove them easily. So why do you still have them?"

"It's an ongoing cover identity," Kassian explained in a dull voice. "Which means in the next few years I'll be sent back to Russia to re-assume my role."

"What the hell," Boyd said in disbelief. "What's so important over there that the mission's so intensive? Or why isn't Konstantin replaceable?"

"Ahhhh." Kassian sighed and grimaced slightly. "It's kind of a long story..."

For a moment it seemed that he would change the subject but then he focused his gaze on Boyd and gave him a half grin. "But I'll tell you if we can go get some dinner. I'm hungry."

Boyd gave Kassian a sly look. "Alright. I'll pay if you drive."

Kassian snorted and grabbed his sweatshirt as they both got up and started towards the ladder. "You just want to ride that damn bike again. Speed fiend."

"I'm not denying it," Boyd drawled with a smirk.

The drive was just long enough for Boyd to enjoy the ride on the motorcycle but not so long that he got too cold as the wind moved easily through his clothing. Kassian drove them into an area of the city Boyd had never been in but he could tell simply by the activity and the especially rundown buildings that it wasn't a good area. It didn't bother Boyd in the least since he could handle himself but he could imagine there being people who wouldn't want to venture down these streets, especially after dark.

Kassian parked the motorcycle on the street and they ended up walking half a block before he brought them into Killian's Pub. It was a hole-in-the-wall pub and grill that was about half full even though it was Christmas night. It wasn't too surprising, though; the holidays had become increasingly unimportant to a vast majority of the nation considering the war had destroyed the economy and with it mass consumerism, as well as killed and split apart many families.

Most of the customers were sitting at the bar and the majority of them seemed largely oblivious or uncaring about the holiday at all. The clientele was a mixture of blue collar working class men, alcoholics, and tough-looking criminals. There were almost entirely men inside with only the occasional woman, several of whom were working there.

A sign in front said to seat themselves and Kassian didn't even glance at it as he led Boyd inside. As they walked through the pub, it became evident that Kassian was a regular.

The bartender, a dark-haired man about Kassian's age, greeted Kassian with a wide grin and a wave and one of the waitresses, a redheaded woman a few years younger than Kassian with smoky eyes, smiled and winked flirtatiously at Kassian. Several of the regulars acknowledged Kassian as well, a mixture of men including all the types of people there.

Kassian casually returned the greetings as he led Boyd into a corner booth in the back that would afford them the most privacy. Kassian slid into the seat that allowed him to face the rest of the pub and Boyd sat down across from him, his eyebrows raised in bemusement.

"Exactly how long have you been going here?"

"Since before I was married," Kassian replied with a half grin, taking off his gloves and loosening the black scarf that was wound around his throat. He sat his helmet next to him and leaned back, extending his legs, causing one boot to accidentally brush against Boyd. "It's laid back."

Boyd nodded, putting his helmet, scarf and gloves on the seat next to him. "So you used to live around here?" He smirked lightly and added, "Unless you lived across town and that's how you got your hobby of trekking the city in subzero weather."

Kassian smiled at Boyd wryly and shook his head as the waitress came over. "I lived a couple of streets over before moving into that house with my wife. She didn't like the atmosphere."

"I can't imagine why," the pretty, red-haired waitress trilled as she leaned against Kassian's side, wrapping one arm around his neck. "It's such a charming neighborhood. Between the bums, the gangs and the prostitutes I can't figure out why your wifey wouldn't have felt like she fit in. Merry Christmas, by the way."

Kassian rolled his eyes at her and looked at Boyd. "This is Shirley. Resident big mouth. Shirley, this is Boyd. He's a co-worker of mine."

"Oh really." Shirley looked at Boyd with interest and extended her hand to shake his, smiling. "I wouldn't have pegged you for the mercenary type."

If Boyd hadn't met a civilian friend of Kassian's last summer, he wouldn't have understood what she meant. Now he knew that Murphy Corps was the cover story for all active field agents with civilian friends or family, in order to explain extended leaves and any skills the agent had acquired through training.

Murphy Corps was supposedly a private military contracting firm that worked around the world. Because drug companies had been targets of terrorism, theft, and threat since the war, and since the Agency's cover was Johnson's Pharmaceuticals, Murphy Corps supposedly sometimes protected the Johnson's Pharmaceuticals staff and compound. Boyd could say he was also with Murphy Corps but he knew he didn't look the part and it would be more work than it was worth, so rather than stick out as something interesting or odd he decided to go the easy route.

"I'm a chemist with Johnson's, actually," Boyd said, returning the smile as he shook her hand. "It's more like he's a bodyguard for nerds like me."

"Oooh," Shirley replied with a grin. "Well you have a good guy for the job. Other than the fact that he's cute as hell, I can't think of anyone else I'd want to watch my back if it came down to it."

"Aw shucks, you're making me blush," Kassian teased her with a half smile.

She ruffled his short hair, causing it to spike out wildly, and stood up straight. "Okay now, down to business! What are you guys drinking?"

"Just bring me a pitcher and a sandwich." Kassian rested his chin on his fist and watched the girl.

"The usual?" she asked knowingly.

"Yup."

Shirley turned her smile to Boyd. "What about you, mister scientist?"

"You seem like you have good taste," Boyd said a light smile. "Why don't you surprise me with your favorite food?"

Shirley winked at him. "Sure thing, hon. Just do me a favor and help Kass with his pitcher of beer. I don't feel like scraping him off the back of the booth tonight."

Kassian made a face. "Shut up."

She laughed and turned away, heading towards the bar.

Boyd watched her go then gave Kassian an innocent look. "If I don't help you drink does that make me the designated driver?"

"You're a funny kid," Kassian replied with a raised brow. "Just ignore Shirley. I've never gotten that plastered in public but I made the mistake of letting it get that way when she and I were together a few times."

"So speaking of," Boyd said in amusement, "how many people have you slept with who are in the room right now?" There were a few other women who'd followed Kassian with

their eyes and he was curious if they were just checking him out or if Kassian had a history with them.

Kassian looked genuinely surprised by the question and he frowned slightly. "Whoa, I think you have the wrong idea. I'm not some kind of womanizer or anything..."

Boyd watched Kassian, finding the response to be curious. "It's more like you said you aren't interested in relationships, it's been at least two years since your divorce, and I suspect a few years longer than that, and there have been a few people it sounds like you've been involved with," he explained, leaning against the table idly.

"So I don't think you're a womanizer; I just figure you don't stay together for long with any one person. And with enough time, good enough looks, and visiting the usual places enough to get to know people, that could result in a number of flings. Not to mention any people you were involved with before your wife." Boyd tilted his head. "I didn't mean to imply anything beyond that."

"Oh." Kassian looked slightly relieved. Despite the fact that he'd claimed Boyd's lack of opinion about him was what had caused him to seek the younger agent's friendship, Kassian now appeared to care very much about what Boyd thought. It was an interesting shift.

Kassian looked around the room and seemed thoughtful. "Shirley and I dated for awhile but it didn't work out. She didn't want something steady but she had too much background drama for me. I did mess around with Joanne over there," he admitted as he nodded towards one of the women at the bar. "But then I went to Russia and didn't really talk to her much after that obviously."

Boyd nodded. "Makes sense."

Shirley returned with the pitcher of beer and set two mugs down. She also set down in front of Kassian a big basket of fries and a large sandwich that was filled with vegetables and meat.

"Awesome," Kassian enthused with a grin. "You can't get sandwiches like this anywhere else. I don't even care that it's synthetic meat as long as it tastes real."

Shirley wrinkled her nose at him. "Don't gross him out," she chastised, putting another plate down in front of Boyd. "Ignore Kass. The chicken pesto Panini is the best thing on the menu and it's my fave. Enjoy, boys."

Kassian didn't reply as he bit into half of his sandwich, making an 'mmm' sound as he chewed.

Boyd didn't get a chance to thank her before she'd already walked away. He had to admit that the Panini did look appetizing and it was probably something he would have ordered anyway. He bit into his own sandwich and raised his eyebrows, impressed by how good it actually was. He hadn't expected the food to taste terrible but he didn't expect to like it this much either.

They chewed in silence for a few moments before Kassian sat back and poured himself some beer. "So, I just remembered that we came here for a purpose."

"True," Boyd said, then poured himself some of the beer as well. He'd forgotten to ask for water and didn't see the point in bothering with it anymore. He took a drink, ignoring the taste he still didn't like, and raised his eyebrows. "So, what first? What was so important there or what do the tattoos mean?"

"I dunno. What do you want to know more?" Kassian asked, picking at his sandwich and dropping his eyes to study it.

"I'm mostly interested in the tattoos, honestly," Boyd admitted. "But I do also wonder why someone else can't replace you in some other capacity. Why you'd have to go back."

"Because it's an ongoing role that I took on," Kassian explained with a shrug. "Unless they have a clone of me somewhere, no one else can take it on."

"Well, obviously not as the person you're being," Boyd said patiently, "but if it's so important why don't they have more than one person involved? Why is no one else starting in on it now in some other form? Is the entire situation only Level 10?"

"It's complicated." Kassian picked up his sandwich but put it down again, eyebrows drawing together as he tried to explain. "I had to work up to being in a certain position to get close to certain people... Eh. This is difficult to be vague about."

He paused and took a long sip of beer, watching Boyd over the rim of the mug before setting it down heavily. "Alright I'm going to go into specifics but don't repeat it to anyone. It's still classified because it's ongoing."

"I won't," Boyd said seriously.

"Well, basically it's like this," Kassian started, wiping his hands on a napkin and lowering his voice slightly even though no one was in their vicinity. Most of the patrons were crowded at the bar. "I was sent in as a convict. Over there I'm Konstantin Petrov and my back story is that I was doing time in a Siberian prison in isolation. I was sent to infiltrate a criminal organization called Black Guard which have ties to and support the new Russian federation financially. I did so successfully. I became a high ranking part of their gang and was trusted by the leader, I was in a relationship with his daughter... I got really sucked into the role."

Kassian absently tore up the napkin, gaze focused steadily on Boyd although it seemed as though his thoughts had wandered far away.

"Which part? The relationship or all of it?" Boyd asked.

"All of it I guess. It was difficult. The things I had to do to prove myself, who I had to become to get involved in that world." Kassian gave Boyd a crooked smile and scoffed. "Sometimes I forgot why I was even there. I forgot who I really was. I actually fell in love with that girl I think and now I can't really understand why. The feelings are gone. It's like they never existed at all. It's difficult to explain."

"There are a lot of things we're all capable of under stress or extreme circumstances--actions, emotions, justifications... All for survival. It's hardwired into our brains." Boyd's tone was reasonable and calm and he took another drink of his beer as he contemplated what Kassian said.

"So you probably convinced yourself that you loved her because that was what you needed to actually feel in order to do your job," Boyd continued. "For someone like you, I can't imagine you otherwise felt comfortable with basically deceiving a random woman for I'm assuming an extended period of time, all for an ulterior motive that would probably ultimately hurt her. But if you thought you loved her then at least you could tell yourself that the relationship itself wasn't a lie, even if your reason for being there with her was." He shrugged. "Not that I know much about the situation, of course; it's just conjecture."

"Nah, you're probably right. That's pretty much what Ann said about it to be honest." Kassian made a wry face at that and sighed. "I don't know what Anya thinks of me now but I never did mean to hurt her. She'd probably blow my brains out if she ever saw me again. One more risk I'll have to take when I'm sent back."

"Why do you have to go back, though?" Boyd couldn't understand that part. "Why did you leave if the mission wasn't finished?"

"Officially Konstantin Petrov is once again in a Siberian prison. I'm supposed to be serving time for the murder of Anya's father, the head of Black Guard." Kassian finally took another bite of his sandwich, chewing slowly as he waited for Boyd's reaction.

Boyd wasn't particularly surprised by that information; it wasn't unusual for a Level 10 mission to involve assassination and if Kassian had formed a relationship with the leader's daughter, it made sense if that was to get close to the leader. Not to mention that would explain why Anya would be furious with Kassian, although initially Boyd had assumed it would have been a lover's quarrel because Kassian had disappeared.

The whole thing was very logical, in the cold, cruel way the Agency often worked. After Boyd's Level 10 training, he was even less surprised by new information he gathered about the Agency and its directives. He could see how Kassian would be bothered by such a mission, especially after two years of having spent time around those people. Maybe Kassian had even come to like or respect the leader, all the while knowing he was going to kill him.

Without living through something like that, Boyd would never fully understand how much it all could affect a person. He didn't judge Kassian for anything he'd heard so far but he still didn't understand the mission.

"I don't mean to sound cruel toward the situation but, wasn't that the goal?" Boyd asked, eyebrows drawn down slightly in confusion. "Why would Konstantin ever need to be released in a manner that requires you being there? And even if he was, why would he return to a place where people would care about what he did and hold him accountable?"

"Her father wasn't the real goal," Kassian said, shaking his head. "The goal was for me to betray him, to betray Black Guard, so that when Konstantin someday escapes or is released from prison, I will be recruited into the group that we're really looking to infiltrate. That group is the goal and since they were major rivals with Anya's father, the fact that I brought about his downfall will make it easier for me to integrate."

Boyd considered that as he finished the last half of his Panini. "Why couldn't you just infiltrate the other group in the first place?"

Kassian squeezed ketchup onto his fries, not looking at Boyd as he replied although he made a face at the question. "If that were possible, it would have been done but it doesn't work that way. The group we're after is called Red Twilight, a faction that wants to bring what they call true communism to Russia. They're I guess..."

He trailed off for a minute and chewed his fries, narrowing his light blue eyes in thought. "They're to Russia what Janus is to the US. A major threat because the current post-war administrations of both countries are so fragile and both Janus and Red Twilight are doing their best to disrupt the infrastructure so that they can take control. Not like the current government is that chummy with the US now but a group like Red Twilight would want all out war all over again. And like Janus, Twilight is really secretive and the leaders are on the super down low, you know?"

"So there's no way for me to just go in and try to infiltrate. We have no idea where they are, just that they exist and that they were at serious odds with Anya's father and his faction, since Black Guard supported the new government with money gained from their illegal and black market activities. When I'm sent back they're hoping that Twilight picks me up to recruit me because I'm an enemy of their enemy and did what they were trying to do. Or at least because I have information about Black Guard, which is currently unstable but likely going to continue after they elect a new leader."

Boyd nodded; he could understand the logic of it when put in those terms. It was one large reason Carhart's unit tried to flip the rebel groups already in existence, because directly trying to infiltrate Janus would be incredibly difficult but getting information on them from other sources was more manageable. Even so, that was a hell of a time commitment to make for a mission.

"When you accepted the mission, did you know how long it would be?"

Kassian nodded and leaned back entirely against the booth, resting his head against the beat up old cushion as he watched Boyd eat. "I knew I would be deep undercover and that I wasn't to come back until I became a legitimate part of that world. I underestimated the time it would take, though. The few times I did check back in, I got pretty frustrated when I was told to stay longer. But the whole thing with them sending me back was fucking news to me. After I came back and was hardcore debriefed and went through the re-integration process they dropped that bombshell. That's partially why I was in such a pissy mood when we picked you up in Mexico."

"I'm fairly certain I'd have reacted the same way," Boyd replied with raised eyebrows. "If you knew the ultimate goal was the other group and you had to undermine Black Guard first, what did they originally tell you that made you not know you'd be sent back?"

"I didn't know that at first. I just knew I had to get close to, get information on and eventually kill the leader of Black Guard. It took me awhile to get close to him, the dude was more heavily guarded than the president, but when I was finally allowed in his inner circle, I contacted the Agency and they told me to hold off on the hit. I didn't really know what was going on for awhile but I started suspecting there was more to it when they kept dragging it out."

Kassian ran a hand through his hair, combing it back so that it wasn't as tousled anymore. "Anyway, enough of that crap. I don't want to talk about the assignment anymore to be honest." He gave Boyd a sly look and another half grin. "How about I answer one more question about all of that shit and then I get to ask you something."

"Okay," Boyd said slowly, eyeing Kassian in mild suspicion. He got the feeling Kassian was going to do or say something tricky but he didn't bother to think about it too much. If he had one more question regarding the Russian mission, there was no hesitation about what it would be. "And the tattoos?"

"I knew you would ask that." Kassian shifted in his seat and shrugged. "A couple they put on me before I went out there but the rest of them I got while I was there. It's a lot of symbolism, something that started in Russian gangs in the prisons. A couple of them show my rank, that I was pretty high up there in the end. The snake is symbolic for that and the spades mean I was also a thief. I mean I have a lot so, I dunno what you're most curious about. The spider web for instance is about addiction. I got myself pretty deep in it with drugs for awhile up there."

Kassian spoke in a completely matter-of-fact tone, not seeming ashamed in the least about the confession. He seemed pretty calm and level-headed about the entire topic given how stressed out he'd been during Boyd's training in Russia. It was somewhat surprising but also relieving; whatever tension Kassian felt about the topic wasn't spilling over into his interaction with Boyd and although it was obviously something Kassian had issues with, he wasn't allowing it to ruin the relatively easygoing dialogue they had.

Although Boyd was initially surprised about the admission, he supposed it made sense. Kassian had been deep undercover, across the world from home, in a completely uncertain situation where he could have been killed, and his mission kept being extended without explanation. Add in the dismal weather, the fact that the group he was

infiltrating likely also included a number of addicts, as well as the moral dilemmas Kassian had probably been experiencing about aspects of the mission, and it was no wonder that he may have felt the need to escape at some point.

Boyd wanted to ask more about it but decided that could wait for another time. At the moment, there was one other tattoo that had been piquing his curiosity for awhile so he didn't want to miss the chance to ask about it. "What about the text?"

"Ah. Rebellious anti-authority stuff." Kassian smirked. "That's actually not one of mine. It was put on me in advance."

"Ahh," Boyd said in understanding with a nod. No doubt it was something that had been well-researched ahead of time by the Agency to best fit the Konstantin persona they'd created. Although Kassian had plenty of other tattoos, the only two he'd really wondered about were the snake and text so he decided to leave the topic alone for the moment.

Boyd pushed his empty plate to the side and pulled the glass of beer closer. "Well, you fulfilled your end of the bargain so looks like it's my turn to do the same. What was your question?"

"Well." Kassian studied Boyd for a long moment before leaning forward and raising both eyebrows. "I'm just curious as to why you said Shirley has good taste."

Boyd hadn't been expecting that question at all and stared at Kassian briefly before he casually took a drink of the beer and looked toward Shirley across the room. He'd been hoping that Kassian hadn't caught that comment or at least hadn't realized there was anything more to it. But since Kassian had answered honestly any question Boyd had asked, Boyd felt it only right to do the same, even if he felt a little uncomfortable saying the truth to Kassian.

"Well," Boyd said slowly after a moment, finally shifting his gaze back to Kassian, who watched him expressionlessly. "It was partially because I didn't feel like perusing a menu and I had no idea what sort of sandwich you were getting. So flattery seemed like a quick, simple way of getting her to like me so she'd take my request seriously and choose something she'd like to eat too."

Boyd paused, dropping his gaze to study the deep color of the beer. "But... also because she basically said you're attractive and can be trusted," he admitted. He looked up at Kassian again, feeling a little awkward saying that aloud, and fidgeted with the

glass. "I mean, obviously you know I'm gay so I don't want you to feel uncomfortable with that, like I'll start hitting on you or anything..."

Kassian made a 'hmm' sound and tapped his fingers against the table, his face completely blank as he watched Boyd fidget. After a while he said flatly, "Well, it does make me uncomfortable."

Boyd stared at Kassian, his fingers briefly going still on the glass. He hadn't expected Kassian to express joy at his confession but he also hadn't been expecting such a blunt answer. Boyd never would have even brought it up in the first place if Kassian hadn't asked and it occurred to Boyd that this was the second time he'd truthfully answered a question about Kassian that, in retrospect, seemed like maybe he should have lied instead.

What surprised him the most was that he actually felt a twinge of regret to think that he may have messed up. He felt like on his end it didn't really matter whether he thought Kassian was attractive or not; he just liked spending time around Kassian and it was going to be a shame if they stopped because of a comment Boyd made.

Kassian had always seemed so objective and reasonable that Boyd wouldn't think this would ruin any type of friendship, but then again Boyd had never been a heterosexual male with a gay friend so who knew what was going through Kassian's mind.

Even so, he couldn't take back what he'd said and he didn't quite know how to respond to that. In the end, he said a little awkwardly, "Ah, well-- I'm sorry..." He drew his eyebrows down and he subconsciously started to fidget with the glass again as he continued more smoothly, "But like I said, it shouldn't affect anything so you could even just forget what I said..."

Kassian narrowed his eyes slightly and nodded. "And you can forget about riding on the back of my bike. That's just out of the question now."

"What?" Boyd said incredulously, feeling surprised and mildly hurt about the entire conversation. "Why? Because I'm gay?"

Kassian continued to stare at him with the same cold expression but when he opened his mouth to reply, the corners twitched slightly. He cleared his throat and seemed to be trying to force himself to keep a straight face but then he just started laughing. "I'm just fucking with you, Boyd. What kind of an asshole do you think I am, anyway?"

Boyd stared at Kassian with an expression that shifted from surprise to suspicion to wariness mixed with relief. He narrowed his eyes and grabbed some of Kassian's fries, throwing them at Kassian.

"A lot bigger one now," he said and although he was a little hurt by it all he wasn't really angry; more than anything he was bewildered and off-balance. "What the hell? Why would you do that?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just wondering if you find me attractive," Kassian admitted, still laughing as he picked fries off his shirt. Ketchup was smeared on his sweater but he didn't complain.

"Jesus," Boyd said in exasperation as he leaned back against the seat, rubbing a hand over his face. "I just told you I think you're hot. There was no reason to mess with me beyond that." He dropped his hand and picked up the beer mug, quirking an eyebrow at Kassian's amusement as he said sarcastically, "I'm glad you find this so hilarious, though."

"I'm sorry," Kassian said sincerely although there was still an amused grin on his face. "Really, I didn't think you'd take me so seriously. I forgot what a genius actor I am. But seriously, did you really think I'd make you walk home?"

"I don't know what I thought," Boyd said honestly. He took another drink of beer and frowned as he set the mug down. "I thought it was atypical of you but I've never told a straight friend I think he's attractive before so I had no idea what to expect. So far in my experience some people can be pretty stupid about the whole thing."

"I see." Kassian rubbed his chin thoughtfully, once again staring at Boyd with that difficult-to-read expression. "Who said I was straight?"

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Oh, come on. I'm not going to fall for this twice."

"You don't believe me?" Kassian looked intrigued by this and rested his face against the palm of his hand. "Why not?"

"Because you flirt with every woman who passes in front of you and you were married," Boyd replied with a raised eyebrow. "You could be bi but I've never seen you even look twice at another man let alone seem interested, and any time I've talked about anything related to homosexuality in front of you, you haven't given any indication that you've

experienced what I mean. You're always completely objective about it. Not to mention you just don't seem like you are."

Kassian laughed again, his blue eyes bright with amusement. "Maybe I just didn't feel the need to mention it before. My experiences have nothing to do with yours."

"Fine, then assuming I believed you," Boyd said, clearly not believing Kassian in the least, "why would you suddenly feel the need to mention it now?"

This earned him a casual shrug and an even more casual reply of, "Because I'm attracted to you and I wanted to tell you."

It was a good thing that Boyd wasn't taking a drink at that time because he probably would have choked. "*What?*" Boyd said incredulously, thinking he had to have heard wrong. "I don't belie--"

But he was already searching Kassian's face, who watched Boyd calmly with an expression that showed he was being serious and honest in a way that was far different from the time before. Boyd cut himself off and stared at Kassian in complete surprise as he realized that Kassian wasn't joking. It was enough trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Kassian was actually bisexual, let alone anything beyond that.

"Wait, what--" Boyd started to say then finally managed, "Since when?"

Kassian raised an eyebrow. "I dunno. Fairly recently I realized it. When you came over to my apartment all upset."

"What the hell?" Boyd gave Kassian a half skeptical, half incredulous look. "Were we in different dimensions at the time? Because unless you think it's hot when a grown man cries or your competitive spirit *really* likes to beat me at games, I have no idea how you had that kind of revelation then..."

Kassian chuckled and he rolled his eyes. "I knew you'd make some wisecrack about the timing." He shrugged. "I forget the exact moment but you had just finished telling me some heavy shit and you had your eyes closed but when you opened them there was a kind of... I dunno. A moment I guess, when I couldn't take my eyes off of you. Or I guess, I couldn't drop your gaze because I was distracted by how gorgeous your eyes looked."

Boyd watched Kassian for a moment, not certain how to respond at first. He wasn't very accustomed to genuine compliments; in truth, he'd almost expected Kassian to respond with a joke, not something more sincere. He had to admit that it felt good to hear and part of him was flattered that Kassian not only thought his eyes were that attractive but also that Kassian had told him. Still, the conversation was flabbergasting to Boyd as he was still trying to wrap his mind around this new information.

"And... you just noticed then?" Boyd asked, trying to understand how this shift in perspective had happened for Kassian. "I've been around you before, so how was that any different?"

"I don't know. I just never paid attention before. I can't explain it or anything." Kassian shrugged again. He leaned back and added firmly. "Don't get the wrong idea though, this isn't some confession of love or anything. I'm not saying let's be boyfriends. I just like being up front about stuff and I wanted to let you know."

Boyd stared at Kassian for a long moment. This was bizarre to him; he'd known for awhile that he thought Kassian was attractive but he'd never even considered that Kassian would think the same in return. He was actually relieved to hear that it was simply attraction; the last thing Boyd wanted right then was to even think about a relationship or have some sort of one-sided feeling of love complicate an otherwise comfortable friendship.

"Okay," Boyd said slowly at length. "So... what now? Does this change anything or was that just an FYI?"

"Just an FYI. If something happens somewhere along the line or either of us wants it to, fine, but I'm not trying to suggest it should." Kassian picked up the other half of his sandwich. "Things are just less complicated when everything is out in the open."

"Hmm." Boyd grabbed a few of Kassian's fries and chewed on them thoughtfully as he nodded. That was probably true and it was certainly a lesson he and Sin had never seemed to manage to learn. It was probably why everything always became such a mess between them.

Even so, it was still strange to realize how much one bit of information could make him rethink all he had thought he knew about a person. He didn't think Kassian had lied about being bisexual but it was almost hard to believe that it was the truth, simply because he hadn't had a clue.

"What do you mean by attracted, anyway?" Boyd asked curiously after a moment. "Do you mean physically or you like being around me... Or something else?"

Kassian once again seemed very amused by the question although it wasn't obvious why. He seemed entirely too pleased by the surprise that Boyd was displaying. "Well, obviously I like being around you or I wouldn't be coming to hang around in your attic. But it dawned on me a little while ago that I thought you're pretty cute."

"Cute?" Boyd made a face and reached across the table to steal more of Kassian's fries. "How do you figure?"

"What do you mean how do I figure?"

"Well," Boyd explained patiently in between eating the fries, "what makes you think I'm cute? Especially after you gave me crap about liking feminine guys, I'm surprised you find me attractive at all, let alone cute."

"I dunno, dude. You're just a cute kid and you have a pretty decent body although you could afford to gain some weight. Besides, I never said I thought Vega and French guy are hideous or anything. I just thought that's the only type of guy you dig," Kassian explained with a smirk.

"Wow," Boyd said in sarcastic amusement. "'Pretty decent.' Stop with the flattery before I faint." He paused. "So what does that make your type?"

Kassian tilted his head back against the booth and his eyes roved across the room idly as he seemed to consider his answer. His gaze briefly lingered on someone by the bar and his mouth turned up in a smile. "I don't really have one. I mean, take Mark for example, the bartender. I've had a couple of encounters with him and you and he are as different as night and day unless you suddenly became really built and started looking like a biker."

Boyd followed Kassian's gaze and raised his eyebrows. He was somewhat intrigued and surprised by the choice; Mark was an attractive enough man but Kassian wasn't joking that Boyd and Mark were not alike. Mark was tall, well-built, about Kassian's age, dark-haired and a little ominous looking when he didn't appear to be talking to someone he was friends with.

It was interesting even considering Kassian and Mark together and Boyd found himself idly wondering which of them had been on top or in control. Somehow, he couldn't see Kassian being submissive in any way to anyone, not even a formidable man like Mark.

Returning his gaze to Kassian, Boyd looked at him in bemusement. "Seriously, we're nothing alike. I don't think I could get that built even if I wanted to, I can't imagine anyone ever calling him cute in his life, and I highly doubt we have similar personalities."

Boyd studied Kassian thoughtfully. "You're perplexing. There must be something that catches your attention for one person and not another. But what commonality could possibly exist between him and me? As far as that goes, you could think I'm cute in passing but not be attracted enough to feel like it could get to a point where you'd feel dishonest not saying anything about it. So I still don't understand why you'd be interested in me, especially considering a history with someone like him." His tone was intrigued and mystified.

"That's like asking me how I can like my steak burnt to a crisp but also enjoy sushi." Kassian's eyes absently went back to Mark as he spoke. "I can appreciate different things. And besides," he added casually, "I'm more particular about sexual styles than looks."

Boyd raised an eyebrow. "How so?"

Kassian shrugged and returned his gaze to Boyd. "I'm not some kinky bastard or anything but I'm pretty specific about what does and doesn't turn me on."

"Hmm." Boyd considered Kassian for a moment before leaning against the table. "Alright. So what turns you on?"

Kassian raised an eyebrow and grinned at Boyd. "What turns *you* on?"

For a moment, Boyd considered making Kassian answer the question first but then he just smirked. "Well, you already have an idea of that, don't you? Fast, powerful, dangerous, and all that?"

The other man narrowed his eyes briefly and after awhile he gave Boyd a knowing smile. "Ah. You like it rough, don't you?"

Boyd made a noise of assent, his expression casual but gaze intense as he watched Kassian. "Very much so. I'm loud anyway but I like it when I can't help but scream."

Kassian opened his mouth to reply but for a moment his jaw just worked and no sound came out. He cleared his throat, eyebrows raising. "For some reason I feel like I should be surprised by that but somehow I'm not," he said finally, mouth twisting into a grin as he watched Boyd.

Boyd smirked, feeling somehow pleased with Kassian's response; it wasn't often that he saw the man at a loss for words, even briefly. And if Kassian was going to ask Boyd what turned him on then Boyd saw no reason to be anything but blunt, especially after the Thierry fiasco. Besides, he felt like he was getting Kassian back a little.

"So," Boyd drawled, "anything else you want to ask? Otherwise I'm still waiting on an answer."

"Oh, I have plenty of questions," Kassian reassured Boyd with a chuckle. "But I'll save them for later. Your one comment nearly gave me a woody-- I can only imagine what would happen if this turned into a full on sexual confessional booth."

Boyd couldn't help a brief laugh. He had to admit he felt a little smug about Kassian's response. "So I take it rough sex qualifies as one of your preferred styles?"

"Well I'm not into violent sex but I like it pretty hard, you know? I don't like all of the gentle caressing that some people are into. I do like a lot of foreplay though." Kassian shrugged, unabashed. "I dunno why. When I'm with a guy I'm all about the fooling around but I don't give head."

"The gentle caressing is actually why it didn't work for me with Thierry," Boyd said, agreeing with Kassian's sentiments.

He wondered where the line was between violent sex and rough sex, and what he and Sin had been doing all along. Maybe what Boyd was used to was violent sex; after all, the two of them were often left with bite marks or bruises from gripping too hard, especially Boyd. There had even been a time or two when it had been uncomfortable for Boyd to sit afterward because they'd gotten so into it.

Thierry had also said he didn't like violent sex but it seemed to Boyd that Thierry's definition of violence also included what Boyd considered just to be rough. However, it was possible that Boyd's idea of rough sex was skewed.

It didn't particularly surprise Boyd to hear that Kassian didn't give blow jobs; in truth, Boyd couldn't actually imagine Kassian doing that. He was willing to concede that Kassian was bisexual but not *that* bisexual.

"What kind of foreplay?" Boyd asked curiously.

"You know, the usual," Kassian replied with a one shouldered shrug. "Kissing, licking, touching, grinding..." He raised his eyebrows again, a smile playing on his lips. "I like getting worked up to the point of wanting to just fuck someone's brains out, until it's pretty unbearable and I'll take my time and have fun getting to that point."

Boyd's gaze briefly intensified on Kassian as he automatically imagined that, as he wondered what Kassian's expression would be like, what sort of sounds he would make; what it would feel like. Boyd wasn't accustomed to extended foreplay aside from with Thierry which had been far too gentle and slow.

But he did like the concept; he enjoyed the feel of hands and lips against his skin, of arousing touches. He found himself automatically imagining what it would be like a little rougher and more intense, more Boyd's style; wondering how long he'd be able to take that sort of stimulation before he couldn't wait any longer--

Boyd looked away abruptly, studying the far wall and the occasional decoration on it in order to stop himself from thinking about that any further. Initially, he'd just asked out of curiosity; he hadn't expected to actually get involved in the thought.

After a moment he returned a calmer look to Kassian. "I see."

Kassian eyed him for a moment before letting out a truly amused laugh. "Maybe we should change the topic before both of us get a little too curious. Maybe turn it back to what we don't like. Like, for example, I'll never let someone fuck me. Mark called me a fake bisexual because of it but that suits me just fine."

Boyd watched Kassian thoughtfully for a moment, once again unsurprised but now curious as well. He didn't understand the attraction to women because he simply didn't feel anything sexually for them; women were just there and he could recognize if a woman was aesthetically pleasing to the eye but it didn't mean anything else. So he didn't understand Kassian's concept of bisexuality.

"If you basically do the same things you would with a woman, why even bother with men?"

Kassian made a face at Boyd. "What kind of question is that? You're not one of those bisexual haters are you?"

"No, I don't really care who likes what," Boyd said honestly. "If a person's attracted to both sexes that's fine. I don't understand attraction to women at all but that's only because I'm gay. So don't take it as my judgment or anything like that; I honestly just don't understand so I'm trying to figure this out. Why bother fucking men at all? What's the difference in your case?"

"Because I'm attracted to men as well as women so why not have both?" Kassian shrugged. "There's no deep reasoning behind it."

"Yes, but is there a big difference in the way it feels?" Boyd persisted curiously. "Is there something that would make you choose one instead of another or is it completely based on who you happen to be attracted to at the time?"

Kassian thought about that for a moment. "I don't know really. I guess whoever I'm attracted to. Sometimes I prefer sex with guys because I don't have to be as careful but I still love being with women because I think women are amazingly beautiful. But there's more to it than sex and looks. If I'm spending time with someone, even if it's not a relationship, I'm still not entirely superficial about it. I appreciate different things about different people and it's not always specific to gender."

Boyd considered that, taking it into context with the one man Boyd knew Kassian had slept with. "What did you appreciate about Mark?"

Kassian's eyes once again returned to the man in question and his mouth turned up slightly at the side. Mark happened to glance in Kassian's direction and their eyes met. Mark shot him a quick smirk before returning to his customers.

"He has a great body and I like the way he dresses. The whole carefully crafted 'I don't give a shit' look works for him. He's also really funny."

"Why did you stop with him?" Boyd asked. "Not that I'm implying you should have been in a relationship, but why did whatever you have end?"

"It wasn't ever anything other than the occasional one-nighter," Kassian said. He raised an eyebrow and smiled. "But I've been gone for two years so he could be with someone now for all I know. It's no big deal or anything, that's just the way things work."

Boyd nodded and idly drank his beer, thinking about it all. He had to admit that he was flattered to know that Kassian thought he was attractive. Boyd truly liked Kassian as a person; Kassian was thoughtful, objective, serious, mischievous, funny, kind... He knew how to make a person feel like it was okay just being themselves while at the same time he didn't let things slide if someone did something out of line.

Even though Boyd still didn't understand what Kassian thought was cute about him, it felt good to know that a good person like that, someone Boyd thought was attractive, was attracted to him in return.

He didn't know yet what he thought about ever getting involved with Kassian in any way other than simply friends, though. He wasn't automatically opposed to the idea but it had come as a surprise and he had to think about it. He felt like he barely knew what he wanted with anything anymore. He hadn't even had the chance to talk to Sin yet and even though he didn't plan to become romantically involved with Sin again, he wasn't about to make any decisions involving other people until there was more of a sense of closure to the whole ordeal.

Beyond that, there was no way he wanted anything even remotely like a relationship and his only experience with casual sex had failed pretty spectacularly with Thierry. Boyd didn't know if he had the sort of personality to be able to be more than just casual friends with a person, yet there was no question he liked spending time with Kassian and he *had* been thinking earlier that he wanted to see Kassian naked...

After everything had fallen apart with Sin, it was good to know there was the potential for other options; one with less commitment than with Sin but more comfortable than with Thierry. Provided that he understood exactly what Kassian was proposing.

"So, let me just make sure I'm getting this straight," Boyd said after a moment, thinking aloud. "If anything happened between us, you're basically thinking friends with benefits?"

"Pretty much. I told you I don't do the relationship thing anymore. I doubt I ever will again. It just doesn't make sense for my life. But like I said, I wasn't trying to proposition you or anything. I don't want you to go home thinking I'm plotting to get you in bed or something." Kassian looked disturbed by the idea. "I just don't do stuff like that. If I want someone, I tell them outright. If I want to sleep with someone, I ask them if they're interested. I don't like cat and mouse games and shit. I don't like confusion and tension and uncertainty."

"Well, even though that surprised the hell out of me, I appreciate the honesty." Boyd leaned against the table and rested his hands on either side of his glass of beer as he studied Kassian. "I think you're right that it's far better to be upfront... it's not something I'm good at but it certainly makes things less complicated. In the interest of returning the favor, I'll be honest. I don't really know what I think. I'm still trying to get over the fact you're bi, let alone that you're attracted to me. But if it ever came to where either of us wanted something like that, I'd consider it. I just don't know what I'd feel about it at that time."

"That's fine with me. I don't really have any expectations at this point anyway. One of the real reasons I told you other than wanting to have the air clear, is that I felt like I was being dishonest by not mentioning it for some reason. You've told me a lot about your life and have been really open and I've been omitting shit regarding that," Kassian admitted with a shrug. "I don't know why. I know you wouldn't tell anyone. It's just... habit."

That intrigued Boyd and made him wonder more about Kassian's sexual orientation. "How long have you known you're bi?"

"I don't really know. I guess I always had an indication that I may be interested in men as well as women but I never really explored the option until I was married." Kassian made a face and pushed his empty plate towards the center of the table, eyes once again scanning the pub as if ensuring that no one was in earshot of the conversation. In the past hour the pub had emptied out somewhat but the bar was still crowded with people even though they were the only two actually sitting in a booth.

After a moment he returned his gaze to Boyd. "It sounds fucked up but being with my wife was pretty miserable for both she and I and even though it had nothing to do with her being a woman, I ended up feeling a connection with another field op that was a lot stronger than what I had with her and it was hard to deny that I cared about him given the comparison."

Boyd remembered Kassian saying something once that one of the reasons for his divorce had been that his wife had thought he'd been cheating on her and that she hadn't exactly been wrong. Boyd had just never even considered that if something had been going on, it had been with a man. Kassian's wording made it sound like it was an emotional connection but he couldn't tell for sure. "Did you have an affair?"

"Not really. I never even really knew if he had interest in me, honestly. We were partners for awhile and I felt like something was there... I really did fall in love with him I think and my wife picked up on my distraction. I don't know how but she just knew." Kassian smiled wryly at that.

"Woman's intuition I guess, right? She thought it was a physical thing with some hot shot mercenary babe but it was never physical between he and me. It seemed sometimes that he felt the same but it's hard to be a field op at the Agency and not be deeply closeted. I'm sure you would still be too had you not been outed, you know?" Kassian frowned slightly and shook his head. "I don't know what would have happened between us."

Boyd nodded; it was true that it was highly unlikely he would have gone public with the fact that he was gay if Sin hadn't basically done it for him. Kassian's wording made him think that there was no chance anything would happen between he and his old partner, which implied something had occurred. "What happened with him?"

"The Agency had him terminated."

Boyd had wondered if it was something like that. "What was their reason?"

The other man shrugged and there was no hint of emotion in his eyes regarding the topic even though Boyd knew Kassian well enough by now to understand that it was likely a very well-crafted facade to hide his true feelings.

"Who knows? Rumor had it that they suspected he may have been giving a civilian relative confidential information but I'm not sure. If that's the case though, both he and his relative were probably taken care of."

"I'm sorry, Kassian," Boyd said sincerely. "I know how it feels to suddenly lose someone close. It's difficult, especially at first. How long ago did it happen?"

"Maybe three or four years ago now. Not too long before I was told about the Russia assignment. I don't think about it much anymore. If I did, I wouldn't be able to do my job properly." Kassian toyed with the beer pitcher and seemed as though he was going to pour himself another mug full but he glanced at Boyd and stopped. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. How's Sin?" he asked, changing the subject entirely.

Boyd looked at Kassian, startled by the topic change and turned his gaze almost distractedly toward the rest of the pub. He purposefully hadn't mentioned Sin, mostly because he felt bad that every time he'd spent any significant amount of time alone with Kassian, Boyd had made Sin a major topic of conversation.

Now that Sin was brought up, he didn't know what to say. There was no way he was going to tell Kassian what he'd learned from Ann; Sin hadn't felt comfortable telling even Boyd about any of it so it certainly wasn't Boyd's place to tell anyone else. Especially not Kassian, who annoyed Sin on principle, even though Boyd knew he would have been able to trust Kassian to keep the information to himself.

In the past, Boyd had probably mentioned things about Sin to Kassian that Sin wouldn't have been pleased to know about but this was not going to be one of those times. Even though Sin didn't know Boyd knew any of this, Boyd wasn't going to betray his secrets. He felt a little bad omitting information from Kassian but he would have felt far worse if he said anything. So he decided that the best way to go about this was to act as though the conversation with Ann had never occurred.

"I don't know," Boyd said after a moment with a hint of a frown. "I haven't seen him since the test. He's on a solo." He returned his attention to Kassian, expression calm and not giving away that he was holding anything back. "But I plan to talk to him as soon as he returns, which I'm guessing should be within a week or two."

"I wonder if it was the mission that your mom offered me. Well-- I'm not due back from my downtime for another few weeks but she seemed to somehow sense that I was getting restless. Downtime sounds great until you realize you don't have a damn thing to do," Kassian said dryly, rolling his eyes. "But in any case I told her I'd come back after the new year instead of in March as was agreed. It wasn't that high profile so she was cool with it. I dunno why they didn't offer it to Vega from jump. He's better for the assignment."

"What's the assignment?" Boyd asked, actually curious about it.

"She didn't actually give me the outline. She just told me that there was an assignment that involved some light undercover work in a shelter. Some target we're trying to get at has a runaway son who's been missing for years and we got word that the kid is there under a false name. It involves hanging out with a bunch of young punks and Vega is a better fit for unruly youth. He looks much younger than me even though we're not too far apart."

"Hmm." Boyd took another drink of beer. "That doesn't sound too difficult. Maybe he'll be back sooner than I thought, then."

"I guess it depends on how long it takes him to figure out which kid it is." Kassian sat up straight and his eyes searched the pub. "You ready to get out of here? It's getting more

crowded-- the depressed-over-the-holiday drunks are starting to straggle in and I don't really feel like censoring myself when people start spilling over in this direction."

"Yeah." Boyd slid out of the booth and put on his winter gear. When Kassian and he were ready, they walked to the register where Boyd paid. When they left Killian's, the weather felt even colder than when they'd gone in.

As they walked the short distance to the motorcycle, Boyd hunched against a burst of icy wind and looked at Kassian. "I know you said earlier you didn't really have plans so I just want you to know the offer still stands for hanging out at my place." He smirked wryly as he continued, "We could even stop the dusty attic cleaning and break out the video games if you want something a little more relaxing."

"If you call me kicking your ass relaxing." Kassian wagged his eyebrows and smiled again. "I'm down."

Boyd rolled his eyes good naturedly. "Only on the shooters, hot shot," he said dryly then smirked. "This time we'll be playing my games and I'll be the one with too many wasted hours as an advantage. You'd best prepare yourself now for defeat, just so you don't get too upset when the time comes."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Kassian put on his helmet and got on the bike, waiting for Boyd to get on behind him. "We'll just have to see about that, kid." Even with the darkened helmet, a grin could be heard in his voice.

"Damn straight we will," Boyd said firmly as he secured his own helmet and slid on the bike behind Kassian. Even so, Boyd found himself grinning in response, especially as the motorcycle thrummed with power and they sped out onto the street.

His arms tightened around Kassian's waist to stabilize himself as they took a turn and he thought about the day as well as the plans ahead. He realized that for the moment he was honestly happy; that he was looking forward to playing video games, to spending time with someone he could be himself around without feeling like he had to watch what he said or did to avoid arguments or misunderstandings or accidentally hurting the person.

He really did feel like this was going to be relaxing. Fun.

As the wind jerked lightly at his clothes and the snow sprayed around them, Boyd thought that this was the first decent Christmas he'd had in a long time.

Chapter 28

"Where are we going, Lee?"

Sin didn't look at the youth to his left and continued to stride up the hill, his eyes narrowed slightly against the blowing wind. The air smelled strange and his eyes burned but he was used to it after spending a little over two weeks in the polluted and radiated landfill that was now New York City.

He stopped walking and frowned slightly, glancing at his watch. It was later than he'd anticipated but there had been complications during egress and now the security of The Bowery had every patrol on the lookout for 'David Lee-Chung,' Sin's cover identity, and 'The Engineer' aka 'Engine' or, as the Agency knew him, Gregory Wick.

"Lee, what's the damn problem?" Gregory demanded, wiping a sleeve across his cold face and glaring up at the man next to him. "As soon as we got out you turned into monosyllabic man. If you're worried about having a tail, we don't. Trust me, dude, we mapped this shit out good during the past week. It just sucks that everyone else got left behind..."

Sin grunted and stared at their surroundings, going over his memorized map as he tried to figure out the pickup point. It was going to be difficult to get to the exact spot but he thought they were close enough.

This time Gregory grabbed Sin's shoulder and jerked him to the side. The teenager's ash blond hair was sticking out everywhere under the furry hood of his coat but it didn't cover the obvious anger and confusion in his expressive blue eyes. He looked almost hurt and Sin didn't really blame him.

It had taken several days for Sin to figure out which one of the kids was Gregory but when he did finally put it together, it'd been easy enough to progress with the mission plan from there.

Upon arriving at The Bowery, Sin had immediately been attacked by the ruling authority among the teenage political structure. Apparently the former leader had sensed something about Sin that made him wary of his already precarious position as unofficial leader of the group home. When Sin, seeing no reason to downplay his fighting abilities, had dispatched them easily enough, people had begun to take notice.

It hadn't taken Sin long to meet Gregory, or The Engineer as he was known due to his tendency to come up with elaborate escape plans, as well as a few other kids who wanted to take control. Sin helped them do it easily enough and it allowed him to get into Gregory's good graces.

Sin had a feeling that the kid actually had some kind of ridiculous crush on him but if that was the case, it had worked to Sin's advantage. After Gregory told Sin tales of their many attempts to escape the group home, Sin merely suggested that they try to do it again and used his knowledge of The Bowery's vent system to perfect Gregory's already brilliant plan. Gregory had immediately told his closest friends but it hadn't taken much for Sin to ditch the others at the last minute and it hadn't taken much more effort than that to convince Gregory to leave anyway.

In essence, the mission had been easy. A Level 6 operative could have done it but he supposed that Vivienne didn't want too many people knowing that the Agency planned to torture some poor kid until his senator father decided to comply with the Agency's demands.

Sin had very little doubt that Gregory and Ernest Wick would ever see the light of day again after the Agency got all the information they needed.

"Don't making me fucking regret leaving my friends behind, Lee," Gregory snapped, his face becoming angrier and more suspicious the longer it took for Sin to respond.

Sin finally met Gregory's gaze and although his face remained coldly expressionless, Sin couldn't deny the burning streak of guilt that shot through his body and went straight to his core.

Gregory had never done anything except try to escape his father's world of lies and corruption and now...

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly.

Now he was likely going to die or at least experience the kind of torture that would permanently scar his mind just so the Agency could blackmail his father. The irony of the situation didn't escape Sin and not for the first time in the past two weeks did he wonder how it turned out that a psychopathic murderer was the one bringing an innocent to his death sentence.

"Life is full of regret," Sin responded finally. "And we will both regret this experience."

Gregory took a step back, eyes narrowing into suspicious slits as he stared at Sin. "Lee, what--"

"My name isn't Lee."

The headlights of a car suddenly appeared as a black van took a sharp turn and began moving steadily towards them. Sin didn't even look at it twice; he'd known they would come to him as soon as he was close enough in range.

"You set me up!" Gregory yelled, backing away, hands balled into angry fists. "They all said something was wrong about you-- that you were strange, that I shouldn't trust you so soon, but I trusted you, I wanted to be your friend. You pretended to be mine, you fucking asshole."

Sin shrugged as the van stopped behind him, expression remorseless even as the words ate away at him like acid. "I fed you lines that I knew you would hungrily devour. I knew you had family issues and I played on that weakness by inventing family issues of my own."

"You're with my father..."

Gregory's eyes widened and he turned without another moment of hesitation, sprinting into the wide open space that had once been a park. He didn't even run a yard before one of the agents in the van leaned out the window and casually shot him with a tranquilizer gun.

"Dumb ass kid," the guy muttered and looked at Sin impatiently. "You gonna get him or what? Your priority has already been downgraded and we have another assignment."

Sin grunted and walked over to Gregory's prone body, picking him up and throwing him over one shoulder before stalking to the van. He slid the door open and tossed Gregory inside carelessly, not bothering to cuff him to the side before slamming the door shut with a resounding bang that echoed in his ears the entire ride back to the Agency.

Gregory didn't wake up before they returned to the Agency and as the van went through the gates of the compound, Sin knew he would never see the kid again.

The van dropped Sin off in front of the Tower before disappearing around the side and going to the underground garage. He stared after it for a moment before shaking his head and running a hand through his hair.

He was supposed to go debrief with Vivienne but Sin had no plans to do that any time soon. She would see that the kid was now in their hands and there was really nothing more to say about the mission other than the fact that it'd been accomplished easily. The only thing he needed to let her in on was that even in the end, Gregory had assumed he was one of his father's people who had finally tracked him down; he hadn't thought it was something more sinister. Sin didn't even know if she wanted that information but it was possible she could use it.

Sin shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket and began walking to his building.

He felt nauseated by the mission, which was strange considering the fact that it hadn't bothered him during it when he'd conned the kid so efficiently. He'd known all along what was going to happen to Gregory but for some reason it was only hitting him now.

And Sin couldn't help but wonder what Boyd would say about it all; what his opinion would be, whether or not he would agree that Sin was a fucking bastard for playing the kid so badly just to bring him to his death.

Sin's skills at undercover operations had greatly improved during Monterrey but he hadn't expected Gregory to actually like him. He'd expected Gregory to feel a connection because of their fake family similarities and maybe even look up to Sin because he had helped overthrow Gregory's enemies.

But Sin hadn't expected those genuine smiles and innocent eyes. He hadn't expected Gregory to actually act like a fucking teenager and not some hardened bad ass street kid like the mission outline had implied he might be.

"Damn it," Sin hissed, squeezing his eyes shut as he stopped walking and just stood in the freezing wind and snow that felt like shards of ice against his skin.

Why did he have to care?

It had been so easy in the past to just shut everything away. He'd felt the remorse but it had never plagued him so completely. It was like his ability to wall away emotions and feelings had disappeared along with the doors that had locked away his memories.

Sin turned his face upwards towards the sky and didn't wince as the ice and snow pelted his face or grimace when the wind lashed at his skin like a freezing dagger. He wished it would hurt even more than it did; maybe then he'd feel something other than this horrible aching guilt that made him want to stop existing completely.

It was bad enough that his past haunted him but now he couldn't even function after a mission. Now he couldn't even do the job that they wanted him to do. Now all he could see was the horrendous actions that they were forcing him to do.

Now the bigger picture just didn't matter.

He didn't care that Ernest Wick financed terrorists who targeted civilians. He didn't care that his information would bring down the leader of the organization.

Sin cared about the fact that Vivienne, the Agency, had ordered him to essentially kill a child. A smart-mouthed, jaded child, but a child nonetheless.

Sin began walking again but he didn't see anything around him. Everything looked shadowed, grayed out. It was like someone had drained all the color and life out of the compound and all he could see was darkness.

The walk to his building didn't take long and he didn't look at any of the guards as he passed them at the entrance to the main doors or his apartment. Sin kept his face expressionless, his posture stiff, and it wasn't until his door was locked and he was alone that he slid into one of the chairs in the kitchen and pressed his hands to his face, biting his lower lip so hard that he was sure it would bleed.

He didn't understand why he kept going. He didn't understand the point when everything looked so bleak, when he so thoroughly and completely saw himself for what he really was.

Carhart had said that he should keep going for Boyd. He said that there could still be a chance, that this was just a low point, that Sin should find someone else and stop obsessing over one person.

But Sin didn't know how to do that. Boyd was all he had, all he knew, and the only person who had ever understood. With that closeness gone, everything seemed pointless.

Shaking his head, Sin inhaled deeply and looked around the apartment. Everything was as sterile as he'd left it; there was nothing to distract him from his self-pitying thoughts and indecisiveness.

Frustrated, Sin's eyes fell on his cell phone and he picked it up, idly turning it on. It vibrated and beeped as it started up and Sin set it back on the table, rubbing his hand over his face again.

It would be wonderful to just sleep...

The phone began vibrating and beeping and Sin opened his eyes, looking down at it again. The display announced that he had several voicemails and two new text messages.

Eyebrows drawing together slightly, Sin picked up the phone and went directly to the inbox. He very rarely received text messages so it was pretty odd that he was suddenly getting two in a row. As he looked at the list, his surprise and curiosity grew.

Both were from Ann and both had arrived less than ten minutes prior to him turning on the phone.

'Call me when you get this. This is serious.'

'Please check your voicemail as soon as possible.'

Sin stared at the phone for a brief moment before shutting it. He had no intentions of--

The phone began vibrating wildly against the table and Ann's name popped up on the display screen. Sin watched it ring several times before it stopped. Confused and somewhat irritated, he pushed back the chair and started to walk away from the table when the phone began vibrating once again.

Sin stopped and looked at the phone, eyebrows drawing together. What the hell could she possibly want? The display announced that he had yet another missed call but immediately after, she called back. Sin finally grabbed the phone and flipped it open.

"What do you want?" he demanded, voice sharp and obviously irritated.

"Sin! Thank God..." Ann sounded shaky; her voice was raw and slightly muffled.

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly and he said flatly, "I told you not to contact me."

There was a long pause on the other end and Ann said finally, "This isn't... this isn't about you. I need your help, Sin. I don't have anyone else I can turn to. I have no protection at the Agency anymore and I have a lot of people who dislike me and, Jesus, I don't know what to fucking do!"

Her words ended on a slightly hysterical note and Sin's expression changed from annoyed to confused.

"What are you talking about?"

A shuddering release of breath was heard over the line. "I don't want to talk about it here. I need you to come to my house. Please, Sin. I'm not playing any games... I'm just in trouble."

Sin closed his eyes briefly, thought about telling her to forget it, telling her to find someone else to help her, but in the end he just set his jaw and asked, "Where are you?"

"West Cunningham. I'll pick you up in the city, by-- by the old hospital." The relief in her voice was nearly palpable.

"Fine. I'll be there in thirty minutes."

Sin left the apartment much the same way he'd entered it, without looking at or speaking to anyone. He shoved his hands in his pockets and kept his head down, walking fast, taking the roundabout way away from his building and trying to avoid catching anyone's eye. Whatever was going on, Ann obviously wanted to keep it away from the Agency.

There was a surprisingly steady stream of people heading out of the compound and he slipped in with them discreetly, his hood covering his face as the upbeat chatter surrounded him, agents acting like regular civilians, obviously drunk and talking about the coming new year, about the old days when a lit up ball used to drop in the center of New York City.

Sin ignored it all and kept going, detaching from the crowd as they left the gates and heading out into the winding streets that led away from the property.

He didn't know what Ann wanted, he didn't know what could have put that frantic, frightened quiver into her usually controlled and disdainful voice, but it was obviously something she couldn't handle.

There was a part of him that felt indebted to Ann; despite how it had all turned out, she'd been the first one to listen to him without judgment and even if it was her job, she'd had more reason than anyone else on the compound to disbelieve him and think the worst of him. Even if they'd fucked themselves over in the end, even if she'd been using him for her own purposes to an extent, he'd benefited from it at the time even if he regretted it now.

As much as he wanted to just put her out of his mind entirely now, as much as he wished he didn't feel obligated to return the help that she'd given him, Sin couldn't do it.

The bus wasn't running due to abbreviated holiday services so Sin jogged to the old hospital, arriving later than they'd planned. Ann's silver Bentley was parked near a chain-link fence, the lights and engine off. He approached it slowly, eyes narrowed as he looked inside, but sped up when her pale, stricken face came into view.

"I thought you weren't coming," she said, her voice tight and hoarse as Sin got into the passenger seat.

Sin surveyed her silently, taking in her long black overcoat, the way her fingers clenched the steering wheel so tightly that they were white. He shifted in the passenger seat and looked away. "What's the problem, Annabelle?"

Ann didn't drive and she didn't look at him again. Her hazel eyes stared straight ahead, fingers clenching the wheel tighter. "Can I trust you?"

"I don't know," he replied flatly. "That's a question you should be asking yourself."

She didn't respond immediately and she exhaled in a quiet tremble of breath. "I have no one else. I have no protection at the Agency-- I'm going to be demoted from my position because of what happened with us. There's no-- there's no reason why-- If this gets out, if they find out, there's no reason why... I won't be terminated."

Ann sounded calmer than she had on the phone and this time she looked at him fully, her eyes blazing intensely as she struggled to keep her composure. She kept opening her mouth and closing it, her jaw setting as she shook her head slightly back and forth.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?" Sin asked finally, eyebrows raising although his expression didn't change. "Or are we going to go through an extended precursor and draw attention to ourselves by sitting in an impoverished neighborhood in a luxury car."

Ann immediately flicked her hand, starting the car and nearly peeling out of the area as if the thought hadn't occurred to her before. She peered into the gloom that surrounded them, taking the car on side roads, turning quickly, speeding.

"Don't waste my time, Annabelle," Sin growled impatiently, sliding a glare over to her. "I already told yo--"

"I killed Philip," she blurted out abruptly, some of the calm dissolving, the frantic edge making its way back into her tone.

Sin made a face. "And that's a bad thing?"

"I'm not fucking joking, Sin!" Ann cried shrilly. "He's a Captain, he's of rank, they'll never let me get away with this. I don't have protection at the Agency anymore. I don't have anything useful to offer them-- they can't use me the way they use you!"

He didn't respond immediately and instead looked out the window. They were leaving the city limits and headed out to the county area, which in turn led to the wasteland of the outer suburbs. The blighted concrete city turned into old strip malls and abandoned homes, which finally led to complete desolation and decay.

"You're right," he said after a while. "She'll have you terminated."

Ann nodded, her head bobbing up and down, brown hair catching on her damp lips although she didn't push it away.

They didn't acknowledge it out loud but they both knew why. Vivienne didn't trust Ann's judgment anymore and because of that, she no longer trusted her with highly classified material, with Level 9 and 10 agents as patients. Ann wasn't of use anymore; she was now just a rank and file doctor who could be easily expended, one that wasn't worth fighting for or defying the rules for.

Sin didn't know how Vivienne had found out about everything and he doubted Carhart had been the one to tell her, but now the sense of responsibility, the fact that Sin's

actions were once again infringing on someone's life, weighed down on his shoulders. He knew it had been Ann's decision just as much as his, but he'd let it occur.

"What happened?"

"He came to pick up his things," Ann said darkly, leaning close to the steering wheel as if it was her anchor. She wet her lips and let go another ragged breath. "We argued as usual but then he said-- I found out that he was stealing from me. I was furious-- I'd always known that he was just fucking *using* me but to think he'd have the audacity to steal my father's money, my--"

"Just get to the point," Sin snapped impatiently, narrowing his eyes out the window.

"Sorry," Ann said quickly, eyes leaping over to his side of the car as if to ensure that he hadn't lost interest due to her babbling. "I got very angry-- I started yelling at him, he said I was disrespecting him and I told him that he wasn't a real man, that he was nothing to respect, I told him... I told him I was fucking a real man."

Sin looked at her incredulously. "Brilliant move, doctor. Didn't you tell me he was going to kill you if he found out?"

"I was furious!" she cried in her own defense, pressing her lips together in a white line. In the dim light illuminating from the dash, she looked almost spectral. Her face was pale and taut, her hair surrounding her face wildly, giving her an almost crazed appearance. "I let him... I let him *degrade* me for so long and to find out that he was stealing from me..."

"So what happened? Did you shoot him? Stab him? Drown him?" Sin demanded, cutting off another spiel. Even in the midst of crisis, Ann still found time to be indignant.

"He came at me-- threw me on the floor, kicked me in the chest but I fought back. I-- in the house, there's a long staircase, it winds up and up-- I pushed him down the stairs. He caught himself but then I kicked him and I shoved him down again until he hit the bottom. There's this mark on his face now-- where I kicked him. I fucked this all up so bad!" Ann finished in a rush, blurting out the words frantically.

"I see."

Sin's mind began moving, trying to figure out different scenarios, weighing options and decisions-- It was self-defense, or at least partially, but that didn't matter at the Agency.

Even if local cops would understand, the Agency wouldn't and they wouldn't forgive Ann if she actually got locals involved. There would be too much poking, too much prodding - matters that involved Agency staff were strictly Agency business.

There was the possibility that Vivienne would take Ann's side, but that was unlikely. Just as Ann had said, Philip had been a captain. He wasn't just rank and file-- his disappearance would be noted, it would be investigated and they would undoubtedly find that Ann had caused his death in the end. They would consider her recent behavior as well as Philip's death, conclude that she was unstable and unfit to be an Agency doctor and likely eliminate her; the Agency saw things in black and white when it was someone expendable and Ann knew too much to simply be let go and put under surveillance.

"I'll get rid of the body," Sin said finally, his tone flat, emotionless. "And you report his theft to Vivienne. Tell her you noticed funds missing and you don't want to go through your lawyer to find out where they went. They might assume he's tried to escape. It's the best you can do."

Ann looked at him, her face drawn and tight. "Get rid of it how?"

Sin continued to stare out the window. "Don't worry about it."

They arrived at West Cunningham Terrace in silence. Sin didn't admire the property or the size of the house; he didn't see any of it, he didn't take any of it in. He just followed Ann to the body which was still laid out on the floor in the foyer.

Philip was crumpled at the bottom of the staircase but luckily there was no blood; just a large indent and gash in his forehead where Ann had kicked him. An examination of the body would make it quite clear to anybody that she had caused his death.

Sin knelt by the body and glanced at Ann. "I need some kind of heavy rubber or plastic," he said curtly. "And a butcher knife. Something bigger if you have it."

Ann stared at him silently, her hands pressed against her chest, fingers tangled together as her mouth trembled slightly. "Sin--"

"Move," he snapped darkly.

There was a low gasp below them and both of their gazes snapped to Philip's body. He was still laying there in the same twisted position but now his milky eyes had slid open,

now he stared at them both; the recognition and accusation in his gaze were undeniable.

"Fucking... whore," Philip hissed, his voice high-pitched with pain.

"He's still alive!" Ann backed away from Philip, her eyes wide and moist, her entire body beginning to shake. "Oh, God."

Sin stared into Philip's eyes, kneeling over the helpless and broken form of him, and stood silently. There was no way around what would have to happen; if Philip survived, he would report Ann and she would die.

Sin looked at Ann again, his face blank, and his voice quiet when he repeated, "Rubber and a knife."

Philip's gaze didn't leave Ann but Ann's snapped over to Sin. The tears that had gathered in her eyes were starting to spill onto her pale cheeks and she released a low, strangled sob. "Sin, you can't. You'll be--"

"Forget about being my doctor," Sin said in the same tone, his eyes devoid of any emotion as he prepared himself, as he began unconsciously closing off sections of himself. "Do what I say unless you want to die."

Ann stood there for another long moment, her thin shoulders shaking as she sobbed quietly, her face full of apologies, of self-loathing, but in the end she gave a jerky nod and hurried out of the room.

Sin's gaze dropped to Philip and Philip finally looked up at him. There was panic in the Captain's eyes; he was shaking his head back and forth in denial, uttering half-oaths that were incomprehensible other than the occasional swear. He was afraid, obviously so, and as Sin once again knelt by the helpless man, Philip choked out a plea.

"Please, no--"

The sound of a neck snapping in the silent room was resounding.

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Boyd carefully hopped off Kassian's motorcycle once it was parked, holding a brown paper bag in one hand as he managed to remove his helmet with the other. He shook his head to get some of the hair out of his eyes and held the helmet between his side and inner elbow, leaving his hand free for the paper bag.

"You're lucky I'm so talented and you didn't take that last corner any faster or there would've been Chinese all over us both," he teased.

"I don't know if talent has anything to do with it," Kassian replied with a snort, yanking off his own helmet and heading towards Boyd's front door.

"Oh really," Boyd drawled as he walked just fast enough to get ahead of Kassian in order to unlock the door. He set the bag inside the helmet so he could pull his keys out of his pocket with the other. "If not talent, then what?"

"Common sense. You *assume* I wouldn't have known on my own and you know what happens when one assumes, don't you?" Kassian asked, wiggling his eyebrows at Boyd as they entered.

Boyd rolled his eyes with a grin. "Yeah, yeah," he said in a long-suffering tone. "Ass, you, me, got it."

He set the helmet on a nearby table along with his cell phone and keys. Grabbing the brown bag with their leftovers, he headed toward the kitchen. He absently flipped on a lamp as he passed and looked over his shoulder back at Kassian. "Want anything to drink before we start waiting for the countdown?"

"Su--" The word broke off abruptly and Kassian fell completely silent.

Boyd stopped as he was about to enter the kitchen and instead turned fully toward Kassian with an odd look. He was just about to ask what was wrong when he noticed Kassian's disturbed and surprised expression.

Boyd followed Kassian's gaze and nearly jumped when he realized that someone was standing in the far corner where the light from the lamp didn't illuminate them. It was rather disturbing to realize neither of them had noticed the presence but Boyd recognized the height and the faintest glimmer of green eyes in the shadows.

"Sin," Boyd said blankly, shocked by his sudden appearance more than anything. This certainly wasn't the first time Sin had easily broken into Boyd's home without a trace

and probably wouldn't be the last but it never made it less startling or alarming to suddenly realize he wasn't alone.

Sin didn't respond at first and Boyd couldn't make out his expression in the darkness although he suspected from the silence that he was displeased.

Kassian's eyebrows drew together slightly and he shook his head in bewilderment. "What the hell?"

Sin didn't move from his position in the corner but Boyd had the feeling that those green eyes were currently trained on Kassian. The feeling was confirmed when Sin's deep voice said flatly, "Get rid of him."

This time Kassian's eyebrows shot up and he threw Boyd a look as if he was wondering whether or not Sin was serious.

Sin's tone had been commanding and allowed no room for negotiation, which irritated Boyd because Sin acted like he owned the house and Boyd. It was especially annoying since Sin had dropped by unannounced and thought he could order Boyd around. At the same time, Boyd *had* left a message for Sin to contact him and that he wanted to talk to him, so Sin did have a legitimate reason to come over.

Boyd glanced briefly at Kassian then looked toward Sin. It was a difficult situation since he didn't want to alienate either of them but Boyd had already made plans with Kassian to hang out for New Year's Eve and he didn't see why he should abruptly send Kassian home and ruin the man's night because Sin had decided to stop by suddenly. At the same time, Boyd really did need to speak with Sin and he had no intentions of going back on his promise to listen this time.

"Look, Sin," Boyd said in a reasonable tone, "I'm not going to kick Kassian out just because you showed up; he can stay or he can go but it's up to him. But I do want to talk to you. We can go into another room, whatever you want. Or we can talk tomorrow. I can make sure I'm available when it works for you."

"Just get rid of him," Sin repeated in the same flat tone. His voice was devoid of all emotion; there was something about it that was odd, almost familiar, but it was so faint that Boyd couldn't place how.

Kassian dropped his helmet onto the table and walked closer to Sin. "What's your problem, man? We're not at the Agency, you can cut the shit and act like a normal human."

He didn't stop until he was directly in front of Sin, appearing completely unconcerned about whether or not Sin was truly pissed off about him being there. If anything, Kassian seemed almost amused by the situation; there was a hint of it in his voice, as though he was trying to make light of it but also enjoying the fact that Sin was taking it far more seriously than the circumstances warranted.

Kassian stared at Sin and waved his fingers in front of the other man's face when he just got silence in response. "Anyone in there?"

"Leave or I'll make you leave."

The strange quality of Sin's voice was slowly becoming more apparent; it was detached, with zero inflection or empathy but at the same time, it sounded almost unsteady. Boyd stared at Sin intently, almost missing the conversation between the two as he tried to pinpoint the significance of Sin's behavior, his voice, the scene...

"You're gonna make me leave?" Kassian asked incredulously, some of the amusement evaporating from his tone as indignant irritation sunk in. "I don't know if you missed it, Vega, but this isn't your house so why don't you leave?"

Alarm flooded Boyd as he suddenly realized that the entire situation was strongly reminiscent of the night Sin had appeared with Lou's necklace.

Boyd dropped the takeout bag and moved forward. "Kass, wait--"

Sin's hand suddenly shot out and grabbed Kassian's arm. Kassian reacted automatically, jerking back from Sin's iron grip as he simultaneously extended his other arm to shove Sin backwards but he was unable to escape Sin's grasp. Both men seemed to go on the offense at once and before Boyd could intervene, Sin was twisting Kassian's arm behind his back with such a violently wrenching motion that the other man grunted in pain.

The next few seconds happened quickly and chaotically. Sin hauled Kassian around with such force and speed that Kassian seemed unprepared to respond adequately but when Sin intensified the grip on his arm and began dragging him towards the door, Kassian twisted out of the grip and spun around, swinging at Sin and making contact

with the other man's face. But Kassian seemed to hesitate after that, his eyes uncertain and brows drawn together, as if he wasn't sure what was going on or how to respond to it.

It was then that Boyd saw the familiar vacantly glazed green eyes that cemented his suspicion that Sin was having a dissociative episode, that Sin was no longer just in the detached limbo that was a precursor of him completely losing it. It was like a switch had been flipped; as soon as Kassian touched him, Sin's vacant expression was replaced by the crazed insanity of the bloodthirsty killer Sin became during the height of his episodes.

The situation went from tense to dangerous in an instant.

There was no hesitation on Sin's part. He responded to Kassian's blow with one of his own, a white-knuckled fist slamming into Kassian's temple before he grabbed Kassian by the neck and lifted him off the floor seemingly effortlessly, squeezing with such force that the other senior agent began gagging.

Boyd was at their side immediately, desperate to get between them and to get the situation under control. He reached out to touch Sin's shoulder; his fingers had barely brushed Sin's clothes and Boyd had just started to say "Hsi--" but he didn't get the chance to finish.

Without looking, Sin's free arm lifted and he threw Boyd to the side with such strength that Boyd literally flew across the room, crashed against a table and slammed into the wall. With the power and abruptness of the move, Boyd was unable to stop his head from hitting the wall with all the momentum he'd gained. His eyes went wide and he let out a startled gasp of pain before he collapsed to the floor, dazed.

"Get th--" Kassian gasped, face pale and turning blue, his eyes meeting Sin's as he stopped clawing at his throat and reached forward swiftly, pressing his thumb into one of Sin's eyeballs viciously. If he'd applied more pressure he could have crushed it completely but once again, Kassian seemed to hold back.

Sin's grip loosened regardless and Kassian leaped backwards, coughing violently. He had no time to recover himself as Sin, even with one temporarily blinded eye, charged at him again and began an onslaught of ruthless attacks that Kassian defended against impressively; his hands and body moved with clear talent, quickly, yet it didn't contend with the near-superhuman speed and strength that Sin seemed to possess during episodes.

Kassian fell backwards at one point, his back slamming against the floor as Sin immediately followed, going to pin the other man down. Kassian's foot slammed into Sin's ankle twice in quick succession, hard enough to break it; although, from Sin's almost complete lack of reaction, it was hard to tell if it actually had an effect.

Sin didn't even wince as his hands shot down to grab one of Kassian's legs, jerking the man up as if he weighed nothing, but Kassian flipped backwards, one foot slamming into Sin's chest before he'd completely landed on the floor.

Boyd dragged himself up and immediately scrambled toward the two of them again, his heartbeat racing with alarm and adrenaline. His attention was completely zeroed in on the violent fight occurring in front of him and his only thought was to stop Sin before anything permanent happened.

Sin was moving like a machine, his face unaffected, expressionless, not even wincing in pain when Kassian hit him. Sin steadfastly and almost calmly attacked Kassian so relentlessly that Kassian was being backed toward the corner. Despite the fact that Kassian was putting up a fight with ten times the skill of any trainee that had faced Sin, it wasn't enough.

Moves Kassian performed that would have incapacitated any other man didn't even seem to faze Sin, as though the adrenaline that roared through Sin, in combination with the removed state of his mind, prevented Sin from even feeling pain.

Boyd scrambled forward and was able to place a hand on Sin's upper arm, already saying in the calm tone he used for these situations, "Hsin, stop."

The response he received was unexpected.

This time Sin didn't pause in surprise; this time Sin didn't hesitate and look at Boyd with that vulnerably confused expression on his face.

This time, Sin turned to Boyd with a vicious snarl and grabbed the arm that was touching him; twisting it just as violently as he'd done to Kassian. Before Boyd could react, Sin flipped him with careless strength; Boyd had barely even realized Sin had grabbed him before he was spinning disconcertingly. He was as powerless and weightless as a doll in Sin's hands and as he was violently thrown to the floor, there was a resounding crack as his head hit the edge of the coffee table in the process.

A shock of white overcame Boyd's vision and he landed like a dropped marionette, pain radiating even down his neck and overwhelming his senses. For a moment, he couldn't even make himself move.

As Boyd lay on the floor in momentarily stunned silence, Sin immediately turned back to Kassian, who was slumped against the wall and doing his best to stagger to his feet. There was blood coming out of Kassian's mouth and despite the fact that he looked unable to even properly stand at this point, his eyes slid over to Boyd's temporarily prone form and he started at Sin again. Kassian's expression was determined, his blue eyes deadly, and he seemed fully prepared to die trying to take Sin down.

Kassian swung twice in quick succession, both fists pounding into Sin's face; one cuffed Sin on the jaw and the other slammed into the side of Sin's neck but Sin barely even blinked. He grabbed Kassian and threw him against the wall so abruptly and with such strength that Kassian couldn't stop himself. Before Kassian could do anything more, Sin once again punched him viciously in the temple. Kassian's head snapped back and hit the wall with a crack as the drywall protested in response.

Kassian's body sagged and his eyes slid closed as he fell unconscious, dead weight in Sin's arms, who pinned him there effortlessly. Boyd was able to stagger to his feet just as he realized in a panic that Sin's hands were shifting and he planned to snap Kassian's neck.

"Sin, no!" Boyd yelled, immediately throwing himself at Sin with all his weight, causing Sin to step to the side as he briefly lost his balance.

Sin carelessly dropped Kassian, uninterested in the face of a new enemy, and turned on Boyd, wrenching Boyd around by the arm and easily throwing him across the room. Boyd hit the coffee table and slid across it before slamming into the side of the couch and falling to the floor with a pained groan.

He immediately tried to scramble up to get away but Sin was too fast; he yanked Boyd's leg out from under him and dragged him out to a wider area where he flipped Boyd onto his back. Boyd rolled out of the way just as Sin punched the floor hard enough for the wood to splinter where his head had been.

Boyd managed to get to his feet and tried to back away, to get to a safe enough distance to regain his balance, but Sin didn't give him the chance. Within the space of a second, Sin was there. His hands struck at Boyd with lightning-fast speed and with

absolutely no mercy; Boyd desperately tried to defend himself, to get away, to do something other than take the hits-- but it was nearly impossible.

No one was faster than Sin; no one was stronger.

Violent pain erupted across Boyd's arms, his chest, as strike after strike battered him like he was caught in a storm, his body jerked from hit to hit without even a breath to figure out where he was or how to get away. It was all he could do to block even the occasional punch.

Sin paused only briefly to look back at Kassian, who had stirred slightly, but Boyd took the opportunity to grab the closest thing to him, a book off one of the shelves, and tried to slam it against the side of Sin's head in the hopes of knocking him unconscious. Sin didn't react at all and grabbed Boyd's wrist, wrenching it behind him so violently that his arm could have very likely been ripped off.

A gasp of pain was wrenched from Boyd and he immediately twisted while elbowing Sin powerfully in the stomach with his free arm. The move did nothing significant except causing Sin to whip Boyd around and throw him against the wall; Boyd flew back and crashed into the shelves next to the entertainment center.

Glass shattered around him, slicing his back and arms as he hit the wall so hard that he almost lost the ability to breathe. He gasped and slumped to the floor, sagging with a groan that turned into a ragged cough.

He was nearly overwhelmed by pain and the speed of the attacks, but he still weakly tried to roll to the side and get away. He'd barely made it a few inches before Sin suddenly appeared in front of him. He kicked Boyd, who tried to dodge and was only fast enough to stop it from being a blow that would have broken bones; even so, Boyd's whole body snapped back with the momentum.

Sin casually grabbed Boyd out of mid-air by the throat and slammed Boyd to his back on the floor, dropping on top of him to hold him down.

Boyd hit the floor with a spark of agony and he was unable to stop himself from crying out in pain. Darkness shuddered on the edges of his vision and his hearing buzzed distantly; for a harrowing moment, he almost blacked out. He forced his eyes open again and willed himself to stay conscious, his body twisting futilely as he automatically tried to get away.

There was no use. He was caught.

Sin's expression was unmoving as he shifted his grip and dug his thumbs into Boyd's windpipe, strangling him. The pressure was painful and immediate; Boyd hadn't had the chance to draw a full breath before the same fingers he used to feel gently run along his body were remorselessly choking him. Boyd gagged as his breath was cut off and his lungs strained furiously; his legs automatically kicked against the floor ineffectually and his fingers scrabbled against Sin's fingers and wrists as he desperately tried to relieve the pressure.

All Boyd could see as he stared in wide-eyed alarm was the green fire of Sin's crazed glare burning into him, the remorseless expression of a killer.

For the first time, Boyd honestly understood why others had been so terrified of Sin.

The only other time Sin had attacked Boyd before Boyd could stop him had been when they'd barely known each other, when Boyd hadn't particularly cared if Sin had killed him. Ever since then, Boyd had never felt truly threatened because he'd always known in the back of his mind that Sin wouldn't really hurt him; that Sin would always stop.

He'd always known he could trust his partner with his life.

But now, after everything they'd been through together, Boyd realized that Sin really could just suddenly turn on him; that Sin really could just go berserk and kill him. For the first time, Boyd truly wasn't safe in Sin's presence and it was frightening to realize.

Boyd's heartbeat skyrocketed and he made a low noise of distress, feeling terrified the longer he tried to draw breath and couldn't, the more his lungs ached and burned, the more he struggled and knew he wouldn't be able to get away. His mouth was wide open as he tried desperately to draw in any amount of breath but he may as well have been drowning. Without even realizing it, voiceless words were formed by his lips-- begging for Sin to stop, that he couldn't breathe.

His eyes automatically teared up and it was sobering to know how powerless he really was, how easily he could lose his life.

It was even worse seeing Sin's remorseless face staring down at him as his vision started to dim and fingers tingled, as his body grew oxygen-starved. The same eyes he'd once gotten lost in were now coldly watching him die; the same lips he'd once kissed passionately were now set in an unsympathetic, straight line. The same body

he'd once arched against in ecstasy was a heavy weight that now held him motionless and powerless as his life was steadily drained away.

As Boyd felt his thoughts grow distant and blackness started to shudder and spread along the outer edges of his vision, he realized it was only a matter of seconds before he wouldn't be able to react at all. Only a handful of seconds until Sin killed him.

His mind raced furiously as he tried to figure out how to get out of Sin's grip but his mind just whirled uselessly as he realized that there was really no way out. Sin was too fast, too strong, too efficient; he'd just kill Boyd another way if he didn't kill him now.

The simple truth was that Boyd had to snap Sin out of this mindset or he would die.

If Boyd couldn't stop Sin the way he normally did then his only option was to do something completely unexpected for a fight; something that would force Sin's mind to take a step back and question the killing mode. Boyd distantly realized he was starting to grow too weak to even kick at the floor and his fingers were starting to slip on Sin's wrists.

Only one solution came to his frantic, oxygen-starved mind and, desperately, Boyd used all his remaining strength to suddenly strain forward and kiss Sin.

It wasn't a passionate kiss; Boyd had no idea how Sin would respond to something like that, but he did know that Ann had seemed adamant that Sin responded to gentleness in this state. His lips barely grazed Sin's but even the slight touch caused Sin to freeze, his fingers easing up on the pressure on Boyd's throat.

Boyd immediately coughed and dragged in a few hectic breaths, trying to get some air while he had the chance, just in case Sin started attacking him again.

Sin's hands remained firm around Boyd's throat and although there was no pressure, Sin would easily be able to start choking Boyd again if Boyd made a wrong move-- or worse, snap his neck. Realizing that his attempt had partially worked, Boyd quickly leaned forward and lightly kissed Sin again, hoping it would work, hoping it would cause Sin to recognize his taste, the feel of his mouth-- anything to break Sin out of this violent daze that made everyone look like an enemy.

This time Sin's lips parted and a shuddering breath escaped his mouth. His hands briefly tightened on Boyd before they abruptly went slack. Sin's eyes were glazed,

confused, and he still looked on the teetering edge of madness but he was no longer the crazed murderer that Boyd had faced seconds ago.

Sin suddenly stood up straight and turned away from Boyd, his hands rising to tangle in his hair.

Boyd coughed violently and drew in a few desperate, ragged breaths as he rolled onto his side, fingers curled against his throat as if he could help himself breathe. He squeezed his eyes shut against the pain reverberating throughout his body and for a few brief seconds he had to just concentrate on drawing a complete breath.

He was too weary to stand up right away so after a moment he slid his eyes open and watched Sin warily. When Sin didn't immediately do anything else, Boyd struggled to his feet and stayed well out of Sin's reach.

"Hsin...?" he asked tentatively.

Sin looked over his shoulder at Boyd for the briefest of moments, his hands still digging into his hair. His eyes were more aware but from what Boyd saw of Sin's expression, he looked horrified and frightened.

Before anything else could happen, Sin all but bolted out the front door and disappeared into the darkness outside.

"Hsin--" Boyd ran to the door and looked out but Sin was already long gone. Boyd hesitated, for a second almost thinking he should follow before deciding against the idea.

He didn't want Sin to do anything drastic but he had no idea where Sin was headed other than possibly his apartment. And realistically if Sin intended to do anything, Boyd wouldn't be able to find him and stop him in time. If anything, Boyd's presence could potentially endanger them both.

Without having a clue what had triggered Sin's episode, there was no way Boyd would know what not to do to start it all over again. And if he could no longer stop Sin then he would almost certainly just get himself killed, especially since he'd barely escaped alive this time and he had no way of knowing whether kissing Sin would work again or if he'd get a chance next time.

Boyd spun around and rushed to Kassian's side; he still appeared to be knocked out. Careful not to move him too much for fear of head or neck damage, Boyd quickly checked Kassian for any serious injuries.

The senior agent stirred at the touch and opened his eyes blearily, staring up at Boyd.

"Kassian?" Boyd said in concern, watching him intently.

Kassian sat up immediately, appearing instantly alert as his gaze swept the living room before falling back on Boyd. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Boyd assured Kassian. "Are you?" He searched Kassian's expression. "How's your head?"

"Where's Vega?" Kassian got to his feet surprisingly steadily considering the fact that he likely had a concussion.

"He's gone." Boyd stood as well, feeling a little lightheaded now that the intensity of the moment was over and all the pains and aches came to the forefront. "Hold on."

Now that he was sure Kassian was alright, Boyd grabbed his cell phone and called Sin's number immediately. The phone rang several times and his eyes narrowed in concern although he wasn't terribly surprised when Sin didn't pick up.

As soon as it went to voice mail, Boyd said urgently into the phone, "Sin, we're both okay. Don't worry about us. Just take care of yourself. Please. I'll see you later."

He flipped the phone closed and tossed it onto a nearby table, his expression troubled.

Kassian leaned against the wall and stared at Boyd with slightly narrowed eyes before lifting one hand and rubbing it over his short blond hair. He winced but didn't complain and his eyes wandered back over to the door before returning to Boyd. "What the fuck was that about?"

Boyd watched Kassian a moment then looked around the living room which had been damaged in the onslaught. He dropped onto the couch and leaned forward to put his face in his hands, suddenly feeling incredibly weary and guilty.

"I don't know for sure," Boyd admitted before looking up at Kassian. "But-- I'm sorry, I should've realized sooner he was having an episode. I should've told you..." He shook his head to himself. "He just-- He didn't know what he was doing."

"I know shit like this has happened before," Kassian, his voice hard and almost impatient as he stared down at Boyd. "But what the fuck was his problem just now? He went nuts for no reason."

"I don't know," Boyd repeated, feeling a little frustrated with the entire situation. "It was different this time, I couldn't even stop him at first. The only time I've ever seen him like that before, something bad had happened shortly beforehand. But..."

Boyd hesitated. Part of him really didn't want to say anything about what Ann had told him because it wasn't Boyd's place to tell anyone. On the other hand, Boyd had never seen Sin snap without provocation.

Even after Sin had killed Jared, he hadn't snapped; but had that been because Boyd had been there, because Sin had thought Boyd was safe? Or had Sin reacted so violently a moment ago because it had been related to everything else that was going on, to hallucinations or something else? There had been a time when Boyd had thought he could read Sin but he didn't know anything anymore, not after months of being deceived in his presence.

Whatever the case was, Boyd felt that Kassian deserved an explanation. Without knowing whether this was all a result of Sin's hallucinations, Boyd couldn't risk Kassian running into Sin in the future and exacerbating the situation unknowingly. Boyd would feel worse about that than betraying Sin's confidence-- both because it could get Kassian hurt, and because despite what Sin felt about Kassian, Boyd was certain Sin would feel some sense of guilt if something went wrong.

"Look, I just found this out recently, but... He's been seeing things lately and it's possible..." Boyd's voice was heavy and tired as he trailed off briefly before he shook his head again. "I don't know, maybe he thought we were someone else."

"He knew who we were," Kassian disagreed with an edge in his voice. "He knew he was at your house and that I was here and he didn't want me to be."

"I don't know what to tell you," Boyd said a little sharper in frustration. Kassian seemed mad but although he didn't seem to be blaming Boyd, it didn't make Boyd feel any better about the entire ordeal. "I haven't seen him since training so I don't know any more than

you do. And if he knew who I am, then I'm not safe to him anymore so that's changed too."

Boyd ran his hands over his face, feeling upset, in pain, and completely at a loss. His entire body hurt and he still barely felt like he could breathe properly. His arm twinged and he was going to be surprised if he got away from all this with only bruises.

He didn't know what the hell was happening. Had Sin's mission been so terrible that it had put him in that mindset? The possibility seemed hard to believe; it hadn't even been an assassination.

Boyd didn't understand any of this, including why he wasn't safe to Sin anymore. Had he ceased to be safe to Sin long ago, from the moment he'd broken up with him? Or was it something more recent, even as simple as refusing to send Kassian away?

He couldn't believe it was something like that, but then, Ann had said even small rejections from Boyd could seem resounding to Sin. Had Sin taken that as Boyd rejecting him? And if so, was that enough for Sin to no longer respond to Boyd's voice or touch?

Could something that small have gotten Kassian and Boyd killed?

Words muffled by his hands, Boyd muttered, "I don't know what the fuck is going on."

Kassian stared down at him at length before he walked over to the front door and pushed it firmly shut, locking it. He stood facing the door for a long moment before he returned to Boyd's side and sat down next to him.

Kassian wiped blood from his busted lip and shook his head wearily before he placed a hesitant hand on Boyd's shoulder, squeezing it. "If I'd known, I never would have provoked him. I don't want you to think I deliberately taunted him. I honestly didn't even think I said anything too bad."

Boyd remained still for a moment before he sighed and dropped his hands, looking over at Kassian. Boyd's face was pale and drawn and he was holding himself carefully so as not to exacerbate any of the aches on his torso. His head throbbed in time with his heartbeat and his throat was starting to turn red from when Sin had choked him.

Kassian didn't look much better off although Boyd suspected most of his injuries were beneath his clothing. But Boyd was just thankful they were all alive and in one piece.

"You didn't," Boyd said heavily. "Normally, it wouldn't have been a problem; I'm sure you've said worse to him before. What happened was probably either inevitable or happened because I didn't send you away or catch it in time."

"Don't start blaming yourself," Kassian said gruffly, leaning back on the sofa and closing his eyes when his head rested against it. "It's not your fault he's insane."

"I'm not," Boyd said honestly. "Not really. I know it's not my fault that he's ill but I've always been able to de-escalate the situation before. The fact that I couldn't this time means either this all would've happened regardless of what I did or that I did something different that failed to stop it. He probably came to my place for a reason; maybe he wanted me to help him. I know it's not my responsibility to always do that for him but... I just think I could've made it all end better."

"It doesn't matter. It's too late for that kind of thinking. I mean you must have gotten him out of it some kind of way in the end." Kassian looked over at Boyd and shook his head slowly. "What happened, anyway?"

"He attacked me and I just forced him to realize I wasn't his enemy and didn't want to hurt him," Boyd said with a shrug. "He only positively responds to kindness in that state." He didn't want to tell Kassian exactly how; it would sound too odd.

"I wish I'd have known that," Kassian said with a frown. He still looked very much on edge but there was something about his expression that made it seem as though he felt guilty over the entire event.

He wiped blood from his face and stared into space for a long moment, not at all appearing concerned with whatever injuries he may have although it seemed that nothing too serious had occurred. If Kassian had been a less skilled fighter there was no denying that he would have been torn apart during the fight.

But now he just looked strangely distant, thoughtful, and almost reflective as though he were replaying the scene again in his mind. The guilty expression never quite left his face during the stretch of silence and after another moment he stood up and walked over to the bag Boyd had dropped on the floor.

Boyd blankly watched as Kassian pulled out the bottle of high-end vodka they'd bought to celebrate the new year with before Kassian looked over at Boyd. "If you still want any

of this, I suggest you get a cup. I could just down the whole fucking bottle on my own right now, otherwise."

Boyd nodded and wearily stood, heading toward the kitchen.

Kassian trailed after him, casting a look back at the destroyed living room, before entering the kitchen and dropping the bag of takeout on the counter. "Where did Sin go?"

"I don't know," Boyd said, worry in his voice. He paused only to put the takeout in the fridge before he walked over to a cupboard. "He ran out but I'm hoping he just went home..."

"Should we... do... something?" Kassian asked, obviously not knowing what that something would be. "I mean-- was he normal when he took off?"

"Yeah," Boyd said, then looked over his shoulder with a sigh, hand pausing just before he grabbed a glass. "I thought about going after him, but I don't know where he went and I don't want to run after him if I don't even know why he was like that in the first place. We could accidentally trigger it again somehow. Hopefully he'll get my message. If we come at him now he may think we're enemies again or we may risk him losing whatever stability he's regained. I don't want to add more stress for him so I think it's just best to wait."

"I guess," Kassian said doubtfully, watching Boyd rummage around.

Silence fell between them as Boyd grabbed the two glasses, shut the cupboard, and together they returned to the living room. Boyd felt so many emotions that it was too difficult to sort them out, to think clearly about anything, and he found that he needed the alcohol to dull his thoughts as well as something tangible to occupy his mind.

He'd been hit in the head so many times that, combined with the distraction of a body that was a mess of bruises and strained muscles, even just trying to string together a coherent thought felt like working on a thesis in physics.

The next period of time was spent in somber silence as they tensely cleaned up the mess in the living room to the best of their ability, drinking along the way. Several items were broken beyond repair and others were salvageable but not something Boyd felt like dealing with at the moment so they just made a small pile in the corner.

Although Boyd stopped at two glasses of vodka, by the time they finished cleaning, Kassian had finished the rest, drinking straight from the bottle.

Kassian ended up passing out on the couch and Boyd hovered near him uncertainly before he turned off all the lights and sat on the floor beside the couch. His body and head continued to hurt but at least the vodka had taken most of the edge off, making him feel a lot calmer about the whole ordeal.

He was still worried about Sin-- whether he was okay, whether he'd return, whether it would all happen again-- so he didn't want to leave Kassian alone when he was now likely very drunk. Boyd figured that if he left all the lights off, his eyes would adjust to the darkness so Sin wouldn't have shadows to hide within if he did return and was in that state of mind again. Not to mention that there were plenty of exits in the living room for them to try to escape if need be.

Boyd settled against the edge of the couch as comfortably as he could, watching Kassian and the surroundings until exhaustion pulled at him so heavily that he passed out as well.

The night was spent restlessly and Boyd jerked into a half-awake state on more than one occasion but he was so mentally and physically exhausted with the effects of the alcohol intensifying it that he could never pull himself into full consciousness. The end result was a confusing slumber of half nightmares and half reality, where it was impossible to distinguish between the two.

Several times Boyd swore Sin was in the room watching them, advancing on them, but when Boyd looked around and saw no one, he was never able to tell which part was truth and which had been a dream.

Chapter 29

By the time Boyd fell into a deep enough sleep to remain that way, light was beginning to shine through the windows and it wasn't too long after that, that Kassian woke up.

Kassian's blue eyes cracked open into slits, wincing at what was likely a combination of a severe hangover and a mild concussion, but he sat up groggily and looked around. After a moment his eyes fell on Boyd. A concerned frown etched its way onto his handsome features and he pushed himself off the couch to sit beside where Boyd was sprawled on the floor.

He watched the younger agent sleep for a moment, the guilty expression once again finding its way onto his face before Kassian finally reached out and brushed a hand against Boyd's cheek.

"You okay, kid?"

Boyd jerked at the touch, in his exhausted state thinking for a second that Sin had returned, and blinked his eyes open to look around him. When he just saw Kassian leaning over him, Boyd immediately relaxed. His eyes fell mostly shut against the light but he continued to watch Kassian blearily.

"What?" he asked, voice scratchy.

Kassian shook his head and dropped his hand, although his eyes remained trained on Boyd. "Just seeing if you're okay."

"Oh." Boyd let his eyes fall shut briefly and made a face. "Yes. Not my best night's sleep but I'm fine."

Boyd opened his eyes again and finally pushed himself up, ignoring the aches and pains from everything that had happened the night before along with sleeping on the floor in a rather awkward position. The movement helped him wake up a little more and remove some of the fuzziness in his mind.

He leaned back against the couch once he was sitting up and searched what he could see of Kassian's face and body. "Are you?"

"I'm fine. But if you haven't noticed, the back of your head is all bloody." Kassian reached out again and slid his fingers into the long strands of blond hair at the back of Boyd's head. Kassian's fingers lightly grazed the wound before dropping away. "I wish I'd noticed that before suggesting we get drunk and pass out. Fucking genius that I am and it was so dark in here that I didn't even notice."

Boyd automatically reached up to touch the back of his head, mildly surprised to feel clotted blood, although that explained why it felt especially sensitive. He continued to watch Kassian and said lightly, "I guess that explains the headache. I just thought I was a lightweight."

"Heh." Kassian shook his head and smiled humorlessly. "I should have known better. Sorry, kid. I'm an idiot. I don't give a shit if I die in my sleep due to my own alcoholic stupidity but I don't need to start bringing you into it too. It would suck if you died."

"Not any more than it would if you did," Boyd said honestly.

Because their whole friendship had started based on the fact that they basically didn't give a damn about each other or have expectations, it felt good to know that Kassian was truly concerned for his survival. The feeling was mutual; the possibility of Sin killing Kassian had been a horrifying one.

Boyd smiled slightly. "Don't worry about it, though. You'd think I would've realized I was hurt but obviously we were both too out of it. You're not an idiot and I'm fine so it doesn't matter."

"It matters," Kassian said with a sigh as he looked at Boyd. "I handled the entire situation wrong, even up to the point where we fought. I was so thrown off guard and, honestly, so hesitant to get in a fight with him that I didn't do all I could in the beginning. Not like I think I could have seriously beaten him, but I could have slowed him down a lot more."

Kassian frowned and touched the side of Boyd's neck, shaking his head at the violent bruises he saw there. "I never expected him to turn on you. I would have never forgiven myself if anything happened to you. And I know you're not some defenseless damsel but I feel protective of you. I'm..."

Kassian's eyes rose and met Boyd's steadily. "I'm becoming really fond of having you around, Boyd."

Boyd met Kassian's gaze and searched his expression briefly, looking for any signs that he wasn't being serious but finding only forthright sincerity. There was nothing hidden in Kassian's eyes; Boyd didn't have to decipher his expression or analyze the other man's body language or tone.

Kassian's words were genuine and honest; this wasn't a confession of love or even an attempt to seduce Boyd. He was simply informing Boyd that he cared, that what had started out as a comfortable acquaintanceship was turning into a real friendship and somehow Kassian's attraction had strengthened.

Judging by the way Kassian's gaze almost absently traced Boyd's features, by the way his eyes narrowed slightly and his fingers seemed to tighten against Boyd's neck seemingly of their own accord, that possibility was very likely. He didn't know why Kassian was making it more obvious now but it was entirely possible that the near death experience had prompted him to be more upfront about things before there wasn't another chance to be.

And in that moment, Boyd couldn't deny his attraction to Kassian. He liked Kassian; everything about him was easygoing and pleasant to be around. Kassian had the uncanny ability to make Boyd feel comfortable and relaxed without even really trying.

Beyond that, even bruised and disheveled, Kassian was incredibly handsome. Although Boyd's lovers had all been far more exotic and striking in their own ways, there was something about Kassian's undeniable masculinity that Boyd found surprisingly attractive.

He thought of what it had been like before Kassian and he realized that he honestly appreciated Kassian's presence; that he didn't mind at all the brush of Kassian's fingertips against his skin.

"The feeling's mutual," Boyd said finally.

Kassian's mouth moved up into a ghost of a smile but then his eyebrows furrowed slightly, the guilty shadow crossed his face, and the moment was broken. He dropped his hand and cleared his throat awkwardly, standing and rubbing a hand along the back of his neck.

"We should contact the Agency."

Boyd glanced toward his phone, still resting on the coffee table where he'd left it earlier. In all the chaos, the thought hadn't even occurred to him; typically when Sin had an episode, the last thing Boyd wanted to do was report it and get Sin in trouble.

"About what happened or the fact we don't know where he is?"

"You should let General Carhart know what's happened-- that Sin is possibly on the loose in a disturbed state of mind and currently a danger to others and possibly even himself." Kassian combed a hand through his short blond hair and frowned again.

Boyd nodded and reached for his cell phone, wincing when a muscle pulled particularly painfully, then sat down on the couch. He flipped the phone open and was unsurprised but disappointed to see that Sin hadn't returned the call in the middle of the night. Part of him had been hoping that he'd missed a response.

On the off chance that Sin would be better and answer, Boyd tried calling him again. The phone rang until it hit voicemail; he didn't bother leaving a message since Sin would see the missed call and know Boyd tried again. It was probably better to talk to Sin in person anyway but that left the question of what Sin's current status was.

Boyd felt a wave of worry overcome him and although for a moment he wondered if he'd made the right choice by not chasing after Sin, he knew it couldn't have been any other way. With even Boyd susceptible to Sin's attacks, there was nothing he or Kassian could have done that wouldn't have endangered their own lives or any sense of stability Sin may have managed to regain.

Even so, Boyd was very concerned about Sin; his whereabouts, his safety, the safety of those around him... Nothing good would come of Sin having another episode and Boyd didn't want it to be the last point against Sin; the incident that made the Agency give up on Sin for good.

Boyd scrolled through the contact list on his phone until he found Carhart's number and, not even thinking to check what time it was, he hit send. As Boyd listened to the phone ring, Kassian watched him from the side.

Boyd had just given up on the idea and was making plans to go directly to the Agency when Carhart picked up in the middle of a ring and demanded somewhat gruffly, "What is it?"

"I-- General Carhart," Boyd said, slightly taken off-guard, "It's Sin. He had an episode last night and I'm worried about him. I don't know if he's recovered and he may be a danger to himself or others."

"I'm aware of that," Carhart said, his voice flat. "Why didn't you call me last night if you believed that to be the case?"

Boyd didn't think it necessarily boded well that Carhart knew; did that mean something had happened overnight after all, something so bad that the information had already reached Carhart? A flash of guilt made Boyd's eyebrows draw down slightly as he looked toward the pile of broken items in the corner of the room.

"He looked like he was back to himself," Boyd replied, voice heavy with weariness. "I thought it would be best for no one to bother him since I don't even know what started it this time. So I didn't even think of it. But he hasn't answered my calls..." He hesitated, unable to keep the concern from his voice when he continued. "Is he-- What happened, is he okay?"

There was a long silence and when Carhart answered, his tone was stern, almost cold, as if he was displeased with Boyd for some reason although it was also possible that he was stressed due to the entire situation. "He's in the psychiatric building. He came to my apartment last night and begged me to lock him away on the fourth. I took him there instead and that is where he will stay until a decision is made."

"Deci--" Boyd started to say, alarmed. For a moment he couldn't even think about what else Carhart had said, about Sin begging to go to Fourth. "She's not going to terminate him, is she?"

"I don't know, Boyd. I really don't." There was another pause and the sound of something rustling in the background as Carhart sighed heavily. "He's at the end of his rope and she knows that. I don't know what happened to get him to this point, I don't know what made him flip out last night, but he told me flat out that if things don't change he'll go to Vivienne himself and ask for termination."

"What-- He can't," Boyd said urgently, eyes narrowing as the alarm and worry intensified considerably. "I know things changed but if he gets help he has a real shot, doesn't he? I don't-- I may not be able to help much but I'll do what I can if you or he need it. He was already fucked up before he even came over last night; if it wasn't for that, he wouldn't have even attacked us. I know it's only part of the issue but that has to count..."

"Vivienne doesn't know about your or Agent Trovosky's part in this," Carhart said flatly. "I think it would be unwise for you to mention that to her."

Boyd got the distinct impression that Carhart was not only pissed at him, but that the General actually disliked him now. Boyd wasn't entirely sure why and it struck him silent for a moment.

He thought part of it was because he hadn't called the night before but it really hadn't even occurred to him. He'd never been in a situation before where Sin had an episode that Boyd couldn't stop; he was so used to handling the situation on his own that he hadn't even thought to alert anyone.

In retrospect, it had been pretty stupid not to call Carhart right away. It didn't matter that Boyd and Kassian had nearly been killed, that Boyd had almost been unable to stop it all and was shaken by the experience, that the two of them had been off-balance and in pain and not thinking clearly. It didn't matter that Sin had seemed back to normal when he'd left, not when he'd still been obviously extremely upset.

If Sin had gone and killed himself or hurt others, Boyd never would have forgiven himself. If this all resulted in Sin's termination, Boyd still wouldn't.

He'd had the opportunity to help Sin when he'd needed it and Boyd not only hadn't, he'd also stood to the side and let the situation get worse. Although it was true that it wasn't Boyd's responsibility to make sure Sin was always stable, despite any fall out that had happened between them, despite even knowing that their relationship as it had been was unhealthy for the two of them, Boyd couldn't stop his feelings for Sin.

He still cared immensely for Sin, he still wanted Sin to live a happy and healthy life. He was still Sin's work partner if nothing else and it was his responsibility to balance Sin's instability in times of duress or alert the authorities if he couldn't. Sin had trusted him to come to his house when he needed help and Boyd hadn't been there for him.

It felt like no matter what Boyd tried to do, he always ended up being a significant part of the problem when Sin's instability brought him close to death. Boyd had been the reason in Monterrey, when he'd let his jealousy overrun his rationality and he'd left Sin alone to die, and now when he was trying to remove emotions, he still ended up being part of the issue because he didn't react properly. He knew it wasn't his fault but he couldn't help feeling guilty for making the situation worse.

And now even Carhart, who had always seemed so understanding, was angry with Boyd.

Boyd squeezed his eyes shut and dropped his head into his free hand, wondering for a moment what the hell he was even doing. He felt conflicted and frustrated, trying to balance his own happiness and health with Sin's, with everyone else's.

Part of him also felt guilty for his time with Kassian, for being interested in someone else even just casually like this. What if Sin had been in trouble or hurt while they were sitting here having a moment?

But at the same time those thoughts alone frustrated Boyd because Sin and he weren't together so why the hell did he have to think of things like this? Was it really so bad to think of himself once in awhile? To put his priorities above someone else's? How was he supposed to be responsible for his own happiness when that alone could so dramatically and negatively affect someone else's life? He couldn't stop thinking of what was best for him yet no matter what he did, he seemed to make matters worse.

He'd thought he'd been making the right decisions and for the most part he still thought he was, but he wished he could stop the second-guessing, the self-doubt. He wished everything would stop getting so messed up so quickly, and he really wished he'd stop disappointing everyone whose opinion he cared about.

More than anything, he wished his actions and words would stop being involved in the literal life or death of someone he truly cared about.

"I understand," Boyd said finally, his voice turning a little more reserved and professional. "Is there anything you need from me instead?"

"No."

The line went dead without another word from Carhart.

"Shit," Boyd hissed, flipping his phone closed and throwing it to the floor. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees as he brought his other hand up to cover his face. His headache intensified dramatically and he almost felt sick from the combination of physical pains, mental exhaustion and emotional conflict.

"What?" Kassian stared down at him, looking genuinely concerned. "Where's Vega?"

"The psych building," Boyd said heavily, pressing his palms against his closed eyes. His head was throbbing painfully and he vaguely wondered if he had any painkillers in the house. "He'll be there until a 'decision is made.'" The way he said it made it clear he was quoting Carhart. "And since my mother was already considering termination..."

"Well, that's just fantastic." Kassian shook his head, looking exhausted and angry and guilty all at the same time. He stood up and crossed his arms over his chest, staring down at Boyd.

Boyd made a noise of agreement and remained hunched over for several long seconds. When Kassian didn't say anything or move, Boyd sighed and dropped his hands, looking up at him. They stared at each other in silence, neither seeming to know what to say, until Boyd finally looked away, perturbed. His gaze dropped to his cell phone and he shook his head to himself.

"I don't know, I'm going to talk to him as soon as I can. See if I can help, or..." Boyd trailed off briefly, frustrated and doubtful. "I don't-- I don't even know anymore. Carhart's pissed and I just..." He sighed again and realized he didn't even know how to finish the sentence. "I hate this."

"It's not your fault," Kassian said again but this time he sighed. "But I wish we'd fucking thought to call last night. I can't believe I didn't even... I don't know, man. It doesn't matter anymore."

Kassian dropped his arms to his sides and shook his head. "There's nothing that can be done now. What happened, happened. Let's just hope the guy gets his shit together and your mom gives him another chance."

"Yeah." Boyd stared down at his hands, feeling incredibly hopeless.

For a moment, he wanted to ask Kassian if he was doing the right thing; he wanted to tell Kassian about his frustration and self-doubt and fears. He wanted to tell Kassian about how much he appreciated his presence yet how even that thought was filled with second-guessing and guilt. He wanted to ask if it was wrong of him to think of himself when things like this kept happening as a result.

A lot of his distress was pretty self-evident but even so, Boyd wanted to say it aloud, to confess all his worries and be reassured that doing his best was good enough. But Kassian didn't know about everything and the man obviously already felt bad enough for the situation.

In truth, the person who Boyd really needed to hear 'it's alright' from was currently in psychiatric care and may not make it out alive.

The thought made Boyd return his gaze to Kassian. Trying to make up for another thing he'd done wrong, he said wearily, "Look, I... I really shouldn't have told you about Sin's hallucinations; he didn't want even me to know. Maybe it doesn't matter anymore and I know I can trust you but still-- don't tell anyone. Please. It wasn't fair to him for me to tell you. Just-- Don't even let him know you know." The unspoken 'if you even see him again' hung in the air uncomfortably.

Kassian's eyebrows drew together and he sat down beside Boyd again. "I wouldn't."

There was another silence and then Kassian lifted his hand to squeeze Boyd's shoulder. "Listen, why don't you just go to the Agency? You can get the details out of Carhart about what happened or even go see your mother and find out the truth from her. It's better than sitting around here assuming the worst."

The suggestion was a good one and something that Boyd had already planned to do. Although Boyd had no intention of seeing his mother after Carhart's comment and he wasn't certain if Carhart would even want to see him right then, at the very least Boyd was going to go to the psychiatric building to see Sin.

Boyd briefly placed his hand over Kassian's and nodded. "I will. I'll go right now." Boyd swiped his cell phone off the floor and stood, glancing around for his keys before looking at Kassian. "My mother's probably awake so if she hasn't made a decision by now, it'll happen shortly."

Kassian stood up as well. "I'm just going to head home. Just give me a call when you find out everything."

Boyd nodded again and grabbed his keys off the table and his coat from the closet. As he was pulling his coat on, ignoring the way his body violently ached in the process, he turned to Kassian. "You should probably get some rest anyway. I can't imagine you slept very well last night."

"It doesn't matter. Just give me a call." Kassian looked at Boyd for a moment before grabbing his jacket and helmet, then turning to the door. "I'll talk to you later, kid," he said quietly and left.

Boyd almost followed him out before stopping when turning his head too abruptly made the bruises on his neck twinge painfully. He brought a hand up to his throat then grabbed a scarf and went into the bathroom to quickly check what he looked like in the mirror. He didn't want to draw any more attention to himself than necessary or, in case the doctors knew Sin had attacked him, give any more evidence toward how dangerous Sin could be.

The bruises on his neck were already turning a dark, angry-looking purple but they were easily covered by winding the scarf over them. His skin was ash pale and there were heavy circles under his eyes, which he couldn't do anything about. His hair was a mess and he'd almost forgotten about the clotted blood until his fingers brushed past it. He didn't want to bother with it so he just went to the closet, grabbed a wool winter hat, and threw that on to cover the wound.

He felt lightheaded, his head pounded so hard that he felt nauseated, and his arm and back especially hurt but he studiously ignored it all.

The drive to the Agency passed quickly and Boyd parked in the psychiatric building's parking lot along the side. Two guards stood in front of the main doors, one short and stocky and the other tall and lean with a permanent look of distaste. Boyd was stopped at the door before he could even get inside.

"You can't go in," the shorter guard said and when Boyd glanced down, he saw the name on his uniform read 'Josephson.'

"I'm Level 9," Boyd said, showing them his ID.

The other guard, whose uniform read 'Brown,' raised his eyebrows. "Yeah? I don't care what level you are; you don't have clearance." He seemed to take personal offense to Boyd's presence and attempt to enter the building.

"Look," Boyd said a little impatiently. "I need to get in; it's important."

"It's always important for you big shots but right here, that means nothing," Brown said flatly. "We're in charge of guarding this building and when we say you can't come in, you can't come in."

"What do I need to do to get clearance, then?" Boyd asked, looking toward Josephson since he seemed to be the calmer of the two.

It was Brown who answered first though, looking pointedly with a hint of a sneer toward the ID Boyd had slid back into his pocket. "Why don't you ask mommy to write a note?"

"Nothing short of a General's okay will let you in," Josephson said calmly, not giving Boyd a chance to respond to Brown. "And even then we would need to know which patient you want to visit and it would need to be approved by their doctor."

Brown rolled his eyes. "Like that's hard to figure out. He's probably here for his psycho partner." He raised his eyebrows and gave Boyd a look that showed he was enjoying the power they held over him. "Maybe they'll get rid of him for good this time. Some of us even started taking bets on it."

Boyd watched the two steadily, ignoring the comment. "Which doctor do I contact for approval?"

"Probably Doctor Król," Josephson replied with a shrug, unconcerned.

Staring at the two for another long moment, Boyd finally nodded and turned away, letting a hint of irritation enter his voice as he held himself stiffly. "Fine. I'll get clearance and come back."

"We'll be waiting for you, sweetheart," Brown called after Boyd. "Better hurry or you'll miss the good part."

Boyd didn't reply as he walked around the corner toward the parking lot, looking like he had every intention of getting into his car and leaving. Once he was out of view of the guards, he casually continued to walk around the building. No one else was in the parking lot or within view so early in the morning, which suited his purposes quite well.

He saw no point in trying to contact Carhart for clearance, not when the man was already angry with Boyd, and even if Carhart said it was fine then Boyd would risk being denied by Sin's doctor. If he waited for legitimate approval, it would probably take too long and Boyd didn't want to risk any delays at this point. His only choice was to sneak in.

A quick glance around showed no one was in the vicinity so he studied the building briefly then peered around the corner. Another guard stood alone by the smaller door in back, seeming bored. No windows on the first floor appeared to be open but a few on the second floor and above were. However, there were no trees close enough for Boyd to climb and get inside.

Although if Boyd gave himself the time he could probably have come up with a more elaborate plan, he decided to just keep it simple.

He looked around until he found a few heavy rocks in the landscaping along the wall. There were several thick bushes dotted around the building, with flower beds in between. The bushes the Agency had chosen were heavy and even in the winter were still thick with blue-green needles aimed upward and brown needles on the ends of the branches, making them look rather like wide little evergreen trees. Boyd hid behind a particularly large one, then threw a rock with all his strength at a window a few down from him, but close enough to the back corner that the guard in the rear of the building would respond.

A crash resounded in the relatively quiet morning and Boyd could hear the lone guard curse. Boyd ducked down immediately and waited until he heard the guard come flying around the corner, already demanding, "Who's there?"

When the guard saw the obviously broken window he headed straight toward it and Boyd took the opportunity to quickly duck behind the other bushes and slide around the corner. Once out of sight of the guard, he ran to the door and slid inside before anyone else could see him.

Boyd straightened and walked casually down the hallway as soon as he was inside the building, looking around completely confidently as if he knew exactly where he was going and was supposed to be there. A woman with a clipboard passed him but she barely glanced at him before dismissing him; since she knew the place was guarded and only people with clearance were allowed inside, she had no reason to think anything strange of his presence.

He walked toward the front entrance and waited until the receptionist looked around the empty area with a half-asleep expression and, with a yawn, ducked into a small room behind her to apparently refill her coffee mug.

Boyd was at the desk immediately and quickly found the list of doctors' offices and patient rooms. Boyd saw a 'Dominik Król' listed next to an office on the fourth floor and, in his patient list, Sin's name next to room number 503. Boyd left before the receptionist had even finished pouring cream into her coffee.

He calmly walked up the stairs, thinking quickly. He could try to visit Dr. Król but there was no point; he'd probably be turned away before he was told anything of import and

he didn't want to alert anyone to his presence before he had the chance to talk to Sin. So he went straight to the fifth floor and walked down the empty hall.

Room 503 was unlocked so Boyd slipped inside and shut the door behind him quietly before he turned around. The room was surprisingly pleasant, with a small table and an armchair, and the bed looked comfortable aside from the restraints currently holding down Sin's wrists.

At first, Boyd could only stare at Sin. It felt like forever since he'd seen Sin in a moment of relative quiet, when internal or external issues weren't pressing down on them. It was hard not to let his gaze linger on the high cheeks and full lips, on the beautiful features he'd once had a near obsession with. But Boyd pushed all those thoughts away; things were different now and even if they weren't, he didn't know how long he had until he was discovered.

Sin's eyes were closed and he was breathing evenly; he seemed to be unconscious but that was all Boyd could tell. A wave of relief washed over Boyd simply from knowing that Sin was still alive but Sin's current state would mean nothing if he gave up or demanded termination.

Boyd stood next to the bed and quietly said, "Sin," as he lightly touched Sin's arm.

Sin didn't stir and Boyd's eyes flicked over to the IV that was placed in Sin's arm. The man was probably sedated but Boyd hoped that he wasn't too heavily knocked out.

"Sin," Boyd said a little louder while still staying quiet enough that he wouldn't be heard through the door. When Sin didn't immediately respond, Boyd leaned closer to the bed so he could speak near Sin's ear while he carefully shook Sin's shoulder. "Sin, please wake up. I'm sorry but I need to talk to you."

Sin's eyes moved beneath his lids and he made a low sound at the back of his throat. His eyebrows drew together slightly but he still didn't wake up entirely.

Boyd glanced toward the door briefly when he thought he heard someone walking in the hallway but the footsteps passed by without pausing.

Returning his gaze to Sin, Boyd shook him harder. "Sin," he hissed urgently.

Sin's eyelashes fluttered open slightly and Boyd could see a glimmer of green between them. Sin's eyes were glazed, his eyelids heavy. For a moment Boyd didn't even think

the other man recognized him but then Sin's slack face morphed into an expression of distress and his eyes slid closed again although his hands clenched into fists.

"Sin, please," Boyd said quietly but intently. "I'm okay and I'm not angry. I'm sorry to get you like this but it's important we talk and I don't know how much time I have."

Sin didn't reply for a long moment but then he shook his head slightly and rasped in a low, gravelly voice, "Just go."

Boyd shook his head and crouched near the bed, his hands resting near Sin's shoulder. "I'm not going to leave until you listen to me. I'm not angry with you anymore-- not about Ann, not about anything. I just..." He paused and searched what he could see of Sin's expression. "I just want you to get better."

Sin's eyes opened wider and he looked up at Boyd but his expression didn't change. He still looked miserable and depressed; if anything, he looked even unhappier than he had previously.

Sin averted his eyes and stared out the window; his lips parted as if he wanted to speak but nothing came out. He swallowed and wet his lips, seeming to be concentrating very hard on keeping himself composed but Boyd could still see through it. He could see the anguish in Sin's expression, the way his eyes looked red and slightly moist, the way his full lips trembled a little.

"I nearly killed you," Sin said finally, voice even quieter, unsteady. "I know I did. And I remember it. I didn't even block it out. And I wish I was dead."

Boyd watched him, feeling a deep sense of sadness. "Sin, look at me," he said softly.

When Sin didn't, Boyd gently turned Sin's face toward him, leaving his hand against Sin's cheek. Sin shuddered slightly at the touch. "That's why you need help. You're ill, Sin. You can't blame yourself for that, for things you can't control. All you can do is work to make it better; to try to understand how to stop that from happening in the first place."

"But what if I can't?" Sin asked weakly, his mouth trembling slightly when he finally met Boyd's eyes. "What if I kill you when I'm like that? I was afraid to be alone with you when I feel so fucked up and unstable because I feared that I would hurt you and now it's just... I just don't care. I just want you to be safe."

As the words hung in the still room, Boyd finally understood why Sin had stopped spending the night all those months ago; what had seemed like Sin becoming more distant had actually been fear. Boyd let out a low breath and leaned down so he could briefly rest his forehead against Sin's.

How much stress and pain had Sin been living with and how had he kept going, terrified even of himself, of his own reactions? How often had Boyd been right beside him, completely oblivious to the severity of the situation?

Boyd's eyes were a little bright when he moved back enough to see Sin more clearly. "I'm safe. I promise you I'm okay. Just..."

He tried to figure out how best to get this across. He couldn't stop himself from bringing his other hand up to rest in Sin's hair with that familiar silky feeling threading through his fingers. Boyd couldn't help touching Sin when the man was in so much pain and, more importantly, he wanted Sin to feel a connection, to stay in the present.

"Sin... I know about everything-- the diagnoses, the hallucinations, even--" He glanced toward the door again although he hadn't heard anyone in the hallway after the one time. Even so, Boyd briefly dropped his voice so low that only Sin would be able to hear. "Even Emilio."

Sin tensed up visibly and he looked away again, eyes narrowed and jaw clenched.

"We can talk about this all another time; none of that matters now. I'm only telling you because I want you to realize that I'm not saying this all without understanding the situation." Boyd paused but Sin didn't seem to react. "Sin, look at me. Please."

When Sin didn't look back or change his expression, Boyd reached out and gently but more firmly turned Sin's face toward him again.

Sin didn't turn away again but he still didn't meet Boyd's gaze.

Boyd sighed and shook his head, his voice turning somber. "I can't even begin to understand how difficult this all is for you, how horrible and painful. It's... It's your life so you have every right to make whatever decision you feel is best. I wouldn't presume to tell you what to do. But if..."

The idea of Sin giving up after everything, especially if Boyd's past actions or words had led Sin to that conclusion, made Boyd's heart twist painfully in his chest. His voice

almost caught and he had to pause briefly in order to retain an even tone. "If my opinion, if my life is already influencing you, please understand that the last thing I want is for you to die. I know that must sound selfish but thinking that you *want* to be terminated-- I just..."

Boyd shook his head briefly as his fingers strengthened a little against Sin's cheek. "All I can think is I want you to get better. Not for me, not for anyone; just for yourself. You deserve it like anyone else does. I want you to have a chance to feel happy. And I want us to try to be friends again, to figure this all out."

The silence that followed his words was long and charged. For one disappointed moment, Boyd thought that it was too late; that Sin didn't care about what was said; that he was determined to go through with his plans regardless. Heartsick and almost feeling physically pained by the thought, Boyd dropped his gaze and started to back away from the bed. But before he could turn to leave, Sin suddenly surged up, snapping the restraints as though they were nothing.

Boyd barely had time to look at Sin in surprise before he was being crushed against Sin's chest. Almost impossibly strong arms wound around Boyd tightly and Sin's face pressed into Boyd's neck as long fingers dug into Boyd's back desperately.

"Please don't hate me ever again," Sin uttered in a choked voice, his breath warm against Boyd's neck. A soundless sob escaped his lips. "I can't take it. I know it's not good to tell you this but I can't live knowing that you hate me."

Boyd slid his eyes closed and let out a shuddering breath, bringing his arms up to clutch Sin tightly. His fingers bunched up Sin's shirt and he just breathed in Sin's scent, felt the warmth of Sin's body and the pounding of Sin's heart. Boyd hadn't even realized he'd had so much tension and stress in his body until it released. The relief that he felt was nearly overwhelming and he couldn't keep the tears from gathering in his eyes.

"I'm so sorry I said it was all a mistake," Boyd whispered, voice twisting in pained regret. "I was wrong-- I was pissed but that was a horrible thing to say. I don't hate you, I don't regret it all. Maybe it didn't end up the way I thought but that's okay. We're okay like this."

Sin nodded against Boyd's neck but his fingers only tightened, almost painfully so, as he clutched Boyd. Drops of moisture slid beneath the fabric of Boyd's scarf and he realized that Sin was crying; judging by the way he continuously took deep breaths, he was desperately trying to stop.

Neither of them spoke for awhile; they just held onto each other as if silently making up for every hurtful word they'd said, every misunderstanding. As if the longer they stayed that way, the better it would be in the end. Boyd wouldn't have been able to pull himself away even if someone had burst in and demanded he leave.

For too long, the silence between them had been damning, painful, and the distance had seemed larger than the physical space between them.

But now, with those strong arms holding him desperately, surrounded by the warmth and scent of the man Boyd had been closer to than anyone else for years, it was hard not to want to stay like that forever. Part of Boyd wanted to pull Sin down, to kiss him desperately, to drink in every bit of his former lover that he'd missed for the past several months. Part of him wanted to become immersed in Sin again, to hold him close and never let go.

Especially knowing that these could be the last moments he ever had with Sin, the thought felt more urgent, more charged. He wanted to breathe against those lips and taste Sin; he wanted to push all his desperation, fear and passion into something that Sin could feel, something they could share on a basic level. Something that would leave Sin with no doubt that Boyd still cared.

But he couldn't let himself do that.

He couldn't let himself fall back into that mindset; and if Sin lived, he especially couldn't do that to Sin, not with the fact that Boyd's decision hadn't changed. Giving in now would only hurt Sin and himself more in the long run. For all that Boyd still felt an intensity of emotions toward Sin, he had to be strong for both of them, especially when Sin was in such a vulnerable state.

So Boyd held Sin as close as Sin held him. If Boyd never saw Sin again, if it all fell apart around them as it always seemed to, then he wanted this to be the memory he kept of Sin. The thought made Boyd's breath hitch and he clutched Sin even tighter, eyes squeezed shut and face buried against Sin.

Finally, Sin pulled away and looked down at Boyd. Sin's eyes were red and his face was damp but the utter hopelessness was gone from his expression. The sadness was still there but it wasn't as heartbreaking as it had been before.

"You should go," Sin said, voice hoarse. "I don't want you getting into trouble because of me."

Boyd nodded but he didn't move immediately; instead, he studied Sin's face as if trying to burn it into his memory. "You'll tell me when you're cleared, right?" He didn't even want to consider the alternative.

Sin shrugged, dropping his gaze. "You'll find out one way or the other."

Still, Boyd didn't leave; he didn't want to. Part of him had the crazy thought that if he just stayed then he could do something, he could somehow affect the decision. Truthfully, he wouldn't be able to do much of anything. If his mother decided to terminate Sin then it wouldn't matter how much Boyd protested or tried to help his partner-- Sin would be killed on the spot.

Despite that, as Boyd's hands slipped from Sin's arms and he looked back toward the door-- when he imagined himself leaving the building without knowing what would happen and later finding out Sin had been terminated after waiting here alone...

He couldn't do it.

Despite everything, he still loved Sin, even though he knew he wouldn't and couldn't act on those feelings. He couldn't walk away now and leave Sin to sit by himself, isolated from the world as he awaited his fate.

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly as he turned back to Sin. "I'm not going."

Sin looked at him for a moment before shaking his head wearily. "Just go, Boyd. They'll make you go anyway."

"Then I can wait until that happens," Boyd said, his mouth set in a determined frown.

Sin just sighed and hunched forward, pressing his face into his hands. His voice was low, subdued, and heavy with regret and depression but traces of his usual stubbornness shone through as he said firmly, "It's not worth it. They're going to remove you before they say anything to me. And the idea of you seeing them drag me off to the basement... I don't want our last moments together to be like that. I'd rather it be the way it was a moment ago."

Boyd hesitated briefly before he looked away, feeling troubled, and absently watched the wind shift the bare branches of trees in the small courtyard he could see through the window. A few people walked across the snowy area, bundled up against the cold.

With a quiet sigh, Boyd looked back at Sin reluctantly, knowing that he was right.
"Okay."

Boyd paused, meeting Sin's gaze and not doing anything to mask the onslaught of emotions that were surely visible in his eyes. He took a deep breath, a shaky breath. "But if I'm going to leave, then... I want you to know that I'm sorry if I ever hurt you. I would never just write you off, no matter what happened between us. I don't want you to ever doubt that again."

Sin looked up at him and it was one of those rare moments when his expression was completely open and Boyd could see every aspect of his humanity, his vulnerability. He could see the desperation, the way Sin looked up with the barest glimmer of hope, the way he seemed to be trying to wall off his feelings, his expressions, but was still unable to do so. Boyd could see guilt and sadness, regret and shame... All of it was written across Sin's beautiful face so plainly that it was almost difficult to take in.

It was hard to see someone so strong looking so incredibly broken.

But then Sin managed to get control of himself again and slowly his face shuttered and all those things that Boyd could read so well were gone. After a moment Sin just shrugged, saying quietly, "I hope you're being honest."

"I am," Boyd said without a hint of hesitation.

Their eyes locked for another moment and Sin's lips turned up into a slight smile before it faded away again. "Thank you."

Boyd watched him, hesitated, then couldn't help pulling Sin into another embrace, an embrace that wasn't long enough, that could never be long enough because Boyd just didn't want to let go. "Just... get better," he whispered urgently, his voice slightly choked as he finally forced himself to let go.

Boyd moved away before Sin had the chance to respond and made himself leave without another word or looking back.

The door shut quietly behind him and he moved quickly through the building. By the time he got home, he was no less worried than when he'd left. Even though he was glad he'd had the chance to talk to Sin, even though if that was the end of it all at least they had the opportunity have better last memories, the knowledge did nothing to quell his troubled thoughts. He could only hope that his mother would pull through for them; that she'd look at the situation in that same clinical coldness as always and still see some use in Sin that outweighed what she would see as his disadvantages.

Without that, Sin had no chance.

After ten minutes of aimlessly wandering around his home, Boyd finally decided that he had to give himself something to focus on or he'd be a mess. Even though he was exhausted and his body ached, he didn't even consider going to sleep; not until he knew.

With a distracted glance at the clock, he decided to work on the attic for an hour and call if he hadn't heard anything by then. He set his cell phone on the floor near the ladder so it was easy access but so it was far enough away that he wouldn't be tempted to call earlier.

He wasn't particularly productive. Despite his best efforts, he found himself repeatedly checking his watch and more than once he realized he was just standing in the middle of a pile of boxes that he didn't remember pulling out. There were too many thoughts and worries and questions running through his tired mind to be able to fully concentrate on the task.

He'd just checked his watch for the fifth time in six minutes, realizing he still had a good twenty minutes to go before the designated time had passed, when his cell phone rang. He jumped and nearly fell as he climbed over the boxes and swiped the phone off the floor. His anxiety heightened as he turned the phone over and saw Carhart's name flashing on the screen.

Heart pounding, Boyd answered the call, saying immediately and a little breathlessly, "Yes?"

There was a brief silence before Carhart said plainly, "Your mother has given him one last chance. I'm only calling because he asked me to."

Boyd felt such a wave of relief that he sat down, his feet resting on the ladder leading down to the rest of the home, and he leaned forward with one shaky hand pressed over his eyes. He barely stopped himself from saying aloud 'thank God,' conscious of Carhart's disapproval of him lately, and instead asked, "What are the conditions?"

"They're not much different than before but the moment he stops cooperating with his new doctor the way he did with Ann, his termination will be immediate. If his condition does not improve or there is no progress within the next few months, it will have the same result."

Boyd nodded; in truth, that was about the best they could have hoped for. There was no way his mother would have cleared Sin for good and, given the fact Sin had already been in danger of termination before all this, they were just lucky Sin was being given another chance.

"Ann's not his doctor anymore?" he asked, not sure whether he was surprised by the information.

Although he realized that Sin had stopped cooperating with Ann weeks ago, the only reason Boyd had been given for why that had happened had been because of his own reaction. He'd somehow just assumed that after he made it clear to Sin that he wasn't angry about Ann anymore, then Sin would default back to the one psychiatrist who so far had managed to be of any help to him at all. Apparently that was not the case, though.

"He refused to see her anymore and he was assigned a doctor from the European Agency. He's one of the first of our new additions," Carhart replied matter-of-factly.

That explained who Dominik Król was; Boyd had just assumed that was someone who was overseeing Sin temporarily. What surprised him the most was that anyone from the European division would be coming over. "We're getting additions?"

"Yes. He's just the first of many. Before the new Marshal arrives she'll send an investigator who will evaluate the Agency and our people. Sin better get his act together before that happens or he's done. The new Marshal has no reason to give him any second chances," Carhart continued in the same tone.

"When will that happen?"

"In a couple of months. I'm not sure of the exact details." Carhart was silent for a moment before he changed the subject abruptly, "I hope you're aware of the fact that your relationship with Sin is bad for him."

Boyd was caught off-guard by the new topic and Carhart's factual tone. "It was bad for everyone," he said honestly after a moment. He sighed and rubbed at his temples with his free hand. "Look, I don't want anything to get more messed up than it already was. I

just want to be his work partner and aim toward friend with him. If you mean that's also bad for him then I don't know what to say."

"I'm telling you to stay away from him unless you're on a mission," Carhart said flatly. "And if you can't comply, there will be problems."

Boyd briefly fell silent; it was clear from Carhart's tone that it was an order. If Boyd didn't listen, Carhart would be angry and would probably consider it insubordination, whatever that would end up meaning for Boyd. Although Boyd could fully understand why Carhart would be against his two agents having a sexual relationship again, he hadn't been expecting to be told not to be friends.

"You think it would affect his recovery?" Boyd ventured, trying to understand the change in the situation.

"He loves you," Carhart said in the same toneless voice. "And he needs you way more than you need him. You're all he has. You have other people. You attempting to have some friendship after everything that has happened is a worthless waste of time and only an attempt to make yourself feel better about the situation. He will just pine for you and be unhappy regardless. Keep it civil, exchange friendly words but stay away from his apartment and keep him away from your home."

Boyd stared at the wall across the attic with a quiet sense of an emotion he couldn't quite name.

Sin loved him?

Obviously Sin cared about him enough to value Boyd's opinion, sometimes even to the detriment of himself, but in all that had happened, Boyd hadn't been sure what exactly Sin felt. However, now that Boyd thought about he realized it was undeniably true.

Months ago, Boyd would have loved to have known for certain what Sin felt. Hearing that Sin loved him would have made him truly happy, would have made his own feelings intensify in return. But now it just made Boyd not know what to think or how to respond. If anything, it was almost worse knowing.

They couldn't be together. Even if Carhart hadn't ordered it, they couldn't. The strength of the feelings they felt for each other was the kind that blinded them, that made them make decisions that hurt one or both of them.

If Sin loved Boyd, then it was that love which had probably made Sin fear losing Boyd; it was that love that had probably made him choose to keep Boyd in the dark and in the

process hurt himself so much more. It was that love that had probably led Sin to stop seeing his psychiatrist despite the fact he could be terminated and it was that love that made every minute mistake of Boyd's seem that much more resounding, that much more terrible for Sin. It was that love which had probably caused Sin to want to demand punishment or termination when he realized he'd hurt Boyd.

Boyd sighed inaudibly. He wished things were different. He wished he could feel happiness at the knowledge; he wished he could simply act on his own feelings toward Sin, let them intensify again to what they had been and just live out the fantasy they'd experienced in Monterrey.

But they were two self-destructive people who hurt each other and themselves unintentionally; they were the product of what happened when extreme desperation and loneliness met. And until they were both stable enough on their own to be primarily a positive influence on the other and not largely a negative too, then they were worse off together than apart.

But despite the fact that Boyd thought there was some truth and logic to Carhart's order, Boyd couldn't help feeling a spike of frustration. It annoyed him that Carhart thought Boyd was just trying to make himself feel better, because in one way it implied this was Boyd's fault or that Boyd had made the wrong decisions and this was his way of placating himself. Wanting to be Sin's friend had nothing to do with making himself feel better and had everything to do with wanting to give the both of them the chance to move on in a positive way.

At the same time, Boyd had come to this conclusion after months of self-analysis and thought. If Sin hadn't concluded any of this, then it probably would be pretty painful for him to be around Boyd without being able to reach out to him. In that regard, it was probably true that it would be unfair to Sin. Yet Boyd had promised to support Sin and he hadn't lied. As much as he wanted Sin to be able to move on, Boyd wasn't going to abandon Sin when he was at his most vulnerable.

The situation was difficult and the more he thought about it, the stronger he could feel his headache returning.

"With all due respect, Sir, I don't want to be Sin's friend to selfishly fulfill my own interests at his expense," Boyd said carefully. "If it's truly in his best interest, I understand. But if he'll be unhappy regardless and if he doesn't have anyone else, won't denying him even a friend seem worse? Or do you think if I stay away from him for now he'll be forced to move on and he'll find a reason to live for himself?"

"He's not going to," Carhart snapped. "That's the point. He's always going to focus on you and you're not going to give him what he wants so why be around him at all? Your relationship with Sin is inappropriate and whatever friendship you think can exist would be tainted from the start. Just do your job and end it there."

"I understand such a friendship wouldn't work right away-- I wasn't planning to try for that anyway, honestly," Boyd said, trying to keep his tone calm. "And I know the relationship was a mess but if I'm suddenly distant outside work and more formal to him now he'll just take it the wrong way. I know you care about him and I have no intentions of getting in the way of his recovery or putting him in any more danger with the new arrivals, but how is it better to leave him with no one at all without even consulting with him about what he wants? I'm not trying to be contrary, it's just that this involves his life too and I don't see how a friendship sometime in the future is automatically destined for failure."

"I'm not asking you to do something," Carhart replied in the same cold voice. "I'm giving you an order. If you can't remain professional, that's a problem that needs to be addressed. Obviously you feel a need to form relationships with senior agents and I don't know why that is, but in Sin's case it ends now. That's the end of the story."

Boyd fell quiet and his eyes narrowed at the slight toward his relationship with Kassian. It annoyed him mostly because he hadn't been the one to initiate the friendship with Kassian and it wasn't Carhart's business anyway. Even if Carhart probably only knew one small part of it-- that Kassian had been over at Boyd's house at midnight-- the fact that Carhart didn't seem to be even attempting to give Boyd the benefit of the doubt frustrated him.

"Kassian and I were hanging out for New Year's Eve so it shouldn't be such a surprise that we returned late," Boyd said evenly, his tone completely neutral despite everything. "I wasn't aware of a rule stating that agents aren't allowed to spend time with other agents outside of work, but if there is one and I breached protocol because of it then I apologize."

"I didn't realize you thought it was appropriate to have a superior who was actively involved in your training at your house in the middle of the night. Considering the fact that decisions have yet to be made regarding promotion and Kassian's opinions and comments are being weighed into things, I would have thought the two of you would think twice before suddenly becoming such great friends," Carhart replied in the same irritated tone. "I'm as displeased with him as I am with you, so don't think you're being singled out."

Boyd paused; he hadn't thought of that. He understood better now why Carhart had warned against letting Vivienne know about their involvement in any of this.

"I didn't think of that," Boyd said honestly after a beat of silence. "I don't believe any of this would affect Senior Agent Trovosky's opinion, Sir, but I do apologize."

"I don't either but that isn't the point. If other people found out about this you would both look bad and I would look like an asshole for nominating someone who is rumored to be having a love affair with one Level 10 and is now having late night visits with the other. I don't believably think you're out there sleeping your way to the top nor do I believe Kassian would go along with such a thing but other people don't think like me, damn it, Boyd." Carhart seemed genuinely upset about the whole thing.

"I really didn't realize he was involved in the selection process at this point. I thought it was only you, Doug and my mother by now. I can see what you're saying." Boyd dropped his head into his free hand, his headache increasing. He almost couldn't think properly with how hard his head was pounding.

His previous irritation with Carhart was all but gone now that he realized what the issue really was. He knew it was only a matter of time until his mother found out and she'd be furious with him simply because of the implications.

Boyd sighed, rubbing at his eyes. "I'd completely understand if you can't answer this, but do you know how long it will be until the results are finalized?"

"Sooner than expected. Likely within the next week."

Boyd nodded even though Carhart couldn't see it. "I see. I will not visit with Senior Agent Trovosky again until after the results have been announced."

"I'm just advising you to be discreet as far as that goes, Boyd, but I'm *telling* you to keep your distance from Sin and that's the last time I'm going to say it," Carhart said sternly. "Despite how strong he may appear on the outside you should know as well as anyone how fragile he is on the inside so don't confuse the situation anymore than it needs to be."

"Understood, General," Boyd said calmly.

Without saying anything further, Carhart hung up. Boyd flipped his phone closed, resting it against his forehead for a few seconds before, with another sigh, he dialed Kassian's number to give him the news.

Chapter 30

The doorbell rang and Emma opened the door within seconds, grinning brightly when she saw Harriet standing in the hallway with a case of beer.

Boyd glanced over from the living room and could see that their polar opposite appearances had carried over into their off time. While Harriet was dressed similarly to training, in a plain black sweater and blue jeans beneath her coat with her hair pulled into a ponytail, Emma wore a short blue, fitted tunic-dress with charcoal skinny jeans, chunky jewelry, and high heels, her hair tumbling freely past her upper back.

"You came!" Emma said happily, already moving to the side so Harriet could enter. "Did you find my place okay?"

"Yeah," Harriet replied, boots thudding against the wood floors as she thumped the case down on the floor in the main room. "I didn't realize you lived in this neighborhood until I followed the directions, though."

"Where'd you think I lived?" Emma asked curiously as she broke open the case and grabbed a few beers.

"Not this stuck up ass area." Harriet shrugged off her down jacket and threw it on the back of a chair, eyes moving over the others in the living room.

The condo Emma owned was well-proportioned, with its main asset being two walls of full-length windows in the corner of the living room, showing off what had probably once been a beautiful view but now basically looked out on a few renovated buildings and broken skyscrapers beyond. The furniture was arranged to get the most of the windows, while a television sat against the far wall where it would be in view from the open kitchen.

The living room was fully visible from most of the kitchen due to the open counter on the end but the refrigerator and cupboards were installed against the full wall in the corner. Several plants and flowers dotted the area, looking well-tended with surprisingly healthy shades of green given the low amount of natural light, even with such large windows.

Harriet was one of the last trainees to arrive at the party. In the living room, Andrew was leaning forward on the edge of a fluffy chair, talking animatedly with Patrick and Toby, who were sitting on the couch. Boyd half-paid attention to Harriet and Emma's

conversation as he sat in the chair's mate, idly listening to Andrew and the others as he drank a glass of vodka with cranberry juice.

Emma laughed. "Yeah, but try finding a decent one bedroom off-compound with good light anywhere else," she said as she tugged open her fridge and shoved food and other drinks around in order to get the beers inside.

Harriet raised a skeptical eyebrow at that but just moved further into the room. "Is Cade alive yet?"

Boyd glanced over at her and offered, "I saw him a few weeks ago and he was briefly conscious but he didn't look very well." He glanced questioningly toward Patrick and Andrew.

Andrew shrugged and looked slightly troubled. "I dunno, man. I heard it's still touch and go..."

"They're hopeful he's going to live," Patrick's low voice put in. The tall man leaned forward slightly and frowned seriously at them all. "But even if he does, they don't know if he's going to be alright upstairs, you know? If he'll get his brain right again."

"Does anyone know what happened?" Emma asked, looking concerned as she walked around the half-wall in the kitchen and took a seat on the floor near the coffee table. She cracked open a can of the beer that Harriet had brought.

"I don't know the mission specifics but he had multiple gunshot wounds to his torso and a bullet grazed his brain." Patrick grimaced and set his glass of wine down. "The only reason he's alive is because he went down not too far from transport and they went to investigate why he wasn't coming in when his signal was so nearby."

"Jesus," Emma said, looking mildly disturbed.

Boyd thought back to what he'd seen of Cade and it made more sense now why the man had seemed so confused. What happened to Cade was a reminder of how dangerous their jobs were and just how easy it would be to die or have their lives permanently changed on a mission. Of course, Boyd knew that death or maiming was entirely possible on any mission but it was always a little strange knowing the person it happened to.

The concept of dying on a mission didn't particularly bother or shock Boyd, but he didn't like the idea of surviving a mission if it only meant having to deal with permanent ramifications. He'd much prefer to be killed and be done with it rather than have to struggle to survive.

Andrew grimaced and seemed troubled as he looked to the side, absently staring out the large windows at the darkening night beyond.

Harriet gave them all an unimpressed look. "If you're all going to cry over Cade all night, I'm leaving. If you people are still that shocked when someone dies at the Agency, I don't know what to tell you."

Toby just shrugged and stood up, walking over to the case of beer. "Don't expect tears from me."

"I don't think you'd cry for anyone, Toby," Boyd said to lighten the mood.

Toby opened his mouth to retort but Harriet just snorted and walked over, ruffling Toby's hair wildly. "I bet he'd cry about that."

"Hey!" Toby protested, shooting her a glare. "Just because you don't spend any time on your appearance doesn't mean I shouldn't care about mine."

Harriet rolled her eyes and wiped her hand against her jeans, making a face. She likely had hair gel all over it.

Emma snorted lightly and briefly held up her beer as if in tribute. "Hey, if I looked as great as her with that little work, I don't think I'd spend time either. She rolls out of bed and she looks fine. I roll out and it's like return of the Wicked Witch of the West."

Harriet gave Emma a considering look before raising her eyebrows. "It's true. I was shocked the first time I witnessed it."

Toby guffawed loudly at that but Patrick just smiled at Emma. "I don't believe that, even for a second."

Emma glanced over at Patrick with a sense of something akin to shyness in her expression that was there and gone nearly before it could be seen. If Boyd hadn't been watching her, he would have easily missed it.

She recovered quickly with a wide, joking grin. "Well, thank you but unfortunately my flying monkeys would beg to differ."

"What the hell was up with those, anyway?" Andrew threw in from the side, drawing his eyebrows down. "Who thinks up stuff like that?"

"Well, if you believe some scholars, they could have represented the 'Murphy Corps' of the time," Boyd said idly.

When Andrew gave him an odd look, Boyd shifted forward in the chair and explained further. His arms rested across his knees, the glass of vodka held loosely in one hand. "Some people read allegories for the time into Baum's books-- the falling house market, unions, monetary standards... There are several interpretations for the Winged Monkeys but my favorite is that they represented the Pinkertons, who were security guards and spies."

"The Pinkertons?" Emma repeated with a laugh. "How would anyone take them seriously with a name like that?"

"They were named after the man who founded them," Boyd said with a shrug. "He supposedly stopped an assassination plot on Abraham Lincoln on his way to his inauguration so he was apparently pretty good."

"You're such a nerd," Emma said amiably, still chuckling. She grinned widely and kicked her feet out in front of her, leaned back on one arm, and took another drink of beer. "Why do you know shit like this off-hand?"

"I read a lot," Boyd said unconcernedly.

"It's a good trait to have," Emma replied with a shrug, seeming amused but not unkind. She raised her eyebrows and pointed at him with the hand holding her beer can. "And for future reference, if we ever play a trivia game I call dibs on you being on my team."

Boyd's lips drew to the side in a slight smirk, looking at her in mild amusement. "Then, for future reference, I'm not very good with random trivia. You'd likely be better off with Jon."

Harriet glanced up from where she knelt by Emma's stereo system. A mixed CD was playing and she seemed to be examining the list of tracks on the small screen. "Is he even showing up tonight?"

Toby gave Harriet a sly look but didn't say whatever he was thinking aloud, instead asking Emma, "I'd been wondering the same thing. Did you get a chance to get in touch with him?"

"Yeah." Emma took another drink of her beer and shook the can a little, making a face when she realized it was empty. She looked over at Toby. "He said he's planning to come but something came up so he'll be late." She paused. "Obviously."

"Ah." Toby looked at Harriet again, raising his eyebrows. "No worries then."

Harriet just gave him a flat look. "Who's worried?"

"Just saying," he replied innocently and then turned to Patrick but not before he could completely mask the smirk on his face. Harriet just rolled her eyes and said nothing in response.

Emma stood and headed toward the kitchen, crinkling the empty beer can along the way. After a moment Boyd followed her to get another drink.

Emma was just finishing putting a few more beer cans in the refrigerator when Boyd turned the corner and stood nearby to wait for her to move. When she glanced back and saw him, she looked a little distracted then stood back with a cold, new beer can in her hands, waiting for him to pour another drink.

Boyd still didn't like beer but he didn't mind vodka and he'd determined that his house was close enough that he could afford a few drinks without irrevocably endangering his driving abilities.

He filled his glass and shut the refrigerator door as he turned to head toward the living room. He was just debating whether the amount of vodka he poured into the glass was too much when he abruptly felt a hand on his arm accompanied with a quiet hiss of, "Boyd, wait."

Boyd blinked and looked back, confused to see Emma looking at him somewhat hesitantly before glancing past him as if to make sure no one else was around.

Giving her an odd look, Boyd turned toward her fully. "Yes?"

Emma dragged him a little closer to the hallway where they would be even less likely to be overheard from the other room, their words covered by the music in the background. Once again she briefly glanced past him out of paranoia before meeting his eyes with an expression that was strangely self-conscious for her.

"Listen," she said so quietly that even Boyd had to strain to hear her over the background noise, "I know this is stupid juvenile of me, but... Well, you're a guy, right?"

The question was rhetorical but she hesitated to glance past him so Boyd raised his eyebrows and said slowly, "Yes..."

"The thing is, I'm usually pretty good at reading people," she said in that same quiet tone, seeming distracted. "But I get really bad at it when I actually care about the person. It's like the more I think about someone, the stupider I get in front of them. So, I mean... Well." She met Boyd's eyes again and fidgeted with her beer can. "I really like Patrick."

Boyd was mildly caught off guard by the fact that she was confiding in him. Emma had consistently reached out to him and seemed to enjoy his presence, so he knew she considered him to be a friendly acquaintance through work; he just hadn't realized it went beyond that. He had to admit that it felt good to know that he'd come such a long way from being perceived as being too haughty to deal with and that Emma didn't question that she could trust him.

Before he had the chance to reply, she continued speaking.

"I'm pretty sure he likes me but I'm being paranoid and I don't want to fuck it up. So, I guess... You heard what he said earlier, right? The way he said it? I don't want to turn into some stupid, crazy girl reading into things too much... I mean, honestly, the man's just a sweetheart in general so it can mean nothing."

She paused, sighed, and pulled her hair behind her ear with a bemused expression. "I know I sound like a twelve-year-old, but what's your take on it all? Has he ever said anything to you either way? Is he the type of guy who's one way in front of a woman and talks shit when just with the guys? Help me out here."

"We've barely spoken... So, no, he's never said anything, and I don't know." She looked a little disappointed in his answer and Boyd tilted his head, considering her. "How did your mission with him go in Australia?"

Emma smiled despite herself. She idly fiddled with the beer can and looked to the side, her eyes going a little distant as she thought back. "Aside from the mission aspect, it was fun. He's easy to be around and he told me all about his kids. We get along pretty well but he's so damn quiet that it's hard to tell what he's thinking. And he seems like a genuine guy but I've been wrong about that before." Her eyes narrowed slightly, with a slightly darker expression than was normal for her, before she looked at him sidelong. "I guess that's why I'm so hesitant."

"Well, I noticed early on that he used to wait around watching you, as if he wanted to say something but was too shy," Boyd said reasonably, continuing to keep his voice quiet so they wouldn't be overheard. "And it's rare to see him laugh or smile but he seems to in your presence. You're easy to be around as well and you both seem like equally good people. I'd say you have a decent chance."

Her smile widened and she seemed truly pleased. "You think?"

"Yes, I think," Boyd said dryly, raising an eyebrow. "Patrick's most likely too shy to initiate anything. He probably thinks he has no chance with you."

"Then maybe I should make a move on him," she said slyly, her eyes falling partially closed and a tricky little smile playing on her lips.

"Maybe," Boyd replied with a slight smirk.

Emma's smile shifted into a grin and she abruptly tugged Boyd forward into a light hug, nearly causing him to spill his drink. Feeling a female body pressed against him was an odd sensation and he realized he didn't know if he'd ever actually been hugged by a woman before. If his mother had ever hugged him, it had been so long ago that he'd since forgotten.

He held his drink to the side carefully to try to avoid any spills and patted her somewhat awkwardly on the back with his free hand. He wasn't really sure what to do in this situation, since people generally didn't hug him out of nowhere.

"Thanks, Boyd," she said quietly then pulled away, looking at him sincerely. "You're a good person too, you know."

Before he had the chance to respond, the doorbell rang and Emma gave him an apologetic look before walking to the door and opening it.

Jon appeared in the doorway looking far too under-dressed for the cold and entirely too unaffected by that fact. He had a fedora on and a threadbare black blazer with a skull and crossbones emblem stitched into the front pocket. The blazer was open over what appeared to be a long sleeved shirt. The only winter item he wore was a loose scarf woven around his neck western-style.

"Sorry I'm late," he said politely as he stepped into the room.

Harriet looked over at him from her position on the floor and made a face. "Nice outfit. Did you miss the part where it's below freezing?"

"Nah." Jon smiled at her and winked. "I left my heavy coat in the car. Didn't want to mess up my entrance with a huge ski jacket and ear muffs and such, right?"

"Right." Harriet shook her head at him and got to her feet, walking to the kitchen and past Boyd to get a beer.

Jon squeezed Emma's shoulder as she closed the door behind him and he offered her a warm smile before greeting the others. "It is bloody freezing out there, though. Emma, you had better be supplying liquor and not waiting for the Irishman to bring it along."

Emma laughed. "Despite my phenomenal taste in music and decor, I doubt I would've been able to keep them all here even this long without boozing them up." She stepped out of the way and gestured to the refrigerator. "Grab whatever you want. There's vodka, rum, beer, gin... Whatever your heart desires."

"Got any Guinness?" Jon asked hopefully as he walked through the living room, cuffing Patrick on the shoulder as he did so. Boyd headed toward the living room as well with his newly refilled glass.

"What's up, man?" Patrick greeted him. "I heard you were awesome throughout training."

"Meh." Jon stopped walking and stood before Patrick, making a 'so-so' gesture with his hand. "I wasn't too shabby but I wasn't on top of it one hundred percent either. The end of it all was fucking horrific, man. I know it sounds insensitive or something but you should almost feel lucky you missed it."

Patrick shrugged silently at that, not looking very sure of what he felt about the alternative.

Harriet re-entered the living room and tossed Jon a Heineken. "Deal with it, Irish boy."

"You do break my heart, Harriet-love," Jon said, holding the beer against his chest with mock sadness.

"But he's right," Harriet went on as if he hadn't spoken. She looked at Patrick. "The last couple of weeks were the worst."

Andrew looked between them all in mild confusion. "Why? The final testing was that bad?"

"Not the tests, although those sucked too," Emma said, expression more reserved than usual. She sat down on the floor again and cracked open her newest beer can. "R2I. Especially the whole... naked uncertainty part." Her eyes narrowed slightly. "And the physical torture." She glanced toward the others almost self-consciously. "What about you guys?"

Boyd leaned against the wall near the kitchen, watching the others with a calm expression. It was good to know he and Toby weren't the only ones who had been so affected by that. Her comment made Boyd wonder how similar all their R2I experiences had been; although both of what she mentioned had happened to him, he actually hadn't been subjected to many physical techniques aside from waterboarding. They'd seemed to realize early on that he reacted more to psychological.

"Definitely the physical torture," Toby agreed, although he didn't meet Emma's eyes as he said it. He studied the television set despite the fact that the screen was black. "They got very creative about it with me, I suppose because they saw how I reacted to pain."

There was a definite note of self-loathing in his tone as he said the words and although it was apparent to everyone, he maintained his typically haughty expression.

"Don't beat yourself up over it, man," Jon said, leaning against the wall next to Harriet and absently brushing his hand against her shoulder. He made it seem like an accident but the almost automatic smirk that quirked on his lips made it obvious that it wasn't, although she once again ignored the attention.

"Who said I was?" Toby retorted coolly, finally looking up.

"Just sayin'," Jon replied easily. "My pain tolerance is nearly as high as my alcohol tolerance and that didn't stop them from nearly twisting my nuts off."

Harriet looked up at him and made a face. "Nice."

"Ain't it?" Jon asked with a grin, not seeming at all bothered by the memory. "I don't mean to be crude, darling, but that's basically what they did."

"I guess I'm lucky I don't have nuts then," Harriet replied dryly, dragging her eyes away from his penetrating blue stare. "And I guess I'm lucky I don't react very much to physical pain. They moved on from that after awhile with me."

"What got you, then?" Emma asked Harriet.

Harriet shrugged and, judging by her expression, she didn't seem very affected by speaking of the ordeal. "It wasn't one particular thing, it was the situation as a whole. I'm used to being in control of everything that's going on around me so having that completely taken away from me was the worst part. The not knowing is what was difficult for me."

Harriet paused for a moment and seemed to think about that before adding, "For the most part I handled the actual techniques better than I expected but the longer it went on, the more they disoriented me with the darkness and the loud blaring music until I had no idea what day it was or anything or how long I had left-- that's what got to me."

"I liked the music," Jon said with an innocent smile.

Harriet made a face at him. "You would."

"That bothered me too, the lack of control," Boyd said honestly, then added, "But the worst part for me was waterboarding."

Patrick shook his head and looked at them all sympathetically, although there was something in his gaze that also seemed like respect. "No matter who ends up getting promoted and who doesn't-- you all should feel damn proud to have gone through all of that. I know guys who were taken captive and tortured during the war and they've never recovered."

"Yeah but they were there probably long term," Harriet said with a shake of her head. "I always knew at the back of my mind that I was at the Agency and that even though they were being as hard fucking core as a real enemy, they weren't going to actually kill me."

"So we think," Toby mumbled.

She shrugged. "Well, yeah."

"It doesn't always feel that way in the midst of it, though," Andrew said, resting his forearms on his knees as he leaned forward. "Even in the training I was in, sometimes I almost wondered if I'd make it through okay. I'm sure Doug was just trying to scare us shitless with all that ominous talk about death and maiming in training, but I can see how it could happen. So I have to say-- I'm with Pat. And in a way I'm glad I didn't make it to the end even though part of me still sort of feels like I suck..."

"It doesn't matter who made it how far," Boyd said, looking at Andrew seriously. His gaze was steady as he met Andrew's eyes. "First of all, only a few of us were nominated in all of the Agency so that alone means something. And for some people, this kind of promotion doesn't fit them. Not because there's anything wrong with them, but because it's not a good fit for their personality. Honestly, I don't think you would have been happy as a 10. At least not the way it's structured right now."

Andrew didn't look away from Boyd's gaze and he seemed to understand what Boyd meant; Andrew's aversion to killing people in cold blood would have made it incredibly difficult for him to make it as a Level 10 and stay emotionally and psychologically balanced.

Andrew nodded but still looked troubled. "True..."

Emma looked between them all and seemed to decide that this was enough of the somewhat dismal atmosphere. She held up her beer can and said cheerfully, "Alright. Toast! For making it through even one day of Doug's shit and all the stuff that came with training."

After a moment, one by one they all raised their own drinks and toasted.

The music shifted tracks in the background and as time passed, they naturally fell back into smaller groups. Boyd ended up moving toward the edge of the room to sit on the sofa, idly watching as Emma, Patrick and Harriet started dancing.

Surprisingly, Patrick didn't seem awkward about dancing with the two women. Despite his typically reserved tendencies, he looked confident and relaxed at the moment.

Jon sat down on the couch, drawing Boyd's gaze away from the trio momentarily.

"Not much of a dancer, eh?" Jon asked with raised eyebrows.

"Not particularly, no," Boyd said dryly. He tilted his head toward the others. "You must not be either or you wouldn't be letting Patrick move in on Harriet like that."

Jon scoffed and relaxed back against the cushions, his eyes following Harriet with a small grin. "I'm not worried; Pat is all about Emma, my man. I stand more chance losing Harriet to Toby and he's a total puff."

Boyd just shrugged easily and drank from his glass, not about to comment either way on his former roommate's sexual orientation. "You never know," he said noncommittally. He paused briefly, watching Emma grin flirtatiously and move a little closer to Patrick, before he looked over at Jon curiously. "What were you doing that made you late, by the way?"

Jon raised his eyebrows and glanced at Boyd. "Important battle with an unruly young hacker trying to get into my system. Don't worry-- the young one was schooled. Or at least I hope he was young for how horrid he was."

"You're that into computers?" Boyd asked, his attention turning fully to Jon, interested mostly because he knew very little about the man.

"I dunno about 'that into,'" Jon replied in his drawling accent, his eyes going back to moving up and down Harriet's body in a manner that seemed very much like he was undressing her with his eyes. "But I understand them very well, the ins and the outs. That's one of the reasons I'm in Spec Ops. When they need a computer nerd who can also beat the brains out of a terrorist, they call me."

Boyd laughed and shook his head to himself, kicking his legs out in front of him. "You don't seem like a computer nerd, but then, that doesn't mean much. Did that help you with the video's decryption? Doug said you handed it in a week before me."

"Ahhh, I wondered if I was the only one working on that!" Jon stopped molesting Harriet with his eyes to turn to Boyd entirely, appearing more interested in the conversation

now. "I dunno if it helped, truthfully. When you understand computer code... you learn to see things a different way, so maybe."

Boyd nodded then asked curiously, "Did you do additional research? I tried to look into it more than just deciphering the message but there was such limited information..."

"Not a ton. I didn't put a whole lot of time into it," Jon replied carelessly, shrugging. "Well not more than I had to after spending eight years figuring out that shite."

"So it took you that long, too?" Boyd asked in mild amusement, smirking lightly and feeling somehow vindicated. "With how much better you were at everything, I'd started to think you'd solved it right away and were just waiting to hand it in. At least I wasn't the only one who had to struggle with it."

"I dunno about me being better at everything," Jon protested mildly. "I'm efficient in some fields and really good in others. I think we're both on the same level as far as undercover goes. I'm surprised you got it so quick since you've only been on for a couple of years."

Boyd shrugged, briefly distracted when Emma suddenly laughed loudly. He looked over just in time to see her throwing her head back, one hand resting on Patrick's arm while he smiled at her quietly.

"I don't know," Boyd said idly, returning his gaze to Jon. "I suppose in some ways it comes pretty easily to me, maybe because I'm usually quiet so I've had a lot of opportunity to watch other people and how they interact, which makes it easier to mimic later. Not to mention it's not uncommon for people to underestimate me or just look past me." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "I did have an undercover stint that lasted almost a year in Mexico, though; that probably helped in some fashion."

"Mexico?" Jon's voice held a note of interest although it was so mild that it barely seemed to be there. "I'd heard about a debacle in Mexico. Was that you?"

Boyd grimaced; in retrospect, he probably shouldn't have mentioned Monterrey. Now Jon was probably thinking of all the unflattering rumors he'd heard and, making it even worse, most likely they were all true.

"Unfortunately," Boyd admitted, his eyes narrowing slightly in remembrance. "The end was pretty horrific but the rest of it was smooth."

Jon nodded and gave Boyd a discreet smile; it was just a brief lifting of the corners of his mouth but somehow it seemed more genuine that way. It fit his typically reserved personality. "Don't let it bug you, Boyd. We all fuck up in the first couple of years. It's only natural and look how far you've come now, right?"

"True," Boyd said, smiling faintly at Jon in return. "Of course, I don't think the fuck ups are typically that grand in scale, but it's over and done with so there's no point in dwelling on it." He quirked an eyebrow. "Did you have anything detrimental happen to you in your first few years?"

Jon leaned forward and grabbed his beer from the floor, slurping down a gulp as he tilted his head thoughtfully. "Shot a guy, the wrong guy, in my first real mission. Ran into an old girlfriend who moved here from the UK and didn't tell no one till she came hunting me down here; and the real gem of 'em all, on my first undercover op I forgot to ditch my accent."

Boyd laughed again, mostly amused by the girlfriend comment. "That's pretty unfortunate," he said in agreement. "I guess I'm lucky that I wouldn't have to worry about a girlfriend tracking me down or anything like that. What happened with her that she followed you all the way here?"

"Oh, you know how it is." Jon rested the beer against his knee, his fingers holding it loosely. Scar tissue was heavily evident on his hand but Jon didn't try to hide it. "We ran into each other. She came to the city for some job or another, something to do with recovery and poverty or some humanitarian thing. She was all excited to see me, thought I'd been killed back in Ireland, and we ended up having a few rolls in bed. I told her I was working at JP like a fool and she came calling when I didn't call her first."

"Ahh." Boyd raised his eyebrows. "I don't imagine that went over well."

"Not really, no," Jon said with a low chuckle. His blue eyes strayed to Harriet's lithe frame again. She'd stopped dancing and headed to the kitchen, likely to refresh her drink. Jon set the beer back down. "I'm going to have to excuse myself for a moment, Boyd. I see an opening to sweep the lady off her feet. You should go mingle with Toby. He looks lonely now that Andrew's gone off to dance."

Boyd nodded and finished his drink before turning his attention to the rest of the room. Toby did look pretty bored as he leaned back in a chair and eyed his watch. After a moment, Boyd set his empty glass on a nearby table then walked over to sit near Toby, who looked mildly relieved when Boyd started up a conversation.

The rest of the night passed comfortably and enjoyably. Boyd found himself laughing more than once at stories or jokes that others told and he even ended up in an amiable conversation with Harriet at one point. By the end of the night everyone mostly seemed to feel on equal ground regardless of how long they'd been in training or how well they felt they'd done.

The party lasted well into the night and by the time Boyd left, he found himself pleased for no particular reason. He'd always only been close to one or two people at once and since his default behavior was rather antisocial, he wasn't accustomed to having a fun night at a party or socializing with multiple people at once. Although some aspects of training had felt like hell to go through, in the end it had given all of them a sense of connection that otherwise wouldn't have been there.

And that felt more welcoming and encouraging to Boyd than he'd anticipated.

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Boyd shut the door to Doug's office behind him and sat down by the desk.

When Doug began speaking, he didn't even look up. "Your rank has already been upgraded," he informed Boyd in a bland voice. "And so has your pay. Missions will be assigned to you as they come about but other than that, everything will remain the same."

Boyd blinked, completely taken off guard by receiving the news immediately. Although he'd hoped he would be promoted, he'd begun to wonder if it would happen, considering the times he'd screwed up. He'd already come to terms with the possibility that he hadn't made it, so hearing so abruptly that he had was startling. Satisfaction mingled with a faint sense of disbelief.

"So-- I made it?"

Doug raised an eyebrow and was silent for a moment before finally met Boyd's gaze, "There were three realistic contenders as the group shortened," he said calmly. "Jon, Harriet and you were at the top of the list. I never realistically believed any of the others would make it. Patrick is too devoted to his loved ones, Andrew is too noble, Emma lacks the cut throat qualities a Level 10 needs, Toby is best suited where he is-- in Intel and maybe Spec Ops in the future, and Cade... well, let's not talk about Cade."

Boyd watched him; for the most part the assessment made sense to him but something about it nagged at him. He didn't have the time to properly analyze it, though. Instead, he was focused on the fact that there were apparently three contenders for three open spots.

"Were Jon and Harriet promoted too, then?"

Doug narrowed his eyes slightly. "Jon was but despite the fact that you and Harriet performed relatively identically, she wasn't."

"What? Why not?" Boyd almost mentioned aloud how odd that was since there were three openings but he remembered at the last moment that he wasn't supposed to know that information.

"Because neither of you were strong enough candidates," Doug said flatly.

Boyd stared at him. "Then why am I being promoted?"

Doug scoffed and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. "You can't be that stupid."

Boyd narrowed his eyes slightly, his expression otherwise remaining unreadable by default .

There was really only one answer; the only difference between Harriet and himself was that his mother was currently in charge of the Agency. But Boyd couldn't believe that Vivienne would actually use connections as a reason to promote him, not after she spent so much time talking about how she didn't even want to be blood-related to him and how everything he did unfortunately reflected back on her.

He had thought he could trust her for one thing, at least: to be ruthlessly logical; to view him only as a candidate and not as her son. He'd never expected her to go against that; after all, she'd worked so hard to get to the position she was at, to be taken seriously, that if anyone thought she was playing favorites they could lose faith in her decisions. She should have been extra cautious, especially since she was now holding two jobs until the new Marshal appeared.

Doug's expression twisted the same way it had since the Ethan Bruce mission; since the time Kassian had told Boyd he was surprised Boyd hadn't been dropped. And

truthfully, Andrew and Patrick had been kicked out for far less than almost completely messing up their first Level 10 mission.

Before Annadale Beach, Doug hadn't particularly seemed to care about Boyd either way, but ever since then Doug had an obvious, unrelenting, intense distaste for Boyd. Although Boyd had wondered why that was, he'd always just assumed it had to do with the mission and nothing else. He'd never once thought that his mother had actually been involved. But now it all made sense.

Doug had probably determined that Boyd had failed and Vivienne must have said no. If that was the case, the idea of her going out of her way to promote him when the Instructor determined he didn't deserve it only infuriated Boyd.

"What did she say when you tried to kick me out after Annadale?" Boyd's displeased tone made it more of a statement than a question.

Doug shook his head and chuckled but the sound was unpleasant and scathing. "It doesn't matter what she said. It was made clear that my professional opinion of you didn't matter because she had determined you would be promoted from the start. That mission proved you don't fucking belong at the top-- that you ain't ready for it. And it ain't like you excelled everywhere else either, boy. Your performance was mediocre at best; the one place you did well was undercover which means you should just stay in your current position in your current unit just like Toby."

The Instructor made a disgusted sound at the back of his throat as he stared at Boyd as if he were something he'd stepped in. "If I had a choice between you and Harriet, I would have chosen Harriet but she ain't ready either."

"Well, that's not right," Boyd said bluntly, too angry to be able to fully hide it. "I didn't know she'd actually pull that and whether or not you believe me, I don't agree with her decision either. The point of this was to see who deserved the promotion, not see who she felt like sticking 'Level 10' by the name."

Doug stared at him and seemed very unmoved by the words. "Well it don't matter, boy. It's done and it can't be undone. All I can do now is hope something tragic happens to you on an assignment so that your mother can see how fucking stupid her decision was. Now get out of my office."

Boyd didn't wait for another word before he stood and left. He immediately headed toward the Tower, his expression turning colder as his anger grew with each stride. He

felt incredibly agitated; furious with his mother for doing this. All the hope and expectations he'd put into this, all the hard work and all the shit he knew he'd get for this-- it was all for nothing.

It was bullshit-- the very antithesis of what he'd been working for. What had been the point of all that if he wasn't being seen as himself? Knowing that he was going to be promoted for all the wrong reasons, knowing that he didn't deserve it and that Doug knew this, that Carhart probably knew it too, that anyone who found out would only blame Boyd or look down on him further because of it-- The knowledge infuriated him.

He felt simultaneously caught in a trap and angry that he hadn't seen this coming, that he'd let himself trust his mother even as much as he had and that she'd thrown it all in his face. That she was still using him despite everything and that she probably didn't care.

He didn't want the added responsibility of Level 10 if it wasn't right for him. He didn't want to be promoted if it was all just a lie. Otherwise what had been the point of it all-- the stress, the exhaustion, the fear, and how in the background everything had gotten so fucked up with Sin?

His agitation only intensified on the long elevator ride to the top of the building, to the point that his expression had become ice cold and his mood made no one even consider talking to him. He made his way past the checkpoints on the seventeenth floor by flashing his badge and saying he needed to speak to his mother. The guards allowed him to pass-- maybe determining that, as her son, his presence was acceptable, or maybe they were anticipating that he would come.

Regardless of the case, Boyd walked right up to Aisha's desk in the foyer of his mother's office. "I need to see my mother," he said firmly.

She looked at him, thoroughly startled, and started to say, "That's not allo--"

Before she knew what he was doing, Boyd leaned over the desk and slammed his hand on the button he knew would buzz him into his mother's office.

"You can't--!" Aisha protested in surprise but Boyd ignored her, striding across the room and yanking the office door open before the little green light flipped off again. He shut the door firmly behind him and immediately stalked up to Vivienne's desk, ignoring Aisha's harried voice over the intercom as she apologized and belatedly warned Vivienne of Boyd's presence.

"Take it back." Boyd's eyes were narrowed and his voice was a firm command.

Vivienne didn't even look up from what she was doing; she had ignored Aisha's comment as thoroughly as she ignored the abrupt entrance. "You do not have an appointment."

"I don't need one," Boyd said without a hint of hesitation.

"I do not have time for this," she said disinterestedly. Her expression remained unaffected and unchanging; for all that she reacted, she may as well have been alone in the room. Her ice blue eyes tracked the paper in front of her, quickly skimming information on a page as she made occasional notes on a separate sheet. "Leave my office and return when you've gone through the proper channels."

"I'm not going to leave," Boyd said firmly, eyes narrowed and arms crossed as he stared coldly down at her.

The fact that she wouldn't even look at him after what she'd done was only serving to anger him further. He hadn't felt such a strong emotion in a long time; he didn't know the last time he'd been so angry that his body shook just slightly, that he felt as though he wasn't fully in control. All he could think as he stared at her face was that all that time he'd been in training, all the shit he'd gone through and all the things he'd compromised - the whole time he'd been trying so hard to be simply himself, she'd been watching from the background ready to yank away even that amount of control he had over his life.

The same intensity of anger and betrayal he'd once felt upon finding out Sin had been sleeping with someone else, upon unquestioned trust in something suddenly being compromised, now shifted toward his mother. It made his eyes darken and jaw set; it built the tension in his shoulders until his back was stiff and his fingers curled tightly.

"If you want me to play by the rules then you need to too," Boyd continued flatly. "Treat me exactly like another agent you have no connection with or don't be surprised when I walk in expecting a moment to speak with my mother."

Vivienne continued to write for a moment before finally looking up. She considered him coolly at length but then laid her pen down and folded her hands in front of her. Her expression was an unreadable mask, her eyes scrutinizing him even as she gave nothing away. "Do not mistake this as acceptance of your ridiculous assertion; I simply

know how childish you can be and feel no need to deal with your antics. I will give you one minute. What are you feeling victimized about now?"

"The promotion," Boyd said, eyes narrowing further at her.

He assumed her comment about childishness was a reference to how he had once yelled outside Connors' office that he wanted to be let in, but it still sent a spike of annoyance through him. Although it was true that it had been an immature move, he thought these circumstances rightfully warranted his irritation toward her and because of that, they were not comparable.

"It's bullshit and it hasn't been declared across compound yet," he continued pointedly. "It can still be taken back."

"I will do no such thing," Vivienne said without even the slightest hint of hesitation.

"Why not?" Boyd demanded, the frustration and irritation growing inside him despite the fact his expression became colder by the second. "Explain to me the fucking logic."

Vivienne's expression did not so much as flicker. "The purpose of the training was to appoint passing candidates into positions that needed to be filled. If you do not understand something that simplistic then I have no need to explain it further. Our conversation is finished."

"Bullshit," Boyd said immediately, glaring at her coldly. "Why don't you try again, explaining in the way you'll tell your superiors why your son, whose score was no higher than Agent Stevens and who royally fucked up in Annadale Beach, is getting promoted despite the Instructor determining that he doesn't deserve it."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, perhaps due to the fact that his words had come out like an order. "Despite your extreme lapse of professionalism and attention on that mission, you single-handedly stopped the target."

"I single-handedly almost got us both killed," Boyd corrected, scrutinizing her. "If Cade hadn't appeared--"

"I am quite aware of the details and I am uninterested in your opinion," Vivienne cut him off coolly. Her posture was perfectly straight, her hands completely still on the desk, and her eyes were slightly narrowed as she watched him in disinterest. "This is not a

negotiation, Agent Beaulieu. You accepted the possibility of promotion the moment you accepted the nomination."

"What I accepted was being treated like anyone else," Boyd protested in a low voice lost between derision and incredulity. "Do you even care what this looks like? What the hell worse time is there for you to pull the mommy strings than when you're God of the Agency?"

"I don't see--"

"You do; that's the problem," Boyd cut her off firmly and dropped his hands on the desk, leaning forward to stare at her with intense brown eyes. The strength of his expression drilled into her, his eyebrows drawn down just enough to shadow his near-glare. "You see everything, think everything through; you just consider people to be numbers in columns and words on paper. You decide what's ideal for you and forget the inconvenience, pain, devastation of everyone else. You've been that way for as long as I can remember and I'm not going to stand here arguing against that because there's no point."

Boyd's expression grew a little darker. "But this," and it was clear he meant the promotion, "*this* is hurting us both. So I really think I have the right to fucking know why you're using me like this. Is it because you think you can control me? Do you think you have me figured out, especially after R2I? Or are you simply under the impression that you can trust me because I'm your child and somewhere along the line I got that same ridiculous notion as you: job first, everything else second." He said the last part as a flat statement.

Vivienne watched him closely and without emotion for a long moment before she dismissed him by looking down at her papers again. "Your minute is up."

"Listen to me," Boyd commanded, and when she picked up her pen to start writing, Boyd's anger overcame him. Without thinking, he reached out, yanking the pen from her hand and throwing it across the room. She looked up with a narrowed stare and started to reach for her intercom but Boyd slammed his hand down on that, too, and leaned forward over the desk with his glare becoming ice cold and furious. "Fucking *listen* to me!" he practically yelled.

"What do you think you're doing," Vivienne demanded. Her cool, collected expression was finally starting to shift a little, eyes narrowing in something akin to irritation rather than the typical disappointment, and even her lips tightened slightly.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Boyd retorted angrily. He glared at her fully now, eyebrows drawn down and shoulders tense. "I'm trying to be logical about this and it's getting us nowhere. If you don't want to answer why you're doing this, fine. But I honestly want to know what you'll be telling your superiors, what shit I should be telling other people. Because this is bullshit-- you know it, I know it, probably all the trainees will know it."

Vivienne scrutinized him but didn't immediately answer so Boyd continued in frustration.

"It's already difficult enough being your son; everyone automatically assumes I'm using your connections. And in some ways it's happened that way, without me meaning to. I'm sure Connors wanted to punish me after I got Sin out, I'm sure he wanted to take Sin back. I'm sure I would've been terminated after Monterrey if it had been up to Connors. As far as that goes, maybe I would've been after Annadale, too."

She raised her eyebrows slightly and her eyes were no longer narrowed, but her posture was stiff. "You certainly seem convinced that I care about your life."

"If you didn't care if I died, you would've let me bleed to death after Lou," Boyd said dismissively, uninterested in debate. "I'm under no delusion that you love me or particularly care about me as a person and I'm sure a large part of the reason back then was to avoid any embarrassment. But I think it's more than that, even if it's just that I'm the only living connection you have anymore to Dad."

Vivienne looked unimpressed. "Your theories are meaningless. If you do not leave immediately, I can assure you there will be worse consequences than there already are."

Boyd ignored her warning, fingers tightening on the intercom and shoulders growing even more tense. "The point is, I'm not going to sit here denying that you've probably helped me for whatever skewed reason you have in your head, but it's different when it's internal workings. Level 10 is too high profile. No one will ever believe I deserved it, not this young and with so few years of experience. It's going to make people look down on you, too; all that hard work to be taken seriously will disappear." His eyes narrowed into slits and his jaw set, giving him at once a stubborn and determined demeanor. "So tell me what the hell is going on."

Vivienne reached for the intercom buzzer again but Boyd grabbed her wrist. This time when she looked up, there was no mercy in her intense glare; nothing but cold, unrelenting displeasure.

"You will release me immediately."

Despite the fact that Boyd was stronger than her and her voice was quiet, and that Boyd was standing while she was sitting, at that moment she was far more intimidating than Boyd could ever hope to be. It was in her voice, her body language; that frozen quality of her expression and narrowed, ice blue eyes.

Her gaze drilled into him as though she could see right through him, as if she were privy to every thought running through his mind and she knew exactly how to exploit it; like she knew exactly why each thought was imbecilic and laughably incorrect. Like she knew how to turn that all against him if he didn't do exactly as she said.

She could have commanded an army to stop and at that moment, Boyd almost thought that they would have listened.

He hesitated, fingers loosening despite himself, but he didn't fully let go. "Just tell me," he said, less demanding although still determined. Some of the tension left his shoulders but he still didn't move. "The longer you avoid it, the more I think I'm right."

"You are misinterpreting disinterest in catering to the whims of a self-important child as avoidance," Vivienne said coldly. Her fingers curled slightly in the hand he still held captive and her back stiffened even further, her head held high, giving her the air of looking down on him even though she was seated while he stood. She pulled her wrist out of his grasp but didn't move toward the intercom. "I have nothing to avoid with you. You are unimportant to me as a whole; the few times I find myself interested in your life quickly fade when I recall how difficult you make life for those around you. I am utterly uninterested in your opinion regarding the promotion."

She raised her eyebrows imperiously. "But if you must know, because the world revolves around you and you have the right to interrupt others' lives for answers you feel you are entitled to, then I will explain something. Despite your faults, you are a good agent. When you are not letting whatever childish emotion you happen to feel at the time interfere with the mission, you are dependable. There are certain skills that make you of use even more to the Agency and in this case, your repertoire as a whole warrants a promotion."

He stared at her for a long moment before releasing the intercom and straightening his back. His expression became blank, honey brown eyes a little duller. "Valentine," he said tonelessly.

She stared at him evenly then pressed the buzzer. "Aisha. Call the guards. I require two at my location and another to ready cell 415."

Boyd's expression didn't so much as twitch at her words; he recognized the cell number as one of them in the isolation wing of Fourth. Even knowing he would be sent there, it did nothing to deter him from needing to finish this conversation.

Aisha's voice came over the intercom in acknowledgment before Vivienne released the button and folded her hands in front of her again, watching Boyd without any sense of emotion or sympathy. "I have told you before that your actions have consequences."

"You were so angry about it, though," Boyd said, eyes narrowing as he tried to understand. "Now that you're in power, why wouldn't you just make it go away? Why would you utilize it even more?"

Vivienne quirked an eyebrow, and the look in her eyes made it clear she felt that to be an imbecilic question. "You wish to be treated no differently yet you expect me to pass up a viable skill for negotiation?"

"Negotiation?" Boyd echoed incredulously. "You just want me to go fuck random people so they'll give up their friends. That's not negotiation."

"You seemed to believe it was in France," Vivienne said evenly and Boyd was struck silent, looking away with a dark expression.

He couldn't believe that one of the reasons he was being promoted was because he'd slept with Thierry; because the Agency was interested in using him for that again in the future. He knew it was more than that, though; even being a valentine operative wasn't enough to promote him considering his apparent mediocrity in nearly everything else. If anything, he could have just received valentine missions as a Level 9.

This was still a promotion that Vivienne was pushing because she had an ulterior motive; probably because she felt certain she could trust him to be loyal to the Agency or her despite everything else. Or maybe there was something else Boyd didn't know about going on in the background.

Whatever the case, none of it made Boyd feel any better.

"I don't always make the best decisions," Boyd said quietly, then returned his intense gaze to her as his voice strengthened stubbornly. "That's the point. Doug doesn't believe I'm ready for promotion and it's his job to know. It doesn't make me happy to be told I'm not good enough but I'll accept it if that's the truth, if that's the extent of my

abilities so far. Promoting me just because you can, because it fits whatever scenario you have where you can use me further-- isn't that just dangerous? What if something happens, what if I'm in a situation where I can't handle it? What if I die? You'd not only be losing a 10 but the 9 that I was, too."

Her expression did not so much as twitch as she said calmly, "That is a risk I am willing to take."

Boyd stared at her at length, feeling unsurprised and disappointed and still somehow hurt, then shook his head. He started to look away from her when his attention was caught by a small, beat-up book amidst larger, newer-looking books on the shelf behind her.

The small book had handwriting along the spine and although Boyd had seen it in her office before, he only now recognized it as being similar to his father's journals he'd found in the attic. It made him think of the journals he'd been reading; of his father's optimistic and adventurous spirit; of the man who felt so much love for his wife and child that he'd seemed incapable of going an entry without mentioning them. Boyd was learning a lot about his parents through the journals, about Cedrick's beliefs and the topics he'd written articles on, as well as the aspirations he'd had.

For Cedrick, his idealism had sometimes not quite been tempered by his realism. He'd seemed optimistic that life could get better, that everything would improve, despite the fallibility of the human race and the problems in the government. Yet he'd also been determined to find the truth and he'd written more than once that it was important that all sides were honest, be it in war or daily life; even if the words were difficult to say or hear. And especially if it was admitting a grievous mistake.

Cedrick talked a lot about his family; first it was how much he wanted one and the acknowledgment that Vivienne seemed less enthused, and how he was hoping she would change her mind. Then it was how happy and humbled he was by the birth of his child. Even the times when Cedrick had mentioned a disagreement with Vivienne or exasperation with something Boyd had done, there was always an undercurrent of pride.

As if Cedrick had been saying, *"This is my family. We aren't perfect by definition but we are for me. I love them, I never want anyone else."*

"Was it worth it?" Boyd asked quietly.

"The guards are here, Marshal," Aisha's voice suddenly said over the intercom. "Would you like them to enter now?"

But Vivienne didn't immediately press the button; instead, her eyes were narrowed slightly as she studied Boyd's face. Despite the fact that normally she would have ignored the question, for some reason she didn't.

"Was what worth it?" she asked evenly.

"The decisions you made in your life," Boyd clarified, watching her closely. "Leaving France to be with my dad, having a child you didn't want just to get closer to him, just because he wanted it. Throwing yourself into a job I'm not even convinced you initially loved; letting Dad's death make you even colder than before. Working for an organization he would have hated; using and hurting anyone you want around you because you were hurt yourself. All that to get to this point, to be sitting there at that desk with the ability to make decisions like telling your son to go exchange sex for information that will probably be used to get people killed, all because one time he made a stupid mistake. Telling your son to maybe get killed or maimed on a mission because something about his promotion is convenient for you."

His honey brown eyes were narrowed and intense on her, scrutinizing every minute shift of her face and body language. "Was it worth it?"

Her expression remained resolute, unreadable, and although there was the briefest flicker in her ice cold eyes, it was gone too quickly for him to know what it was. It could have been irritation that he was still talking or it could have been something else, something deeper; something that maybe meant she was actually thinking about what he said or she felt it wasn't worth it after all. Despite that, her posture didn't change; her back was still stiff, her fingers not even twitching as they rested on the desk in front of her.

He would probably never know what she truly thought.

She didn't break eye contact with Boyd as she pressed the button. "Send them in."

Mother and son continued to stare at each other, neither expression giving anything away even as the guards came on either side of Boyd, even as they grabbed his arms. The intense stare was only broken when the guards turned Boyd around.

"I hope it is for you," Boyd said evenly over his shoulder as they started to lead him out of the office. He didn't look behind him; he didn't want to see her face. "I don't think he would've been proud."

The only answer was the door shutting firmly behind them.

Boyd let the guards lead him to Fourth Floor; he didn't speak or resist-- he simply stared forward with a resolute expression.

He wasn't too surprised by the fact that he was being put into isolation-- he knew of agents who had been put into temporary isolation for various infractions that warranted discipline but not an extreme visit with Shane. Although Boyd had never been put in isolation before, with how angry he was about the promotion he wouldn't have been able to rein in his temper even if the consequences had resulted in torture.

Even when they shoved him into a tiny cell with no windows and a single door that shut resoundingly behind him, he didn't say anything. There was a hole in the corner of the room for him to go to the bathroom and that was it; no cot, no sink, no chair, no window on the door to the hallway-- nothing. The light seemed to come from everywhere at once yet no fixture was readily visible.

He stood in the middle of the room for a long moment, eyes narrowed and frigid as he glared at a point on the opposite wall, tension building steadily in his frame until his shoulders nearly ached from it, before he finally walked across the room. It wasn't until his jaw started to ache that he even realized that he was gritting his teeth. Tension flooded his body and the agitation, the anger-- it all grew within him steadily, with nothing to distract it in that tiny, silent room.

He felt an overwhelming, frustrating sense of impotence at the irony of his situation. So many choices in his life had become utterly unattainable since he'd joined the Agency; whether he lived or died, whether he did things he didn't want to, even who he could love or befriend. Yet of the few choices he'd made, it seemed like the only ones permanently taken into account were so resoundingly negative that they set him back further in his life.

He slammed his fist abruptly against the wall, hissing angrily, "Shit!"

He grit his teeth so hard it nearly hurt and dropped his forehead against the wall, his forearm resting rough cement even as he partially hunched forward. His hand twinged in pain but he didn't care; at that moment, he would have tried to break the wall apart with his bare hands if it would have made him feel better, even if it would have broken every bone in his limbs.

He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to control the quaking in his limbs, the frustration that made him want to scream. Tension made his body taut and uncomfortable, made his shoulders ache with the pressure of trying to stop himself from doing anything other

than what he was doing-- standing still when he felt like everything inside him wanted to rip out.

He suddenly hit the wall again, less hard this time, and made a low, angry noise that twisted out of his throat but didn't become words.

He concentrated on trying to control his breathing, on reining the frustration in, and slowly he was able to come back to himself enough that he could unlock the frozen muscles in his back and push himself away. He turned and slid down until he was sitting against the wall, his legs and arms draped over his knees. His eyes were narrowed in an ice cold glare before he abruptly slammed his head back against the wall.

The wound on the back of his head screamed at the movement and the pain of that combined with his hand was welcome as a way to distract him from the anger coursing through his veins.

He couldn't believe his life had become this.

As he sat there in the completely silent, tiny room, he felt so overwhelmed that he realized his breath was starting to quicken, his heart and throat felt twisted and heavy.

Part of him wanted to explode with anger-- he wanted to punch and kick the walls more, to throw his body against the door and try to rip it off its hinges, to scream until his throat was raw and voice was lost. As if that would make this better; as if it would change anything. As if it would do anything but give the guards something to laugh about.

Another part almost wanted to cry from sheer frustration-- to let the feeling of being completely overwhelmed and without any sense of control in his life eclipse everything else, to just give in to the feeling of pained sorrow he tried so hard to deny but couldn't every time he remembered his mother saying so seriously, "That is a risk I am willing to take."

He didn't want this.

He didn't want to be stuck as Level 10, a mockery of all his hard work shoved in his face, to be forced into missions or situations he didn't feel comfortable with-- not if it wasn't all for a purpose, not if it wasn't all at least proving he was strong enough on his own.

He felt disgusted and used; he felt like a sham. Comparing himself to Jon, Kassian and Sin, there was no question that Boyd wasn't their equal and this was just going to make that even clearer. Sin had tried to warn him against going for Level 10 and now Boyd

wished he'd just listened; he wished he'd never trusted his mother to treat him like any other trainee.

He sat there for a long time, going over the argument with his mother, coming to grips with the new turn his life had taken; trying to deal with the anger and resentment that seeped into every facet of him at the idea of everything he'd been working so hard to get away from becoming precisely the reason he was being promoted.

Knowing now what he did-- that valentine operatives existed and, in the process of becoming one, he'd in effect given his mother that extra bit of leverage needed to force him exactly into the position he'd been trying so hard to escape--

Now there was no longer any question in Boyd's mind: It didn't matter anymore whether Thierry would have given him the information or not; with these consequences, fucking Thierry in France had been a mistake. He couldn't really blame anyone for the situation he was in now since it was all his own fault, yet he couldn't help feeling frustrated and angry despite that.

That night of sex for information had changed everything for Boyd, had gathered momentum and rolled into his future and fucked everything up for him so completely that now, sitting there with his eyes narrowed in anger and shoulders tense against the rough cement wall behind him in isolation, it made him wonder how the hell he'd ever been so naive.

How could he have believed that he had been doing the right thing, that no one would take note of it and use it against him? How could he have trusted the Agency or his mother not to twist his mistakes around until they became snares that caught him in their web? How could he have thought it wouldn't fuck everything up between he and Sin?

At the thought of his partner, Boyd's eyes slid shut and he pressed his head back against the wall a little harder, the ache in his head a reminder of what had happened on New Year's Eve.

Sin's expression was burned into his memory from the psych room; that vulnerable hopefulness buried amidst regret, pain, and the guardedness that had made it all disappear. Carhart's words moved through his mind, *'he loves you,'* and a dull pain twisted Boyd's stomach.

Something didn't sit right with him and he didn't understand why for the longest time until Doug's words caught in his head; the reasons they each hadn't been promoted.

Doug had said Patrick was too devoted to his loved ones and suddenly Boyd realized why that had bothered him.

He wanted to believe he was devoted to his loved ones, too. He wanted to believe he'd do anything for the person he loved-- but he realized with a sinking feeling that he wouldn't. When he put himself in Patrick's place in Australia, when he tried to imagine what he would've done had he found out that Sin was ill back in the States-- would he have left?

He probably would have only if he'd thought his presence would have made a significant difference-- if it was a life or death situation and if he wasn't there, then Sin would die or be seriously hurt. Otherwise, he would have thought that it was better to continue with training, to not lose sight of his own goals.

He wouldn't have thought twice about that decision, either.

It wouldn't have mattered if Sin would have just appreciated or wanted Boyd by his side-- Boyd still would have looked at the situation with ice cold logic and determined that Sin's feelings of gratefulness for his presence in a non-life-threatening situation wouldn't have outweighed what Boyd would have gained by staying in training; wouldn't have been more important than Boyd advancing in his skills.

Yet when he remembered Sin's expression-- when he imagined how it must have felt for Sin to feel himself falling apart at the seams, to literally be going crazy, and to still think of Boyd in the midst of that-- Boyd almost felt ashamed in comparison.

He'd been telling Sin for a year that he loved him; he'd used it as a reason he'd felt so angry and resentful about Jessica, about Ann. And there was no doubt in Boyd's mind that he did feel love for Sin.

He couldn't not feel it; he couldn't not be affected by Sin's presence, or not think of him when he wasn't around, or not want him to be happy. He couldn't not want to touch him, to run his fingers through that silky hair. He couldn't not appreciate those quiet smiles, that startled laugh. He couldn't not feel emotions when he thought of Sin, and he couldn't not want to be with him.

Yet Boyd's love wasn't unconditional.

He would sacrifice himself for Sin-- he had literally been willing to die when Chingón had held a gun to his head back in Monterrey-- yet it was clear that the feeling wasn't universal for Boyd. He would still choose his training over Sin if he deemed Sin's issues to be insignificant enough or his training to be important enough.

What the hell was that saying about Boyd, when he knew he didn't even care about the Agency's goals? Was his pride so strong that the idea of failing in training or a personal goal outweighed the support he could give to someone he loved?

And even when Boyd did think of Sin first, it tended to be self-destructive and based on what he perceived Sin to want. After Monterrey, there had been no question in Boyd's mind that he'd deserved to suffer for the rest of his life for what he'd done to his partner; he'd been willing to sacrifice any sense of future freedom and happiness in atonement for his mistakes with Sin. He would have stayed in that house forever, killing himself slowly with regret in the name of the person he loved.

But Sin hadn't asked for that, hadn't even wanted that, and it had been guilt that had formed the solution in Boyd's mind.

Boyd knew he would die for Sin when it came down to it; he would still protect his partner with his life. Would he put himself through hell for fear of losing Sin? Yes, in many ways he would and he had. Yet would he give everything up for Sin-- even if it was inconvenient for him, even if it interfered with his goals, even if it interrupted work?

He wanted to believe he would but now he wasn't certain. Now, he realized the answer was probably 'not yet.'

It wasn't anything malicious or purposeful on Boyd's part; it was just that something seemed ingrained in him, something that led him automatically down paths that put his wants above others' needs. He wanted to be different that this, he wanted to have no doubts he could be there for someone like Sin as much as Sin needed it, yet if Boyd was being bluntly honest with himself, it was clear he still had a ways to go. It was obvious that in some ways he still needed to grow a lot stronger as an individual.

If Boyd compared his own outlook to Sin's, there was no doubt that Sin was more devoted. If Sin had been in Patrick's place-- if he'd been on assignment and had heard that Boyd was ill, would Sin have returned?

Boyd thought it was likely he would have. Sin would've probably said fuck it to whatever mission he was on and he would have returned to Boyd.

Because he loved Boyd.

He loved him enough to want to die for hurting him, loved him enough to kill himself slowly for fear of losing him, loved him enough to suffer silently if he thought it was in Boyd's interest. Sin loved Boyd enough to make difficult decisions easily, as if there

were no contest; he went toward Boyd as if he hadn't even considered any other choices.

Yet, as much as Boyd hadn't been lying when he'd said he loved Sin, he looked at Sin as more of part of an equation. A very large, important part; but a part nonetheless.

The realization, combined with the sham of the promotion and the fact it had somehow caught him so off guard, made him feel discouraged enough in general to find it difficult to deny or disbelieve anything bad that he thought about himself.

Boyd's mind moved at times sluggishly and at times too quickly for his thoughts to properly form. He didn't know how long he was stuck in the cell although it felt like several days to him. It was consistently light in the room and he had no way of gauging time; they'd taken his watch and personal effects from him so he was in there without anything to distract himself.

It gave him too much time to think, too much time to obsess over what had been said. The time only heightened his feeling of impotence and although the frustration faded somewhat, the disgust over his current situation did not.

He felt tired and didn't sleep well, and the food they gave him did little to make him feel stronger. The constant light was almost worse and more disorienting than the darkness and loud music from R2I; here, he had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and even that hated interaction with the man who had interrogated him wasn't there as a distraction. He was utterly, completely alone, in a completely silent cell; even the food they slid through a small flap didn't give him a chance to see anyone, talk to anyone-- to just be in the presence of another human being.

The room seemed to grow steadily smaller by the day until the point that even without being claustrophobic he began to feel like the walls were moving in on him. He tried to distract himself with moving around, with exercising or counting steps around the room, but each time the second dragged out and it all inexorably came back to the knowledge that he was completely isolated in a tiny cell.

And maybe they would never let him out again.

By the time the guard finally opened the door to let him out, it felt like he'd been in there forever. The relief he felt when he finally looked into that open hallway was startling and off-putting. He wouldn't have realized how stressful and agitating isolation could be, but for someone like him, being forced to live in his mind for an extended period of time was not a good thing. He'd expected to be unaffected by it compared to the interrogation in

R21 or the torture with Shane, but he found that isolation bothered more than he cared to admit.

Despite that and the disconnected, off-balanced way he felt, Boyd's expression shuttered completely the second he was in view of another human being. His body language was blank, his eyes emotionless; he wouldn't give the guards or anyone the satisfaction of knowing that isolation had disturbed him at all.

Much of the control in his life may have been taken away but the Agency had yet to rid him of his stubbornness.

The guard stood in the hallway, giving Boyd an expectant look, who stood wearily and silently walked out to the hallway. The guard grabbed Boyd's arm and shut the door behind him, then looked down the hallway toward two other guards standing outside another cell's door.

The guards were laughing and at first Boyd was too uninterested in his surroundings to even understand why the guards were amused until he realized there was someone in that cell who was talking to them through a small window that had been opened. Not all the cells were the same in this hallway and apparently that prisoner wasn't in complete isolation. Boyd could only hear the barest hint of a man's voice, which sounded faintly familiar to him but he didn't care enough to figure out how. Considering the floor he was on, it was probably a rebel he'd run into in the past who was now in Agency custody.

One of the two guards glanced toward Boyd distractedly before, with a wide grin and a shake of his head, he strode over and joined them. Boyd didn't react and kept his gaze steadily focused in front of him.

"That guy's fucking crazy," the guard said, seeming truly amused.

The first guard glanced longingly back down the hallway. "You always get the good ones," he lamented before giving Boyd a look as if he was resentful that his prisoner hadn't been more entertaining.

As they turned the corner, a man's booming laugh echoed faintly in the hallway behind them.

Chapter 31

Boyd read the apartment numbers as he passed, finally stopping at 217 where he knocked on the door. The building was larger than he'd expected it to be but Boyd supposed that it wasn't too strange; a lot of the high-rise condos that had survived the bombings had wound up becoming largely vacant due to the economic collapse. That and the fact that this particular building was only a few blocks from the compound was likely the reason a large percentage of the agents who'd been left homeless after the raid had been housed here.

Ryan had been one of those agents and after learning that he'd been released from the medical building, Boyd had wasted no time getting in contact with the other man.

The door opened and Ryan smiled at him then stepped aside in silent invitation for Boyd to come in. It was a noted difference from the previous exuberance Ryan had shown in the past whenever Boyd had visited.

"I'm glad you came," Ryan told him, shutting the door. He was wearing battered jeans and a sweatshirt with the sleeves rolled up. His clothes were paint-splattered and Boyd saw that he was in the process of painting the walls a metallic grey color with black borders.

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly in surprise as he looked around. "Are you planning to stay here even after you can move back on compound?"

Ryan wiped his hands against his jeans and shrugged, leaning against a rounded counter that led to the kitchen area. The counter separated the tiled kitchen from the living room space. "Yeah. I mean the compound was always my home, I used the excuse that it was my safe place and guess what? Not so safe anymore!"

Boyd inclined his head; it was a fair point. "Well, I approve of the colors." He spoke with faint wryness; when had he ever not liked black?

Ryan grinned at him. "I knew you'd appreciate the color scheme. I'm going for a more modern look-- not all cluttered and ridiculous like my last place. I'm throwing a lot of junk out too. Probably more than I'm saving." He gestured toward several stacks of boxes that sat in a corner.

Looking toward the boxes, Boyd was surprised to see in the ones that were open that they contained all the things he thought of as the essence of Ryan: his action figures

and toys, posters, manga, as well as what appeared to be his anime collection on legitimate and burned DVDs.

Boyd raised his eyebrows and looked back at Ryan. "All of that?"

"Yep. I'm getting rid of all of that crap." Ryan picked up a cup from the counter and took a sip before adding. "It's time for me to grow up and give up all of my little kid habits. Living here will be kind of like a clean slate for me."

Boyd studied Ryan idly, taking in all the things that had changed in his friend from the times when they had first spent time around each other. There were a lot of differences but Boyd could still see some aspects of the person he'd once known, and it was for that reason he didn't think it was a good idea for Ryan to give up all his old habits. As much as Ryan was probably trying to cope with his new life and as much as he probably wanted to become someone stronger, someone new, Boyd also felt that in the process of starting a new life it didn't mean one had to completely get rid of the old.

"You know," Boyd said carefully after a moment, expression calm as he watched his friend, "even if you feel different, that doesn't mean everything has to change. You can still be someone new without giving up everything you cared about before."

"I guess," Ryan replied noncommittally although it was obvious he wasn't necessarily agreeing.

Boyd walked over and casually leaned against the counter as well. His arms were loosely crossed and expression idle as he looked at the boxes. "You know, I have a car and it's no trouble for me to take care of them. Especially if you're trying to arrange your place, you probably don't need anything else on your mind."

Ryan finished whatever was in his cup and gave Boyd a somewhat suspicious stare. "Why?"

"Maybe there's something I'd be interested in so I'd like to go through them later," Boyd said with a shrug. His demeanor was completely casual and unassuming.

Ryan looked at him for a moment before shrugging. "That's cool. They're in the way of my painting anyway."

"That's what I figured," Boyd said easily. He studied the boxes thoughtfully. "I could load them into my car now and come back to help you paint if you want."

"We can do it later. I was taking a break from painting anyway." Ryan walked to the middle of the living room and sat down on the carpet, gesturing for Boyd to come over. "We need to catch up and stuff."

"Sounds good." Boyd took his trench coat and messenger bag off and set them to the side before he walked over and sat down on the carpet as well. The fibers were soft and fluffy beneath his hands and he couldn't help idly scrunching his fingers against the carpet. "So has anything exciting happened with you lately?"

"Other than getting my freedom?" Ryan asked with a laugh, brushing strands of his wild black hair out of his eyes. "Nah. But I'm planning some stuff for the future. I don't know what's gonna happen yet but I have big dreams. It's so strange how... I dunno, how my way of thinking has changed so much."

"What are your dreams?" Boyd pulled some hair behind his ear and watched Ryan in interest.

"Well..." Ryan let the word roll off his tongue a bit and rocked back and forth slightly, a shy smile lifting the corners of his mouth. "I kind of want to leave the country and live in Europe. Ideally I'd get a release from the Agency to go to a university and deal with their surveillance and shit for the rest of my life but if I can't do that I may just try to transfer to the Euro Agency."

Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Europe," he said in a tone that was half impressed and half surprised. "That would definitely be a change." He kicked his legs out in front of him and leaned back on his hands as he smiled. "It sounds interesting. What would you major in?"

"I'm not really sure. Everyone keeps expecting me to say something to do with computers but honestly?" Ryan made a face, rolling his round eyes almost comically. "Do they seriously think I'd learn something about technology in a university than I haven't learned here? Bree taught me everything she knows and she knows a *lot* about everything. She's practically a genius. Any professor would be light years behind what she knows."

Boyd couldn't help a brief laugh; he didn't know who Bree was but she had obviously been Ryan's mentor. "True. Honestly, I'd think you'd be better suited to teach a computer class rather than take one. It makes more sense to do something you have interest in but haven't had the chance to explore yet."

"I'll probably do something either super liberal artsy or like... be totally random and go pre-med. That would be hilarious!" Ryan looked thoroughly amused by the idea, most likely picturing himself in scrubs with rubber gloves on or something.

"You could do whatever you want," Boyd said lightly. His honey brown eyes softened slightly in a mixture of amusement and fondness and his lips pulled to the side in a smile. "You could be a photojournalist or revive the travel book movement..."

"Or I could become a scientist and learn how to clone people," Ryan said enthusiastically, some of the old sparkle back in his eyes. "Man, the idea of school sounds so exciting but... but I know it won't be how I imagine. Hell, it won't even be how it was on all of those old TV shows. The kind of college I'll end up going to will be full of spoiled brat kids that I'll hate."

"They may not all be that terrible," Boyd said with a shrug. He pulled his feet in to sit cross-legged instead, a more comfortable position, and he rested one arm against his knee while the other hand dropped to the carpet where his fingers idly curled against the softness. "Who knows how different it may be in Europe, depending on the country. And even if the place is crawling with elitists, there may be other people like you there that you can band together with and commiserate." He tilted his head slightly, studying Ryan thoughtfully. "Even if there isn't, there's plenty you can do and people you can meet outside of classes. If nothing else, just be yourself and prove to all the snobs that you can excel far past them without their attitude."

Ryan leaned back, resting his open hands on the carpet and sighed. "I dunno. We'll see how it goes, if it goes at all anyway."

There was a very brief silence before he looked over at Boyd again and asked, "Hey, is Hsin doing any better?"

Boyd hesitated, fingers going still against the carpet. "What did you last hear?"

Ryan frowned slightly and sat up straight again. "I'm sorry to bring it up if you don't want to talk about it, Boyd. Just... all of this talking about starting some new fantastic life for some reason made me think of him. I guess because... well, anyway it doesn't matter. Last I heard he was in the psychiatric building."

Boyd shook his head. "It's alright. But unfortunately, I don't have much information. He's still there and all I know is he'll be released once he's deemed fit for service again. I'm

assuming that means his psychiatrist will have to determine that he's at a certain level of control, and probably is taking medication and has been regularly attending sessions. But they aren't telling me anything so I don't really know."

Ryan nodded and tilted his head to the side. He studied Boyd for a long moment, his deep blue eyes entirely focused on the other man as he chewed on the inside of his cheek. After awhile he smiled and said somewhat sheepishly, "I can't help but ask-- are the two of you still together?"

Boyd paused for a moment before shaking his head. "No. Not anymore."

Ryan's eyebrows shot up and his back straightened. "Really? Why not?"

With a slight twist of his expression, Boyd sighed quietly. He didn't mind talking about it all; it was simply that the situation was complicated. He fought the urge to slide his gaze away and instead continued to meet Ryan's eyes. "Because... Well, the catalyst was he cheated on me. But we'd never discussed the relationship or our expectations so he didn't realize what he was doing. And honestly... We're completely dysfunctional together; we go in cycles of everything being fantastic and everything being horrific. It started affecting other people as well, not to mention aggravating our already self-destructive tendencies, so it was time to end it."

Ryan's mouth turned down slightly and he crossed his legs in front of him as he leaned forward slightly. His eyebrows drew together under his long bangs and he sighed. "That's terrible to hear. I really don't know what to say. It's like someone just told me my parents got divorced."

The comment made Boyd smile faintly. "If it makes you feel any better, I don't think Sin is too happy with the current state either."

Ryan seemed to consider that and he hesitated visibly before asking, "Why would he ever cheat on you? I mean, he seemed so consumed by you and stuff."

Boyd didn't want to keep telling people about Sin's problems but Ryan had supported them for so long that he deserved an answer.

"The last several months have been difficult for him and I happened to be in training when it all hit him," Boyd explained with a shrug. His eyes expression was calm and honest as he did nothing to hide the truth of the situation. "He was trying to escape through sex. I just didn't know that at the time so I was angry with him."

"Are you angry with him now?" Ryan asked curiously. He was frowning slightly and looking truly disappointed to be hearing this. He actually shook his head with a sigh.

"No." Boyd gave Ryan a faint, humorless smirk. "If I were, I wouldn't be as calm as I am and I probably wouldn't have wanted to talk about any of it."

"Oh." Ryan's frown deepened slightly and he tilted his head to the side. "I'm confused, though. If you're not mad anymore, why not give him another chance or something?"

"Because..." Boyd trailed off for a second, then sighed and leaned forward, resting his other arm across his knee and watching Ryan more frankly. "We're bad for each other. Regardless of what we feel for each other, people have gotten hurt because of us. Jessica died and Sin was tortured and almost killed because I was jealous about them so I abandoned him. Sin..."

Boyd looked away for a moment, trying to figure out what he wanted to say and the best way to say it. His eyes narrowed slightly and his expression turned pensive, not entirely pleased, yet he didn't hesitate to explain further. "When he's more vulnerable, he makes rash decisions influenced by my actions or words. He almost killed himself when he came out of his coma because I told him to leave me alone and even recently he demanded termination because he had an episode and hurt me. We constantly hurt ourselves and each other and all our best moments happen after some of the most terrible. It's stressful and I just want stability for both of us. Not to mention, Carhart told me to stay away from him except at work and made it very clear that it would be a problem if I didn't."

Ryan sighed long and loud, almost exaggeratedly, and blew bangs out of his eyes in the process. "I mean, it makes me want to cry and lose hope in the possibility of true love and all of that stuff but if it's been like that... if that's the way it is, you're doing the smartest thing. Like, the mature thing. It's like..."

Ryan screwed up his face slightly, something he typically did when in deep thought, but somehow he looked far more serious than he had in the past. "It's like people who stay in abusive relationships because they're so obsessed with the idea of how they want stuff to be. Except here maybe it's like... mutual abusiveness?"

Boyd inclined his head in agreement; unfortunately, it was a fairly accurate assessment of his and Sin's relationship. "But this shouldn't make you lose hope in anything. It's not impossible that we'd get back together again in the future, it's just... I don't know if it will."

Right now, my only goal is properly building whatever relationship we end up having. First and foremost, we have to be work partners who can completely trust each other. After that, I want to have as close to a normal friendship as we can have. And beyond that..." He shook his head. "Well. We'd both have to put a lot of effort into fixing ourselves before anything more happened."

"Makes sense."

There was a moment of silence before Ryan asked, "So... what was it like? Just being in a relationship with him at all?"

"In what way?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down slightly.

"I guess... Sexually? Emotionally?" Ryan smiled slightly. "I know I sound like an obsessed weirdo again but for the rest of us he's so untouchable and stuff, Boyd. It's so insane to hear about him being with anyone even though I always wanted you guys to get together."

Boyd found it interesting that in some ways, that was basically what Kassian said-- how odd it was to hear about the other sides of Sin. "We had very rough, sometimes violent sex," he said bluntly, seeing no reason to do anything other than honestly answer Ryan's questions. "Bruises, marks, that sort of thing. He uses sex to forget things he doesn't want to think about so many times it was really frantic."

Ryan's face reddened slightly at the description and his shoulders hunched forward slightly. "Did you... I mean-- did it bother you that he was that way?"

"Not really," Boyd said with a shrug.

He thought it was cute the way Ryan seemed almost embarrassed by the conversation despite having initiated it, but Boyd didn't feel the need to be any less blunt about his answers. "Honestly, for the most part I like it that way except for the times when he would get so impatient he'd completely manhandle me to get me into whatever position he wanted but even then it wasn't too big a deal."

There was a brief pause as Ryan stared at him, seeming slightly flustered, but otherwise didn't respond.

When it was clear he was still listening, Boyd continued, "Things only really started to bother me when it felt like all we had going between us was sex and nothing else."

During those times it made me feel like he just wanted me to make him come and it didn't matter as much what I wanted. He didn't focus on my likes the way I sometimes would for him, although I don't think it was anything malicious on his part and since I didn't say anything, he can't be blamed for it."

There was a brief pause before Ryan admitted abruptly, "I wish I had specific likes in bed. I feel like all I've ever done is fool around a little." Ryan looked embarrassed but somehow relieved to be saying it. He stretched out on the carpet, resting his elbow on the floor and face on his open palm. "Isn't that odd?"

"Do you mean you haven't had sex or you just usually fool around more?" Boyd asked curiously. He leaned back on his hands and straightened his legs again after a moment.

"I've never had anal sex before," Ryan admitted. "All I've ever done is oral sex. I know I'm lame and that's not like *real* sex but the one time I tried anal it just hurt so much it was awful!"

"You're not lame at all," Boyd said honestly. He watched Ryan with thoughtful brown eyes, and although he was intent on what Ryan was saying, he was completely accepting of the information and didn't judge Ryan in the least. "Did you keep going or did you stop when it hurt? And how much lubricant was your partner using?"

"I dunno." Ryan extended the word slightly so it sounded like an almost mournful wail and the embarrassment was clear on his face now as he talked about his failed attempt. "It hurt so bad I made him stop even after he offered to use more."

"The first time I had anal sex, it was very awkward," Boyd admitted casually. He kicked his feet slightly, eyes going a little distant as he remembered his first time; the fumbling fingers on his clothing, Lou's hot breath against his skin, the awkward way they moved against each other even as they couldn't bring themselves to pull apart. "I wasn't expecting it to be painful so it seemed even worse to me than it probably otherwise would have. I felt stupid for feeling that way, especially since the sex wasn't initially my idea so I felt somehow like I had to live up to it. I tried not to show it but Lou noticed and tried to stop. I just made him keep going and once my body adjusted to it, it felt good."

Ryan watched him, the embarrassment still clear although he seemed interested and a little relieved to know he wasn't the only one.

Boyd sat up straight and shrugged, watching Ryan idly. "My advice is, next time just make sure your partner uses a lot of lube and gives you a chance to adjust. If you keep

going, you'll probably like it. If you don't have sex for awhile, it's always a little uncomfortable at first, but then you know what to expect and it gets better. Once you're used to it, and if you have a partner who's in line with your style, it can feel amazing."

"It must," Ryan agreed. "Andrew was all crazy for it. He practically begged me to let him do it and then he started asking me to do it to him but I was so... I guess embarrassed because I had no idea what to do, that I refused." He winced slightly at the memory. "I'm such a loser."

Boyd rolled his eyes although it was good-natured. "You're not a loser. Just keep it in mind for next time. Not everyone's interested in the same thing at the same time in their lives; that doesn't make one side or the other right."

"Yeah." Ryan seemed to consider that for a moment, his blue eyes drifting away to stare into space thoughtfully for a moment. The silence stretched between them and Boyd noticed that it was nowhere nearly as awkward as it had been in the hospital room, which he was thankful for.

After a minute, Ryan focused on Boyd again and he smiled hesitantly. "What about the emotional aspect of your relationship? I know you probably don't want to talk so much about this and you can tell me that-- I just wonder how it was to be with someone like him... You guys always seemed to have such an intense relationship."

"Hmm." For a short moment, Boyd paused as he once again considered how to word his thoughts. His eyes were a little distant and without realizing it, his expression softened slightly yet turned a little sad as he thought about the way it had been. "He's not affectionate; unless we were having sex, we infrequently kissed or touched. And if it did happen, it was usually because I initiated it. But he loves to be touched gently, especially when I ran my fingers through his hair. He usually leans into that. Emotionally... he's distant but he's also vulnerable. When he smiles, even when he's tired, somehow it seems to lighten his expression; and I love the sound of his laugh."

Ryan's mouth turned up into a small, sad smile and he sighed again but this time it wasn't as dramatic. "I'm sorry it turned out the way it did, Boyd."

"Me too," Boyd said quietly, then tilted his head and looked at Ryan a little more somberly. "But then, maybe it was inevitable. I never meant for any of this to happen, so I guess... given our personalities, maybe we were both just too unstable and desperate from the start."

Ryan nodded slightly. For a moment his eyes dropped and he studied the carpet, dragging one finger along it before saying quietly, "Well, I haven't been very stable myself. In the last couple of years anyway... I know Andrew was in training, I'd wondered if he told you about it."

"We didn't talk about anything of import," Boyd said, shaking his head.

Ryan looked somewhat relieved to hear that. "Good. It isn't any of his business and I don't want him telling you that kind of stuff. I'd rather you hear it from my side, not someone else's, especially not his." His tone of voice made it quite clear that his feelings towards Andrew weren't entirely friendly.

"What happened?"

"Well..." Ryan trailed off and suddenly he turned on his back, laying on the floor and looking up at the ceiling as if he couldn't meet Boyd's eyes. "It actually happened even before you got back from Monterrey. I just... I don't know. I was so happy to see you before, I didn't want to spoil it by bringing it up."

There was another brief hesitation before Ryan said finally, "After I found out about my diagnosis I tried to kill myself."

For a moment Boyd could only look at Ryan silently as shock overtook him, mostly because it seemed like something so against what Ryan had once been like. For someone who had been so exuberant and optimistic, imagining him trying to commit suicide was a complete change.

At the same time, Boyd could appreciate the strength of the hopelessness Ryan must have felt, so he could understand what had driven Ryan to such a decision. He was just glad that somehow Ryan had failed and, given the fact Andrew apparently knew about it...

He studied Ryan's calm expression and asked without judgment, "Did Andrew stop you?"

"He found me," Ryan replied with a frown. "He still had access to my apartment even after we broke up because I was dumb and forgot to change it back."

"Is that part of the reason you don't get along with him?" Boyd asked in the same tone.

Ryan seemed to think seriously about that for a long moment before finally shaking his head. "No. It was the way... the way he handled it. The way he acted like, because he thought I was so fragile and broken and out of control that he could suddenly come in and take charge of me and treat me like I was some damaged little boy who he needs to protect. Even when I told him that I'd made the decision like... I don't know... not even in a moment of weakness. When I tried to explain why I wanted to do it... he still wouldn't understand me. He just acted like I was some confused kid."

"Ah," Boyd said, now completely understanding the situation and why there was resentment between the two. That attitude fell right in line with what Boyd knew of Andrew, who wouldn't have been trying to offend Ryan but who was so into the hero role that he probably couldn't help it. Andrew just wasn't the type of person who could appreciate or understand that sort of decision; he would have only been able to look at Ryan as needing protection.

"I can see why you would have been upset about that," Boyd said with a nod of understanding. "I may not have ever been in a situation like you were, but I can understand why you may have made that decision. After Lou died, I tried to kill myself, too; I felt like I had no future so it made it harder to see the point in struggling to live."

"Exactly," Ryan said, sitting up and looking at Boyd again. "I mean now I'm glad that I didn't succeed because I wouldn't have gotten to really live before I die but then it was just like, what's the damn point, ya know? Like... I'm going to die anyway, why die and be really sick all the time before it actually happens? Why not get it done with?"

"I can appreciate that mindset but I'm also glad you didn't succeed," Boyd said honestly, then hesitated as he studied Ryan. "How have you been feeling lately? Is there any pain or is it mostly weakness..? You don't have to answer if you don't want to talk about it."

"Hmm." Ryan shrugged his thin shoulders. "Lately it hasn't been that bad but that's how it always is. It comes and goes... it's bad then I'm okay. But I'm not responding to the treatments anymore so it's only a matter of time before I'm always really bad. All of the smoke and debris inhalation took a really long time for me to recover from after the raid, that's why I was in the hospital so long."

Boyd felt a short spike of guilt at the comment; his expression darkened slightly and he looked away. "I'm sorry about that... When Andrew and I found you, we were so intent on getting you out of the building that we didn't cover your mouth the way we should have."

Ryan frowned at that. "What? You saved my life, Boyd. I was laying there for a long time breathing it all in when I was unconscious, it's not like you saving me did more damage than that!"

Feeling a sense of relief, Boyd nodded reluctantly. He'd been so worried about whether he'd made it worse that he hadn't considered how long Ryan may have been lying there all along. His honey brown gaze slid back to Ryan. "That's true."

Silence fell between them and when it became apparent that neither of them quite knew what to say next, Boyd raised his eyebrows. "Alright, I have a proposal. I'll help you paint for a bit, then you help me bring the boxes to my car, and after that we can go get something to eat as a reward for all our hard work. How does that sound?"

"Sounds good to me," Ryan replied with a smile, looking relieved to be off the topic of his illness.

Boyd returned the smile then stood up, dusting his hands off on his legs, mostly as something to do. "Then tell me what to do, Boss. Am I on silver duty too, or do I get to be lucky enough to work with black?"

"You can do the borders of the parts I already finished with silver." Ryan pointed to the wall, smiling. "But don't blame me if you get all covered in paint."

"Ha," Boyd said with a small grin. "Black becomes me so I'll just be better off." He grabbed one of the paintbrushes next to the buckets and set to work on the border.

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The wind was cold and caused Boyd's trench coat to billow out behind him with the occasional stronger gust. He'd felt a little restless and bored when he'd awoken in the morning and since he hadn't received a call for any new missions, he'd ended up working on his attic for several hours. By the time evening came, he was tired of being in the house and despite the cold weather, he decided to take a walk to cool down. The attic was so stuffy that, especially with moving around, it was easy to feel overheated rather quickly.

He hadn't had any particular plans for where he was going to go, although he'd considered heading to the grocery store to pick up some more tea, but as he passed Harkey Street and absently glanced down the block, he noticed Kassian's new truck in his driveway. The truck had been parked in the Agency lot while Kassian was on a mission and Boyd hadn't realized Kassian had returned.

After a moment of debating, Boyd decided to head toward Kassian's house and see what he was up to.

His suspicion that Kassian was home was basically confirmed once he approached the door and could faintly hear the pounding bass of loud rock music blaring inside.

Boyd reached up to knock on Kassian's door, grimacing as the cold touched the bare skin of his hands. It had been a few days since Boyd had helped Ryan paint the walls but there were still a few flecks of black paint that stubbornly clung to his skin and he noticed it idly before shoving his hands back into his pockets.

There was no answer and it quickly became apparent that it was probably because the music was too loud. Feeling mildly amused by Kassian's tendency to blare music loud enough for his neighbors to hear, Boyd rang the doorbell instead.

After a moment that seemed incredibly long due to the chill of the wind, the music finally lowered and Boyd heard the clattering of locks before the door swung open.

Kassian smiled down at him and immediately stepped back so that Boyd could enter. The senior agent was barefoot and wearing nothing but boxer-briefs and a threadbare wife-beater. He looked slightly flushed and his smile was a little brighter than usual.

"What's up?"

Boyd walked into the house and turned toward Kassian with a grin. Even though Kassian tended to be very amiable, it was nice to see him in an especially good mood. For some reason, it lightened Boyd's mood as well. "You look happy. I was just bored and noticed you were back. I was going to ask how the mission went but apparently pretty well?"

"Yeah, I guess," Kassian said with a shrug, turning and heading to the kitchen as he spoke over his shoulder. "I'm just on a crazy fucking adrenaline high right now. My first recon and storm in years, kid."

Boyd couldn't help checking Kassian out as the man walked away; the boxer-briefs Kassian wore were cotton and form-fitting, showing off what Boyd felt was a very nice ass and muscular thighs. It was the first time Boyd had clearly seen so much of Kassian's lower body and he briefly thought it was a shame that Kassian had turned away before Boyd had been able to properly see his front.

Boyd took off his boots then pulled his coat off and tossed it onto the couch. He then trailed after Kassian and walked into the kitchen in time to see Kassian leaning over to

grab some drinks from a lower shelf in the fridge. Boyd sat on one of the stools at the island and leaned against the counter, casually admiring Kassian rear and deciding that today he'd had very good timing.

"Who'd you storm with?" Boyd asked idly.

"Archer and Blair," Kassian replied as he straightened and shut the fridge, setting a Guinness and a twelve ounce bottle of flavored premixed vodka down on the counter. After the first several times they'd hung out, Kassian had quickly realized that Boyd would never grow fond of dark beer and had offered to buy him a six pack of the mixed drink instead. Since vodka was Boyd's drink of choice and the twelve ounce bottles weren't that strong, it had worked out in the end.

Kassian sat on the bar stool next to Boyd, twisting so that they were facing each other. He slouched back on it casually and gave a rolling shrug of his strong shoulders. "It was a last-minute mission pretty much; a follow-up of something gone astray. They only pulled me in because they knew I'd get it done and Harriet and her team are already out somewhere."

Boyd nodded as he opened his vodka and then took a drink.

Kassian had told Boyd the last time they'd met, after Boyd had been released from isolation and they'd talked about the results of training, that Harriet had received a pseudo-promotion; she was still Level 9, but had a higher status within. Boyd was pleased to know that at least Harriet had received that much of a promotion even if he still thought his own promotion was bullshit.

Harriet had taken over Kassian's previous position of being the team leader of all high-profile storms and groups of upper-level agents. Although originally Boyd thought that the team he'd met in Monterrey had been Kassian's only team, Kassian had actually been the designated team leader for all high profile missions that required an entire group. The only reason that team had been so close with Kassian was because they were all in General Stephen's division and were typically sent out together since the unit consisted of so many level 9 agents.

"How are t hey?" Boyd asked curiously.

"I dunno." Kassian extended his legs, slouching down more so that his feet rested on the bottom of Boyd's bar stool. "Fine, I guess; same as usual. But I'm not too concerned with them right now. My interests lie elsewhere."

Kassian picked up his Guinness and cracked the can open, taking a long gulp.

"What are you interested in?" Boyd asked a little distractedly, finding it difficult not to look down now that Kassian's legs were sprawled open.

"You know," Kassian said with a half smile, wiggling his eyebrows. "All of that adrenaline has a certain kind of effect on me."

Boyd met Kassian's eyes but before he could reply, Kassian's phone vibrated and the senior agent looked over to check it. Especially considering the conversation had turned toward sex, Boyd couldn't help dropping his gaze to briefly admire what he could see of Kassian's body. His gaze traced the nice-sized bulge that rested behind the briefs and between Kassian's well-defined thighs.

"Hmm." Boyd leaned an elbow against the counter and returned his gaze to Kassian's face. "Well, that's a problem. That energy has to go somewhere."

"Uh huh." Kassian shrugged one shoulder and looked at Boyd again. "It was going to go towards Christina. You remember her, right?"

Boyd nodded and smirked. "The saleslady you planned to take for a ride; I remember."

Kassian grinned slightly and he lifted his beer but paused before drinking. "I actually did take her for a ride a couple of weeks ago."

"It must've been good if you were planning to head over there again," Boyd observed idly before taking another drink.

"Eh." Kassian made a face and shrugged. "A little too conservative for me."

Boyd watched Kassian. "What are you going to do, then?"

"Well I was going to go over there anyway but I think I'd rather hang out with you," Kassian replied innocently, although there was a glint in his eyes that was definitely part mischief and part something Boyd couldn't readily identify.

Although Boyd was pretty sure Kassian was hitting on him, he still didn't want to say anything about it until he was certain. He had to admit that while initially when their mutual attraction had come up in conversation Boyd hadn't known what he'd thought of acting on any of it, by now the idea of sex with Kassian was appealing.

There was no question that he found the man to be attractive and Boyd was intrigued by the idea of casual sex with someone he liked as a friend-- of something he could simply

enjoy without any expectations. There was no one else he would have considered saying yes to; but over time, the comfortableness he'd grown to feel around Kassian had extended to acceptance of the idea of sleeping with him, as well as interest in what Kassian had described in the pub as his preferred sexual style.

But since Kassian could be a prankster at times, Boyd wasn't about to outright say anything until it was clear between them what the expectations were.

"What kind of hanging out are you thinking?" Boyd asked, not looking away from Kassian's eyes.

"Oh I dunno," Kassian replied in the same innocent tone, his grin widening slightly. "Some pizza, some music, some sex. The possibilities are numerous and some are more interesting than others."

"Hmm." Boyd took a drink of vodka as he seemed to consider it then set the bottle down on the counter. He studied Kassian and a slight smile pulled at one edge of his lips as he said casually, "Then I want to hang out, especially if the more interesting possibility comes into play."

"Oh, really." One of Kassian's eyebrows rose and he tilted his head to the side as he gazed at Boyd. "Is that a fact?"

Boyd made a noise of assent. "Maybe some of your excess energy is rubbing off on me." He tilted his head toward Kassian's lap. "Or maybe your clothing choice is contributing."

"I don't know what you mean," Kassian replied, although his lips spread into a satisfied smile and he sprawled out even more, as much as he could on a bar stool.

Boyd's smirk widened and he lifted one socked foot, resting it on the stool between Kassian's legs although he didn't quite touch him. "Then I won't know what you mean when my foot accidentally slips forward," he said innocently.

"Should I take that as some kind of threat?" Kassian asked, raising his other eyebrow although he didn't seem very concerned. He just seemed intrigued by the proximity of Boyd's foot to his crotch.

"Not unless you find the idea of me rubbing my foot against you to be frightening," Boyd said idly. "Then I suppose it could be."

Kassian looked downright amused now and he scooted down slightly on the small bar stool so that his crotch was lightly touching Boyd's foot. He had an almost challenging look in his eye, akin to the expression he got when they played video games. It was almost like he was playing a game now, seeing how far Boyd would take it and making it quite clear that he would always be the one to go farther first.

"What would you do if I, as your senior agent, ordered you to strip naked right now?" Kassian asked with the same half-grin, making it impossible to tell if he was being serious or not.

"Hmm." Boyd put some pressure on Kassian's crotch with his toes, then met Kassian's eyes with a somewhat challenging look of his own as he moved his foot back and forth. "And how would I know you, as my senior agent, wouldn't just be playing a trick on me?"

Kassian's lips parted slightly at the contact but his expression didn't change. "Would I really do a thing like that?"

Boyd narrowed his eyes and smiled slowly as he increased the pressure and movement of his foot. "I seem to recall a conversation about me not being allowed on the bike again..."

"Oh, but that was before," Kassian said mildly, moving his thighs apart even more and allowing Boyd full access as he absently wet his lips. "Before you knew about my random tendency to want to fuck men until they scream."

Boyd began kneading Kassian more thoroughly, watching as the other man's eyes rolled back slightly although the grin never quite left Kassian's face. "You wanna see me naked, Trovosky? You have two hands-- you could undress me yourself."

"Is that what you really want?" Kassian asked, looking at Boyd through half closed eyes, still seeming terribly amused by everything that was going on although his breathing had picked up a little.

Boyd realized he didn't know the answer to that question; part of him did want that and part of him didn't really want to give up the control he had at the moment. He smirked languidly, continuing to massage Kassian with his foot. "Maybe."

Kassian's made a sound at the back of his throat and moved backwards on the stool, ending the contact abruptly. He pushed Boyd's leg to the side and leaned forward so that he was less than an inch from Boyd's face. "Either you do or you don't, Agent. It's a yes or no question. This is serious business, obviously."

Boyd watched Kassian, equally amused and intrigued by the situation. The small smirk continued to play on his lips and his honey brown gaze only intensified on Kassian. "Then I suppose it's a yes, Senior Agent."

"Alright then."

Kassian seemed satisfied with the situation; the corners of his mouth twitched as though he wanted to laugh and he stood up. He stared down at Boyd for a moment before suddenly grabbing him and almost casually flinging Boyd over his shoulder.

"Hey," Boyd said with a startled laugh, his tone half indignant and half amused. "I can walk, you know."

"It's true," Kassian agreed before he began striding out of the kitchen and across the living room. Peaches gave them an odd look and leaped out of the way as Kassian crossed the foyer and went up the stairs.

"Wow, the second floor," Boyd drawled as if it were a great honor. He'd never been up the stairs in Kassian's house because Kassian basically lived on the first floor. "I'm getting four-star treatment tonight."

"Quiet, punk." Kassian smacked Boyd's ass and bounded up the rest of the stairs, crossing a short hall and toeing open a door.

The door led to what appeared to be the master bedroom. The room was rather Spartan, which was unsurprising since Kassian's ex-wife had likely taken most of her belongings. The only furniture in there was a chest of drawers, a mirror, a single nightstand and an extremely wide mattress that was laying on the floor. The bed was made and the room looked much neater than the living room did, likely because Kassian had made it obvious that he rarely used the bedroom except, apparently, on special occasions.

Kassian dropped Boyd to his feet so abruptly that Boyd nearly lost his footing; before he could properly regain it, Kassian spun him around and began disrobing him with the speed of a man who was clearly an expert at stripping people naked.

He yanked Boyd's shirt over his head easily, not even getting it caught around Boyd's neck although blond hair went flying everywhere in disarray. Before Boyd could even run a hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes, he felt his dark jeans being yanked down so that he was left standing in only a pair of black briefs and his socks.

Boyd quirked an eyebrow then kicked his jeans to the side to get them out of the way. "Points for speed but your style is a little lacking," he informed Kassian.

"Pfft. I don't need to impress you." Kassian placed an open palm on Boyd's back and shoved him forward and down onto the mattress. He stood above Boyd and seemed to be admiring the view from behind, his blue eyes roving over Boyd's back, ass and thighs appreciatively.

Boyd flipped onto his back and propped himself up on his elbows, leaving his legs open wide enough to give Kassian a good view. "Oh, but you do. What if I decided to walk away right now? Then you'd have to go conservative tonight."

Kassian gave him a 'yeah, right' look and knelt between Boyd's legs at the edge of the mattress. He lifted one of Boyd's feet and looked back at Boyd. "Do you watch gay porn often?" he asked curiously, as if this was a normal occurrence and he typically queried such things from between his friend's spread legs.

"Not really," Boyd answered as he watched Kassian movements with interest. "I've read a few books but that's about it. Why?"

"Failure of a gay," Kassian informed him casually and pulled one of Boyd's socks off. Kassian's fingers slid up the bared flesh. "I was going to comment on the sheer amount of gay porn movies where the guys fuck with their shoes and socks on."

Boyd's eyes fell slightly closed at the feel of Kassian's fingers on his skin, although he otherwise gave no indication that he liked it. Kassian dropped Boyd's foot and lifted the other, taking that sock off as well.

"You've watched a lot, then?" Boyd asked.

"Some. Mostly out of curiosity before I'd ever been with a man," Kassian replied nonchalantly as he idly ran his fingers along Boyd's other foot, trailing his hand up Boyd's leg and down to one thigh. The movement was casual and Kassian finished his thought almost belatedly, "But then I realized I'd rather do it than watch it."

Boyd watched Kassian with slightly darkened eyes. "What are you planning to do?"

Kassian lifted Boyd's leg a little higher and shrugged casually, pressing a kiss against Boyd's ankle. "I'm not entirely sure, kid."

He gave Boyd another grin and kissed Boyd's calf. Kassian's lips were slightly parted and the warm moistness of his mouth temporarily heated the flesh of Boyd's leg. Kassian never broke eye contact, his blue-eyed gaze continuing to possess the same half-mischievous and half-serious expression he'd had since this new sudden flirtation began.

One hand skimmed up Boyd's other leg, trailing up his thigh and squeezing slightly as Kassian moved forward on the bed.

Boyd leaned back on his elbows and spread his legs more to give Kassian better access. His lips parted slightly and his gaze intensified as he stared at the other man. Kassian's light blue eyes were such a vibrant color that they were impossible to look away from, especially when trained on Boyd and his every move.

"Well," Boyd said after a moment, partially not serious and partially distracted. "I don't know if I can trust you when you don't have a plan..."

Kassian chuckled quietly and hunched over slightly, leaning over Boyd and placing another kiss against the inside of his thigh. "You shouldn't. I have no grand seduction plans for you, sorry to say." Kassian's lips trailed up, the touch firm and confident, and he completely bypassed the growing bulge in Boyd's briefs to kiss his stomach. "I'm just having fun."

"What a disappointment," Boyd said, although a small smirk pulled at his lips. He laid back and enjoyed the warmth against his skin, leaning just a little into the touch; he wasn't as sensitive on his stomach as he once had been but he still felt especially aroused by gentle touches brushing his scars. He didn't break eye contact and reached one hand up to rest on Kassian's upper shoulder near his neck. "You've had all this time to come up with one."

"Ha." Kassian ran his tongue up the middle of Boyd's flat stomach, causing Boyd to arch into the touch with a nearly inaudible hiss of breath. Kassian straddled Boyd on either side of his thighs and spoke against his skin, "I told you I don't play those games. We're either going to fuck or we're not."

Boyd's hand unconsciously tightened against Kassian's shoulder at the words and the fabric of Kassian's tank top bunched beneath Boyd's fingers in the process. His gaze finally slid away from Kassian's eyes to study what he could see of the man's body, but all the parts he was interested in were covered in clothing.

"You're overdressed," Boyd informed him, meeting Kassian's gaze again.

"So are you," Kassian replied with another grin and abruptly ceased all contact, shifting to the side and looking down at Boyd. "Take off your underwear."

With a quirked eyebrow, Boyd met Kassian's eyes evenly. "Take off your shirt."

Kassian shrugged easily, obviously not too impressed with the demand, and yanked off his wife-beater to reveal his powerful chest and well-defined abs, his pale skin covered with tattoos. His gaze traveled along the length of Boyd's body and, judging by the obvious erection in his boxer briefs, Kassian liked what he saw.

Boyd ran an appreciative eye along Kassian, feeling himself grow more aroused by the sight of Kassian's hard muscles, the lines of his body, and the desire that was currently beginning to show through the good-natured amusement that had glinted in Kassian's clear blue eyes since this started. Boyd briefly considered dragging their game out longer but then decided against it. He casually pulled his underwear off and tossed it to the side, doing nothing to cover himself.

Leaning up on his elbows again and reaching over to hook his fingers beneath the elastic band of Kassian's boxer briefs, Boyd pulled down just enough to see more of the snake tattoo that dipped beneath the fabric. His gaze focused on the tattoo as well as where a light line of hair led from Kassian's navel and down beneath the boxer briefs. He looked up at Kassian again.

"Your turn."

Kassian leaned forward and pulled Boyd up into a sitting position so that they were facing before he stood up entirely and yanked his boxers down, freeing his penis which stood hard and completely erect, directly in front of Boyd's face.

Boyd's mouth fell open slightly and he couldn't drag his eyes away from the length of flesh that was so near his lips. He didn't even care that Kassian was watching him or that his desire to just lean forward and take it into his mouth was incredibly obvious. Boyd had realized that he enjoyed giving blowjobs awhile ago and he saw no reason to hide it from Kassian.

But just as he leaned forward to give in to the desire to run his tongue along Kassian's cock, Kassian planted one hand against Boyd's naked chest and pushed him

backwards onto the mattress. Boyd looked at the other man with such an indignant expression that Kassian actually snickered before straddling Boyd once again.

For a moment Boyd paused, unable to do anything but go still as the feel of Kassian's naked body pressing against his own caused a shudder to go through him. As Kassian leaned down and their lips finally met, Boyd couldn't help absently feeling a brief sense of disbelief that this was actually happening. After all their subtle flirtation and the obvious, appreciative gazes that had lingered in the past several weeks... Even after all that, Boyd still couldn't help feeling a little surprised.

But then Kassian's tongue slid into his mouth and all coherent thought fled Boyd's mind.

It wasn't romantic, it wasn't frantically hungry; the kiss they shared could only be described as intense. For several long moments, Kassian didn't even touch the rest of Boyd's body, he didn't do anything but explore Boyd's mouth so deeply and thoroughly that Boyd couldn't do anything but respond desperately with muffled moans. At some point, Kassian slid down so that he was laying directly on top of Boyd but despite that, despite the fact that Boyd would normally begin bucking his hips wildly and impatiently for more pressure, he couldn't focus on anything but Kassian's mouth.

When Kassian pulled back finally, their breath coming quicker and their lips a little swollen, Boyd could only think somewhat distantly that Kassian was an amazing kisser. Boyd started to lean forward, not really wanting it to end; he wanted to keep tasting Kassian's lips, his tongue, the slight hint of alcohol and something minty; he wanted to keep feeling the heat and the slide of a well-practiced tongue that seemed to be worshiping Boyd's mouth. But Kassian combed his fingers through Boyd's hair, pulling Boyd's head back firmly but not painfully, and began sucking on Boyd's neck.

The feel of it was unexpectedly, especially arousing. A hiss of breath escaped Boyd's mouth and his eyes shut slightly, unable to stop himself from grinding up against Kassian's crotch this time.

Kassian laughed against Boyd's neck, looking up at him with smoldering blue eyes and an arched eyebrow. "I just had an epiphany."

"What?" Boyd asked somewhat breathlessly, partially curious and partially incredulous that Kassian was so casually talking at a time like this.

"You'd asked me why I was attracted to you," Kassian replied, running his tongue along Boyd's neck. "I think it's your androgyny. It fucking turns me on like nothing else."

Boyd watched Kassian with golden brown eyes dark with desire; Kassian's comment served to arouse Boyd further, partially due to knowing that an experienced person like Kassian was that turned on by him. "Am I the best of both worlds?" he asked jokingly, unable to stop the smirk that spread across his face.

"Ehhhh." Kassian kissed up his neck, over his cheek. "Not exactly but I still want to fuck your brains out."

Boyd shuddered visibly and Kassian covered his mouth again. They began tonguing each other more wildly, more passionately, both of them grinding against each other unabashedly now. Boyd arched up off the mattress as he panted against Kassian's mouth, wrapping his legs around Kassian and forcing them to roll over.

Boyd tried to stay on top of Kassian but the other man immediately flipped their position, muscular thighs clenching around Boyd in a way that was incredibly hot and impossible to escape from as he trapped Boyd beneath him.

Boyd couldn't help a breathless laugh as Kassian finally broke the kiss. It seemed that the competitive spirit of their friendship would follow them to the bedroom as well.

Kassian scooted backwards, face flushed and lips parted as he breathed hard and stared down at Boyd with a heated, lustful expression that he didn't even attempt to conceal. Boyd surged up off the bed, unable to look away from Kassian's face, and crushed their lips together again but Kassian spun him around in one quick movement so that Boyd's back was against his chest as they knelt on the mattress.

Boyd turned his face to the side as they shared another fiery kiss but this time one of Kassian's muscular arms snaked around Boyd's waist. Kassian's hand slid down and he began masturbating Boyd's swollen cock, pumping it with swift, steady movements of his long fingers as he swallowed every moan that escaped Boyd's lips.

Boyd's entire body was trembling with pleasure and as Kassian's hand continued to work his dick, Boyd's kisses degraded into open mouthed groans as he fucked Kassian's hand. "Christ-- Kass, you're gonna make me come," Boyd panted, sliding his eyes open as he bucked his hips forward insistently.

"That's the point," Kassian said in his ear, voice low and thick with arousal.

"Fuck," Boyd growled, breathing hard, not wanting to come so soon, not wanting this to be the extent of it all-- yet he couldn't deny that he didn't want Kassian to stop. He didn't want those long fingers to stop sliding up and down his dick, pre-cum making it slick, sticky, and hotter.

"Look up," Kassian murmured against Boyd's ear once more. "Look at the wall."

"Wha--" Boyd dragged his eyes up and tried to focus despite the explosions of color that were dancing behind his eyes, and what he saw made him swear loudly. The large oval mirror was leaning against the wall opposite from the bed. The reflection of them, of Kassian crushed against his back, gazing at him intently, heatedly, as his hand worked between Boyd's thighs faster and faster-- Boyd's breath quickened and the burning in his stomach spread like wildfire.

"Oh God... Oh--Fu--" Boyd tried to keep his eyes open as he came violently hard but it was impossible. He shouted loudly, his voice a desperate moan, before he slumped forward on the mattress and panted against the sheets.

Kassian's hands slid up Boyd's bared back, squeezing his ass cheeks as he grinned. "You like that, huh?"

"Pervert," Boyd said hoarsely against the sheets, still breathing hard.

Kassian laughed at that. "It's purely coincidence that the mirror is there. Scout's honor. Although Christina got a kick out of it too."

Boyd rolled over onto his back and gazed up at Kassian through half open eyes. "I didn't want to come so soon, asshole," he muttered in an accusatory voice, although he was unable to keep his gaze from dropping once again to Kassian's cock; the other man was stroking it idly and despite the fact that Boyd had just orgasmed, the sight sent a bolt of lightning straight through his body.

"It's okay, kid," Kassian said easily, lips twisted in the same smirk. "We have plenty of time."

Boyd regained his breath and pushed himself up on his elbows. Before he could do or say anything else, Kassian tackled him and they fell backwards on the large mattress. They rolled across the bed in a passionate wrestling match, long limbs tangled together and in the sheets as they groped each other and exchanged hot kisses.

Boyd had never spent so much time just fooling around in bed, grinding and licking, kissing and laughing, and he found himself temporarily forgetting everything else that existed outside the bedroom, which was hot from the radiators, humid from their sweat and rich with the smell of sex. For a brief time all he cared about was the feel of strong, confident hands on his body, a knowing grin that held no expectations, and mind-blowing pleasure that made him want to stay on the sagging and too-soft mattress forever.

He didn't know how long they spent touching each other, exploring each other, taking turns bringing each other to the brink of orgasm and stopping before it could go too far. After awhile, Boyd couldn't help giving in to his desire to suck Kassian off.

"Jesus," Kassian hissed as Boyd's head bobbed up and down between his thighs.

Boyd took the entire length of Kassian's cock in his mouth, enjoying the way the older man arched off the bed, the way Kassian's hands gripped the sheets as he fucked Boyd's mouth. The sounds Kassian made were enough to make Boyd shiver; he was incredibly turned on by the effect he was having on the senior agent.

"Fuck, kid, you deep throat like a champ," Kassian mumbled, throwing his head back against one of the askew pillows, thrusting up into Boyd's hot, wet mouth with abandon.

Boyd began moving faster, taking Kassian deep in his mouth and then sliding almost entirely away before going down again. Kassian's dick was driving Boyd wild, the feel of it pulsating between his lips as Kassian tensed up, the salty taste at the tip as clear liquid oozed out, the musky scent-- Boyd couldn't help getting off on the act as he performed it.

"Boyd," Kassian groaned, unable to stop himself from slamming up into Boyd's mouth, although he was starting to shake his head back and forth.

"Fuck, Boyd," he said again, voice getting louder. "S-st--stop! Holy fuck stop or I'm gonna come!"

Boyd pulled back immediately, releasing the swollen flesh from his mouth and immediately licking his lips as he sat up and looked at Kassian with eyes that were dilated and darkened with lust.

"Jesus," Kassian hissed again. His fingers and toes dug into the sheets, his entire body tense with the need for the release he wasn't allowing it. "Give an old man a heart attack, why don't you?"

"I'm sorry," Boyd replied huskily, once again falling backwards onto the mattress. "I didn't realize an old timer like you wouldn't be able to appreciate amazing head."

"Fuck you, punk," Kassian muttered.

"I certainly hope so."

Kassian's eyes slid open and he gave Boyd a wicked smile before extending one hand over the side of the mattress. He reached up to the nightstand and jerked a drawer open, fiddling around blindly and dropping an empty box of condoms on the floor.

"I thought you always came prepared, Trovosky?" Boyd asked idly, stretching languidly on the sweat-dampened sheets and feeling a sense of relaxation he wasn't sure he'd felt since Monterrey. His entire body was humming with pleasure; if he'd known extended foreplay could make him feel so sated, he'd have looked into it long ago.

"I used them all with Christina," Kassian replied with a grunt as he sat up entirely and pulled a bottle of lubricant out. "And I knew a dirty bitch such as yourself wouldn't mind."

Boyd was startled into a laugh. "Hey," he said with a grin, shoving Kassian with his foot. "Just be glad this dirty bitch stopped by or you'd be risking kids right now. Or ruining the mood for a condom stop."

"The world doesn't need little Kassians running around," Kassian drawled, moving across the bed towards Boyd. "Fucking you is a lot less complicated."

"Is it, now?" Boyd asked, his voice low.

"Yeah, it is." Kassian grabbed one of Boyd's thighs and rolled him over onto his stomach. Boyd immediately got on his knees, looking into the mirror and watching as Kassian once again ran his hands along Boyd's smooth back before sliding down to the curve of his ass.

Boyd watched as Kassian poured a generous handful of lubricant onto his dick, sliding his hand up and down the length in hurried motions as his ice blue eyes took in Boyd's body hungrily. Boyd felt his stomach tighten with anticipation and he began breathing faster, shifting on the bed, unable to stop staring at their reflection. He wanted this

badly; he wanted Kassian inside him and that was the only reason Boyd had stopped sucking the other man off.

When Kassian's dick slid into his body, Boyd shuddered violently, his body barely resisting although Kassian paused for a moment anyway.

"It doesn't hurt," Boyd ground out breathlessly, mouth dropping open at the pressure that sent mind-numbing sparks of pleasure through his body.

Kassian licked his lips and ran his hand along one of Boyd's ass cheeks. "Your ass is so fucking tight," he uttered, his face slack with pleasure. He shifted a bit, adjusting his position, and squeezed Boyd's ass before giving it a sharp smack.

Boyd let out a startled burst of air and looked into the mirror again, unsurprised by the half smirk that graced Kassian's features.

Kassian pulled out slightly and then slammed back in so hard that Boyd slid forward on the bed, a loud moan escaping his mouth.

"Yeah," Kassian whispered, eyes rolling backwards and shutting as he slammed his cock into Boyd again. "Hell, yeah."

Boyd whimpered slightly, a low sound that betrayed his need for more.

Kassian pulled out and rammed into Boyd again, harder, and when Boyd cried out appreciatively, Kassian's lips once again twisted into a smile. His eyes still didn't open as he began fucking Boyd faster, harder; a staccato slapping sound of skin on skin that echoed throughout the room, only rivaled by the music that floated up the stairs.

Boyd began slamming back on Kassian's cock with short, harsh sounds escaping his mouth; a steady chant of "yes, yes, uh, uh, fuck, yes," that he panted into the sheets. Even then, it still didn't serve to muffle him entirely.

The feel of Kassian's cock searing into him was so intense that Boyd could do nothing but clutch the sheets and release guttural grunts and wild moans that only seemed to encourage Kassian.

One of Kassian's hands clutched Boyd's waist and the other tangled in the long blond hair that Kassian seemed to be obsessed with as he pounded Boyd's ass mercilessly. Boyd's eyes slid open and he couldn't help looking in the mirror again, watching Kassian's sweat-slicked muscles move behind him, watching the black ink of Kassian's tattoos shine in the dim light of the room as Kassian began uttering hoarse curse words.

"I told you I'd give it to you the way you fucking like it, kid," he growled, eyes open and drilling into Boyd's as their gazes met in the mirror. Kassian snapped his hips especially hard as if to prove his point and Boyd released a loud groan of pleasure.

"You like that?" Kassian demanded, voice husky and low, barely recognizable as he fucked Boyd mindless; harsh groans and pants escaped Kassian's mouth, although they were nothing to match Boyd's loud, demanding screams.

"Fuck yes," Boyd shouted in assent, digging his fingers into the sheets, the mattress, slamming back on Kassian with all his strength. "Don't fucking stop!"

Kassian rode his ass relentlessly, his cock filling Boyd to the core, pressing against every sensitive nerve that sent Boyd into a begging frenzy every time it hit a certain spot. Every deep thrust made Boyd feel out of his mind with pleasure and his sweaty body pushed back on Kassian's hard cock, desperate for more, desperate for that hard dick to just stay there-- to press against the spot that made him wild--

"Yes-- God, yes!"

Boyd came once again and just as explosively, the violence of it sending his mind reeling even though he hadn't once touched himself. His eyes were wide and partially unseeing, glazed with the strength of his orgasm-- but even then he couldn't stop slamming back on Kassian. That hard dick pounding into him felt too intense, too incredible--

Boyd kept moving, his spent cock doing nothing to slow him down, not abating his need to be fucked until Kassian couldn't fuck him anymore. Boyd's moans fell over each other, incoherent pleas tumbling from his lips as Kassian's body started to tighten up, as his cock slammed into Boyd with more urgency.

"Take that fucking dick," Kassian panted, his face twisted in pleasure as their fucking began to reach its climax, as his body pounded harder and harder, faster and faster. "Fuck, fuck, oh God, take my fucking cock," he groaned, lost in the moment, in the sex; almost seeming as though his mind was somewhere else, completely lost in a daze of mind-blowing pleasure.

"God, right fucking there!" Boyd screamed, tangling his hands in the sheets more tightly, crying out in abandon as Kassian's dick slammed into his prostate. "Jesus-- Fuck me right there!"

"Yeah... yeah... Oh fucking--!" Kassian threw his head back and shouted his pleasure, his hoarse voice echoing in the mostly empty room as he came hard in Boyd's ass. His fingers spasmed wildly and tightened on Boyd as he orgasmed and his expression was briefly lost to euphoria.

"Yes," Boyd growled as he felt Kassian come inside him, as he watched that muscular body in the mirror. He pressed his hips back until Kassian slid out of him and collapsed onto the bed with a low moan. Boyd dropped to the mattress soon after, eyes sliding closed as his body positively hummed with pleasure.

For a long moment the only sounds were their harsh panting and the slightly muffled thrum of bass from Team Sleep's song King Diamond blaring through the door.

"Goddamn," Kassian breathed finally, when his heartbeat slowed slightly.

Boyd's moist breath was caught between his open mouth and the sheets, heating the space beneath him until he rolled over onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "Fuck," he groaned appreciatively. "I can barely move..."

Kassian grunted and raised one arm, wiping it across his sweaty brow. "This is a good time for me to pass out," he said, stretching.

"Passing out isn't allowed, old man," Boyd said dryly, looking over at Kassian with a quirked eyebrow and a smirk playing on his lips. "You promised me pizza so I expect it." Kassian sighed loudly. "I wish there was a place around here that delivered."

Boyd made a sound of agreement then flipped over onto his stomach and rested his chin in one hand as he watched Kassian. "We could go out. What about Annie's?"

Kassian made a face. "I don't want to get dressed and wash up. So much work."

"We don't need to-- let's just grab a pizza and come back. It'll take ten minutes." Boyd raised his eyebrows and offered, "I'll drive."

"Hmmm." Kassian rubbed a hand against his stomach idly. "That doesn't sound too tragic, I guess. I am pretty hungry..."

"Good." Boyd pushed himself up and shoved Kassian good-naturedly on the shoulder. "Then get off your ass." He stood up and looked around for his clothes.

Kassian made a face and stood as well. He opened one of the drawers in the chest and pulled out a pair of dark jeans and put them on without bothering with underwear. He

idly watched Boyd get dressed before also taking out a long-sleeved sweater and throwing that on as well.

Boyd looked over as soon as he was dressed and the two of them headed toward the car. As Boyd drove them to Annie's Pizzeria, one of Kassian's local favorites due to their phenomenal thin crust pizza, Boyd found himself in a state of bemusement about the events of the day.

Part of him still felt disbelief over the fact that he and Kassian had not only had sex, but that it had also been so intense and hot.

But more than that, and most relieving to Boyd, he didn't feel that same sense of awkwardness he had with Thierry. If anything, he was surprised by how little had changed. Even when he'd been lying there in Kassian's bed, as strange as it was to realize Kassian and he had just had sex, it had somehow still felt... comfortable. Good.

Normal.

Even if he looked at Kassian's lips and remembered the intensity of the kisses that had made him groan with pleasure, even if he saw Kassian's hands and remembered the feel of those fingers on his dick and the helpless way he had thrust into them, even if he heard Kassian speak and remembered that sexy, low voice talking dirty into his ear...

Despite that, he still looked at Kassian and thought of him as a friend. He knew he could still hang around with Kassian as casually as before, that the sex hadn't interfered with their relationship at all, at least from Boyd's perspective. And given the fact that Kassian seemed as casual and comfortable around Boyd as ever, not to mention that Kassian was more accustomed to casual sex than Boyd was, Boyd knew the feeling would be mutual.

It felt good to experience such a casual relationship without any expectations, in or out of the bedroom.

Boyd didn't know why sex was so different with Kassian than Thierry, except that they'd become friends first and that there hadn't been any pressure on either side regarding decisions. The fact that he thought of Kassian only as a friend made everything seem less complicated and difficult. He didn't feel like he had to live up to anything with Kassian; he could just be himself and that was fine.

Boyd mused about the new aspect to his friendship with Kassian on the short ride to the pizzeria; by the time they arrived, he realized that overall, he was glad he'd happened to stop by Kassian's house tonight.

Annie's was pretty quiet for that time of night and as Boyd and Kassian walked inside, they noticed there were only a handful of other people in the restaurant. Kassian and Boyd headed toward the counter, where a bored-looking, dark-haired man seemed to wake up a little when he noticed them.

"Hey Pete," Kassian greeted casually, leaning against the counter with a grin. "How's it going?"

"It's going," Pete replied with a shrug, his eyes taking in Boyd's still-tousled hair and haphazard attire before swinging back to zero in on a particularly prominent hickey on Kassian's neck. It wasn't too surprising that Pete had noticed-- Boyd and Kassian both had the presence of two people who were well-fucked and neither of them cared enough to look more put-together.

"Fun night?" the cashier asked in the same bored tone.

Kassian just shrugged innocently. "Sure. It looks like you're having a blast yourself."

"Uh huh." Pete raised an eyebrow. "Business is slower than usual. I bet it's only a matter of time before this place closes down."

"You've been saying that for as long as I've been coming here," Kassian replied with a snort. "I think the only remaining pizza place on this side of town has a good chance of surviving the economy."

"Uh huh." Pete didn't look convinced. "The usual?"

"Yup." Kassian glanced at Boyd. "You want something else?"

Boyd shrugged. "A soda and I'm good."

"Give me some garlic knots, too," Kassian told Pete. "And another soda."

Pete nodded. "Give it twenty."

Kassian turned and walked to the back corner of the pizzeria, sitting down at one of the small tables. He stretched his long legs out in front of him as Boyd sat down across the

table. Kassian unzipped his jacket and looked around, noticing but not reacting to the fact that Pete wasn't the only one eyeballing them.

Kassian smirked and returned his gaze to Boyd. "Maybe we should have cleaned up better."

Boyd grinned; he felt sated and well-fucked and it put him in a great mood. "But then we wouldn't be the envy of the room..."

"True enough." Kassian put one elbow on the table and leaned his face against it, watching Boyd. "So you're cool with everything, then?"

Leaning back in his chair and sprawling his legs out beneath the table, accidentally bumping one of Kassian's feet in the process, Boyd tilted his head slightly to study Kassian. His expression was somewhat enigmatic and a small smile pulled at one side of his lips but he nodded without hesitation. "Surprisingly so."

"Good." Kassian nodded, appearing pleased. "You seemed to enjoy yourself. I wasn't sure if you would since you claimed Thierry was such a bore."

"Yeah, well; as it turns out, you two aren't exactly alike in the bedroom," Boyd said mildly.

"Yeah," Kassian agreed with a nod. "But you said you liked it all crazy style so I had some doubts at first."

"Well, I do. But I'd never experienced that kind of extended foreplay... I had no idea it could be like that." Boyd smirked. "And you're sufficiently rough so between the two, I definitely enjoyed myself."

Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd curiously. "So I take it Vega is rougher?"

"You know, you're the second person this week to ask me what Sin's like in bed," Boyd said in amusement.

"Oh really?" Kassian gave him an odd look. "Who was the other person?"

"Ryan Freedman," Boyd said, watching Kassian curiously. "Do you know him?"

"Not personally but I know who he is. Mostly everyone knows who he is because of his relationship to the late Marshal Connors, just like everyone knows who you are because

of your mom." Kassian didn't look too surprised by the information. "He's in your unit, right?"

Boyd nodded. "He's one of our R&D's."

Kassian considered Boyd for a long moment before saying, "I'm not trying to get the details about Everything Vega or anything, Boyd. I'm just curious about the difference between us since you mentioned it before about him and Thierry."

Boyd watched Kassian thoughtfully. He wasn't going to deny Kassian's request but he also wasn't going to say much about Sin, since he suspected Sin wouldn't appreciate it. "Sin and I were more likely to come out with bruises after having sex, yes," he said neutrally after a moment.

Kassian shook his head with a wry smile. "I'm not too shocked by that."
Boyd smirked lightly. "I didn't think you would be."

There was another brief silence and after awhile Kassian said, "Can I ask you something else?"

"Of course," Boyd said easily, leaning back in the chair and idly watching Kassian. Boyd's long blond hair was mussed and partially fell into his face, so he pushed it out of the way.

Kassian hesitated for a moment and raised his eyebrows at Boyd. "I know you don't owe Sin explanations anymore but I also know that you still want to be his friend. So I was wondering if you're going to regret all this if he finds out and gets pissed?"

Rather than answer immediately, Boyd took the time to actually consider the question. He did not intend to unnecessarily mention to Sin the fact that he'd had sex with Kassian, but if Sin were to find out or ask, Boyd wasn't going to lie.

Considering the fact that Sin hadn't seemed too impressed even with the idea of Boyd being friends with Kassian, Boyd couldn't imagine knowing they'd slept together would make Sin any happier. Then again, even when they'd been together, Sin had said he'd thought that Boyd could sleep with whoever he wanted so the fact that Boyd slept with Kassian months after the fact was something to be taken into account.

Regardless, even imagining Sin being angry about this later on, it didn't change Boyd's answer.

"No," Boyd said without a hint of uncertainty. "It's not his business who I sleep with and this has nothing to do with him. I do want to be his friend but we'll have to build toward even that since our relationship was always a little dysfunctional and abnormal. I doubt he'd be pleased about it but if that knowledge affected our friendship then it'll just prove that we wouldn't be ready to be friends yet."

Boyd shrugged and continued, "Since I'm willing to be his friend again even after he slept with someone else while involved with me, I should hope he'll be willing to be my friend if I slept with someone else after it was all said and done. Even if it's you. And beyond that, I've been enjoying spending time with you... I think it's good for me. So, regardless of how it affects my relationship with him, I won't regret it for how it affects me."

"Good," Kassian replied, satisfied. "It's pretty rare that I can find someone I'm so comfortable around, you know? I have friends, but... well, you know the deal. If us fucking around would in any way compromise us being friends I'd stop it, as I'm sure you would too."

"Yes, I would," Boyd said without hesitation. He paused and idly watched Kassian, a small smile playing at the edges of his lips as he quirked his eyebrows. "So does that mean you enjoyed yourself enough that you'd consider doing it again if it came up?"

"Hey, your order's ready," Pete called over to them.

Kassian nodded at Pete and stood up, although at first he just grinned down at Boyd with a wink. "You know it, kiddo."

"Good," Boyd said with a satisfied smirk as he stood and followed Kassian to the counter.

Chapter 32

The first few hours of the eighteen-hour flight were spent in silence that seemed absolutely deafening on the Agency jet. Typically agents flew commercially for transpacific or transatlantic flights, but the unit was unable to get anything going out to Hong Kong on such short notice. Due to the nature of the mission, Sin and Boyd were given clearance to fly out on one of the private jets before the small window passed in which their target would allegedly be in the city.

They sat across from each other quietly, Boyd flipping through his outline and occasionally writing notes in the margins and Sin staring out the window at the blackened sky. The silence was uncomfortable, awkward, and despite the fact that Sin had looked forward to seeing Boyd for his entire stay in the psychiatric unit, he now had the desire to be very far away.

His eyes absently strayed over to Boyd and he couldn't feel any distant form of satisfaction that they were near each other, that they were on a mission together, that things were apparently 'okay' between them, or at least that Boyd didn't despise him anymore.

At first Sin had felt so relieved by the embrace they'd shared in his room at the psychiatric center that he'd mistaken it for happiness. But as the days had turned into weeks and Sin went over every word shared between them, every detail of the night of the attack, the relief had slowly faded away and the possibility of happiness had all but vanished completely.

Things had changed; Boyd had said that they could still be friends. Just friends. Nothing else.

And judging by the silence between them, the way Boyd barely looked up at him as he focused on the mission outline, it was clear that even an alleged friendship wouldn't be exactly as it had been before. Boyd wasn't being cold, he wasn't being malicious, but there was a distance between them that had never been there before.

Sin looked away again and tried to ignore the intense feeling of disappointment that weighed on his shoulders.

He wanted to go back to the city, back to his apartment; he wanted to go anywhere but here, anywhere but to the hotel in the Mong Kok district of Kowloon, Hong Kong, where he would have to share a double room with Boyd and be in such close proximity.

Especially since they didn't know how long it would take them to track down and talk with Chen Jianjuo, a Di Zhi affiliate from mainland China who did business in Kowloon with the Chinese mafia on Di Zhi's behalf.

The mission was based on intel from Carhart's mysterious informant and Sin wished distantly that the intel was a lie, that Jianjun wouldn't be where it was claimed he was and that this would be discovered early on. That he and Boyd would be forced to return to the compound where Sin wouldn't have to look at his partner, his friend, his former lover, whatever they were now, and be constantly reminded of how badly things had been fucked up, how badly Sin had ruined it all.

It was one of the few times in his life that Sin honestly wish he'd blacked out the entire episode. He wished he'd stop replaying the scene in his mind, the entire night in his mind. He wished he could forget Ann's pale, frightened face, the gratitude mixed with overpowering guilt in her eyes, the mutual knowledge that this was the official end of any correspondence between them. The way he'd mechanically dismembered Philip's body and disposed of it.

He wished he could forget the out-of-control feeling of being in the world but not feeling like a part of it as the shadow in his brain had begun to push him out, out and away, urging him to forget this, not to remember it, not to see what he was doing. The way it didn't quite work as it usually did because as on edge as he'd been when he'd mindlessly and desperately gone to Boyd's house, he'd still been aware. Aware but a thread away from snapping completely; a thread that had unraveled as soon as Kassian had touched him.

Things would be easier if he didn't remember because now he was reminded of it every time he looked at Boyd's face. He was reminded of his hands around Boyd's throat, of Boyd's frightened eyes staring up at him as his face grew pale, lips blue; of Boyd's choked, desperate gasps and his slowly slipping fingers; of the way Boyd's feet had stopped kicking and those golden brown eyes had started to grow distant, glazed.

When Sin looked at Boyd, he was reminded of the horror he had felt as he had come back to himself; of the overwhelming guilt that had burned through him like fire as he'd fled the house and had begged Carhart to just end it all for him.

If he didn't remember, he wouldn't be reminded of the confusion that had raced through him for weeks afterward as he'd wondered just what in the hell Kassian had been doing there anyway...

Sin looked at Boyd again and tried to ignore the desire to touch him, the desire to kiss him and embrace him again, an almost embarrassing desire to beg him to change his mind about all this and just give Sin a second chance. But alongside those almost desperate needs were irritation and suspicion as he asked himself over and over if Boyd had already replaced him so easily-- and with Kassian, of all people.

Sin ran a hand through his hair and masked his feelings, put on the stoic face he'd worn for years before they'd met, and said nothing.

There was nothing to say anyway; he didn't have any ideas to contribute. This mission was more Boyd's than his; it was all talking and negotiation, an attempt to get Jianjun to set up an appointment with the higher ups in Di Zhi, to convince him that the Agency wanted to work with Di Zhi again now that their mutual enemy of Janus had grown so strong. It was all Boyd's department and all Sin had to do was act as back up.

Boyd looked up finally, honey brown eyes calm and unreadable. "What exactly was the connection Carhart mentioned you had with Xu Xiaolian? Is it something we'll be able to use?"

The sound of his voice in the silent cabin was almost startling but Sin just shrugged and continued to stare out the window, "I doubt it. I haven't seen her since she became leader of Di Zhi."

"What was your interaction prior to that?" Boyd persisted. He sat with his back straight and his hands rested on the mission profile in front of him. His expression was mostly neutral but not unkind as he watched Sin. "Would it be better or worse to mention your name?"

"Don't know. She tried to befriend me as a child but the last time I saw her, she gave me this," Sin replied dully, indicating the thick scar that stretched across his throat. "It could go either way."

Boyd raised his eyebrows slightly, gaze falling to study the scar on Sin's neck. His eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtfully, and Sin could still read Boyd's expression well enough to see a hint of surprise in his eyes. "Why, what happened?"

"Nothing interesting, it was over a decade ago. I was sent on a mission to collect data from a Di Zhi base in Beijing and Xiaolian found me. She got pissed off, called me a traitor and a spy, and we tried to kill each other. It was a good fight."

Sin thought back to that day and remembered the way he and Xiaolian had taunted each other during the fight, how they'd toyed with each other, drawing out the fight, almost killing each other but never actually doing it. It was almost a fond memory even though she'd nearly cut his throat; she'd always seemed like the female version of him.

"Hmm." Boyd leaned back in his seat and seemed to consider that. He let his legs straighten in front of him and he rearranged the folder on his lap when it started to slip. "How did you meet her as a child?"

"Through my father. Even while in the Agency, he continued to work on the side with his old associates in black market dealing weapons and so on. The Agency encouraged it because he was able to hold ties with people the Agency couldn't get a foot in with." Sin shrugged. "In the past his old organization had weapons dealings with the Triad out of Hong Kong and he continued to hold ties with the Triad, who in turn had ties to Di Zhi. Because of that, I met her when she and I were quite young."

Boyd nodded and briefly dropped his gaze to the mission notes, as if remembering something he'd read previously, before looking at Sin again. He seemed to calmly take in the information and although he looked partially intrigued, it was difficult to tell if it was simply for the mission. His tone remained calm and mostly professional when he spoke. "How well would you say you knew her?"

"She's very similar to myself. I understood her, to an extent. She tried to befriend me in her own way and while we weren't friends ever, there was a mutual acknowledgment of two children in the same situation. I believe she was fond of me because of it and that's why she was so angry to find me stealing intel from her father's base." Sin shook his head and looked at Boyd again. "I don't know how useful this is to you. I haven't seen her in many years. She might not even remember me but if she does, there is a chance that she will be intrigued to learn of my involvement."

"So you don't think she'll have held a grudge?"

"Maybe. I don't know. If she did, she'd be more likely to want to fight me again than ignore my existence completely."

"Hmm." Boyd fell silent a moment as he considered the information and then he simply nodded. "That's good to know. Thank you."

Sin said nothing and just shook his head. The desire to get away from the situation was getting stronger.

The same somewhat uncomfortable silence fell between them and at first it almost seemed like they would go the rest of the trip without either speaking again. But then the sound of paper shuffling against each other broke the moment when Boyd flipped his mission profile closed and set it on the seat next to him. His eyes were mostly calm as he studied Sin but there was something else there as well, something a little deeper and more indefinable.

There was only the slightest hint of hesitation before Boyd said, "Sin, I'm not... trying to pry into your life. But... How are you feeling lately?"

His tone was a little more approachable than before but there was still a faint sense of distance he was keeping, something that made his posture stiffer than usual, his eyes a bit harder to read. Despite that, he seemed truly interested in Sin's response, judging by the way his gaze didn't so much as flicker on his partner's face.

Sin didn't look at Boyd and he shrugged stiffly. Apparently asking how one was doing was considered prying in Boyd's definition of friendship. It was not an optimistic beginning to whatever they were supposed to be now. "Wonderful."

Boyd hesitated again, although this time it seemed as though he wasn't quite sure what to make of Sin's responses. "I mean Doctor Król. How did that go?"

Sin nearly had the automatic response of, 'Do you really care?', but he stopped himself. What purpose would it serve to make the already awkward situation even worse? Boyd was distant now but if Sin began being outright rude, would Boyd even bother attempting conversation anymore or would he revert back to the coldness that he'd defaulted to in the past?

None of this was Boyd's fault, anyway; regardless of whether or not Sin liked the way things were going, it was his own behavior and actions that had brought them to this point.

"He's an interesting man," he replied finally.

"Do you feel the sessions helped?" Boyd asked after a moment, as if waiting for Sin to continue.

Sin frowned slightly and really thought about the question before answering. After awhile he just shrugged again. "I'm not sure yet. He's a good doctor as far as I can see

and I get along with him generally well. The first thing he did was dispose of my old files. He wanted nothing to do with another doctor's work. But as far as whether or not I'm improving in other ways? I guess we'll see."

"That's good to hear," Boyd said with a nod, watching Sin without any indication of judgment. His eyebrows drew down slightly, contemplatively, before he asked, "Is there anything you need me to know? Something that may trigger an episode or an action I can take to help you if it happens?"

Boyd paused very briefly, looking at Sin with a forthright expression. "And I want you to know I'm not asking this expecting that something would happen, and I'm not bringing it up to assign blame or make anything more uncomfortable. But, honestly, I was completely taken off guard last time and wasn't much help to you or anyone. If anything, I think I just made it worse. But since my usual approach didn't work... I realize trying to understand dissociation is a long process but if you're aware of anything pertinent, then I'd like to know ahead of time what I should do to help if something occurs."

Sin looked away from Boyd once again, this time his expression completely shuttered and the inflection he'd briefly allowed into his tone disappeared. "I don't know what to tell you. I don't know why that happened the way it did. The only way to ensure I don't hurt you in that state is to stay away from me."

"I'm not concerned about you hurting me, I'm concerned about helping you and ensuring the mission goes smoothly," Boyd said honestly. "Assuming you were on medication at the time, I thought if you knew what had triggered that and if it was something that could potentially happen here, and if you'd happened to learn anything new from Doctor Król about what may help you, then it would be good to know. That's all. If there's nothing new to know then that's understandable."

Sin just shook his head, trying to keep his expression blank but unable to stop the way his fingers automatically tightened in a fist. He'd thought about explaining things to Boyd, of telling him about Ann and Philip and that bloody night... but he didn't. He didn't even think at this point that Boyd would have any interest now that it was over and done.

"What happened that night won't happen again," he replied tonelessly. "Your mission will be fine."

Without giving Boyd a chance to reply, Sin stood up and walked to the back of the cabin where he entered the lavatory. He leaned against the shut door and closed his eyes, willing the sudden suffocating pressure on his chest to release.

He wanted this to be over. He'd told himself that maybe things would be okay like this at first, maybe things wouldn't be so bad as long as they could still be friends, but even after realizing how wrong that was, how impossible it was for him to do that, he'd thought he could try anyway. But this wasn't what Sin had had in mind.

Even before Monterrey, their friendship had never been like this. This was something unfamiliar but not entirely so because it reminded him of how it'd been when they first met, before the friendship had existed at all. Except back then the distance hadn't meant anything because he hadn't known what it felt like to hold Boyd, to kiss him, to confide in him, to be with him in every possible way. Back then he hadn't known it was possible to do and feel those things; then, it hadn't feel like such a blatant rejection.

But now the distance hurt intensely.

The words had been simple but the way Boyd politely inquired about his health as if they were strangers, the fact that even then it was partially for the sake of the mission, it was even worse than Boyd not talking to him at all. At least the angry silence that Boyd had graced him with during training had shown that he still cared enough to be angry.

Now it just seemed like there wasn't a point to them speaking at all if there was going to be such a great space between them, a space that made it impossible for Sin to forget the fact that Boyd's feelings for him and Boyd's attitude toward him had entirely changed. It was so disheartening that Sin couldn't help wondering what the point of anything was. He felt misled by Boyd's words in the psych ward and he felt foolish for thinking things could return to any semblance of normality but even so, the disappointment was crushing.

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Langham Place had undergone some changes from the last time Sin had seen it. As a child, he remembered the beginnings of talks about the project, an attempt to clean up Portland Street, the well known red-light district of Hong Kong. He remembered how a few years later, after he'd left that massage parlor and the dirty apartments above it, his father had ended up taking him right back to this same street numerous times to do

whatever underhanded business he was involved in at the time. Right before Emilio's death was when they'd made their last trip here.

That had been after the grand opening of Langham Place, back when the war first started and people were thinking the mass array of bombings that had crossed the globe a few years prior had been an isolated incident. People were still hopeful, thinking the whole mess would be cleaned up soon, still thinking idealistically about the future, and so Langham Place had been completed and the structure gleamed above Portland Street in all its shining glory.

The luxury hotel hadn't done much to change the environment of the area or budge the sex trade but it'd seemed like a symbol of prosperity and good fortune regardless.

It was still gleaming now as Sin and Boyd entered the hotel, but it was obvious that things had changed dramatically. The hotel wasn't even entirely a hotel anymore; the owners had rented out numerous floors as offices to make ends meet after the clientele of the five star hotel had slowed down to a trickle. The attached mall was now filled with wholesale and bargain stores instead of the trendy shops that had once been there.

Sin wondered idly how much longer any of it would remain running. The idea of such a massive center falling into disrepair like mostly everything else in the area was kind of pathetic but it wouldn't be the first time it happened. He could just imagine all the little shops and stores with their neon signs announcing massages, saunas and one-woman brothels continuing on strongly while a deserted and dilapidated Langham Place loomed in the background like an unforgettable reminder of how nothing would ever change.

The employees spoke English and so Sin maintained his distance as Boyd got their room and key. The staff went out of their way to be overly helpful, as if their good work ethic would ensure that Sin and Boyd would return and bring enough friends to fill all the empty rooms. However, since Sin and Boyd had very little luggage, there was not much for the staff members to do.

The Agency had booked them a room with two King-sized beds and a kitchenette. Sin had no idea why they would have use for such a thing and he hoped that it wasn't a sign that this mission was likely to drag on for an extended period of time.

Boyd paused just inside the room once the door was shut behind them. He looked around with slightly raised eyebrows, seeming impressed despite himself. "Somehow I doubt we'll ever get such nice accommodations again," he observed mildly.

Sin dropped his backpack on the floor at the foot of one bed and walked to the window, looking down at Mong Kok. "I doubt this place will survive much longer anyway."

Boyd set his bag on the other bed and looked toward the window, although he didn't walk over. "Have you ever been here before?"

Sin squinted down at the street that was seven floors below them. "I was conceived and born about two blocks away from this hotel."

Boyd raised his eyebrows in surprise and, after a moment, walked over near Sin to look out the window. His reflection was contemplative and a little pensive as he stared below. "How long has it been since you've been back here?"

Sin looked down at Boyd, thrown off by the question. Whenever he thought he had Boyd figured out, when he thought he understood where they stood, something changed. "I haven't been to Kowloon for many years. The last time I was here I was with my father."

Boyd nodded, still staring at the streets spread out below them. He was quiet at first but then he looked up at Sin, his gaze mostly unreadable but not unkind. "Is it going to be hard for you? Being back here?"

"I don't know." It began to mist slightly outside, the neon lights of Portland Street blurring a little outside the window. "It should be. I thought it would be but I don't really feel anything."

Sin shrugged and stepped back from the window, moving to his bag which he sat on the bed. He was actually planning to visit the parlor his mother worked in but he didn't see the need to fill Boyd in on that piece of information yet. He'd probably think it would endanger the mission.

At first, Boyd continued to stare outside but then he turned, watching Sin from across the room. "Sin..." He hesitated, sliding his hands in his back pockets and looking to the side with a quiet sigh.

"Earlier, you made a comment about how my mission would be fine." He looked over at Sin again, his expression serious and a little uncomfortable. "And I just... don't want any misunderstandings. I do care about this mission but only insofar as it affects us. Even if this is primarily my mission, you're on it; so if something goes wrong..."

Boyd shook his head and slid his hands out of his pockets, crossing his arms at his stomach instead. "I know how precarious your position is. I don't want anything to happen that can negatively affect your status. I don't know what you're thinking, but... before anything can happen like it always seems to, I don't want you thinking I'm asking for the mission. I'm asking for you. We're here in your hometown and..." He trailed off briefly before finishing, "Just know that I'm not here to judge your life based on how it will affect the mission."

Sin stopped unloading his bag and looked at Boyd with a frown. "I don't know what to think about you or the things you say anymore. I don't know what to expect and I don't know where we stand. You said you wanted to still be my friend but then you've been acting like we're barely acquaintances, like I could be any random agent you're on a mission with."

Boyd studied Sin's expression then sighed again, quietly, and walked over to his bed. He sat on the edge, watching Sin with an expression that was forthright yet still seemed troubled. "Look... I really think we need to talk about everything. I know I made the decision to break it off but whatever we had, we were in it together, so we both need the chance to speak. I'm tired of miscommunication between us and I'm sure you are too. Are you fine with talking now? I don't want to suddenly decide we'll talk about this if you don't want to."

Sin's gaze shifted to his bag again but this time he didn't take anything else out. He didn't really know what else there was to say about everything that had happened but for the sake of understanding the situation and knowing exactly how all of this was going to play out, Sin nodded. "We can talk."

Boyd nodded. "Good."

He paused briefly, as if now that it was time to talk, he wasn't quite sure how to start. He shifted, pushing himself back on the bed a little further to get more comfortable. He crossed his legs and rested his arms at his sides, watching Sin seriously.

"I wasn't lying when I told you I wanted to be friends. But it's really important to me that we do this right. I want the foundation to be strong each step of the way-- otherwise, if something goes wrong, it can all fall apart and we'd have to start all over at the beginning again. We need something we can always fall back on. Before we can even think of being friends, we need to be sure we can function properly, professionally, as work partners."

Sin looked up and gave Boyd an almost incredulous look, eyes narrowing slightly. "So I'm supposed to just pretend other aspects of our relationship never existed and act like we're just partners? It doesn't work that way, sorry."

"I didn't say we had to forget anything," Boyd said, shaking his head. "I just mean that I want to make sure our emotions won't keep interfering with anything. My measure of success for that would be if, despite everything, we can at the very least function as normal work partners while on missions. It doesn't mean we have to be cold toward each other or pretend the last two years didn't exist."

Sin frowned and ran a hand through his hair, feeling agitated by the conversation even though it had barely started. "But you're not behaving towards me the way I've seen you behave with other people. You're friends with Ryan and he's also our partner and you don't talk to him in that tone of voice, you don't act removed and distant to him like you've been acting to me. You're treating me like some distant fucking acquaintance and if that's the way you want it to be then just say that but don't tell me that it isn't so."

"That's because it's not the same with Ryan-- We don't have the same history." Boyd sighed again and looked away with a troubled expression. "Sin, this is really hard for me, as I'm sure it is for you. I'm trying to do the right thing but I've never been in this position before. I'm not trying to piss you off but it's very... difficult for me to not go all one way or the other. So right now I'm erring on the side of caution."

Sin went back to unpacking his bag, removing the few weapons he'd brought. "Then you shouldn't have visited me when I was locked up. Or at least you shouldn't have behaved the way you did. It was misleading, extremely so."

At first, Boyd was silent, seeming contemplative and almost a little guilty as he watched Sin's movements. "I didn't want you to die without seeing you," he said softly. "I didn't..." He trailed off briefly and his eyebrows drew down slightly, gaze darkening. "When I found out you were demanding termination, I just wanted you to know my side, in case any part of your decision was based on me. When you hugged me... I didn't know if I'd ever see you again, I was so worried, I just-- I couldn't not respond..."

"I'm not talking about that," Sin said, raising his voice and briefly looking over at Boyd with narrowed eyes before turning his gaze back to his belongings. "I'm talking about the things you said. When you said them. That we should be friends, that we were okay 'like this,' while you had your arms wrapped around me. And yet I was supposed to be prepared for the way you've been acting on this mission?"

Boyd opened his mouth but didn't speak immediately; the guilt in his eyes flashed more strongly and he closed his mouth, fingers curling briefly and eyebrows drawing down. He was silent for a full breath before he said quietly, "You're right. I'm sorry." His gaze was heavy and pensive on Sin. "I didn't think of it that way."

Sin just shook his head silently and continued what he was doing, his movements stiffer and shoulders becoming more tense.

"Sin..." Boyd was quiet again for a moment before he sighed and ran a hand briefly over his eyes. "Look... I do want to be friends."

He dropped his hand and met Sin's eyes steadily, his tone forthright. "I do. I want to be able to do the things we used to before it all got so complicated. So when I said we were okay like this, I meant it was okay if we ended up as friends. It's just, I'm concerned about going into it too fast, reverting to the way it used to be in ways we shouldn't. I want it to be right every step of the way. I didn't communicate that well in that room, so I'm sorry. I didn't mean to mislead you but I didn't lie-- I do want that again. I just think we should be careful how we go about it in the beginning."

Sin was quiet for a moment, his gaze focused blankly on the bed as his hands stilled. He let the words soak into him, the confirmation that he really had misinterpreted Boyd's intentions in the psych ward and he closed his eyes for a moment, wishing it wasn't so, wishing Boyd wasn't so resolute and determined. "I just don't understand why it has to be that way. I don't understand why we have to start over from scratch when you know that there's no such thing as a clean slate with us."

"Because I don't trust us to make the right choice when the other is involved," Boyd said plainly, watching Sin almost sadly. "Because I really want something healthy and balanced for us and even if it seems impossible, I think it's important to try. And I think our past-- your decisions based on me, my reactions to you, the way we treat each other-- I think it shows we were never strong enough for each other."

"Believe me, I know that," Sin scoffed, not bothering to hide the self-loathing in his voice. He turned away from the bed and walked to the kitchen area of the large room, needing to do something other than stand and stare down at his gun. "I'm not strong enough for anything. That was made blatantly clear in the past several months."

His gaze focused on the mini refrigerator and he opened it to find an assortment of beverages, alcoholic and non; he pulled out a bottle of tequila.

"Yes, you are," Boyd said without a hint of doubt in his voice. "You're an incredibly strong person on your own. But when it comes to us, we both have too many fears and vulnerabilities. As far as that goes, between the two of us, I've probably been the weaker one when it comes to our relationship. So don't think I'm trying to blame you."

"The weaker one?" Sin asked doubtfully, taking a short glass off the wire rack and pouring some of the tequila in it. "You seem to have no trouble getting on with your life and I'm a fucking wreck. I thought I could deal with us being friends but the idea of things never being able to go back to the way they were before--"

Sin stopped talking and downed his drink in one gulp. "Whatever. Just forget it. It doesn't matter anymore."

"It hasn't been easy for me either; I've just been making a concentrated effort." Boyd's gaze was intense on Sin and he seemed to be thinking about something but then he just shook his head again, very slightly. "I think... the problem is we were both thinking of each other as everything in one-- partner, friend, lover-- and we didn't have anyone else, so when that person was gone, suddenly we were at a loss."

"I don't know what you or Carhart expect me to do or how to act. I don't have anyone else and I don't want anyone else." Sin poured another drink, not meeting Boyd's gaze. "You have your promotion and Ryan and Kassian apparently, and I've got a job I hate at an organization that hates me, and alcohol."

"My promotion is bullshit and I only have other people because I've been putting myself out there to them," Boyd said frankly. "I realize you're in a lot more of a difficult position than I am, but it would help you to have some other friends. Ryan would be your friend. I'm sure others would too. It would be good for you to have someone else to lean on in case something happens to me."

Sin gave Boyd a scathing look. "Yeah, I'll jump right on that train."

Boyd sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to make light of your situation or how hard that would be. But I just... I'm trying to help. I don't know what you want me to say. I honestly think that would be good for you." He looked a bit at a loss himself.

"Otherwise... This is just... it's really hard," Boyd continued, tone honest. "If I'm all you have, that's not good for you. It's stressful for you and makes things worse when you're trying to become stable, because I'm not always a stable person myself. And how do you think it makes me feel to never know if something small or large I do will so

negatively affect you? I can't keep being the only person you have, not when your position is so precarious, not with the new regime coming. I'm worried... and I don't ever want to be a factor in your death."

"Well it's not going to happen," Sin replied gloomily, swallowing the drink. He knew that the entire situation was his fault but the idea of Boyd wanting him to go out and try to befriend people who despised him just to get him off Boyd's back was disheartening. Was he just a burden now?

"I'm aware of the fact that my issues put pressure on you and I wish it wasn't that way. Maybe it's better for you that you don't be around me at all because of that, maybe you're right and Carhart's right, but it isn't going to make me move on past this any easier and I'm not going to go out and try to find people to be friends with. I thought you understood me and my situation better than that by now."

"That's why I thought it would be easier on both of us to be professional. And you're ignoring the fact that there are some people who are on your side, even if it's not many. Those are who I'm talking about." Boyd tilted his head toward the bed, eyes sliding closed as he rubbed at his temples, as if he was getting a headache. "Look... I've thought about this a lot. But one of the reasons..."

He looked up at Sin again. "For months, you were dealing with incredibly serious issues that could literally be life or death for you, me, anyone around you... Every moment I spent next to you not realizing what was happening, I failed you by not noticing and you failed me by not telling me. The fact that despite everything you didn't trust me with something even that serious, that if anything you specifically hid it from me--"

Sin winced and his fingers tightened around the glass guiltily.

Boyd shook his head again. "I know it wasn't with malicious intent but that doesn't affect our relationship any less. How can we immediately return to the same level of trust as partners, let alone as friends? How do I know you aren't lying to me or hiding something because you've decided ahead of time I can't be trusted with it? And how can you trust me as a partner, let alone a friend, if even in the situation you found yourself you didn't believe you could just talk to me?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry for the way things happened. I don't know what else to say about it." Sin shook his head, wishing he really did have more words, wishing he could say something to make the situation better or more understandable but all he could say was, "I was just afraid of losing you."

"I know you were-- that's the point." Boyd's hands curled, a shift of sadness and resolution crossing his eyes and turning hard lines on his shoulders. "I've been afraid of losing you too, before. That's why I was an idiot with Jessica-- why I didn't talk to you when I should have, because I didn't want to lose what we had. And when things fall apart around us, either you give up and make self-destructive decisions or I react emotionally and do something stupid that could hurt or kill others, especially you. I know now that we just can't be any other way, not unless something significant changes within us individually and together. And I know that I'm not strong enough to stop once I start with you... that if we were together again right now, nothing would have changed; it would only get worse."

It was almost an echo of what Carhart had said to Sin weeks ago and it only served to emphasize that it was probably true. Sin couldn't deny it, he couldn't deny that Boyd brought out the best in him but also had the ability to bring out the worst.

He knew that he depended on Boyd too much; he knew how terrible it was that a cool glance and a distant tone could make him feel like he was falling apart but Sin didn't know how to get past the desire to be with Boyd anyway. He didn't know how to give up, how to move on; he didn't know if he could and Sin wished, not for the first time, that he'd had the foresight of this all in the very beginning; if he had, he never would have allowed himself to get so close to Boyd or anyone at all.

After all they'd been through, after everything that had happened to get to the point of them being together, none of it apparently mattered anymore. They were right back at square one because of his own stupidity and now he was left with nothing. He felt like a poor, homeless kid who'd been briefly taken off the street and given a home, to feel content and secure and connected for the first time in his life-- only to be abruptly thrown back to the streets, told to find that safety and comfort somewhere else.

It would have been easier to have never experienced it in the first place; if so, it wouldn't feel like such a loss to not have it anymore.

"I understand," Sin replied finally.

Boyd sighed again and looked distractedly at his bag, as if he was considering unpacking, but instead he leaned forward, arms resting on his knees as he watched Sin. "For what it's worth, I'm not blaming you that this all happened. I think we both really needed each other in our own way and I think there were some great times. But even if all that hadn't happened with Ann, something else would've occurred eventually with the

same result. It was probably inevitable, just as our getting together may have been inevitable as well. And I know you're going to think I'm wrong or only thinking of myself when I say this, but I think it will be better for us as individuals in the end, too, if we don't get dragged down by this and instead use it to grow stronger."

"I'm curious as to how you're doing that," Sin commented evenly, finally looking up at Boyd. "By reaching out to other people? To Kassian?"

Boyd's gaze stilled on Sin and he grew quiet a moment. "Over time, I've become friends with a few people. Kassian happens to be one of them, yes."

"I see." Sin stared at Boyd and thought about that night, about Kassian walking into the house and being obviously familiar with it, being so sure that he belonged there and that Sin didn't. It caused something in Sin to twist and he couldn't help asking abruptly, "Are you fucking him?"

Boyd seemed a little taken off guard by the question. He paused, his solemn gaze shifting across Sin's face to settle on his eyes. When he spoke, his tone was truthful. "We're friends and we have no feelings for each other. I promise you it's pure coincidence that I became friends with someone with such a history with you. But I don't want to lie to you, Sin. Yes, I've had sex with him."

For a moment Sin had to repeat the words in his head for it to really get through. He'd wondered about it since that night, he'd wondered why Kassian was acting so familiar, why he was there so late, why they were together. But even then Sin had never really thought that Boyd would say that it was true.

Sin stared down at the glass and realized that he'd crushed it in his hand. Little pieces of glass stuck to his skin but he didn't even feel pain from it; he was too focused on the fact that Boyd's admission had all but knocked the wind out of him.

Of all people, why Kassian? Why?

Sin looked at Boyd again and for the first time since everything had happened the desire, the longing-- all of it was gone. It was like looking at someone and seeing them for the first time and not really understanding anything about them at all. And he didn't.

Sin kept hearing Boyd's angry words, the accusations, everything that had been said in the argument and he couldn't understand why. Boyd had said that if Sin really loved him, he wouldn't have wanted to have sex with anyone else but now Boyd was fucking

Kassian. So did that mean his feelings for Sin had vanished? Gone up in smoke with the relationship that was so unhealthy and bad?

And as much as the idea of that hurt, even though it made Sin's throat tighten uncomfortably, he couldn't help the anger that started to radiate through him as well. Of all people, why did it have to be the person Sin hated more than anyone? The person who made him feel low and stupid and insignificant? If Boyd didn't even have feelings for Kassian, why would he pick him of all people?

Sin didn't reply. He walked to the bed, movements stiff and jerky, not looking at Boyd or the hand that was trickling blood, and began shoving his stuff back into the bag.

"Sin..." Boyd watched him, his eyebrows drawing down, his mouth twitching very faintly into a frown. He watched Sin closely and as his gaze flicked past the blood, past Sin's expression, a hint of disquiet entered his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I don't know," Sin replied as he shoved his gun into the waistband of his jeans at the small of his back. His hands were trembling slightly and he had to make a concentrated effort to not let the anger and resentment into his voice. "Leaving, it seems."

"Where?" Boyd asked, automatically glancing out the window.

"I don't know," Sin repeated, shrugging his bag on one shoulder and striding quickly to the door. "Call me when you're ready for the mission."

"Sin," Boyd said again, starting to shift into a stand. "This was never meant to hurt--"

The door shut before Boyd could finish the sentence.

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Sin stared down at the damp ground as he strode away from the hotel. He watched how the neon lights reflected on the wet, slick sidewalks and he didn't look up or meet anyone's eyes as he automatically wound his way through the streets.

He moved past the shops and markets, the brothels with the yellow signs in front of the doors advertising the available girls and prices, his feet moving without him telling them where to go. Even though Sin absently knew where they were taking him, he didn't stop it; he just needed to get away. The idea of spending an unknown amount of nights, of days, in that room with Boyd was too much to bear.

A confusing mixture of emotions clotted his throat and Sin exhaled slowly, trying to calm himself but his hands kept shaking, his heart kept pounding, and he really wanted to hit someone. He wanted to inflict violence on someone, to see them bleed, to see them writhe in pain and just fucking die. His mind automatically supplied images of Kassian as Sin turned down Shantung Street and it only caused the anger to intensify.

He stopped walking abruptly and looked around, automatically recognizing the stores, the shape of the signs, the neon yellow boxes in the windows above the stores that indicated a whorehouse.

Sin looked away from the lit-up stores and his gaze fell on a dilapidated building with fading signs; a building that appeared to have been abandoned for awhile.

The sign in Chinese characters announced a massage parlor and was unlit and filthy but it still crossed the front of the store. The yellow sign indicating available girls still hung outside the door even though it was barely readable. The fact that the building hadn't been resold yet was a sign of the struggling economy or an indication that it'd been abandoned fairly recently.

The kitchen supplies store that had been there since his childhood was next door to the brothel, still open and lit up, and he walked inside before he even knew why.

There was a young girl sweeping the small sales floor and an older lady sitting behind a counter. The woman's gaze fell on Sin as he entered and she raised her eyebrows at him, likely thinking he was a tourist and not a native of the neighborhood.

"*The parlor next door,*" he said in rough Cantonese, hoping he could speak it well enough to make sense. His mother had come from mainland China and had always spoken to him strictly in Mandarin despite the fact that the dialect wasn't largely spoken in Hong Kong. "*When did it close?*"

"*Why do you ask, boss?*" the lady asked, not looking very impressed with his language skills. "*There's plenty of places around here for you.*"

Sin looked at the girl who had stopped sweeping and was now watching him curiously. They likely thought he was some tourist looking to get laid, who was too stupid to realize there were dozens of other brothels in the area. "*I knew a girl who worked there a long time ago. Her name was Liu Lien.*"

"Ahhh." The lady shrugged her bony shoulders but gave him a long look. *"It closed last year sometime. Cai Zhen died and nobody bought it since. Business is bad lately, you know."*

Sin stared at the lady. *"Wong Cai Zhen?"*

The old woman sat back in her seat and stared at Sin hard. *"Yes, that's her."*

Sin turned and walked out without further comment. The name Wong evoked something in him, something unpleasant and uncomfortable that mixed with the swirl of feelings that was already threatening to choke him, but even then, he didn't have the same reaction he would have expected.

He looked around briefly before approaching the door at the side of the parlor's main entrance. The massage parlor had been nothing but a front for what the business had really been. Although prostitution had always been legal in Hong Kong, it was illegal for so many women to actually live together in a whorehouse for fear of ties to organized crime and Triad activity. Because of this, there was typically a rotation of different girls at the other brothels in the area.

The girls went to the brothels to work but they didn't live there and the girls who did conduct business from their homes likely put out ads for their services. Ms. Wong had gotten around it, though, by 'renting' the rooms above the parlor to the girls who worked there. It was a brilliant move on her part and had allowed her a steady number of girls who were always available, which opened the door for repeat customers and regular clientele, while still offering legitimate massages to the tourists who didn't actually want extra perks.

It didn't take much effort for Sin to pick the lock and before Sin really even knew what he was doing, he was entering the building and mindlessly taking the steps two at a time as he ascended the grimy staircase that led to the apartments.

The main room looked the same as it had many years ago, even in the dark. It had the same sagging furniture and sad-looking fake plants. The set up had changed somewhat but Sin still remembered sitting in the corner by the window, going over the English his mother insisted he learn as he read the books that had been stacked haphazardly on a side table; reading material for the clients who were willing to wait.

Sin walked slowly down the hallway, dragging his fingers along the wall, and looked into the open doors of what were supposed to be individually rented out rooms. They were

empty, deserted and stripped of everything; most likely by the girls who had inhabited them.

He stopped at the room at the end of the hall and walked in without hesitation. It was empty now and he couldn't help wondering if the girl who'd lived in it recently had been told the story of Liu Lien, the young woman from mainland China who'd been sent to Hong Kong by her parents to make money for the family; the girl who'd gone absolutely insane before her short life had ended, often taking out her psychotic frustrations on her young son.

He wondered if Ms. Wong had ever recounted the scene of Lien's death; her pale underweight body looking almost peaceful on the bed as her eight-year-old son sat by her side calmly, not looking at all disturbed or concerned with the decidedly blue tint of his mother's mouth.

Sin stared at the spot where her bed would have been and he expected himself to begin having flashbacks; he expected himself to start shuddering, flinching away from the scene, recalling the way Ms. Wong had dragged him away in horror and locked him once again in the cellar beneath the parlor for lack of anything better to do with him.

But Sin felt nothing.

He felt detached from the scene, unaffected by it, relatively unmoved.

It was surprising, almost startling, and Sin didn't really know what he'd expected to gain from coming here. Maybe to test himself? To see if the medication was working? If his anxiety was under control or if he'd freak out so much he'd send himself into an episode...

But even now that it wasn't happening, he didn't know if it was a sign of his doctor's good work or if it was a sign that he was too preoccupied with Boyd and Kassian to care.

Suddenly, the anger returned with a vengeance, flooding through him viciously and without control, and Sin's fist went flying into the wall before he could stop himself.

"Fuck you!" He didn't even realize the words were out of his mouth as he began shouting over and over, "Fuck you! Fuck you both!"

His hand slammed into the wall repeatedly until his knuckles bled and the wall looked like someone had tried to demolish it. Even then he didn't stop. His breath came hard and his thoughts raced; even though he knew this was stupid and childish, he also knew that if he didn't take out his aggression here, alone and on an inanimate object, someone else would suffer later.

Thoughts ran through his head wildly, angry accusations and questions, and Sin was barely keeping himself from crying the entire time.

Was this some kind of punishment? Would Boyd do that? It didn't seem like something he would do but then why?

Why go to someone who Boyd knew had such a bad history with Sin? Why turn to him as soon as they'd broken up? Was Kassian such a big improvement? Was he so much better? Was he easier to talk to, more adept at understanding, better looking, better in bed? Maybe Kassian didn't have as much emotional baggage, maybe Boyd appreciated someone normal; someone so unlike Sin.

"I fucking hate you," Sin whispered harshly, eyes squeezing shut as he finally stopped swinging and took a few steps back, sliding down the opposite wall.

Was he so much of a failure that Boyd couldn't help going to the person who was everything Sin wasn't? Did he think so badly of their relationship that he went to the person who was the antithesis of everything Sin?

Did he not fucking care how this would make Sin feel or did he not give a shit anymore? Had he banished every fond feeling so thoroughly that it hadn't even occurred to him that fucking Kassian would make Sin feel like someone had just stabbed him through the heart? That he'd feel like Boyd was confirming what everyone else always said; that Kassian was everything Sin was supposed to be yet wasn't, because he was just a fuck-up, a failure.

Sin took deep breaths, trying to calm himself, trying to get control, trying to replay Ann and Król's tips and advice on how to manage his temper.

Minutes went by and although Sin felt the anger begin to dissipate, the sadness and disappointment didn't; he could feel the tears wanting to fall from his eyes but he wouldn't let them. He wouldn't feel sorry for himself and he wouldn't take it all out on Boyd. There was no point to it and it would do nothing but alienate them further. He didn't have answers to his questions and he likely never would.

It didn't even matter anymore. They were finished.

Sin wiped an arm across his face and sat up, finally feeling the pain in his throbbing hands. None of this would have happened if he hadn't fucked everything up so royally. It was nobody's fault but his own.

"*Mister?*"

Sin jumped, thoroughly startled, and had his gun out before he even saw who was speaking to him.

It was the young girl from the kitchen supply shop; she stood in the doorway of the room and looked down at him oddly, not appearing at all concerned about the gun. Up close she looked to be twelve or thirteen and she took a few steps into the room, utterly fearless.

"*Are you okay?*" She'd switched to Mandarin as if remembering that Sin's Cantonese had left much to be desired. Her Mandarin didn't sound fluent but that was unsurprising; the Chinese government had made attempts to standardize Mandarin as the official language of Hong Kong for years, so although she was likely taught Mandarin in school, her family probably had brought her up to speak Cantonese.

"*Are you stupid?*" he demanded harshly, also speaking Mandarin and extremely annoyed that a twelve-year-old had managed to get the drop on him. "*I could be a rapist or a killer and you follow me up into an abandoned building?*" The words rolled off his tongue easily, fluidly, and he was relieved to be able to yell at her in a language he was confident about.

The girl shrugged, unconcerned, but didn't come any closer. She toyed with the corner of her pink sweater and tilted her head to the side, straight black hair covering some of her face. "*I saw you break in. I could have called the cops, you know.*"

Sin scoffed and put the gun away, standing up and wiping the blood from his knuckles on his dark jacket. "*That would have been smart but you're obviously brain dead or just plain dumb.*"

"*I guess it's smarter to yell at the walls and beat them up.*" The girl cocked an eyebrow at him and put her fists on her thin hips. "*Don't be a dickhead, Mister. I was just seeing if you were hurt.*"

Sin shook his head and walked across the room, planting a hand on her shoulder and guiding her out of the room. Despite his annoyance, he felt an odd desire to remove her from the area; as if the history of the room would taint her.

"Well thanks, kid, but you can't help me. I don't even see why you'd want to."

"What's your name? I'm Sunny," the girl went on, undeterred. He found it interesting that she gave her Western name instead of her given name but didn't care to question it.

"Are you American?"

Sin scowled down at her, pushing her down the hall and into the main living room area. He stopped walking and took another deep breath. *"Go away."*

Sunny gave him a funny look and turned away, examining the room. *"Are you going to sleep here?"*

He hadn't really given that much thought but the idea actually seemed like a good one since he had nowhere better to go and wasn't about to sleep in the same room as Boyd for who knew how many days. *"Mind your business."*

The girl sighed loudly and threw herself onto one of the sagging couches. *"It's not very nice, Mister. I could ask my grandmother if you can stay in our guest room. She kept wondering about you after you left the store."*

That got his attention; Sin looked up. *"What did she say?"*

Sunny smiled and leaned forward as if she was his conspirator. *"She's owned that same store for thirty years, you know. She said Ms. Wong told her a story before about a girl named Lien who died here. My grandma remembered the girl a bit and she said Lien had a little son who looked like a gweilo."*

"Really." If the lady actually remembered seeing him around it was likely that she'd put two and two together; not many locals had green eyes and olive skin.

"Uh huh." Sunny grinned at him, showing her crooked teeth unabashedly. *"Can I see your gun again?"*

Sin's glare returned full force. *"Get out of here, little girl. I'm not in the mood for this shit. I don't care if your grandmother thinks she knows me, I doubt she'd be happy that you followed me up here."*

Sunny scowled and rolled her eyes, obviously not able to argue with that logic, and pushed herself off the sofa, walking sulkily towards the door. *"You're not very friendly, Mister."*

He stared at her flatly until she gave a long suffering sigh and disappeared out the door. Sin continued to stand in the middle of the main room until he heard her light footsteps running down the long narrow staircase that led out to the street.

He didn't know if the old woman really knew him, he didn't even know if he cared about the possibility; he had no intentions of staying with strangers. The darkened shell of his former home would be good enough; Sin felt no desire to leave the shadows of his past and for once in his life, he didn't feel the need to run from them.

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"Who was the informant you mentioned last time?"

The dim lights of the night club cast shadows across their faces, leaving half their expressions unreadable. Loud techno music blasted around them, the pulsating bass thrumming in the air so powerfully that the glasses on the table vibrated slightly.

Boyd studied Jianjuo from across the short table, his eyes taking in everything about the Chinese man. He examined the fall of Jianjuo's jet black hair over half his face and the scar that peeked out from under the straight strands, the way his black leather jacket shone beneath the swinging lights of the club like liquid onyx; the way his heavily ringed fingers toyed nonchalantly with a lighter.

Sin stood to the side, keeping an alert eye on the crowd, although he frequently studied Jianjuo's bodyguards and their movements. There were six of them in total, all of them heavily tattooed and wearing dark colors. Although none of them had a physical presence that would immediately demand submission, Sin could tell by the way they stood and the way they stared at him that they were extremely dangerous.

Sin made frequent eye contact with the tallest of them, a man Jianjuo simply referred to as 'Ton' although Sin didn't necessarily think it was the man's real name. Ton wore

sunglasses even in the darkness of the club but Sin had no doubts that the other man was staring directly at him and Ton's body language made it quite clear that he wanted to challenge Sin for one reason or another.

Boyd leaned back in the booth with a bemused smile, his fingers loosely intertwined and resting on the table. "You can't seriously expect me to betray the confidentiality of an informant before we've even reached an agreement."

Jianjue shrugged, flicking the lighter on and off as he flipped it between his slim fingers. "If you cannot provide proof..."

"Oh, I can provide proof," Boyd said idly. His back was straight but he gave the impression of casualness, of being comfortable with sitting there for hours if need be. He seemed entirely unperturbed by Jianjue's bodyguards and the obvious danger they could be, and his golden brown eyes remained trained casually on Jianjue. "But I hardly doubt your group wants to work with an organization that so easily gives out such valuable information as a name."

Because they'd only met in public so far, Boyd hadn't once called Di Zhi or the Agency by name and Jianjue seemed to notice and appreciate this, judging by the way he made no move to leave.

"Then what do you have?"

"Tianjin, Shenyang, Mianyang," Boyd said smoothly, listing the Chinese cities that the informant had said contained some of the original Di Zhi bases.

Jianjue's expression did not change but his eyes did narrow slightly and he seemed to zero in on Boyd intently. The look was dangerous and intense; Jianjue's dark eyes focused entirely on Boyd, scrutinizing every minute shift of his expression, and although Jianjue made no overt moves the tension rose dramatically.

Ton seemed to pick up on his boss's mood change because he glanced down discreetly, moving closer but not making any other motions.

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly but he didn't move. Any abrupt motion could signal a gun fight in the middle of the club; then the mission would fail and Di Zhi would likely never work with them if blood was shed over nothing. They weren't even certain whether Di Zhi would work with the Agency in the first place. It was entirely possible that Jianjue had only come to the club to draw Sin and Boyd into a trap, that Di Zhi planned to

kidnap them and torture information out of them regarding their informant and whatever else they wanted to know.

But the moment passed and Ton relaxed after a short time, his face turning back toward Sin again. He seemed to somehow know exactly what his boss wanted without words having to be exchanged between them.

"Information current as of...?" Jianjuo said at length, trailing off in a leading manner.

"You know as well as I do that's a trick question," Boyd said calmly with the slightest quirk of an eyebrow. Either he hadn't noticed the tension or he wasn't letting it affect his demeanor; his honey brown eyes had remained steady on Jianjuo the entire time and his fingers hadn't so much as twitched as they rested on the table. "Foundation cities don't have dates and anything beyond that would be a subtle inquiry into our informant's identity."

There was another long moment in which Jianjuo scrutinized Boyd before Jianjuo leaned back very slightly in the booth. "And the other?"

Boyd didn't break eye contact as he slipped one hand into his pocket then slid his hand across the table, palm down, seeming as though there was nothing inside. Jianjuo reached forward and palmed the small disc that Boyd was offering before sliding it into his own pocket without looking at it. The disc contained information that proved they were from the Agency and had some additional information that Di Zhi should be interested in.

"Encrypted?" Jianjuo asked casually, one eyebrow raising slightly.

"The validity depends on it," Boyd said smoothly.

"The key?"

Boyd just watched Jianjuo evenly without answering and there was another long, charged silence before Jianjuo nodded curtly, seemingly satisfied for the moment, and stood. "Perhaps I will call you."

Boyd nodded and before he could say anything further, Jianjuo was walking through the crowd with his bodyguards in tow. Ton paused very briefly, appearing hesitant to take his vigilant gaze off whatever threat he assumed Sin held, but ultimately he retreated too.

Boyd waited an extra few seconds after he lost sight of Jianjuo before he let out a low breath and relaxed against the back of his seat, the tension that had been in his shoulders releasing. He looked at Sin sidelong then stood and walked over by him.

"Ready?" he asked with a tilt of his head toward the door.

Sin nodded and followed Boyd to the exit. The loud music and throngs of dancing bodies reminded Sin briefly of Lunar and he couldn't help letting his gaze stray over to Boyd's retreating back, recalling the bittersweet memory of the sexual tension that had sparked between them so prominently at the start of their relationship.

He wondered if Boyd and Kassian shared that same charged sexual chemistry.

The thought stung him and Sin averted his gaze, returning to his vigilant search of their surroundings even as they walked out onto the street.

Boyd was silent at first, looking contemplative, but as they started to take a winding route to avoid any potential tails, he looked over at Sin. "How do you think that went?"

Sin shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket and shrugged. "I'm not here to think. That's your job, Senior Agent Beaulieu," he replied tonelessly.

"Ha." The word came out as a short, humorless sound. Boyd's eyes narrowed and tension built in his shoulders. "Not really. My job is to be used like everyone else is." He didn't sound pleased; if anything, something about him even seemed almost agitated.

Sin couldn't help returning his gaze to Boyd. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I should have listened to you about Thierry and Level 10 training," Boyd said, gaze steady on Sin even as some bitterness made its way faintly into his voice.

Sin stared at Boyd blankly. "What are you talking about?"

Boyd sighed. "I found out that Thierry would have given me the information regardless of if I'd slept with him."

"What does that have to do with you being Level 10?" Sin returned his gaze to the darkened streets, scrutinizing every sound, every shadow.

"Because I did that, they made me a valentine op," Boyd explained dully. "Which my mother once basically told me I had to be proficient at if the time comes. In training, I completely fucked up a mission. Our first group mission, Level 10. The guy almost got away..."

Sin's eyes narrowed slightly on a young white man who was lingering across the street from them but after a brief moment, the man turned away with a frown, appearing to be lost.

Boyd's gaze passed over their surroundings, although he seemed less intent about it than Sin was. "Practically overnight, Doug went from not really giving a shit about me to suddenly loathing my existence. When I tried to ask him about it he was very angry; said I was lucky he hadn't recommended me for termination, that he didn't care who my mother was..."

Sin's eyebrows rose slightly and despite the bitter resentfulness that had been raging inside him for the past few days, he couldn't help wondering exactly what Boyd was getting at with this line of conversation. "Are you trying to say he didn't actually want to promote you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Boyd said darkly, looking over at Sin with agitation tainting his expression. "He tried to kick me out and she told him no. He hated me and mocked me for the rest of training and I didn't know why until it came time to know who was promoted. And why."

"That doesn't seem like something your mother would do," Sin said doubtfully.

"I didn't think so either but it's true." Boyd returned his narrow-eyed stare to search the dark streets ahead of them. "She basically told me the fact that I'm a valentine op made me that much more useful, I'm sure especially because I'm gay. Whatever her reasons, she pushed it, probably to get her way before the new administration arrives and takes away half her control."

"Ah." They turned down a deserted, darkened road. The shops were closed and shuttered and the faint flickering neon billboards didn't cast much light on the road.

"Well, I'm sorry it didn't turn out the way you wanted," Sin added after a long moment.

"Well, I'm sorry I'm a fucking idiot," Boyd grumbled, although some of the tension faded from his shoulders and he seemed to appreciate the gesture on some level.

This time Sin didn't comment and they walked for several blocks in silence. Boyd seemed to be contemplating something seriously judging by the way his expression turned inward.

"What caused your last episode?" Boyd asked, the question seeming abrupt after the quiet. His tone was calm and he watched Sin. "You said what happened that night wouldn't happen again. How do you know?"

Sin's long-legged stride slowed and he stopped walking entirely as he stared at Boyd wearily. "Why are you asking me this now?"

Boyd stopped as well, turning to face Sin and saying simply, "Because I've been wondering about it for awhile and as your partner I feel I have the right to know. Now that we're away from any potential taps, it seemed as good a time as any."

Sin dragged his gaze from Boyd's face and stared off down the street. He stood stiffly, uncomfortably, wanting Boyd to forget about this and move on. But he knew that wasn't going to happen and really, Boyd had a point. As far as Boyd knew, Sin had flipped out for no apparent reason; as far as Boyd knew, Sin was worse than ever and could go off at any given moment.

"Kassian touched me," Sin replied flatly, leaving eighty percent of the story out, although technically it wasn't a lie. "He shouldn't have."

Boyd stared at Sin, unconvinced. "I've only ever seen you in that state once before and I know why. If you don't want to talk about what happened this time-- alright, fair point. But that doesn't answer my question. Kassian touched you so you reacted. I can understand that. But if it were just a question of touching you when you're in that state... How do you know that entire situation won't happen again? Was whatever initiated your first state of mind that unique?"

"Yes." Sin refused to meet Boyd's steady stare, although his mouth turned down slightly at the sides. "I did something that won't need to be done again."

For a moment, Boyd just watched Sin quietly, something almost knowing in his gaze. "Did you kill someone like you did Jared?"

Sin finally looked at Boyd as his hands tightened into fists in his pockets, tension building in his shoulders as he thought about that night. "He was dying already. I just... got rid of him."

Boyd studied Sin solemnly. "Why?"

"Because I was..." Sin hesitated and shook his head, scowling, wanting this conversation to be over. As much as he hated to discuss this, hated to rehash that night, hated to confide in Boyd about something so horrible when their relationship was so precarious-- it was better to be done with it.

"I was helping Ann," he said finally. "Philip attacked her, she pushed him down the stairs but he didn't die. She likely would have been terminated, so I got rid of him for her. She didn't know who else to turn to and despite all that happened, she helped me in some ways so I felt that I owed her that much."

Boyd searched Sin's eyes, his face, and there was something pained in his honey brown eyes. "Sin, you..." He fell quiet for a breath before he asked more somberly, "When you came to my house... was it for help?"

Yes.

Sin almost said it out loud, but stopped himself.

"It doesn't matter anymore." Sin said quietly. "It's done."

But Boyd seemed to understand the answer without hearing it. He slid his eyes closed and brought his hand to his face for a moment. "Hsin, I'm so..."

His mouth tightened and he dropped his hand, meeting Sin's eyes with a completely sincere expression tinged with weariness and sadness. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that happened and I'm sorry I wasn't there for you when you needed me. I didn't understand the situation at first so I didn't react as quickly as I should have."

Sin's eyes dropped and his chest clenched as the feelings he'd tried to repress once again consumed him. All the questions and bitterness that had overtaken his previous longing for Boyd were momentarily forgotten and a small spark of hope fanned like a flame that was trying hard to burn hotter.

At the back of his mind he thought that if things stayed this way, if this moment could be frozen when Boyd was once again open and sincere and looking at Sin without anything hidden away, it wouldn't be so bad. Maybe things would be okay...

"Don't apologize," Sin said, his voice low. "It's not your fault. It's not your responsibility. I'm not your responsibility and I'm sorry that because of all of my bullshit, it's turned out that you feel obligated to look out for me."

Boyd watched Sin seriously and the sadness only seemed to increase as he studied Sin's eyes, his face, his body language. But then he just shook his head with a slightly troubled look and briefly watched the shadows and asked quietly, "Am I not safe to you anymore because I didn't turn Kassian away?"

And just like that, the spark of hope sizzled and burned out. The memory of Kassian standing in front of him, so sure of himself, so confident that Boyd would choose him, flashed through Sin's mind and his face shuttered as he resumed walking stiffly. "I don't know."

"Sin..."

Once again Boyd's voice held a mixture of determination and discomfort and he immediately caught up to Sin's side. "I don't want you to read more significance into the fact I've gotten close to Kassian than actually exists. I know you must be thinking there's more because it's Kassian but I meant it when I said it wasn't about you. I'm not friends with him to hurt you, to compare you, because he's your rival, because he's better... Nothing like that."

"Okay." Sin walked faster, once again wanting the distance that Boyd had initiated from the beginning, not wanting to be anywhere near the conversation.

Yet Boyd was undeterred; the stubbornness he typically held for missions was now aimed toward finishing the conversation. "Sin, I'm serious. I know it may seem suspect, but our friendship grew over time. We kept running into each other because of training and when I was fucked up after R2I, I felt like I didn't have anyone else to go to. He was there to help me get through that and we just... we ended up becoming friends."

Sin stopped and turned to Boyd again. "That's bullshit, Boyd. I know I'm fucked up, I know I've made big mistakes, but I've done a lot for you. I've killed for you, I've saved your life more than once, I'd fucking die for you and for you to sit here and tell me

Kassian is the only one you could go to is complete fucking shit," Sin exploded, his voice rising as all of the anger and resentment burst out of him at once.

Boyd opened his mouth but Sin continued before he could get out a word.

"None of it matters anymore though, right? Because of what happened, suddenly nothing else good that I've ever done counts, suddenly I'm the last person you would go to if you have problems. So instead you go to the person who I hate more than anyone in the world, who makes me feel like a fuck-up on a regular basis. But that's okay because technically we're broken up yet you still want to be friends? I guess if I wasn't such a stupid fuck-up I'd follow your sense of logic but I don't, so good thing you have Kassian to turn to."

"Damn it, Sin," Boyd burst out in frustration. "This isn't only about you! I needed someone to talk to and Kassian reached out to me during training-- it had nothing to do with you. And I never said anything about forgetting what you've done for me-- but I've done things for you too and that didn't stop you from fucking Ann the first time I wasn't around as stress relief for you. If all that hadn't happened, I would have gone straight to you. But you lied to me for months even when I would have done everything I could to help you."

Sin stared at Boyd and shook his head, feeling his aggravation beginning to rise. "It's not the same thing. I didn't fucking tell you because..."

He looked away for a moment, trying to calm himself before he got truly frustrated and let it turn into anger. "Because you always had a certain perception of me-- you thought it wasn't me, it was the others, how I was treated, the environment." He stopped, and gestured sharply.

"It seemed like you didn't want to believe I was actually fucking psychotic and insane. And I am. I know I am. And I thought maybe you wouldn't want me anymore because you never accepted it. That's why I hid things from you, Boyd. Not because I made some conscious decision that you were untrustworthy. I did it out of stupidity and fear. And I did try to tell you, on more than one occasion, so it's not like I never wanted you to know."

"I get that you were scared and I know you did try to talk to me twice in training," Boyd said. "And maybe I shouldn't have been so impatient with you but I had no idea any of this was happening. You can't put all the blame on me for not taking time during training when you could have told me before then and when you didn't tell me how serious it

was at the time." His gaze shifted across Sin's face before he shook his head. "But no matter the reasons, it shows exactly how imbalanced our relationship was if you didn't believe I could overcome any preconceptions-- and now I can't even be sure whether you would tell me if something incredibly important was happening."

"I already admitted I was stupid for doing that and I'm sorry for it. I'm sorry for everything. But from where I stand, you didn't waste any time running to Kassian." Sin didn't try to keep any of the bitterness out of his voice as he said it. "I guess it's a good thing you found an instant confidant in him."

Boyd sighed, crossing his arms. "I already told you it was something that happened over time. It seems like you'll keep assigning the wrong reasons to my actions unless I say more, so-- if you want a reason for my spending time with him, it's because we can be upfront without making prejudgments or constantly ending up in pointless arguments. And I know he will tell me the truth without hiding things from me, whether or not it's something I want to hear. Right now, that's just-- something I feel like I need."

Sin forced himself to look away as his jaw clenched, his teeth grinding together. He concentrated on staring at a parked car, focusing on the rusted paint of it, and tried to make his expression blank, tried to swallow the knot in his throat. Sin didn't even know why he was surprised. Boyd wasn't the lost, emotionless kid he'd been at the start. He was someone else now, so Sin should have fucking expected him to need something other than a basket case. He should have expected him to need someone normal.

But the words still burned.

"You must really not give a shit about me anymore."

Boyd stared at Sin for a long moment before he looked away, arms dropping to his sides. "I do care. I'm not trying to hurt you, I just want you to know where I'm at."

Sin couldn't help scoffing quietly. "I don't think you really care about hurting me. Please stop saying you do."

Boyd shook his head wordlessly and at first he didn't respond although his expression darkened as a flash of guilt and discomfort crossed his face. He studied the shadows briefly, his eyebrows drawn down as tension built in his shoulders. He seemed to be thinking about something seriously and the conclusion he drew must not have been a good one judging by his expression.

"We're fucked up, Hsin." He looked at Sin heavily as he admitted, "*I'm* fucked up. You're standing there telling me you're sorry for something you didn't mean to do and still... I keep saying this shit, doing this shit that hurts you. I don't want..."

Boyd frowned and he truly looked disturbed, uncomfortable, before he shook his head once more. He studied Sin, not hiding anything he was feeling; the doubt and uncertainty, the guilt and regret, the frustration and sadness. "I don't want you to think I'm blaming you for everything. A lot of this is my fault. I fuck up so much because I get emotional and over-think things and through it all I keep doing these stupid, heartless things."

Sin continued to look away from Boyd, swallowing heavily as he said, "I know what I did with Ann was wrong. I understand how it hurt you now. But I never would have had sex with her had I known how it would make you feel. You stood there and told me that if I really loved you, I never would have even wanted to fuck her yet now you're with Kassian. You had to know how that would tear me apart but since you made your own conclusions about us, since you decided that we shouldn't be together, it didn't matter. If you actually cared about my feelings in any way, you wouldn't have fucked him in the first place."

Boyd's expression darkened and he looked away again. "You're right," he said quietly. "I should have considered what it would do to you."

Sin just shrugged but he did look at Boyd finally. He wanted to feel better about the admission, but in reality it didn't change anything. It didn't change the fact that after everything, Sin truly believed that Boyd didn't really care about him as much as he'd always claimed.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed, the sound slightly unsteady in the still night air. "I think--" He stopped, frowned slightly, but continued. "I think I'm going to ask to transfer out of the unit."

Boyd looked truly taken aback, going completely still as his gaze snapped to Sin. His eyes were dark with disbelief and thinly veiled surprise as he searched Sin's expression. "You want to leave the unit because of this?"

"Yes," Sin replied without hesitation.

Boyd began to look less sure of himself; his back wasn't quite as straight, his eyebrows drew down. "You want to get away from me that much?" His voice was hushed in the quiet night.

"I can't deal with being near you," Sin admitted. "If it's not one thing, it's another. If it's not the fact that I want to be with you, that I want to touch you, it's the fact that right now it's hard for me to look at you and not feel like shit."

Sin gave a humorless laugh at that although the sound was harsh. "Maybe me coming to that conclusion means I'm finally becoming a rational person since before I was the only one trying to hold onto what we had."

The unhappiness in Boyd's expression was clear. "I can understand needing distance," he said honestly, quietly, and his gaze flickered with a slightly twisted expression, as it was difficult to meet Sin's eyes.

Despite that, Boyd didn't look away and his voice strengthened. "But I don't want you to get the wrong impression from all this. He isn't and never could replace you for me. No one ever could. Maybe it's better anyway if we have some space, even if I don't want you to leave, but I don't want you to ever think I replaced you."

Sin shrugged woodenly. He didn't know what he felt about that; apparently all they did was get into pointless arguments, anyway. Apparently Kassian was easier to talk to, easier to be around. What was there to replace except negative aspects of a relationship that had apparently already been deemed unstable and destructive? What was there to replace except for the fact that now Boyd was spending his time with someone he enjoyed and was getting away from someone who he apparently couldn't trust?

"It doesn't really matter anymore," Sin replied after a time. "But as far as the unit goes, I am going to recommend that he be my replacement."

Boyd was silent at first; his expression became pensive even as he continued to watch Sin. "Is impossible to be friends again?" he asked quietly after a stretched out moment.

The answer was surprisingly difficult to find.

Whereas before Sin hadn't thought it was possible to only be friends with Boyd, to not look at him and desire him and mourn the loss of what once was, ever since that moment in the hotel when Boyd had admitted to fucking Kassian, Sin had begun to

wonder if he wanted a friendship with Boyd at all. But that doubt hadn't solidified until the moment when Boyd had compared he and Kassian.

It had been the second time during the last few days that Sin had looked at Boyd and the yearning to fix things had slipped away.

He wanted to ignore the thoughts, he wanted to tell himself that Boyd had probably felt similarly betrayed over Ann, but it didn't really change anything. He was still unsure of what he wanted, unsure of what to do, and the only thing that really stood out to him at the moment was the fact that for the first time he wasn't completely falling apart at the idea of their relationship fading away.

He'd always thought Boyd's feelings for him were as deep as his feelings were for Boyd and it was the sense of unconditional emotional connection that had made him so desperate to hold on even when Boyd had rejected him. He'd still wanted Boyd to love him, he'd still wanted to feel that love-- and now he was realizing that maybe it had never really existed the way he'd thought it had. Now he was realizing that if there was something else that Boyd wanted badly enough, he would choose it over Sin despite how it would affect him.

So what was the point of desperately clinging to something that had turned out to not even be true?

But even then, Sin couldn't look at Boyd and not feel something stir within him. He couldn't not automatically look at Boyd's lips, his golden eyes and the fall of his fine blond hair and not want to close the distance between them; to completely devour Boyd, taste him, breathe him in, feel their bodies crushed against each other and want even more. He couldn't deny that even now a part of him just wanted to beg Boyd to forget everything that had happened and to just let it be like it was before because for a brief time it had been so unbelievably good.

"I don't know," Sin replied after the silence stretched too long. "I don't think it's impossible but I don't know if I can behave the way you want me to."

There was a measure of relief in Boyd's eyes and some of the tension seemed to release from his shoulders. Still, there was a sense of hesitation and uncertainty in his features. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know, Boyd." Sin frowned and dropped his gaze again. "You want me to act the way you were acting on the plane, like nothing ever happened between us, but all of this will affect my interaction with you, my behavior in general, so I can't do that."

Boyd shook his head. "I don't know, maybe I was wrong about that. All I wanted was to make sure we could function properly as work partners without getting distracted with anything else, but it's stupid to add more stress by expecting something unreasonable. If we can achieve the same thing regardless, then that's the way it should happen."

"Well I don't know if it can be achieved. That's why I want to transfer."

Sin turned away slightly, shifting his gaze down the street and into the darkness of the Mong Kok district. Two young women were walking down the street, their faces illuminated by the neon lights that loomed above. "Maybe it'd be better if we didn't even see each other anymore."

"Ever?" Boyd asked uncertainly.

The corners of Sin's full lips turned down slightly and he reached up to press a hand against his eyes, squeezing them shut briefly. It was so hard to make a decision-- every time he thought he had one, it changed. Every time he said something, it was difficult to stand firm on it.

He kept going back and forth in his mind between betrayal and resentment to remorse and depression. The entire situation was so complicated that he didn't know which feeling was the most appropriate one.

"We'd still see each other on the compound."

"Why?" Boyd pressed, his voice growing stronger as he searched Sin's expression. "Because I had sex with Kassian once? I know it fucked things up between us and I'm not expecting everything to be perfect right away, but how does that fix anything? I understand needing distance but just dropping everything because of one thing I did would be like me having decided to give up for good after Ann. I still want to work through things with you, Sin; I don't want to ignore it."

"Well I don't know if that's what I want." Sin shrugged and looked at Boyd directly this time, not allowing his eyes to drop even as Boyd drew back slightly, his eyes widening. When Sin spoke, his voice was dull and tinged with resignation. "And it's not just about the fact that you fucked Kassian or that you continue to fuck Kassian or whatever it is

that you want to do. It's the fact that every time I look at you it hurts to think that you never considered how it would affect me. I think it would hurt less if you actually cared for him. At least then it would have meant something and it wouldn't feel like a knife through the heart for nothing more than a casual fuck."

Blond eyelashes lowered, partially covering Boyd's gaze as he looked away. He was silent a moment, hands flexing and weight shifting, before meeting Sin's eyes again. The tinge of sadness in his eyes was accompanied by the way his eyebrows drew down. "I don't know what to tell you. Any explanation I have will seem meaningless in the face of how you feel. I know I hurt you and I'm sorry that my actions made you feel this way. But regardless of what you decide now, I'll still want to work it out with you. If you need time, alright. If you decide you don't want to fix anything but a year from now you do, alright. I can't tell you what to feel or think but I can tell you that I'll be here and I won't change my mind."

A car rumbled by them, the engine clanking loudly as it was obviously in a state of disrepair. Water splashed beneath the tires of the car, splattering dirty water onto the sidewalk where they stood. Still, neither of them looked away from each other.

"I'm not trying to put this all on you. None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for me." Sin combed his fingers through his hair, tangling them in it before he took a deep breath. "But that's why I'm saying now that you're right, Boyd. Maybe it's better if we're not together. I didn't live up to your expectations and you aren't living up to mine."

He stopped briefly, eyebrows furrowing, disappointment coursing through him as he realized that this entire situation was actually and finally coming to a head. This was really happening here, now; on a dreary street in Mong Kok, his relationship with Boyd was coming to an abrupt close. Two blocks away from the place where his pathetic life had begun, his connection to the only person who had ever made that life worth living was being severed.

Once again it made him falter, it made his fingers tighten in the roots of his hair before he released the strands and dropped his arms to his sides again. "For all you know, you may be happier without me in your life. It could be that you're just used to having me around, used to the idea of having a connection with me, and you feel obligated to yourself to pursue it because of everything we've been through together. I just believe that whatever happens... will happen naturally, without me or you forcing it."

Boyd watched Sin for a long moment before he looked away, eyebrows drawn together as he almost absently searched the shadows. "I think you're right that whatever happens will happen naturally. It's why we were together in the first place."

He sighed, briefly running a hand through his hair before he let it fall again, blond hair partially shadowing his eyes when he met Sin's gaze again. "I guess we'll see. But even though you have your doubts about whether I'd be happier without you around, I honestly don't foresee my mind changing. Some things have changed but my promise still stands from the morning when you were locked up."

There was another moment of charged silence as they stared at each other and Sin took a step back. He didn't know if there was anything else to say on the topic and the proximity to Boyd was becoming overwhelming. Sin's mind was spinning in so many different directions that he didn't know which was the best to follow.

It was all too confusing and at the moment his emotions felt like they were overloading; he didn't think he could continue to appear as collected and calm in front of Boyd for much longer. "I'm going to return to my temporary quarters. It's probably best if we don't go in the same direction the entire way anyway."

He turned when Boyd didn't immediately reply and Sin started to walk away. Sin shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket and tilted his head down slightly, feeling Boyd's gaze burning into his back. He walked faster and the distance grew between them quickly.

Even though it was only a few blocks, the space between them felt like miles.

Chapter 33

Boyd paused after he parked his car in an Agency lot and didn't immediately leave the vehicle. He stayed still for several moments, staring at the Agency buildings before he stepped out of the car and locked the doors behind him. He'd only returned from China the night before so it was impossible to look at the Agency, to look at Sin's building, and not think about the conversation they'd had.

He couldn't help replaying parts of their interaction and, each time, he came to the same conclusion.

As usual, things hadn't gone the way he'd wanted or expected them to. As usual, things had been misinterpreted and they'd hurt each other. He'd hurt Sin.

All he'd wanted to do was get things out in the open so he could say, "I feel this way," and Sin could say, "I feel that way," and they would know where they stood. He just hadn't realized the way it must have seemed to Sin, especially when Kassian came into the equation.

As Boyd replayed the conversation and their interaction over the past few months, he realized that he'd been so focused on his progress with his training, and enjoying the fact that for the first time ever he was accepted by his peers based solely on his own personality and actions, that he'd stopped focusing on how things would affect Sin.

Even though he looked at Kassian as the man who had been there for him after R2I and who had listened to his problems, he'd somehow overlooked that he was also the man who had a volatile, tense relationship with Sin. Somehow Boyd had completely overlooked how this all would make Sin feel.

He'd known that Sin wouldn't be thrilled with the revelation of he and Kassian having sex but he'd never expected Sin to be so betrayed by it. Sin seemed to think that him being with Kassian meant Boyd thought Kassian was superior, or because he thought Sin was too damaged, but in reality Boyd was just enjoying a friendship that was casual and lacked stress and tension, and that didn't make him feel like he had to watch everything he did or said.

His friendship with Kassian was finally giving Boyd a chance to see that he didn't have to constantly feel so conflicted and upset and introverted-- that he didn't have to think everything through five times over or tiptoe around certain topics because it may make

everything fall apart around him. He could just be himself and that was okay. He didn't have to try to be stronger or better for Kassian and he didn't have to hurt himself or Kassian in the process.

Frowning, Boyd got out of the car and began to head to the Tower. Boyd didn't meet anyone's eyes as he entered the Tower and bypassed the elevator bank. Instead, he headed straight for the stairs, sometimes taking them two at a time. There were a few people in the stairwell, most of them talking to each other or laughing quietly as they walked between a flight or two. Boyd ignored them and seemed to be the only one who was in the stairwell for over a dozen flights.

Boyd finally made it to the fourteenth floor and headed toward the library. The report room downstairs had better computers but he didn't care; right then, he preferred the solitude.

When he stepped inside the room, he paused briefly in the doorway. Across the room, Boyd had once been shoved against that glass and Sin had arrived at the last second to kill Harry. Boyd let out a low breath, then looked to the side.

"Agent Beaulieu," a voice said suddenly in greeting and he looked over just in time for the man to smile a little self-consciously. "Sorry-- Senior Agent now, I guess."

The man was only a few years older than Boyd, with light brown skin, bright hazel eyes and dark hair that looked perpetually uncombed. Boyd had seen the man in the library before and faintly remembered his name to be Kaspar. For the most part, Boyd had never paid much attention to him but once or twice, Kaspar had rambled on about something while Boyd had taken breaks from researching or planning longer or more intensive missions.

Because of that, Boyd knew that Kaspar was more or less the caretaker of this old library and had been the one to fight to keep the few worn-down report terminals that still sat in the corner; remnants of when this library had been the only place for agents to write reports. But that was about the extent of his knowledge of the man, other than that he was one of the very few other people Boyd had ever seen use the room.

"Hello, Kaspar," Boyd said simply.

"It's been awhile, huh?" A smile played on Kaspar's lips as he studied Boyd, his gaze intense. He held himself with slight tension, as if he was trying to hold himself back or was trying to stop himself from saying something more.

"I suppose it has," Boyd agreed with a faint nod, heading straight toward the terminals. He didn't particularly feel like talking right now.

"I have to say, it's just so cool knowing one of the newest 10's," Kaspar burst out suddenly, taking a step forward as if he couldn't stop himself. He was fairly animated and seemed to talk with his hands, as evidenced by the way he moved them around as he spoke. "I mean, that position is like legend... Only the Greats get it. And-- no offense or anything-- but I never thought you'd actually make it first try. And-- Well, I mean-- Congratulations!" His eyes were especially bright with interest as he watched Boyd, who didn't speak at first.

Boyd slid into the chair at one of the report terminals and looked over at Kaspar. He supposed at least Kaspar was looking at this positively and seemed to be assuming Boyd had received the promotion on merit but it didn't make the topic any less bitter for Boyd.

"Thank you," Boyd said, then tilted his head toward the computer monitor. "I don't mean to be rude, but I really need to write my report now..."

"Oh! Of course," Kaspar said, looking as though he was trying very hard not to grin.

"Well, you know-- if you need help or anything, I'm here for you," Kaspar continued, backing away from Boyd and heading toward the nearby tables to collect some books that had been left behind. He glanced rather giddily at Boyd now and then but otherwise did his best to stay out of Boyd's way.

As Boyd focused on writing the report, his mind mostly cleared as he described the interaction with the informant, as he relayed that the mission had been a success as far as they could tell and hopefully they would receive word that Xu Xiaolian, current leader of the Di Zhi, would agree to meet with them.

But as soon as the report was finished, he found himself staring at the screen, at Sin's name so calmly displayed. Staring at his name made Boyd think of Sin, of his deep voice saying, "I didn't live up to your expectations and you aren't living up to mine." It made him remember the disbelief, the feeling of pain and near-regret at Sin saying so seriously that he wanted to leave the unit because of Boyd, because of what he'd done with Kassian.

Boyd tilted his head down, staring blankly at his fingers resting against the keys of the keyboard.

He couldn't deny the truth of the statement.

Regardless of what Boyd got out of his situation with Kassian, it didn't change the fact that he'd never even considered Sin's feelings. And when Boyd thought of it in other terms-- would he have done something like that to Lou if there had been similar circumstances-- he didn't think he would have. He would have stopped first, thought about how Lou would feel.

The fact he hadn't thought about the way it would hurt Sin wasn't something Boyd fully understood. And he certainly wasn't proud to realize just how selfish he could be with Sin-- to know that the person he'd loved more than anyone else in the last few years was also the person he'd hurt the most, the person he apparently felt he could do anything to.

He didn't understand why this happened. The only thing he could think was that in some ways his feelings were too strong for Sin-- an obsession he'd had for awhile, an addiction to the first person who'd made him feel in years-- and this triggered something in his mind, like an automatic defense measure.

Maybe when he realized he was getting too close to Sin, like a moth that could burn from the flame, he automatically snapped himself back-- he snuffed out the fire before it could hurt him. Maybe part of him had always been aware of how precarious this all was-- the emotions, the relationship, the trust-- and he'd been afraid to believe. So when he finally did and everything happened with Ann and all the realizations that came after that-- it made it impossible to ignore that he and Sin were messed up, that they weren't on the same wavelength.

And the part of him that had been nervous and agitated about getting involved with anyone-- about letting that addiction briefly overpower him-- now stood stronger than ever to say, *"I told you so."*

Whatever the case, it had obviously all come to a head because of Kassian.

It really did seem like their expectations didn't match, that their love for each other was unbalanced.

When he thought back on their relationship, Sin had been the one reaching out first to Boyd intimately-- the first to realize he cared about Boyd, the first to want to kiss him, the first to let it be known that he was attracted to Boyd, even if he didn't know Boyd was watching.

Sin loved Boyd too much; something unhealthy and sometimes overwhelming; something that made Sin make rash decisions when he thought he was losing Boyd. Something that put additional pressure on Boyd to live up to Sin, to his expectations and needs; to be there for someone who was incredibly strong and in an incredibly difficult position, and who needed someone who could remain steady through all the ups and downs.

And Boyd...

He was in a much more stable state of mind now than he had been even a year ago, but that didn't mean he was strong enough, well enough, balanced enough to be in a relationship with someone else.

"Is something wrong?"

Kaspar's voice was hesitant and Boyd looked over, mildly startled.

"What?" Boyd asked.

Kaspar stood next to a table across the room, fidgeting with a book, his eyebrows drawn down. He nodded toward the computer. "You've been spacing out for a bit and I thought maybe something was wrong. Like the computer failed and you were really annoyed, or..." Kaspar trailed off briefly and shrugged uncomfortably. "I don't know; or something."

"Oh." Boyd turned back to the screen, to the cursor flashing next to Sin's name, and he shook his head to himself. He quickly saved and sent the report in, hit the print button to bring a copy with him to General Carhart's office, then closed the programs and logged off the computer.

"No," Boyd said belatedly, grabbing his messenger bag from the floor and turning toward Kaspar with a faintly bemused expression. "I'm fine; I just wasn't paying attention. I suppose it was a long flight." He paused briefly then thought to add, "Thank you, though."

Kaspar stared at him a moment then grinned widely even as he tilted his head down a little and looked to the side, seeming strangely shy.

Boyd passed him to head toward the printer where he gathered the report, stapled it, then slid it into his bag. He nodded at Kaspar as he started to walk by the man again, saying as a calm farewell, "I'm sure we'll run into each other again."

"Did they teach you manners in Level 10 training, too?" Kaspar asked suddenly and when Boyd stopped with a blink aimed his way, Kaspar looked at once startled and chagrined. He was watching Boyd with slightly widened eyes and his fingers stilled on the book he'd been twisting back and forth on the table. "I didn't-- That made me sound like an ass, sorry," he said with a grimace. "I just meant you seem a little... friendlier somehow. Or approachable?" He shook his head to himself. "I don't know. But usually you ignore me unless you're asking for reference materials and even then you never really explain anything. It's just strange."

Boyd stared, mildly startled by Kaspar's comment; by the fact that anything had changed enough to be noticeable. For some reason, Kaspar's assessment of how Boyd used to act made him look at Kaspar in a new light, as his own person, and that only emphasized the truth of Kaspar's statement.

Boyd hadn't realized that he'd been so casually dismissing Kaspar as part of the background before but now he could see the difference; he could understand how the reserved and silent way he'd dealt with people in the past probably made them feel insignificant, so now that he was making an effort to change that, his behavior would probably seem especially startling.

He was partially relieved to know that it hadn't all disappeared with training. It was good to realize that some of changes he'd been struggling to achieve during training-- to be more approachable-- were continuing even outside the group of trainees. That at least some of the goals he'd been striving for had remained untouched by the other issues happening in his life.

Boyd smiled at Kaspar lightly. "Not exactly," he said dryly, answering Kaspar's question to show he wasn't offended. "But apparently something good rubbed off on me."

Kaspar grinned back, a little uncertain but mostly relieved, and Boyd reached out a hand. Kaspar stared down at it in confusion and surprise, then looked up to meet Boyd's eyes again, who simply watched him. After a moment, Kaspar drew his eyebrows down then reached out as well, letting Boyd shake his hand.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Kaspar," Boyd said lightly, as if this was the first time they'd met. In a way it was, since Boyd had barely acknowledged the man in the past. "I'm Senior Agent Boyd Beaulieu; you can call me Boyd or another name if you prefer. I appreciate all the help you've given me in the past with research."

Kaspar's grin brightened considerably and he pumped Boyd's hand more enthusiastically than the situation warranted. "Nice to meet you. I'm Kaspar Çelik-- Level 4 R&D."

"R&D?" Boyd echoed in faint surprise. For some reason, he'd always just assumed the man was civilian staff, not a Research and Development agent.

"Yeah," Kaspar said, seeming half embarrassed and half proud. He dropped Boyd's hand to rub the back of his head. "The freaks and geeks division, I know..."

Boyd shook his head. "One of my good friends is in R&D. That's an important division; I just didn't realize you were in it."

"Well, it's not nearly as exciting as field agent work," Kaspar said, looking at Boyd slightly in awe. "But it has its moments... And I really like working with information, you know? And books. So it's pretty much the perfect place for me."

"Why is an R&D agent keeping track of the old research library, though?" Boyd asked, drawing his eyebrows down slightly.

"Oh, that," Kaspar said, waving a hand dismissively. "Well, the official story is it's an internship, sort of, for the lower level agents. Plus, there's some sensitive information in here so they like to keep track. But more than that, this was sort of my mom's pet project so I like to keep it up..."

"She created the library?" Boyd asked, slightly confused by Kaspar's wording.

"Not exactly," Kaspar said with a shrug. "She just built up most of the databases and found a lot of the books that are in here. But then she got sick so she couldn't continue..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Boyd said but Kaspar was already shaking his head.

"No, it's fine." He waved a hand again as if to fend off Boyd's assumption. "I mean, she's alive still; she was just transferred to another area with less heavy lifting and movement." He shrugged.

"But she'll ask me sometimes how the collection's going so I like to stop in as much as possible and make sure everything's going smoothly. Besides," he added with a sly smirk, "almost no one stops in here so it's nice and quiet. I have to say, though, the other field agents who do aren't nearly as good of customers as you. Some of them act like they've never seen a library before and I swear others are trying to pile whole bookshelves-worth on the tables... It's like they don't know how to treat books."

Boyd smiled faintly. "I suppose I'm at an advantage in that regard. I've loved books since I was a child."

"Yeah, I could tell." Kaspar fell silent briefly and watched Boyd with that same intensity as before, something almost tense and just barely held back-- he looked as though he wanted to say something else but then he stopped himself with a shake of his head. A smile that was half shy and half self-deprecating crossed his features instead and he shrugged a little uncomfortably. "Anyway, sorry. I know you were busy so I don't mean to keep you..."

Boyd shook his head again, gaze calm and not unkind as he watched Kaspar. "It's fine. But it's true that I should leave; I have to hand in my report."

Kaspar nodded in understanding then backed away, already briefly glancing to the side in distraction, gaze darting amongst the piles of books dotted around the tables. He looked at Boyd again. "Well-- Maybe I'll see you again. And I really do mean congratulations."

Boyd nodded and when Kaspar flashed him a smile then turned to gather the books, Boyd left the library and headed toward Carhart's office.

It didn't take him long to get there and when he arrived, he knocked on Carhart's closed door.

"Yes?" Carhart's voice called after a moment.

Boyd opened the door and walked into the office, noting that Carhart looked just as stressed as ever. Boyd closed the door quietly behind him before sliding the report out of his messenger bag. "I have the latest report."

Carhart shut the file he was examining and looked at Boyd. "Sit down. We need to talk."

Boyd hesitated then placed the report on the desk and sat down. That sort of phrase rarely preceded something good and in this case he had a feeling he knew what it would be about. He didn't say anything, though; he simply watched Carhart.

Carhart studied him for a moment and sat back in his chair with a sigh. He looked tired and had abandoned the suit that he'd started wearing awhile ago for a plain white button down shirt that was opened at the neck. He reached up to rub his stubble-covered jaw as he continued to watch Boyd before sighing briefly.

"How were things between the two of you?"

"Not... great," Boyd admitted, meeting Carhart's gaze. "But not as bad as it could have been, I suppose." He paused very briefly. "We talked."

"It must have been some talk since he wants to leave the unit now," Carhart observed calmly, raising his eyebrows.

Boyd's gaze didn't flicker from Carhart's even as he felt something shift inside him; he hadn't known whether Sin would actually go through with the request or not but this removed the question entirely. They hadn't spoken much after their conversation on the street and even though part of him had hoped Sin had changed his mind, he still hadn't been able to forget the seriousness of Sin's expression...

"I see," Boyd said.

"He wouldn't tell me why," Carhart continued, a frown finally making its way onto his handsome face. "All he said was that it was better that way and that we don't need him anyway now that you've been promoted. And that if I'm still not confident enough in your fighting or physical abilities, I should consider Kassian for a replacement."

Boyd's eyebrows twitched very briefly but he otherwise did not let any of his thoughts make it to his face. "What will happen? Will his transfer actually go through?"

Carhart shrugged, his broad shoulders rustling the stiff fabric of his shirt. "My first response is that I don't want it to go through, that I want to keep him here and that I don't want to bring in a second new person when we're already getting one. But that's likely because I want Sin where I can keep an eye on him."

Boyd inclined his head; he could understand the sentiment, at least insofar as not wanting Sin to leave. At the same time, part of him still had the same thoughts he'd had the night that Sin had brought it up. Maybe...

Maybe in some ways it would be better, easier to deal with the conflicting emotions and history between them if they didn't have to see each other on such a regular basis, in such serious situations where something going wrong could be the end of one of them... Maybe having some space would be the best option for them.

But then he thought about having anyone else as a partner and he knew he didn't want that.

"Has my mother said anything?" Boyd's expression remained largely unreadable and his gaze was steady on Carhart. His posture remained straight and a little tense and his hands remained still on his lap.

"I haven't mentioned it to her and I won't until I think it through. I have to weigh the pros and cons of the situation. Professionally, it may be a good idea. The two of you wouldn't be partners and then you can be free to be as ridiculous as you feel the need to be together and Kassian would likely take what we do here a lot more seriously."

Carhart tilted his head to the side thoughtfully. Despite the fact that he didn't look any less stressed out, he was speaking to Boyd like he usually did and not at all in the strangely hostile way he'd been on the phone on New Year's morning. "On the other hand, I question whether or not you and Kassian would mesh well together as partners or if he'd even want the position."

Boyd studied Carhart for a moment. He tried to imagine himself partnered with Kassian and he honestly didn't know what that would be like.

They had worked together well enough in Russia, but that had been atypical; Kassian hadn't been in his Senior Agent mode. The only experience Boyd had with Kassian when he was taking the mission seriously had been in Monterrey, which had overall been a fiasco. But Monterrey had been a study in extreme levels of stress for both of them...

"Why do you think we wouldn't?"

"Because you're both Type A personalities to an extent, and that's not necessarily a good thing." Carhart waved his hand as if to dismiss the comment. "In any case, if I do take this idea into consideration and Vivienne okays it, there would be a trial before anyone is formally moved but I doubt any such thing would happen for the next few months. This isn't a good time in any way, shape, or form."

Boyd didn't have to ask why; he suspected it had a lot to do with the possible new arrival. Instead, he asked, "What would the trial entail?"

"Kassian would accompany you on a few missions and we'd see how things play out. I don't doubt his capabilities but like I said, we'd have to see how you work together. There's no real reason for him to replace Sin other than Sin wanting it so if it turns out that Kassian and you aren't a good match, it won't happen." Carhart paused briefly. "Unless you and Sin are an even worse match at this point."

It was unfortunate that there was the possibility Carhart was right. For a moment, the entire situation felt ridiculous and frustrating. But Boyd wasn't going to dwell on the thought since the reason it had come to this point was almost equally Sin's and his responsibility. The only thing Boyd could do was try to be the best partner possible to whoever he ended up with.

He just couldn't help feeling a sense of disbelief that it had come to this; that the unit was in such a state of transition. With the possibility of Sin transferring out, a new person coming in, Kassian possibly becoming Boyd's partner, and even Ryan talking about wanting to move to Europe-- the entire situation was surreal.

It was especially strange for Boyd, who had only been recruited by the Agency because of Sin. Imagining anyone else as his partner was bizarre.

Boyd sighed quietly and looked at Carhart seriously. "I don't know what will happen, but... I'm sorry it came to this. I never meant for any of it to happen; I'm sure the unit ran more smoothly before I came around. But I do want you to know that regardless of who ultimately becomes my partner, I intend to work with him to the best of my professional ability."

"The unit wasn't stable until you came along," Carhart corrected. "All of his other partners didn't make it past their trials and Sin never wanted to be here anyway. He only was because he was the only one available with high enough classification. He doesn't give a damn about what we do here and I don't blame him. If I was Sin, I wouldn't care about the Agency either."

The General shrugged again and sighed. "In any case, we will see how this plays out."

Boyd nodded, feeling a little better about the situation to at least know Carhart didn't seem to be blaming him for the way it had all turned out. He didn't know what to say to that, so he just stayed quiet, knowing he wasn't dismissed yet.

Carhart looked at Boyd for a moment before giving him a wan smile. "I hope you know the reason I was so curt that morning on the phone was due to my worry for Sin. I did not intend to blame you for any of his issues and I know it's not your fault that he is the way he is. While I don't intend to retract my opinion that you two shouldn't be together romantically, I wouldn't really order you to deny him friendship, especially in the coming weeks."

At first, Boyd thought that was an odd thing to say; what was so significant about the coming weeks? But then it occurred to him that Carhart probably meant all the issues related to the possible transfer and the transitions that were occurring. He nodded again, appreciating the information.

"I don't know what will happen," Boyd said honestly. "But I don't intend to abandon him; not after everything we've been through."

"That's good to hear," Carhart replied quietly, turning his blue eyes back to his computer screen. "He needs at least one person he can count on."

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Kassian flipped through one of Boyd's sketchpads. His blue eyes scanned the pages and as he took several moments to turn each page, it really seemed as though he was interested in the drawings and not just looking at them out of idle curiosity. He was slouched in the couch as Boyd sat next to him, hands behind his head as he idly stared out the window, debating whether he felt like grabbing a book to read.

"Have you ever taken art classes or anything?" Kassian asked, glancing over at Boyd after a long examination of one of the drawings.

Boyd had been half-listening to the pages turning, but at the question he looked over to see what sketchpad Kassian had. He realized it was one of his old sketchpads, back from when Lou had been alive; he'd recently found it and had realized that the last third of the book was blank pages so he'd started to draw in there since the raid.

The earlier drawings in the sketchpad were primarily of landscape and buildings in the city, with the occasional drawing of a person or still life. The drawings that started after the over-six-year-gap were more predominantly of people and occasionally of buildings.

Kassian was currently looking at a sketch Boyd had drawn of Jezebel over the summer; it was a candid drawing from when she hadn't realized anyone was watching. She was sitting in her wheelchair, looking to the side as wind pulled her hair and ruffled the handmade sign proclaiming the ice cream flavors that she'd taped to the front of her cart.

Her expression was more enigmatic than usual; he was used to seeing her with her with large smiles or eyes that twinkled with a faint sense of mischief. That day, her lashes had been lowered over hazel eyes staring into the distance, her lips had pulled down just the faintest bit on the edges. The fingers on her hand had curled within the fabric of the blanket on her lap, while her other arm, which ended at the elbow and that day hadn't been hidden by long sleeves, tilted just slightly inward toward her body.

The blanket had draped over her leg and dipped down to the seat of the wheelchair where her other leg ended a few inches down her thigh. The rustiness of the wheelchair was obvious even shaded in with pencil and, sitting there beneath a dilapidated roof with a rickety little cart next to her, Jezebel looked very alone and almost sad.

Boyd remembered that day; it had been warm and the wind had been light. Boyd had been called in to work before he could alert Jezebel to his presence or show her the drawing but he wondered now what she'd think and whether she would even want to see it.

"I took one in college," Boyd said belatedly.

Kassian nodded. "You must have a lot of natural talent then. You wouldn't get this good from one class."

"Thanks," Boyd said idly as he watched Kassian flip to another page.

A drawing of Sin sleeping covered the page. He was half curled on his side, fingers lax near his face but looking as though at any second they could twitch into fists. The drawing was from an angle closer to Sin's face, with the rest of his body in the background.

Even in sleep, Sin's expression looked wearied and stressed; although his lips were slightly parted, his eyebrows were drawn down as if he were in mild pain and he didn't look as though he was truly at rest. His hair fell against the sides of his face almost elegantly, though, and Boyd's fingers twitched very slightly, feeling the urge to run his hands through those strands the same as he had when he'd drawn the picture.

This drawing had also been from the summer, when Boyd had still felt disbelieving relief that Sin was alive and well and the peculiarities of Sin's actions and distance hadn't yet been explained. At the time, Boyd had thought Sin was just exhausted and maybe having nightmares.

Now, Boyd understood what had really been happening and it made him a little sad to see the drawing; to know the thoughts that had probably been running through Sin's head. This had to have been one of the few times exhaustion had overcome Sin's paranoia of sleeping near Boyd; his fear that he would hurt Boyd if he stayed.

"He's awfully pretty, isn't he?" Kassian observed, tilting his head and looking thoughtful.

There was no sarcasm in Kassian's tone and it made Boyd smile slightly. "That's what I've been saying. And you called him odd-looking..." He trailed off lightly, teasingly.

"He just has an odd combination of features," Kassian replied with a shrug. "And it's hard for me to really appreciate his looks when he always looks ready to punch me in the face. But looking at him like this makes it pretty hard to deny that he's gorgeous."

"Yeah..." Boyd's gaze was a little distant as he absently tracked the lines of Sin's face. "I don't remember the first time I fully appreciated it, either. Maybe it was the first time I saw him sleep or maybe it was when he smiled."

"I've never seen him smile for real." Kassian continued to study the drawing and his mouth curved into the half-smirk that typically meant that his thoughts were turning to a particular direction. "He has nice lips..."

Boyd looked over with a quirked eyebrow, quite surprised to hear Kassian make any type of sexual innuendo related to Sin. Although Kassian was, in general, a lot more open-minded about Sin than Sin was about Kassian, Boyd still hadn't expected there to come a day when he'd hear a comment like that. It was almost amusing that now Kassian was apparently okay enough with the idea of Sin to say that.

"Yeah, why don't you try suggesting that sometime," Boyd said dryly. "See if he doesn't bite you."

"What?" Kassian asked innocently although his eyes sparkled mischievously. "All I said was that they're nice!"

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Yeah. Nice like my lips are nice when I'm sucking you off."

Kassian snickered and he finally turned the page. "It's possible that the thought may have crossed my mind. But does he actually do that?"

"Hmm." Boyd leaned back in the couch and put his hands behind his head, looking at the ceiling with a decidedly neutral, if a little amused, expression. "A gentleman never kisses and tells," he said archly.

"I'll take that as a yes." Kassian looked over at Boyd with slightly narrowed eyes as if he were picturing it. "That's pretty hot."

Boyd looked over at Kassian again, quirking an eyebrow with a small, disbelieving smirk playing at one side of his lips. "For someone with such a negative history with Sin, you're really getting into this..."

Kassian snorted and propped his face against his hand, his elbow against the back of the couch as he looked at Boyd. "Just because I don't like him doesn't mean I don't like the way he looks. I'm just joking, though, so hopefully you're not actually thinking I'm going to go try to hit on him and sign my own death warrant or some odd crap like that."

"I don't," Boyd said with a half-grin. "You wouldn't be one of the longest-living Level 10's if you were the type to actually think that'd be a good idea."

Kassian laughed out loud at that and sat up fully, shaking his head. After a moment, a more serious expression crossed his face and he considered Boyd silently for a brief time. "So speaking of Sin and Level 10 agents, I'm not really into this transfer idea."

Boyd sighed then shifted to look at Kassian straight on. "So it did go through," he said, more to himself than anything.

After the mission in China, Kassian had asked how the talk went with Sin; during the conversation, the possibility of a transfer had inevitably been brought up. They hadn't

said much about it because they hadn't known if Carhart would pass it along or if Vivienne would approve the suggestion.

For two weeks there hadn't been word, but now...

"What will you do?" Boyd asked Kassian, watching him seriously.

Kassian shrugged his broad shoulders and frowned, shades of his Senior Agent Trovosky personality showing through. "I'm not quite sure, Boyd. I'm not interested in the idea. While I am curious about what goes on in your unit, I don't know if I'm so dedicated to the Agency that I want to do more for them or be there more often and you spend a lot of time on the compound because of your constant meetings and such. I pretty much get to stay far removed unless I'm needed."

His eyebrows drew together and he shook his head slightly, "And honestly I don't like the fact that I'm replacing Sin. I think he's got the wrong idea about all of this and this is just going to reaffirm something in his mind that isn't even true."

"I know. I tried to explain..." Boyd trailed off and shook his head. He shifted so he could lean against the side of the couch, his legs half crossed along the cushions. His golden brown eyes studied Kassian openly. "I don't know what's best for anyone anymore. Half of me thinks it could be good and half of me thinks it's a bad idea."

"Why do you think it would be good at all?" Kassian raised an eyebrow at Boyd. "I thought the mission was successful even if you weren't on the best of terms."

"It was, but..." Boyd frowned slightly, eyebrows drawing down a little as a pensive expression crossed his face. "It's hard being around him and I think it's worse for him being around me. I still want to be his friend and I don't know how easy that would be if we're partners still. So part of me thinks without the additional stress of a partnership, where an issue between us could be lethal or incredibly dangerous, maybe it'll be easier to reach some sense of normalcy."

Boyd shrugged. "But then I also think that avoiding the issue won't make it go away and if his decision is based on a misinterpretation then it won't help anyone. And if we can be good partners first, then if we become friends again in the future it'll be stronger."

"What makes you think it'd be easier to be friends with him if you won't even see him?" Kassian asked with a raised eyebrow. "It's more likely you won't see each other at all if he leaves the unit."

"Maybe," Boyd allowed. He shifted his legs and briefly glanced down at the sketchpad again before returning his gaze to study Kassian as he tilted his head. "But I still see you enough to hang out, enough that we became friends; and you're in a position Sin may be in. Obviously, long missions could mean I wouldn't see him for an extended period of time. But considering the fact we seem to have the worst trouble when missions are involved, even if I'd see him more as a partner, if that time wasn't as well spent or did more damage than good, then it would be a moot point."

"That's not really what I meant," Kassian said with a brief pause. "If he's leaving the unit because of you, I highly doubt you're going to be able to establish a friendship with him when he probably won't even leave his apartment. I bet he'll go back to being the way he was before you came here. Although who knows since they kept him locked up most of the time. It could be different now, I guess."

"That's one of the reasons I don't know what's best-- if he's forced to be around me, maybe it would be better," Boyd said, although he didn't sound entirely convinced. His eyes narrowed slightly and he looked away, gaze absently straying toward the open window. "But I also think that having space may be exactly what's needed. If he doesn't want to see me, then being forced to go on missions and be in the same unit won't help matters or make him any happier."

Boyd leaned back and frowned slightly, thoughtfully to himself. "When I was so pissed off at him because of Ann, the best thing for me was probably precisely the fact that we didn't see each other for several months. I had the chance to cool down, to decide to see him on my own time. It took a lot of the resentment away. So when I say I want to be friends, I want to hang out... I know he doesn't want to see me now but I'm hoping that in the future he will. But I don't know what would happen; for all I know, he'll never give me a chance again."

"I don't know, kid. It could go either way." Kassian rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully.

Boyd opened his mouth to reply but before he could, his phone rang. He glanced at Kassian then got off the couch to grab his phone. He raised his eyebrows slightly when he saw it was Carhart calling him. The conversation was short and to the point and within seconds, Boyd was flipping the phone closed and turning back to Kassian in bemusement.

"So, speaking of meetings..."

Kassian snorted and stood up, grabbing his jacket from the nearby chair and tugging it on. "That's exactly what I was talking about, man."

"I always assumed it was like this for everyone." Boyd slid his hands in his pockets and quirked an eyebrow. "Now I'm a little envious of the idea of not having them."

"Well, it's different for me. I'm not in a particular unit anymore. Before your unit was created, Sin wasn't either. It's usually different for Level 10s." Kassian shrugged and grabbed his riding helmet from the closet as he continued. "I mean, I still get called in on stuff with other units but it's mainly if it's a sensitive assignment so it's not a typical thing that happens really frequently, especially not now that Harriet took over my spot as team leader. Now I'll just get my solo assignments for the most part."

"Well, if I'm honest, it'd be nice to not be on call for meetings all the time but by now I like the unit I work with, so I suppose it could be worse," Boyd said with a shrug, sitting on the couch's arm rest and absently holding his phone in one hand. "It just seems strange to me to imagine all solos with the occasional collaborative. I have no issue with solos but I'm just so used to a partner..."

Kassian put on his boots and tied them quickly. "They didn't really lay it on very thick about me and Sin switching, I guess because they don't really see any dire need for a change. But I guess if they actually care about giving him what he wants regardless of my decision, they might just have you go at it alone since you're Level 10 now."

He stood up with a shrug. "Just throwing that out that as a possibility. And now I'm gonna take off."

Boyd nodded and thoughtfully watched as Kassian left; it hadn't occurred to him that maybe he'd just get solo assignments. For the most part he liked having a partner but he figured that whatever happened, he'd just deal with it. He wasn't going to worry about it and he doubted they would send him after Janus alone anyway if the group started rising up again.

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When Boyd walked into the conference room, he was surprised to find only Sin and Carhart there. Carhart had just told Boyd to come in and he'd assumed it was a normal briefing or some other meeting, yet Jeffrey was almost always at the meetings a few minutes early so it was odd that he and Owen weren't present.

Sin didn't look up at Boyd as Boyd entered and although Sin wasn't ignoring Boyd, he wasn't really acknowledging him either. Boyd wasn't surprised by this and simply slid into a chair across the table from him, looking over at Carhart curiously.

It was a good ten minutes before the meeting was supposed to have started but once Boyd settled in, Carhart started talking. "This obviously isn't a normal meeting or briefing-- I just wanted the two of you here for this. I'll inform the others later."

He looked from Sin's indifferent face to Boyd's curious one and then back again before sighing quietly. "There's really no ea--"

Carhart stopped and frowned, eyes finding their way back to Sin's and holding his gaze as he started again, "I didn't say anything before because I wasn't sure what would happen. I didn't know if this was really going to happen or if they would determine that he's useless or untrustworthy and just terminate him."

Sin's brow furrowed and he gave Carhart an odd look before glancing at Boyd in relative confusion.

Boyd returned the glance, also feeling confused. Although Boyd assumed Carhart was talking about their new person, he had no idea why Carhart was starting the conversation this way or why he was looking at Sin somewhat apologetically.

Carhart opened his mouth to speak again but before anything could leave his mouth, the door suddenly opened behind him. Carhart frowned and turned in annoyance but when the intruder stepped fully into the room, the General's face went ashen.

"Zacha-- o...kay then."

The man stopped short of whatever he'd been about to say to Carhart and turned to face the conference room.

Boyd stared in complete shock as he saw the man fully.

The man was remarkably similar to Sin, with the same olive skin tone and brilliant green eye color, although his eyes were currently dulled and tired and there were dark circles beneath them. His cheeks were gaunt with a layer of stubble; a barely noticeable scar passed through the left side of his mouth and another through his right eyebrow, and his

nose was slightly crooked, as if it had been broken in the past. He wore all black clothing-- plain pants and a shirt with the long sleeves rolled up.

At the moment he was almost expressionless but, if anything, he looked slightly startled. It was impossible to tell the man's exact age but he looked at least a few years older than Sin.

Boyd's first initial, confused thought was that he hadn't known Sin had an older brother.

But that didn't make sense to him and almost immediately he replayed Carhart's hesitation, his apologetic look toward Sin, his words... The fact that Boyd had assumed they'd be meeting the new informant and all the little idiosyncrasies that now added up; that the person would be interrogated first but then allowed into one of the most highly classified units, and who better for that than a former agent? The fact that the informant knew all this information about Di Zhi and Janus and Sin had mentioned the ties his father had once had to the Triad... The fact the man looked almost exactly like Sin...

It all added up to one seemingly impossible, stupefying conclusion:

Boyd was staring at Emilio Vega.

Boyd couldn't even comprehend how it was possible and even if he'd wanted to say anything, he couldn't; he was struck silent. At the realization that Emilio was alive, Boyd's gaze immediately snapped toward Sin.

But Sin just looked confused. His eyebrows were drawn together slightly and he glanced at Boyd as if to see if they were looking at the same thing, to see if Emilio was really standing there. Maybe Sin was even wondering if he'd started losing his mind again. But when Sin saw his confusion and shock mirrored in Boyd's expression, everything changed.

Sin shot Carhart a venomous look, a look of betrayal, and didn't even glance at his father again before he strode quickly away from the table, shoving past Emilio violently, and disappeared out the door.

Emilio immediately started to follow but Carhart grabbed his arm.

"Just leave him," Carhart snapped angrily, jerking Emilio towards the table.

Emilio snorted and yanked his arm away. "Yeah, okay." He was out the door before Carhart could protest.

Boyd immediately headed toward the door at almost the same time as Carhart, and the two of them arrived in the hallway just in time to see Emilio following Sin.

"Hey!" Emilio jogged after Sin's long-legged strides, trying to catch up to his son. The people in the area stopped and stared at the two of them, civilian staff and agents alike gawking at the spectacle they made.

Emilio reached forward and grabbed Sin's arm, dragging him to a stop with an annoyed scowl. "*Qué te paso*, Hsin?"

Sin spun around and shoved Emilio violently, so violently that Emilio actually stumbled backwards. Sin glared at him hatefully and Emilio stared back with an almost bewildered expression.

"What the fuck, kid? This is the reception I get after almost twenty years? I guess no one taught you manners yet, huh?" Emilio rubbed his chest idly where Sin had hit him, green eyes narrowed slightly at his son.

Sin just stared at him, breath coming fast and eyes blazing like green fire, his hands clenched at his sides and shoulders hunched forward slightly. He looked on the verge of a meltdown and the uninvolved staff around them began edging away discreetly, yet not far enough away to lose sight of the two Vegas. It was likely that most of them had no idea what was going on.

Boyd and Carhart watched from the side, silent and knowing better than to interrupt.

"I killed you," Sin said finally, his voice low and shaking with anger.

Emilio looked genuinely confused now and he gave Sin a bizarre look. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Sin shook his head slowly, incredulously, eyes narrowing into slits. "I fucking shot you, and you fucking died!" he shouted finally, taking a menacing step towards his father.

But Emilio didn't back down, he just shrugged calmly at the younger reflection of himself. "Oh, that."

"You-- what--" Sin's mouth opened and closed before he spun around again and started to storm off but Emilio once again prevented him from doing so by grabbing his arm. This time when Sin turned around he did so with a flying fist that raced toward Emilio's face hard enough, it seemed, to break bones.

Or it would have been if Emilio hadn't dodged out of the way before maximum damage could be done. Instead of stopping and letting Sin go, instead of backing off right then, Emilio gave Sin an incredulous glare and immediately went on the offense.

Although Sin had attacked him first, Emilio didn't seem interested in reasoning with his son or simply defending himself. He swung at Sin with his left fist and when Sin dodged with incredible speed, Emilio still managed an almost immediate follow-up strike with his right. The punch made contact with Sin's chest before Emilio immediately jumped back, spinning to the side and out of the way of the flurry of attacks that Sin unleashed on him.

It didn't seem possible but Emilio easily dodged most of Sin's advances and parried the others, fending his son off almost casually. He looked mostly annoyed by the fact that he had to do this and not at all concerned with the deadly threat of his look-alike son, who admittedly didn't seem to be putting as much lethal force into the hits as he was capable of doing.

Sin's movements were quick and furious and more than anything, he seemed angry with his father, seemed like he wanted to beat him up.

Despite that, it seemed quite clear that Emilio was just as skilled a fighter as Sin, if not more so in the way of technique. But when Sin grabbed his father and hurled him across the room, it was obvious that Sin had more strength.

Emilio literally flew across the room and slammed into the wall, sliding down and into a crumpled heap on the floor. He shook his head back and forth for a moment, obviously stunned, before he stared up at Sin incredulously as he started to pull himself up off the floor. "What the fuck, man."

Sin didn't reply and he took the opportunity to finally turn completely and leave the scene, moving so quickly that he was already far down the hallway and disappearing from view before anyone could follow.

"What the hell were you thinking?" Carhart shouted at Emilio angrily.

"Jesus Christ, you people are ridiculous." Emilio stood up straight and rubbed the back of his head with a wince. "I come back to people yelling at me and psychos throwing me at walls. Nice."

Boyd couldn't even comprehend how in the world this had all happened and although he was still in a state of shock over the revelation that Emilio was alive, Emilio's comment caused a spike of anger in Boyd.

How could the man possibly not understand the severity of the situation; how could he so calmly push aside something that had been tearing Sin apart? And how the hell could he so casually call Sin a psycho when Emilio was part of the reason his son was so fucked up?

"Fuck you," Boyd snapped furiously at Emilio with a glare before he briefly shifted the look to Carhart. Without waiting for a response, Boyd immediately half-strode, half-jogged in the direction Sin had disappeared.

Chapter 34

Carhart shoved Emilio back into the conference room and stepped in, slamming the door shut behind him. He could do nothing for a long moment but inhale deeply as he tried to get control of himself but even then he couldn't help turning on Emilio with a furious glare.

"What the hell were you thinking?"

Emilio leaned against the table, rubbing the back of his head with a wince. His mouth was turned down in a dark scowl and his stiff posture screamed frustration. "I didn't fucking know he was going to be in here, okay? Don't start your shit with me."

Carhart shook his head and took another deep breath, trying to ignore the fact that he wanted to do nothing more than yell at his former partner at the top of his lungs until Emilio finally got what Carhart had been telling him for years; that he couldn't do whatever the hell he wanted, that someday there would be consequences.

But this was the first time he was seeing the other man in nearly two decades and he couldn't bring himself to rehash old arguments just yet. So instead he just sighed heavily and crossed his arms over his chest, studying Emilio closely, taking in the fact that he really hadn't changed much in nearly twenty years.

Instead of looking to be in his mid-forties, Emilio didn't look much older than early thirties; he and Sin could be brothers instead of father and son but that wasn't too surprising since Emilio had barely been fourteen when Sin was born.

"That was a really bad move, Vega," Carhart said evenly, shaking his head and dragging his gaze away from Emilio's face. It was hard to look at him, the man who had once been his best friend and partner, and not feel a large amount of resentment and bitterness. He'd hoped to get all of it out of his system before Emilio had actually been released from his cell, before he was inducted into the unit, but Vivienne had stopped Carhart from having any contact with Emilio until she was sure the man hadn't turned on them.

Emilio just shrugged silently, his eyes finally lifting to Carhart. His gaze skimmed over him idly, taking in how he'd changed, matured, how he looked jaded and hardened; how almost every trace of the naive twenty-five year old with the big blue eyes had vanished.

"He's been in a bad way lately, Emilio. You couldn't have--"

"I just fucking told you I didn't fucking know!" Emilio growled, standing up straight and glaring at Carhart. "The bitch at the desk told me your meeting didn't start for ten minutes and even then I didn't know it was with him. Jesus Christ, Zachary, lay off my ass already. I don't see you in twenty years and the first thing you do is nag me to fucking death but I guess at least some shit didn't change."

Carhart glared back, facing his former partner evenly. "Well, maybe if you put more thought into your actions, I wouldn't have to nag you. Just the fact that you're waltzing all over the compound is stupid. He lives here, you know; he could have run into you."

Emilio shook his head incredulously, looking at Carhart as if he was the biggest idiot in the world. "So what, dude? What's the big fucking deal? If I'm going to be working with him chances are he would have figured it out at some point anyway unless you were gonna tell the fucker that the Agency found a way to confer with the other side and I'm some really good-looking fucking spirit. I don't even see why you didn't tell him already, anyway."

"Because--" Carhart broke off and looked away, angry glare drilling a hole into the wall beyond Emilio's head. "Because I still wasn't sure whether or not you'd be terminated. I was kept out of everything, if you didn't notice. I didn't even know you were off the Fourth until you came busting in like the thoughtless jackass you've always been."

Emilio made a face and sat down in one of the chairs, resting his elbows on the table and leaning forward to massage his temples. He looked tired and worn out and it was no wonder considering the Agency had put him through months of intense interrogation. There had been a point when Carhart had wondered if there would be anything left of Emilio when they were done.

He watched as Emilio ran his fingers through his hair and saw that some of them were adorned with tattoos. He watched his former best friend and couldn't help but allow some of his initial anger to drain away.

After a moment Carhart sighed and rubbed a hand across his face, exhaling slowly before turning his gaze back on Emilio. It was hard not to feel awed to be in his presence after so much time. It was like seeing a ghost, seeing someone who was supposed to be dead and had been in Carhart's mind for years.

There had been times immediately after Emilio had disappeared that Carhart had wondered if they would ever find a body, if they would ever find his killers, if he'd ever

gotten a burial. Those questions had haunted him for nearly ten years before he'd finally been able to let it go and now...

"Why didn't you tell me?"

The words were out of Carhart's mouth before he could stop them and Emilio looked up at him, his expression morose. Carhart was relieved that Emilio wasn't putting on his joker facade.

"I couldn't tell you. You know that, Zach."

"Why?" Carhart demanded angrily, bitterly. "You didn't trust me? After everything we'd been through, you thought I'd go running to Connors?"

"That's not it at all," Emilio replied tiredly, sitting back in the chair with a heavy sigh. "I wanted to tell you, man. I really fucking did. I wanted to tell you about Connors and I wanted to tell you about Hsin but I couldn't. I fucking know you, I know how you are. You never would have let it rest-- if you knew I was underground, you would have tried to find me or contact me or something and I couldn't risk you getting me killed."

"Why thank you for that vote of confidence," Carhart replied. He continued to stand above Emilio as he glared down. "I just don't understand why you had to always go at everything alone. I was your partner, your friend, and you just didn't give a shit. You just let me think you'd been murdered for years but I guess you didn't care about what that would do to me."

Emilio leaned his cheek against one open hand and stared up at Carhart. A slight smile found its way onto his full lips and he looked at the general tiredly but the smile was still genuine. Carhart knew it was; even after so long, he still remembered all of Emilio's mannerisms.

"I cared. I actually worried about you, bro. I saw how hard you took your wife's death and I wondered if you'd revert back into being an antisocial freak again if you thought I died," Emilio admitted. "If you'd just crawl back into a hole and think everyone sucks and dies and that it's not worth getting close to anyone and all of that shit."

Carhart dropped the other man's intense gaze, as uncomfortable as he'd always been with Emilio's uncanny talent of reading him.

"I actually worried about you more than I worried about Hsin."

Carhart's gaze shot back to Emilio and his glare returned. "How could you do that to him? That poor kid-- do you know how psychologically ruined he is? Do you know he's had more than one breakdown? That he hallucinates? That he hears your voice in his head calling him a goddamn murderer?"

"Wha--" Emilio's eyebrows drew together, handsome face twisting in bewilderment. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. He said the same thing-- that he killed me. How was I supposed to know he thought that? Do I look fucking psychic to you?"

"He said he shot you--"

"Yeah, he did shoot me," Emilio interrupted impatiently, waving a hand to prevent Carhart from speaking again. "Connors' boys came to take me out and Hsin spazzed and killed them. I came up on him and he shot me too but he didn't realize it was me. I don't even remember much after that, bro. I remember opening my eyes sometimes, seeing a field, feeling someone dragging me-- but next thing I knew I was waking up in a friend's attic. They found me half-dead dumped with the agents who came to cap my ass."

Emilio looked away briefly, his eyes faraway as if he was remembering that night. His lips pressed together, eyebrows drawn down as he absently ran his fingers over the fabric of his pants. After a pause he shrugged stiffly, his tone slightly darker. "I thought maybe he was dead for awhile. That something had happened to him, that Peter came back and killed him. It bothered me more than I thought it would. I can't really explain it, dude. I wasn't a good father at all, I know that shit now even if I didn't know it then, but... I don't know, it was just like..."

Emilio trailed off and his expression closed up as he flexed his hands, shifting agitatedly, uncomfortably; a mannerism that reminded Carhart of Sin. "Forget it."

"No, finish what you were saying," Carhart encouraged, sitting down next to Emilio. He leaned forward, frowning. "Just help me understand, Emilio, because it's really hard to take in right now. It's hard to understand why you did the shit that you do to him."

"Oh yeah?" Emilio's gaze finally returned to Carhart but this time his eyes were narrowed slightly, his expression was cool and all traces of his vulnerability and regret were gone. "I've been wondering the same shit about you, bro."

Carhart sat back defensively, thrown off guard by the cold tone of Emilio's voice. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah." Emilio's expression turned into a full-on glare, dark eyebrows lowering over his intense green eyes, shooting sparks. "A collar and a cage, huh? What is he-- a fucking dog?"

"Fuck you," Carhart snapped and looked away, although he was unable to hide the flash of guilt that crossed his face. "You weren't here. You didn't know what it was like."

"Well, enlighten me, General Carhart," Emilio said, his voice a low, angry growl that grew stronger and more agitated as he spoke. "I mean, after I found out he'd made it back here, that he was an agent, I thought he was safe 'cause you'd have his back. I thought you'd do that for me but no. Not at all. You just helped them fuck his head up even more than it already was."

Emilio stood up as the anger seemed to totally consume him, his movements stiff with tension, his jaw clenched as he stared at Carhart. His mood swings were as bad as ever and they occurred just as radically.

"They wanted to kill him, to keep him locked up in that cage forever!" Carhart snapped, not meeting Emilio's gaze. "I only thought of the collar so they wouldn't keep him in that fucking box. Or would you have preferred they keep your son in a drugged daze for the rest of his life because he's so claustrophobic that he tries to kill himself when they put him in there totally conscious?"

"Maybe he would have been better off if they did terminate him," Emilio replied coldly, not looking away from Carhart's face. His gaze was steely and unrelenting. "It would have been better than turning him into a fucking circus animal. At least he would have had some peace."

Carhart stared at his boots, unable to meet Emilio's stare, unable to hide the shame that he was sure was blazing blatantly on his face. He'd known for years that he'd failed Sin; he didn't need Emilio to remind him.

"Things were better for awhile," Carhart said quietly after a moment. "He was happy."

"I know. With that blond kid. Boyd. I know all about it." Emilio snorted and rolled his shoulders as if he was trying to work away some of the aggression that had built inside him.

"Yes."

But now that was over with. Sin didn't turn to Boyd anymore and Carhart had no doubts that Sin wouldn't be turning to him anymore either. The look Sin had speared through him had nearly stopped his heart. Carhart had no delusions that Sin had taken his silence regarding Emilio as anything but an absolute betrayal.

Emilio cleared his throat and rocked on the balls of his feet, rolling his neck and cracking it loudly. "Anyway, I need to find Hsin. I don't want to deal with him socking me in the face and throwing me into walls anymore or I may have to terminate him myself."

Emilio shook his head. "Fucking threw my ass into a wall. I'm still not really clear on how that worked out. There's a freakin' dent in that wall now. Tell me, Zach, how is that possible."

Carhart shrugged. "How is anything he does possible? He's incredible. Always has been."

Emilio looked at Carhart sharply, eyes narrowed, and didn't respond for nearly a full minute before asking finally, "Where would he be?"

"I don't know. I doubt he went home. Maybe Boyd's house but I'm not even sure about that. He goes to Willowbrook Park sometimes. Sometimes he sits on the damn roof of the Tower. I honestly have no idea and you can't stray far so I doubt you'll find him."

Emilio grunted and gave Carhart another long look before turning. "We'll finish our discussion later, Zachary. I'm not done with you yet."

Carhart just scoffed quietly and didn't stand, feeling no need to play the part of general in front of Emilio, feeling no desire to mask how dejected and guilty and pathetic he felt at that point. Emilio would see through whatever front he put up, he always had; and he'd always known that he had the ability to reduce Carhart to an embarrassed-- and in this case, ashamed-- mess with only a few words.

Emilio had been right; not much had changed.

"Well, I have some questions for you too, Vega."

"Can't wait."

With that, Emilio turned away and left the conference room.

Carhart stared after him silently and didn't move to stand up until quite awhile later.

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Boyd glanced at his watch and pushed himself away from the wall when he saw that he'd been waiting for four hours already. At some point, he had to acknowledge that Sin wasn't returning to his apartment tonight, and the calls to Sin's phone had all ended in voice mail.

He glanced at the guard, who had been giving Boyd the occasional odd glance.

"Let him know I stopped by if you see him."

The guard nodded and Boyd didn't wait for further response before he walked down the stairs. He stopped by the gym again, just in case Sin was there now, but he still couldn't find his partner.

Although Sin had only disappeared several hours ago after storming out on Emilio, Boyd still felt worried about the lack of response; Sin had seemed angry enough that he could do something reckless, which would never end well.

The entire situation was surreal.

Boyd still couldn't believe that he'd actually seen Emilio; that after nearly twenty years it turned out the man had been alive all along and apparently hadn't once considered letting his son know he hadn't died.

Boyd still didn't know exactly what had happened the night Sin thought he'd killed Emilio; obviously a gun had been involved but Boyd held no doubt in his mind that it must have been some sort of accident. He knew Sin never would have intentionally killed Emilio, especially not with how it had been eating at him.

Yet if it was strange for Boyd then this had to be life-changing for Sin. The fact that Boyd hadn't known where to look for Sin other than the gym and Sin's apartment made it more difficult. He wanted to find Sin, to talk to him about this if Sin wanted; to just give Sin someone to rely on. But two hours of searching the compound and four hours of

sitting by Sin's apartment finally caused Boyd to decide to go home; to try again tomorrow.

After this much time, he didn't believe Sin would do anything rash overnight and maybe it would be easier to find him in the morning. He left Sin another voice mail saying he was looking for him so at least Sin knew Boyd hadn't just walked away without a second thought, then told the guard to contact him when Sin returned. The guard looked at Boyd a little oddly but nodded.

Nearly another half hour had passed by the time Boyd got back to his car and drove home. As he turned onto Magnolia Lane and parked in his driveway, movement caught his eye. Relief rushed through him as he noticed a dark figure sitting on the swing on his front porch. Boyd slammed his car door shut behind him and quickly headed toward the house, shadows half-covering the man who was slumped down in the swing, legs stretched out in front of him as he smoked. Green eyes glinted faintly in the dim light as they turned toward him.

"Hsi--" Boyd started to say but, at the same time it occurred to him that the posture was entirely too relaxed for the situation, the smell of marijuana drifted past him.

Boyd stopped in his tracks with a narrowed stare, his body language going from pleased to closed off in an instant. What the hell was with the Vega men and not only suddenly knowing where he lived, but showing up unannounced as well? For all that Boyd would have welcomed a surprise visit from Sin, he wasn't interested in seeing Emilio and he couldn't fathom why the man had decided to stop by his house.

"What are you doing here," Boyd said flatly.

Emilio exhaled, blowing the sweet-smelling smoke in Boyd's face as he replied almost lazily, "You should try being more friendly, *chico*. I could get in a lot of trouble for being here."

Something nagged at the back of Boyd's mind as that low, deep voice drifted through the darkness but Boyd was too irritated to give it any thought.

"What gave you the impression that I care?" Boyd asked with slightly raised eyebrows, crossing his arms with a strong posture as he watched Emilio steadily.

Emilio didn't reply right away and it was obvious that he was sizing up Boyd, the situation, and calculating the pros and cons of his next move. It was tense and the

moment was charged. As Emilio stared into Boyd's eyes unflinchingly, it was obvious that he wasn't even sure about whether or not he wanted to deal with the younger agent; that he wasn't entirely thrilled with the attitude he was receiving.

But then Emilio just shook his head and took another deep hit before stubbing the joint out on his tongue. He tucked the joint into a side pocket of his loose black pants and scoffed softly. "You don't know anything about me, boy. Don't start talking out of your ass just yet. At least invite me in first."

Boyd stared at Emilio, a portion of his initial irritation somewhat quelled by Emilio's reaction. Boyd didn't particularly care what Emilio thought about him but if the otherwise flippant man was clearly debating this interaction in his mind, and especially if Emilio could get in trouble for coming over, then there was probably a good reason. It didn't change his opinion of Emilio but it did cause him to give the man a chance.

"Fine," Boyd said evenly as he turned and walked inside the house, leaving the door open behind him. He flipped some lights on as he went inside, casting pale light across the living room.

Emilio pushed himself off the swing after a moment and followed, not looking very concerned with Boyd's attitude any longer as he took in the interior of the house almost in boredom. In that brief moment on the swing, Emilio's entire demeanor had changed; it was as if he'd decided how he wanted this to play out and had taken on a specific role for the encounter.

Instead of tense and dangerously moody, Emilio looked calm and nearly relaxed, despite the fact that he'd just gotten out of what had apparently been months of Agency interrogation and a failed first meeting with his son.

None of these things appeared to weigh on Emilio's mind anymore. Despite the fact that the evidence of his intense interrogation was shown in his slightly underweight frame and the way his olive complexion looked peaked, Emilio gave the impression of being entirely nonchalant, of not having a care in the world. "So this is where all of the action goes down with you and my boy, eh?"

Boyd pushed the door closed behind Emilio and turned toward the man, eyes narrowed slightly. How would Emilio have known that, unless Carhart told him? But that seemed odd; there would be no reason for Carhart to bring something like that up, especially when he knew Boyd and Sin weren't sleeping together anymore.

"Why would you say that?" Boyd asked somewhat suspiciously.

Emilio smirked at Boyd and crossed his arms over his chest. Some kind of intricate tribal tattoo encircled one forearm; it had a variety of lines and circles of varying lengths and widths which encased exotic-looking symbols and shapes. The tattoo caught Boyd's attention slightly but he returned his attention to Emilio's face, not wanting to get distracted.

The older man's dark eyebrows arched over intensely familiar green eyes, which were currently twinkling with what appeared to be genuine amusement. After a brief silence he shook his head and snorted. "I know you're blond but you can't be that stupid."

Boyd's eyes narrowed further and at first he only felt suspicion at the comment but then his gaze automatically dropped to the tattoo again. Something about the placement of the tattoo was familiar but he didn't know why at first, or why an indefinable aspect of Emilio and his body language was nagging at the back of Boyd's mind. He had never met Emilio before and he'd only heard a few stories of the man so at first Boyd thought maybe it was just mannerisms that overlapped with Sin's or the fact they looked so alike.

But Emilio's comment gave Boyd pause and as he stared at the tattoo, he abruptly realized where he remembered seeing it before: in a darkened tunnel in Monterrey.

Boyd's gaze snapped back up to Emilio's face as disbelief briefly struck him silent.

It seemed impossible, but the more he thought of it-- that low drawl of Emilio's voice, the fact that Emilio knew about Boyd and Sin's sex life, the tattoo, the way he acted around Boyd as if they'd met before-- it all led back to Lo Más Chingón.

As that realization swept through Boyd and he thought back to Chingón, he finally understood why Chingón's had been the way he was; his American accent, the fact he could tail even Sin without him knowing, maybe even the reason he gave Boyd that tip about Laguna de Sánchez and why he let them through when Sin was hurt. It actually made sense in some fashion but for Boyd, who was still surprised to know that Emilio was alive, it was another shock for the night.

Boyd stared at Emilio as a mixture of surprise and wariness moved through him quickly. "What the hell?"

"What the hell, what?" Emilio asked dryly, walking into the house casually. "I can't figure out if that's a question or a statement."

"What--"

Boyd stared at Emilio, trying to reconcile the fact that the man he'd met back in Mexico-- who had surprised Boyd in the alley, who'd managed to remove everything from that warehouse in less time than had seemed possible, who had blocked the exit in the tunnel and who'd so casually strolled toward the van and peered inside while Sin had lain there dying -- had all been Sin's father.

That while Boyd and Sin had sat in that apartment talking about Sin's life, while Sin had been finding it difficult to think of his father -- all along, Emilio had been across the city. All along, Emilio had been tailing them.

All along, Emilio had known they were there.

Boyd had always disliked Emilio due to the stories but he hadn't had anything against Lo Más Chingón. The fact that Chingón had let them through so they could save Sin had always been something Boyd was grateful to him for. In a way, Boyd had almost been entertained by Chingón by the end of it all; by the cat and mouse game and how, despite the man's reputation and profession, Boyd had felt that he could take Chingón at his word.

To know that they were the same person... It shifted enough in Boyd's mind that he still couldn't quite figure out what to say.

"You-- How long?" Boyd finally managed, not even caring at the moment that it would be incredibly obvious to Emilio how caught off-guard he was.

"How long what?" Emilio walked into the kitchen and seemed unimpressed by the white walls and complete lack of decoration as he pulled a face and shook his head to himself.

"How long were you Lo Más Chingón?" Boyd clarified, following him. "How long did you know we were there?"

"I can't reveal all of my secrets just yet, *chico*. But I will say that I knew the guys in 4FF before I joined the Agency. They're my buddies, *mis hermanos*. *Comprendes?*" Emilio

turned to Boyd again and continued, "But 4FF didn't form until shortly after I got out of the Agency. I have to make money some kinda way, you know."

Boyd stood near the wall, watching Emilio closely with his arms crossed as he tried to take this all in. Now that they were in a well-lit area and it was a less chaotic situation, it really hit Boyd how similar Emilio and Sin were in ways. It was disturbing to Boyd, in fact.

So much was the same-- that aristocratic nose although Emilio's was a little bent, they stood the same with their shoulders back when they were trying to intimidate someone, the way they both smirked mockingly, the quick witted-sarcasm that seemed to come with being a Vega and that intense, scrutinizing, hawk-like stare. Most of all, they shared those same brilliant jade green eyes although Emilio's were less guarded, his expressions more animated.

It was bizarre seeing those eyes on someone else's face. It was even stranger to see those eyes red-rimmed from the effects of marijuana, to smell the aroma of the drug wafting off Emilio and to see all the similarities of their features so close up while also being able to spot so many differences.

In truth, the differences were what felt jarring to Boyd.

He could see the small scars on Emilio's face, the fact that his lips were slightly less full than Sin's, that Emilio's eyes weren't almond shaped and were actually wider, more expressive, that his build was more solid, lacking the lankiness of Sin's frame without looking bulky.

Emilio was Boyd's height, which was odd to Boyd after years of looking up the several inches to meet Sin's eyes. And his voice was so drastically different that it was incredibly bizarre to hear it coming out of such a familiar face; Emilio's voice wasn't as low and his language lacked the near perfection of Sin's way of speaking. Emilio spoke in a deep drawl, slang peppered in, and he seemed grammatically incorrect more often than not.

For Boyd, it was like watching a skewed version of Sin; like seeing Sin in a dream with details that had been forgotten and blurred from the reality they'd been taken.

It was off-putting to Boyd and despite how much he'd disliked Emilio from the stories, it was difficult not to look at that face, at the tiredness and guardedness of those eyes,

and not remember Sin several months ago when he'd been exhausted and nearly overwhelmed by the demons in his mind.

It was difficult to look at Emilio and not see aspects of Sin; which, grudgingly for Boyd, made him feel some sense of compassion for everything Emilio had probably been through recently if he'd just been released from Fourth. Boyd saw Sin in Emilio and couldn't help feeling a little more open-minded in response.

But then Boyd remembered how Emilio hadn't exactly done Sin many favors in life with the way he'd raised him, and he thought about how casually Emilio had dismissed the surprise, betrayal and anger Sin had shown -- he thought about how Sin's guilt and depression may not have been so debilitating if only things had happened differently when Sin had grown up or if Sin had realized he hadn't murdered his father... He thought of Emilio tailing them and having more than enough opportunities to talk to his son...

And he didn't feel quite so bad for Emilio after all.

Instead, he considered what Emilio said about 4FF. That certainly explained the close-knit group and why it had been so difficult to get any information on Chingón. He remembered Sin's comment about Emilio's connections with Triad and Boyd put that in context with Mexico.

"Your group was unusually effective with smuggling goods; even assuming you found your friends immediately after you disappeared, it takes time to build routes and a reputation. And the fear the locals had of even hinting at your name..." Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly, thoughtfully, as he asked, "Did you use pre-established routes from the drug cartel or are you or your friends still in it?"

Emilio just shrugged, enigmatic smirk back on his lips. "Maybe. And maybe not."

Boyd studied Emilio for another moment, not particularly surprised by the evasiveness. Emilio and 4FF had been quite successful in Monterrey and Boyd had gotten the distinct impression that the group operated out of more than just that city. It made him wonder why Emilio had given that up; he'd disappeared from the Agency for nearly two decades. Boyd didn't know if the administration had been aware of his presence all that time but he doubted it.

So why return when Emilio probably hadn't needed to; when he likely could have stayed away for his entire life? The only thing Boyd could think of was that the Monterrey

mission may have been the first time Emilio had seen Sin in a long time. Maybe seeing Sin so hurt in the back of the van had changed something for Emilio... maybe it was possible he wasn't quite as self-absorbed as Boyd's impression had always been from stories.

"Your group was certainly successful and I doubt your relative monopoly was likely to end any time soon," Boyd said, his tone observational and somewhat curious. "Why did you come back?"

Emilio tilted his head to the side and considered Boyd for a long moment as he chewed on the inside of his cheek, fingers absently toying with the hem of his shirt. It was yet another similarity he shared with his son; he fidgeted the same way Sin did.

"I just felt like it. I missed scraping at the feet of higher powers and not being my own boss," Emilio said after a while, lying blatantly and not even trying to sound believable.

"Was it because of Sin?" Boyd pressed, not knowing whether Emilio would respond but needing to ask the question anyway.

Emilio arched one dark eyebrow and smirked again. "Maybe. Maybe not."

It was clear that Emilio had no intentions of answering any of Boyd's questions, so Boyd just pushed himself from the wall and walked over to the counter where a pot of cold jasmine tea was sitting from earlier that day.

"Why are you here?" Boyd filled the tea kettle with water but didn't turn on the stove; he just set the kettle to the side and turned around to look at Emilio again. "Don't you have a son to look for?"

Emilio adopted an innocent expression and looked away casually, lifting one shoulder in another one of his shrugs. It was like something a child would do, an exaggerated motion that seemed to imply either complete confusion or innocent nonchalance. "I thought Hsin might be here."

"Well, he's not," Boyd said simply. "I was looking for him, too."

"Why isn't he here?" Emilio asked shrewdly, eyes narrowing at the younger man as his gaze returned quickly. "Who better to run to in one's time of need than one's manlover slash partner?"

"We aren't together anymore." Boyd's eyes narrowed and a hint of an edge briefly crept into his voice at Emilio's choice of words; this wouldn't be a 'time of need' and Sin wouldn't need to be 'running to' anyone if it hadn't been for the way this had all happened. And Emilio didn't seem interested in really even acknowledging his part in it all. "If anything, this is probably the last place he'd go."

Emilio stared at Boyd hard for a stretch of time and the cocky, wise-ass attitude seemed to slip once again as a hint of frustration showed through his expression. "Well, that's great."

"I don't know where to tell you to look, either," Boyd said after a moment. At least it seemed there was something else to Emilio other than what he'd so far been showing, and even if Boyd didn't like the man, it was probably a good thing that Emilio was trying to find Sin. Sin had never disliked Emilio the way Boyd had and it would probably help Sin to talk to his father, provided that Emilio didn't agitate his son further. "I've exhausted my resources which is why I returned here. Usually he's at his apartment or the gym but I can't find him anywhere and he won't answer his phone."

"Fine." Emilio pushed himself away from the counter and with a smart-ass half wave, started to leave the room.

"Emilio," Boyd said suddenly and it was clear from his tone that he wanted the man to wait.

"Boyd," Emilio parroted, stopping to look at Boyd over his shoulder.

Boyd watched Emilio more seriously for a moment before sighing and looking away, dropping his hands to rest against the counter behind him. "Listen. I don't know you and I'm quite aware that you have no reason to care about what I think. But Sin never thought ill of you; despite everything, I think he always looked up to you. He was always... grateful to you and he didn't see anything wrong with the way you raised him. I heard stories and I didn't agree with him but I wasn't there. Still, if you were dead, you couldn't have helped how it all ended. But now..."

His honey brown gaze slid over to Emilio again and Boyd found it at once disconcerting and odd to be saying this aloud to someone who looked so eerily similar to Sin; to know that the man he'd always believed to be dead was in fact standing in his kitchen, perfectly healthy and alive.

It was even worse imagining what this must all be like for Sin, who had believed in Emilio despite everything. Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze sharpened, and his expression turned more resolute. "I just don't understand... Why did you leave him?" The unspoken question of, 'why did you hurt him like that?' hung in the air.

"What the fuck is with this question?" Emilio wondered out loud, shaking his head and rolling his eyes upward at the ceiling in exasperation. "None of it happened the way it was supposed to. It's not my fault he went batshit crazy and nearly killed me."

Boyd drew his eyebrows down slightly, not knowing what Emilio was talking about exactly but not wanting to ask too many questions at once. "How was it supposed to happen?"

Emilio sighed tragically and walked further into the kitchen until he was standing directly in front of Boyd, almost too close to be entirely normal or comfortable. He crossed his arms over his chest again.

"We were supposed to go underground together."

Boyd met Emilio's gaze steadily and he stayed still, not backing down from Emilio or his proximity.

He didn't fully understand what that meant but he didn't feel it was his place to ask Emilio about details of that night. There was too much Boyd had already learned about Sin's life from other people; it was only right to ask Sin about this instead.

Knowing only that Sin thought he'd killed his father and that a gun had been involved, Boyd was still highly confused as to why Sin would have slipped into an episode as Boyd assumed he had, what had even been happening. How had Emilio planned to go underground, had he been alone with Sin, how had he survived..?

A number of questions raced through his mind but he didn't ask any of them; instead, he focused on what only Emilio would be able to answer.

"But after he shot you, it never once occurred to you that he'd think he killed you?" Boyd pressed, although there was nothing accusatory in his tone. "That you could bring him underground with you later, or at least somehow tell him you were alive so he wouldn't worry?"

"Why bother?" Emilio asked with a shrug. "He could take care of himself, and the Agency inducted him into their fold so as far as I knew, he wasn't in any danger. What would have been the point of endangering his life by hunting him down and dragging him off with me so then Connors would track him down and have a reason to wanna cap us both?"

"But you had eight months in Monterrey to tell him you were alive," Boyd said stubbornly. "Did you honestly think he didn't care about what happened? Or did you just distrust him after years of being with the Agency?"

Emilio scoffed at that, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "What difference would it make? He's a grown fucking man, he doesn't need me in his life, I was never some great parental figure, and when I saw him in Mexico he seemed to be doing just fine until the end. What would he have gotten out of me showing up and announcing I was still around after twenty years? Maybe if I'd have known he was all traumatized from thinking he killed me I would have but I didn't so whatever." Emilio shrugged and didn't seem too apologetic or remorseful over having kept his survival from Sin.

Boyd shook his head, not entirely able to argue the point at least from Emilio's perspective but that really only explained the end of it all. It didn't seem to Boyd as though Emilio cared enough about how he'd affected Sin in general.

Boyd remembered Sin telling him once that the training had been good; that he would have been worse off without it. But Boyd couldn't understand why, and even if Sin felt he'd needed some sense of discipline and training for whatever reason, Boyd still didn't think it was right for Emilio to have taken a child and to have taught him nothing but how to kill. Emilio could have at least instilled some sense of self-esteem in Sin; he could have taught Sin to be human or at least that it was alright if he was; that it was okay to feel emotions or have faults.

Instead, it sounded to Boyd like Emilio had basically hardcore trained Sin on a whole range of skills and left out the most important parts; the parts that would have let Sin be more balanced in whatever way he could have managed with the shitty life he'd been dealt.

"Doesn't it bother you that you took a child and trained him to be an assassin, fucking him up in the head because of that?" Boyd watched Emilio evenly, his gaze steady and intense on Emilio's face. "You say he wasn't in danger because he was in the Agency but it's not like this is a good life. You had to have known that with what you'd taught him, he'd just be used at the Agency until he was killed in action or there was nothing

left for him to give. If he'd had at least some brief sense of normalcy in his life or had been taught it was okay to just be human, maybe he wouldn't have been in such a difficult position."

"He was fucked up before I even got him," Emilio scoffed again, raising an eyebrow.

He rocked back on his heels, tilting his head to the side and never shifting his intense stare from Boyd's face. It was invasive and penetrating and Boyd could see where Sin had gained the ability to look right through people in such an intimidating way. "I got a crazy ass kid with mental problems and anger problems and who'd already killed before the age of eight. He creeped me the fuck out so I dealt with him the only way I knew how 'cause that's how I grew up and that's what I knew."

With Emilio watching him so closely, Boyd doubted the flash of confusion he felt was entirely hidden from the older man. "What do you mean already killed?"

"His mom was a little bit touched, you know?" Emilio tapped the side of his head and crossed his eyes. "She tortured the kid until he had enough and killed her. Can't blame him but still, poisoning your mom ain't the most normal conclusion for a eight-year-old to come to, am I right?"

Boyd was sure that the surprise he felt was evident in his eyes and slightly raised eyebrows; he'd known Sin's mom had definitely had issues and he'd known that as a result, Sin had been abused. Although he knew that Sin's mother had died, he'd never once thought to suspect that Sin had killed her. It had never once crossed his mind to think that Sin would have thought of, let alone been capable of, murder at such a young age.

As much as he could understand why Sin would have wanted to get away from that place, he had to agree with Emilio that it wasn't a normal conclusion for a child.

Even though they'd grown up in completely different environments, when Boyd had been eight it had never once occurred to him to kill someone else, let alone actually go through with it. And if poison had been involved, that wasn't a spur of the moment decision-- that took cunning and planning. That took intent. That took intelligence to acquire the poison and the capability to follow through, to know full well that he was about to kill his own mother.

Boyd looked away from Emilio's gaze, mildly disturbed by the information.

For the longest time, he'd always seen Sin's violent outbursts as explainable, as reacting to immediate threats. He'd thought it had all stemmed back to Emilio's training and the misguided treatment of his young child.

Knowing what he did now, it partially made Boyd have to look at Sin in a new light; to acknowledge that even from an early age, even before Emilio had arrived, there had been something off about Sin. That for all that Boyd had defended him for years as just reacting violently to negative experiences, in this case Sin hadn't blindly lashed out in anger and hurt someone because Emilio had made it so he hadn't known any other way.

Even so, it didn't mean Sin was any different of a person now than he'd been before Boyd had known this. Boyd couldn't imagine being a vulnerable child in the position Sin had been, so he couldn't judge Sin's decision without knowing what sort of desperation that could make a person feel, or to what lengths he himself would have gone to escape.

He tried to remember what Sin had told him about his mother but at that moment the main thing that stuck out in his mind was Sin's comment that he'd wanted to be taken away; to be protected and saved by a father he'd never known.

"What was he like?" Boyd looked over at Emilio again. "When you found him."

Emilio narrowed his eyes at Boyd and made a long 'hmm' sound before shrugging his shoulders and walking around him, heading to the refrigerator. He threw it open and looked inside as if it was a completely normal thing to do. "He was odd. He just sat around and didn't talk and when he talked it was like he was trying to figure out what I was up to or what I was gonna do to him. I could relate to a kid like that but he was still fucking creepy. Even when I went to pick him up from Hong Kong, all the bitches at the parlor were terrified of him. You shoulda seen it-- all of these grown women scared of a scrawny little boy."

Emilio slammed the door shut abruptly. "You're mad boring, *chico*. Even your food is boring. You should do something to be more interesting-- get into hard drugs maybe."

"How did you know to get him?" Boyd asked rather than responding to the side comment. "Were you even aware you had a child?"

"Yeah, I knew." Emilio turned and leaned against the fridge, crossing his arms loosely over his chest and raising his eyebrows at Boyd. "I had a little love affair with his mom

for a few months. I even got all affectionate towards her. Maybe started thinking about long term plans, takin' her out of that shit hole and what not. We kept in touch but after awhile I knew it wouldn't work out."

He said it so simply that for some reason, it seemed almost callous. "So I stopped going to see her. I felt bad about knocking her up so I told her if she ever needed anything, she could call me. 'Course I changed my number later on so that didn't work out too well for her..."

Boyd was honestly surprised that Emilio had been even that interested in Sin's mother; given Emilio's personality and Sin's mother's profession, Boyd had always assumed it had all just been a fluke and Emilio wouldn't have thought twice about her or the baby. He drew his eyebrows down slightly and crossed his arms at his chest, studying Emilio. "If you changed your phone number then how did you know when she died?"

"Well..." Emilio trailed off mysteriously for a moment. "See, the whole reason I met her is because my people were doing business with the Triads. I had connections with the people who owned the brothels down that way. The old lady who ran that parlor knew my connec' and got in touch with him. She said she woulda just thrown Hsin out on the street but she was afraid of what would happen to her if I found out."

Boyd's gaze was intense on Emilio, watching his expression, his movements. The contrast between Emilio and Sin continued to seem strange, even down to the fact that Emilio was giving away as much information as he was. In his place, Sin probably would have stared blankly at a person he barely knew asking such personal questions.

"What would you have done?"

"I dunno, really.." Emilio shrugged. "It's not like I never gave a shit that I had a kid with her. I didn't even change my number just to be a dick. She just never contacted me really and so I didn't think twice. Besides, I knew they could find me if they wanted to and look-- they did."

"Hmm." Boyd scrutinized Emilio, golden brown eyes serious and thoughtful, his expression neutral. The conversation was interesting, if a little bizarre, but he didn't know what to say to that.

Emilio stared at him for a moment before asking abruptly, "So why aren't the two of you gay together anymore?"

Boyd studied Emilio closely, not particularly surprised by the sudden topic change, then turned on the stove to heat the teakettle. He wondered whether he should answer and how much he would even say, but he thought it was better Emilio for to find out now rather than grilling Sin about it.

"We had a lot of problems," Boyd said finally. The burner turned on and Boyd firmly pushed the lid down on the kettle, then turned to look at Emilio again. "It got to the point where it was fucking things up."

"Fucking didn't seem to be something y'all had a problem with down in Mexico," Emilio smirked, wagging his eyebrows at Boyd. It was impossible to tell if he was taking this entire situation lightly, as a joke, or if he felt something more but was masking it with all the bullshit. He was giving Boyd a half grin but his eyes appeared more intense and they lacked the glint of genuine humor.

Boyd watched Emilio sidelong, scrutinizing his expression and body language. Emilio had a way of almost throwing a person off; Boyd couldn't tell when he was fully serious or not and his moods seemed to shift erratically. Then again, the unpredictability wasn't particularly surprising knowing now that he was Chingón.

Still, there was something about the way Emilio said that which made it seem like more than a baseless comment. "Why do you say that?"

Emilio gave a languid shrug, lips curling up at the side slightly. "Didn't I tell you I followed you around? When I got word Hsin was in my city, I got too curious. I wanted to see what he was all about and what his little friend was all about. I may have even followed you home a time or two or three."

Boyd's eyes narrowed slightly. "You heard us?"

"You're lucky the whole neighborhood didn't hear you, *chico*." Emilio raised both eyebrows, giving Boyd a knowing smile and a wink. "But I actually saw it with my own two eyes and I gotta say, something serious must have happened to make the two of you give up such enthusiastic fucking."

"You-- what?" Boyd's eyes widened as he was caught off guard enough that his neutral expression shifted, became a little more incredulous. He dropped his arms to his sides, barely paying attention to the rest of the sentence in light of the new information. The idea of anyone watching them have sex was disturbing and rather embarrassing, and

Emilio's wording made it sound like he'd more than just seen part of it in passing. "You actually *watched*?"

"Yeah, sure, why not?" Emilio asked, still smirking at Boyd.

"Because," Boyd said blankly, feeling highly disturbed and thrown off. His posture wasn't quite as stiff or challenging as it had been before; he was too distracted with thinking about what Emilio would have seen; what he would have heard. "Well, for one thing, he's your son and he looks a lot like you."

"What's your point?" Emilio didn't seem too impressed by this statement. "I'm hot and so is he. It was like watching a porno starring a younger version of myself."

"Wow." Boyd continued to stare at Emilio, eyebrows rising just slightly in disbelief.

Despite the fact that he didn't want to think about it too closely, his mind almost automatically ran over the times he and Sin had fooled around, wondering in something akin to paranoia which of them Emilio had witnessed.

It was disturbing to know the man had seen them; that he had actually sat there watching his son fuck another man or be fucked, and that in the process he'd seen what had been incredibly private moments for them. That he probably knew what Boyd looked like naked and aroused, what sort of sounds they made, what expressions they had, had probably watched them come...

The concept was invasive and made it difficult for Boyd to keep his expression neutral.

Just as it occurred to Boyd to wonder if Emilio had just been watching or if, considering he spoke of it like pornography, he'd been doing something more, the tea kettle suddenly whistled behind him.

Boyd more than welcomed the distraction, immediately turning toward the stove and flipping off the burner. He took a little longer than necessary to move the kettle to another burner as he tried to regain some sense of equilibrium, to not show Emilio any more than he probably already had exactly how the knowledge bothered him.

"Well, for future reference, don't ever watch me again," Boyd said evenly, tone firm. "Even if you just watched because of Sin, if you get the chance again, don't. You shouldn't even be watching him."

"I'll keep that in mind in case I ever decide to listen to other people's wants and desires."

Boyd shot Emilio a sharp, somewhat exasperated look but decided not to comment.

"What are you going to say to Sin when you find him?" he asked instead, wanting to get off the topic of his sex life.

Emilio shrugged carelessly, the same smirk playing on his well-formed mouth although his eyelashes lowered over his eyes slightly. "If you and him aren't even on good terms, what do you care?"

"We don't have to be involved for me to care." Boyd turned toward Emilio and gave him a more serious, unrelenting look reminiscent of the expression he'd had in the Monterrey tunnel when he'd stood between Sin's battered body and Chingón. He put aside the feelings of disquiet at the knowledge of what Emilio had seen and focused solely on the present instead.

Despite the stubborn strength of his body language, his tone remained informative. "I don't know what it's been like for you lately, how you usually interact with Sin, or even what you know. But it's been extremely difficult for Sin lately and he's been in a very vulnerable state. I sincerely hope you'll at least do him the favor of taking that into consideration when you see him."

"Well..." Emilio let the word roll off his tongue slowly, tilting his head to the side as if he were considering his actions very carefully. "I *had* planned to smack him in the face and tell him to stop crying like a bitch but maybe you're right."

Boyd continued to watch Emilio evenly for a moment. He knew Emilio was being sarcastic but Boyd didn't rise to the bait; he just nodded instead. He'd only brought the topic up because he wanted to make sure Emilio knew ahead of time that Sin had been in a difficult position, just in case it would affect his talk with Sin.

"I hope it goes well," Boyd said calmly, and he actually meant it, although that was only for Sin's sake.

Emilio stared at him for a brief stretch before giving another one of his languid rolling shrugs. "Who knows."

He said it in a calmer tone and for a moment he seemed to be more serious but then he reached out and slapped Boyd on the back with more force than was necessary. "Have

a wonderful night, blondie. It was nice talking to you but I can't waste my time here chatting here forever."

Boyd rocked slightly with the movement and watched Emilio for another moment, his expression mostly unreadable, before he turned to the stove and poured the water into the teapot. "Goodbye."

"*Adios, chico*," Emilio replied and hesitated for only the briefest of moments as he stared at Boyd before turning and walking out of the room. Seconds later, the front door could be heard slamming shut firmly in the outer room.

Chapter 35

For the first time in the past several months, Sin felt something other than helplessness and despair. For the first time since losing Boyd, something was filling the void that had been left inside him since the moment of their separation. Now, that emptiness was filled with a fire that raged inside him so violently that Sin felt like his head was spinning.

He couldn't focus, couldn't concentrate and everything seemed very unreal. As he'd stormed across the compound in a blind, seething rage, he'd wondered more than once if any of this was actually happening. Had he just fought his father or had he been hallucinating again? Had he struck out at an innocent bystander while in the throes of an episode?

Was any of this even happening or was it another one of his prolonged and horrifying dreams?

At one point he'd had the urge to reach out and touch something, someone, just to see if they were really there or if – in his confused daze – they would shimmer and sparkle like a reflection in water. There but not there. Alive but not alive.

Sin had gone on like that for several moments until he found himself abruptly turning away from the direction of his apartment and instead heading a roundabout way back to the Tower, taking the back entrance and the stairs two at a time until he arrived on the roof for no good reason at all.

Sin pushed the door shut and stood on the blacktop of the roof, palms spread open and pressed flat against the door as he allowed his head to drop.

He took a deep breath, and then another, trying to calm his racing heart and the furious cycle of thoughts that railroaded through his mind. It took several moments but after awhile he did feel calmer and Sin allowed himself to look up, to open his eyes and see the world once again without the red haze of anger and confusion clouding his vision.

Everything steadied and took shape; shapes solidified and as Sin walked to the edge of the roof, as he stared blankly into the expanse of sky, he took in the fact that his father really was alive.

Now that he had calmed to an extent, the feeling of a thousand pounds of guilt seemed to lift from his shoulders. The burden and the stain of his father's blood had washed

away the moment Sin had looked up into Emilio's eyes, but at that moment the feeling of betrayal had been too much and Sin had completely missed the feeling of release.

The knowledge of his own innocence was striking but not as satisfying as it should have been. How could it be? He'd lost the most important person in his life due to his own psychosis which had stemmed largely from the trauma of believing that he'd murdered his father.

And it turned out to have all been a lie.

His father had lied to him, had faked his own death; had allowed Sin to believe himself guilty of patricide for so long, only to reappear without a shred of remorse.

Sin put his face in his hands and inhaled again, trying to fight the anger that was once again starting to build, trying to achieve an immaculate calm that wouldn't allow the dark part of him to get inside and take over.

But then Sin remembered Carhart's face so many months ago, his dismissal of Sin's trouble and guilt, his disregard for what Sin had wanted to confide; Carhart's failure to tell Sin the truth.

And Sin couldn't figure out why. After everything, after Carhart's desire to allegedly protect Sin during the last several years, why had he watched Sin fall apart in silence? Because the Agency hadn't wanted him to speak the truth of Emilio's survival? Because he'd been following orders?

Yet despite the anger that Sin felt towards the General, he still couldn't help doubting himself. Sin couldn't help wondering if what he saw as a betrayal was something Carhart had seen as logic and common sense. Maybe Sin was the one who was mistaking the entire situation just like Boyd had seemed to think in China and yet again, Sin was completely unable to stop the negative feelings that consumed him and pushed him to just cut all ties.

But what if that was the wrong reaction? What if Carhart's reasoning made sense and Boyd wasn't really so bad for fucking Kassian and Sin was the one taking everything too personally?

Because the issue couldn't really be everyone around him. How could everyone else be wrong? This wasn't a question of just the general masses on the compound but even the people who he'd gotten close to and trusted.

What he thought was right or logical never seemed to match up with the desires and beliefs of the people around him and the difference between him and others seemed to be a never-ending source of problems.

Maybe there was just something inherently wrong with him, something that repelled people, that drove them away. Something that made them want to reach out but then forced them to turn away to some degree when they realized that someone like him could never behave normally, could never understand things that seemed so clear to everyone else. Something that made them determine there really was no point in continuing to try.

Boyd saw their damaged relationship and had gotten out of it. He'd realized that things would never improve between them in their current state and that there were people out there who weren't so dysfunctional.

Maybe Carhart had seen Sin at his worst, falling to pieces, and had held back the information anyway because whether or not Emilio had survived, in the end this information would have changed nothing; he knew Sin would be damaged regardless of when he'd found out about his father. Maybe he'd just accepted that and had figured that maybe Sin would eventually do the same; see the logic in it, see that Carhart was preserving his own sense of duty because the alternative wouldn't have made much a difference.

Maybe Sin was just selfish and thought everyone should think about his feelings before their own needs and responsibilities and this was another example of that.

But it still didn't stop the tightness in Sin's chest, the way it constricted, the way he dug his fingers into his hair. His eyes squeezed shut as he mourned the death of yet another failed connection, another failed relationship; another lost friend.

Every time he thought he understood people and what he had with them, the sense of peace, of happiness that it briefly stirred in his being, seemed to slip through his fingers like sand until it was gone.

This time, there really was nothing left.

He sat there on the roof for what seemed like hours-- until the sky darkened entirely and the day went from early evening to the middle of the night -- until the cool breeze of the day strengthened into a cold wind and the lamp posts began flickering on far below him.

He sat there until everything drained out of him and he felt nothing but emptiness once again. He decided that maybe it was better that way; maybe it was better if he remembered how to feel nothing.

But then the door creaked open behind him and Sin sensed his father instantly. The emptiness he'd thought he'd achieved disappeared and Sin couldn't help feeling disappointed that it seemed impossible for him to go back to the way he was before.

"Nice place you've got here," Emilio commented idly, walking over to his son and not even bothering to maintain his distance. He sidled right up to Sin and leaned against the short wall at the edge of the roof, eyes fixed on Sin.

Sin didn't reply and his body automatically tensed, his fingers balling into fists as he refused to meet that steady stare.

"It's actually a lot nicer than mine," Emilio continued nonchalantly. "They got me staying in a holding cell on the Fourth due to the ongoing construction of the compound and whatnot. And apparently I'm not allowed to go stay in one of their off-compound spots since I'm not trusted enough to leave without clearance."

Sin's eyes narrowed and he stared at the dark sky, at the faint light of the moon through the cloud coverage.

"Not that I'll let that stop me. It's like good old Vivienne is just daring me to bust out of here. Maybe she wants me to, though. I don't think she likes me too much." Emilio nodded to himself, smirking, and pulled out a half-smoked joint and a lighter. His eyes didn't leave Sin as he flicked the lighter and lit the joint, inhaling deeply.

Go away, Sin mentally urged his father. Just go the fuck away. I don't want to see you. I don't want to look at you.

"Your little boyfriend is pretty cute," Emilio said abruptly and seemingly out of the blue. "Too bad you're all... broken up now. Y'all were all sexed up and happy down in Mexico."

Sin scoffed softly, unable to stop himself, and just shook his head. "So that was you."

"Uh huh." Emilio exhaled slowly, the smoke wafting into Sin's face but Sin didn't even blink.

The news wasn't too surprising; it actually made sense. The location, the fact that Chingón had been able to track him undetected... Even the name had stuck out to him; when Boyd had mentioned it in Monterrey, Sin had distinctly remembered his father calling himself that jokingly many years ago, but he had ultimately dismissed it as a bizarre coincidence. At least, until now.

"Blondie went running to Zachary with details on me and my crew down there. I always figured Zach would figure out the 4FF thing if the Agency ever got interested in my group. It's an old code we used to use back in the day, back when shit was getting heavy and we were warning each other to get the fuck out of dodge. It's just some gibberish I made up but I knew he'd remember."

Emilio took another long puff and pulled himself up onto the wall, sitting precariously on the edge of the roof. His bloodshot eyes studied Sin intently, wandering along his form, taking in every detail of his face, his hands, the way he stood so rigidly. "So he looked into it and they tracked me down. 'Course they wouldn't have found me unless I wanted them to..."

Sin finally looked up and he couldn't keep the animosity from his expression. "Why don't you just go back to Mexico and leave me the fuck alone? You could get out of here if you wanted to."

Emilio leaned forward slightly, hooded eyes not leaving Sin, and he smiled around the smoke that drifted out of his mouth. "Nah. Now that they know I'm here it's too late. They'd track me down forever and that ain't no fun. I was looking over both shoulders even when they thought I was dead."

At the mention of that, Sin's gaze swung away and he tensed even more, teeth gritting together angrily. He couldn't handle being near his father; it was too much to take. Too much to understand.

"Just leave before I push you off the roof," he growled from between clenched teeth.

"Psssh." Emilio leaned closer, flicking the rest of his joint off the side of the roof, completely disregarding the fact that anger was radiating off his son. "That's just silly talk. If you really wanted me dead you wouldn't be so tight over thinking you'd killed me."

"Maybe it would have been better off if I really had," Sin replied woodenly, refusing to acknowledge their proximity, the fact that he could feel his father's breath on his face. But then Emilio actually reached out to idly run his fingers through Sin's hair and Sin couldn't help but shudder, backing away.

Emilio gave him a half smile and sat back, letting his black sneakers thump against the wall idly. "That's a stupid thing to say, boy. At least now you won't be a guilty wreck for the rest of your life. Even if you're all pissed off at me now..."

"I'm fucking furious at you now," Sin hissed stormily, snapping his eyes back to Emilio's face. "Do you have any fucking idea what I've been through since I came to this place? What my life has been like?"

A shadow crossed Emilio's face and for a moment he didn't look nearly as self-assured, as confident, but he still didn't look away. "I know everything, kiddo. I know about the box, about Lydia, about the collars and the way they let guards have fun beating the shit out of you when you're drugged up. I know all about it."

Slightly taken aback, Sin shook his head but didn't reply and Emilio explained simply, "Do you really think I didn't have a connection on the inside all of these years? That I wasn't checking up on my spawn?"

"Why would you even care?" Sin demanded bitterly. "You obviously didn't give a shit enough to let me know you were alive."

Emilio's face twisted into an impatient glare and he jumped off the wall, standing next to Sin and grabbing Sin's arm. He forced Sin to turn so that they were facing each other and gripped Sin's chin between his fingers tightly, eyes narrowed and completely unconcerned by the death glare Sin aimed at him.

"Grow up, boy," Emilio snapped coldly, irritation in his face, his shoulders. "I understand that you're all pissed off because you thought I knew about your guilt trip and shit, but I didn't. How the fuck would I? I don't remember much after you shot me, I don't remember much from the next few weeks after; I had to practically relearn how to function like a normal human because a bullet had scraped the side of my fucking brain."

Sin didn't reply but his eyebrows did draw together slightly.

"I thought you were dead too for awhile but when I found out you wasn't, I didn't see the point in tracking you down, in fucking getting us both killed if Connors found out I was still alive. The only reason they kept you is 'cause he probably figured you didn't know what I knew-- that you wouldn't have gone if you knew the truth."

Sin shook his head slightly, finally jerking his face away from Emilio's grasp, finding it difficult to keep staring into his father's intense eyes. "What was the truth?"

This time Emilio scoffed and the sound was half amused, half disgusted. "I'm a notorious snoop and a thief. I found out some shit on Connors. I found out that before this city was hit, he'd been exchanging info with a big shot in the Russian government-- they was feeding each other info so that he always looked like he was two steps ahead of Russia for the big shots here but in reality, they were just playing a game. But then his Russian friend got sloppy and his people got wind of their partnership and the e-mails were traced to this city. Connors' inside guy got capped by his own people and they targeted this city specifically because of Connors' correspondence."

Sin stared at his father blankly, unmoved by the information that Connors had inadvertently been responsible for the destruction of the city. It explained a lot; why this city was specifically hit, why they'd gone after it more than once to ensure that it'd been obliterated. "I see."

"Yeah. You should see. Of all fucking people, Hsin, I thought you'd understand." Emilio scowled deeply, crossing his arms over his chest. "I got Zachary on my back, I got your boy toy on my back-- I figured you'd see where I was coming from, that you understand me enough to get why the fuck I wouldn't go running to bring you down with me just so we can play house and be together."

"I had no such delusions that you wanted to play at being daddy," Sin replied flatly. His eyes focused on the skyline, on the dark night sky. "It's not even about that. It's about the fact that these last few months have been a fucking mess and it turns out it was all for nothing."

"Wow, you just don't get it, man." Emilio actually looked disappointed in Sin, as if he was stupider than Emilio had anticipated him being. "There was nothing I could fucking do for you, boy. I knew how shitty your life was, but I knew you were strong enough to take it. I knew you could handle it. So why show my face and endanger your life and mine? It's a fucking stupid idea-- a stupid waste. I thought if it ever came to a point where it got too bad, you'd just get out."

"Get out." Sin smiled humorlessly, shaking his head. "It had never occurred to me that what they were doing... the way they treated me wasn't normal until recently. It never occurred to me to care."

"Well, that's tough," Emilio replied coldly. "Now get the fuck over it."

Once again, Sin didn't respond. He couldn't. He wasn't sure what he would do or how he would react if he released the anger that was bubbling up inside him.

"You think your life was such a sad story?" Emilio demanded hotly, once again reaching out and forcing Sin to look at him. Sin immediately shoved his father away and tensed up, but Emilio didn't seem to care.

"Why don't you try my childhood on for size," Emilio went on darkly, eyes narrowing and glittering dangerously; Sin couldn't help wondering if that was how he looked when he was angry.

"My mom killed my sisters, my dad killed my mom, then he drove me to Brazil, without looking at me or talkin' to me, without changing my shirt that was still covered in my mom's brains and my sisters' blood, and he dropped me off on a doorstep without lookin' back. How about eatin' out of garbage cans for years? Dodging death squads that cleaned up the streets by killing all the little street kids, sucking dick so they'd let me get away, letting old women play with me in exchange for a meal? Or cutting a nine year old's throat 'cause she woulda cut mine to get the few bucks I'd just gotten off the rich couple in the hotel who'd paid me in exchange for lettin' them dress me up and shove things inside me while I was fucked up on dope that they'd pumped me full of."

Emilio didn't take his eyes off Sin and this time, Sin didn't look away.

"And all of that before I was ten."

"So that's why you didn't just leave me in Hong Kong." Sin had always wondered why his self-absorbed party-boy father had ever come to rescue him; what had possessed Emilio to take in a child at all. Now it made more sense... Now Sin understood, or at least he thought he did, and some of the animosity drifted away.

"That's right, *mijo*. I didn't want you growin' up like me. I didn't want you to be that way. So I did the only thing I knew how-- I kept you off the streets and I taught you how to be strong. I taught you how to protect yourself, how to make a living the only way I knew how, taught you how to be fucking independent and never have to rely on anyone. I

wanted you to have all of my strengths and none of my weaknesses-- I didn't want you to be weak-minded and emotional like me, I didn't want you to be a fucking drug addict and an alcoholic like me. I wanted you to be someone who didn't need no one or nothing from no one."

Emilio shook his head slowly, his expression taut and almost angry. "And looks like I didn't train you as well as I thought. 'Cause you don't understand where I was coming from. I was never trying to be father of the fucking year. I was trying to teach you how to survive in this shit world without ever havin' to depend on anyone, even me, your fuck-up of a father."

"Well," Sin said dully, crossing his arms over his chest as Emilio's glare burned into him. "Now I know."

He wished he'd known then. He wished he'd never gotten some ridiculous idea in his head that his father had wanted them to be a team, a family even if it was a dysfunctional one; that they could trust each other even if they couldn't trust anyone else. Sin wished it had occurred to him as a child that his father had only been training him to be a fully autonomous being; that he'd never intended to stick around when he thought Sin's training was done.

Sin wished he'd realized from the start that when Emilio had told him not to trust anyone, not to get close to anyone, never to become vulnerable around anyone-- he'd been including himself in that statement.

Maybe if Sin had known, he wouldn't have taken his recent revelations so hard.

"I've changed since then," Emilio replied finally, looking away from his son and turning towards the edge of the roof to stare down at the compound below. "Somewhat. But you were an idiot for ever thinking that back then I'd have risked my life to come back for you."

Sin said nothing. There was really nothing to say. When his father said everything in such plain black and white language, it all just served to make Sin feel like a fool. It made him feel pathetic for ever feeling abandoned, for being so ridiculously psychologically fucked up when his father had had a much worse life. It made him feel stupid for being so weak, but even then, he still felt resentful.

He resented that his father could show up after all these years and completely shift the blame onto Sin, castigating him for being dumb enough to have expected his life to be any better than it was.

"Do you have anything more to add?" Sin asked dully. "If not, I think we're finished here."

Emilio sighed disgustedly and pointed at Sin, his finger inches from the younger man's face. "You need to grow up, Hsin. Grow the fuck up and stop worrying so much about shit that doesn't matter. Your past doesn't matter. It's done. It's fucking history. The people you've killed-- they ain't coming back. They don't matter. Life sucks, get over it, stop fucking letting it dictate the way you act and treat people."

Sin looked at his father sharply, eyes narrowed. "You don't even know me anymore. You don't even know what you're speaking about."

"Oh really?" Emilio arched a derisive eyebrow at his son, leaning forward again. "You wanna know why I didn't think you'd give a shit about my plan? Why I thought you were strong enough to not let it affect you?"

"Sure, why not," Sin replied tonelessly, letting his eyes drift away again but this time Emilio took a step forward and gripped Sin's shoulders. Sin once again felt his body tense and start to react, he felt his fists twitching as he fought the desire to hit Emilio. It took every fiber of his being to stay still, to not start a fight that would likely end badly in one way or the other; instead, he glared into his father's eyes.

"That's why," Emilio said flatly. "That right there. Your automatic reaction to beat the fuck out of anyone who touches you, who gets too close to you, who gets under your fucking skin. You probably walk around this place with a huge chip on your shoulder, hating everyone because you don't trust no one, letting the shit that happened to you as a kid twist your fucked up little brain so that you think everyone is out to get you."

Sin stiffened and tried to back away but Emilio tightened his grip and pulled Sin closer until their faces were nearly touching. His father's green eyes drilled into his own and Sin couldn't look away even as he felt his earlier revelation echoing in his brain.

"And that's the reason why everyone on the compound singled you out and called you a freak, boy. I don't care what no one says about me-- I taught you how to kill but you were capable of it before you met me and you had that fucked up attitude, that fucked up temper, before I was in the picture. I'm not saying these people had a right to put you

in a box and do all the shit they did, but you didn't give them a reason not to think you're a fucking psychopathic freak, did you?"

Emilio finally released his grip on Sin and stepped back with a disgusted scoff, shaking his head at his son.

"What do you want from me?" Sin asked tiredly, not wanting to listen to anything else, even though he knew it was all true.

Emilio shrugged, a disappointed scowl on his handsome face. "I want you to tell me the difference between your life and mine. Tell me why mine is so much better."

"I never said it was."

"That's 'cause it ain't. I already outlined it all for you, boy. In fact, my life has been a lot shittier. I've seen worse shit and I've killed more people. The only difference between you and me is you're a psychopath and you can't help it and I'm a sociopath 'cause I just don't give a fuck." Emilio smirked and looked almost proud of that fact, eyes narrowing to stare at his son.

Sin just stared back, his expression purposely blank, his posture slack.

"But you act like a fucking weirdo. You act like a ticking time bomb. You freaked me out when you were eight years old, I can imagine how you freak people out now that you're grown. And that's why I never thought you'd really care too much if you thought I was dead-- why I thought you'd get over it and move on. 'Cause even though you're acting all hurt now, you never acted like you gave a shit back then. You stayed to yourself or was just as much of an asshole to me as I was to you. You didn't treat me like I was some father you loved-- I didn't even think you gave a shit about me in that way and I didn't care 'cause I wasn't sure I really gave a shit about you in that way other than not wanting you to be completely fucked over in life."

Emilio shrugged his shoulders again, his movements expressive and animated, although his eyes were hard and unyielding. He looked genuinely frustrated with his son, genuinely annoyed that Sin wasn't getting it.

But Sin was getting it.

He just wasn't letting his father know and that was apparently a case in point.

But he couldn't help it. He didn't want to admit that his father was probably right; he didn't want to admit that he *had* acted like a ticking time bomb, a kid who was so prone to quick violence and mean retorts that everyone just assumed he was a psychopath and a freak. And he definitely didn't want to admit that, because of his mother and what he'd seen and done in China, he couldn't trust people not to hurt him or exploit him.

He didn't want to tell Emilio that he was right; that Sin had let paranoia run his life and dictate his interactions; that eventually, he'd let his distrust of people even poison his relationship with Boyd.

He didn't want to show Emilio what he was feeling or how the words were affecting him so he just stood there, stared at his father, and said nothing. Because in the end, even though he was aware of his own behavior and how poor it actually was, it wasn't easy to change and he wasn't even sure if he should for his father.

This seemed to annoy his father more and Emilio turned away finally, frustration evident in his expression and posture. "I'm gonna be reinstated as an agent soon." Emilio looked over his shoulder at Sin and raised his eyebrows. "Learn to live with it."

When Sin just stared at him, Emilio strode away, flinging open the door violently before he disappeared. Sin could hear his footsteps pounding down the long flight of stairs that led to the top floor of the Tower.

Sin stood there just staring at the open door for a long time before he finally made the descent himself. The walk to his building seemed to take forever and when he finally arrived, Sin barely acknowledged Officer Daniels, even though the man was quite obviously trying to get his attention.

The door closed and the sound seemed unnecessarily loud in the silent apartment.

He stood in the middle of the living room and stared at the carpet blankly for a long time. He wasn't really quite sure how long he just stood there and allowed the events of the day and the conversation with his father to sink in but after awhile his body began to feel stiff and he mindlessly walked further into the apartment.

The cushions on the couch sank down as he sat on it, absently running his fingers along the stiff fabric, allowing his mind to wander into the depths of his memories. He thought of his childhood, his teenage years, the first time he'd met people on the compound...

He remembered Connors introducing him to Ryan, Ann and Lydia, unaware that his daughter had already come into contact with Sin, unaware that Lydia looked at him so warily because he'd broken her nose a year earlier just because she'd kissed him. Not yet aware that the kid he had in his hands wasn't a normal kid, that Sin didn't have a normal way of thinking. Unaware that Sin didn't know how to interact with people because he thought all people were just potential predators.

Sin remembered Connors looking at him with narrowed eyes but deciding that maybe putting the child assassin with kids around his own age would do some good-- make him more likely to integrate in the Agency, to form alliances and make connections. Because then he'd be more loyal, and a loyal agent was the best kind.

But Sin had just stared at Ryan and the twins coldly, with detachment, and when he'd spoken to them it had been with barely concealed sarcasm and disdain. He remembered sizing them up, memorizing things about them just in case he had to fight them some day, just in case they turned against him. He remembered coming to the conclusion that they weren't even worth that much of his time.

And that had been the end of that.

They'd complained to Connors about how creepy he was and the isolation had begun from there.

Sin stared at his hands and allowed himself to come back to the present, to recall his own thoughts from earlier in the evening when he'd wondered if something was just inherently wrong with him.

Now he felt that something definitely was; Emilio had summed it all up perfectly a few hours after seeing his son again for the first time in almost twenty years. Yet Sin wondered if it was really inherent or if it he'd just never considered the possibility of his own role in things.

He wondered if it wasn't something inevitable; if it was possible for him to change.

A knock on the door shattered the muted silence of the apartment but Sin didn't react. He didn't look up and he didn't move, not even when moments passed, not even when he heard the muffled beep of his door unlocking as someone swiped a keycard to gain entry.

Boyd walked in and shut the door behind him. His gaze searched the apartment and when his eyes fell on Sin, Boyd briefly appeared relieved but then he took in Sin's resigned posture, his blank expression, and Boyd's eyes took on a measure of somberness.

He walked over and silently sat down next to him Sin, reaching over to gently touch Sin's hand.

Even knowing that Boyd was next to him, for some reason the touch startled Sin. He looked up, wondering why Boyd was there; wondering what he wanted, why he'd come over in the middle of the night. What he thought he would gain by being there when things were barely civil between them lately.

But when Sin met Boyd's intense brown eyes, when he saw Boyd's hesitantly reassuring half-smile, a feeling of relief swept through Sin. He allowed it to warm him, to consume him; to wash all the doubts, suspicions and questions away.

Sin closed his eyes, took a shallow, shuddering breath, and when Boyd lightly squeezed his fingers, Sin wrapped his hand entirely around Boyd's and squeezed tight because none of those questions mattered anymore.

All that mattered was that Boyd was there. He was there for Sin, and when Sin opened his eyes to look at Boyd once more, Sin ignored all the self-doubt and paranoia.

Because at that moment he somehow knew that Boyd always would be.

End of Book Two

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